

## NOTES ET DISCUSSIONS

**On word division in Judeo-Italian manuscripts**

While studying late medieval manuscripts in Judeo-Italian (Italian in Hebrew characters), I focused upon the most important corpus of extant Judeo-Italian manuscripts, namely eight fifteenth-century liturgical texts (seven prayerbooks and one compilation of Psalms verses for daily recitation) both dated and undated, in an attempt to trace a codicological criterion which would differentiate this corpus from a parallel group of Hebrew liturgical manuscripts. Thus I came to observe a feature which seems to characterize all Judeo-Italian texts and is virtually non-existent in their Hebrew counterparts, namely word division (whether hyphenated or unhyphenated) at the end of lines.

Such a feature is indeed comprised in what has been defined by M. Beit-Arié as devices for producing even left margins — and specifically those preventing the margin from being exceeded, which also include compression of last letters or words, and abbreviations — employed by Hebrew scribes. In Hebrew codicological study of manuscripts, these devices and their combinations serve as convenient tools for distinguishing between hands as well as for their individual identification when no colophon is found.

Word division, as a device for margin justification, is common in Latin manuscripts: in fifteenth-century Italian (Latin) manuscripts in humanistic script, a rate as high as 60% of the written lines may be affected in some cases. In Hebrew manuscripts this device is present in all regions of production but occurs, as a rule, at a very reduced scale (except for Yemen, where it is common practice among Jewish scribes). For instance, grammatically unconditioned word division (i. e. at any random point of the word) occurs in only 0.51% of Hebrew manuscripts produced in Sefarad, while in the Near East (excluding Yemen) it amounts to 0.24% only. In Ashkenaz the figures are close to those found in Italy, i. e. roughly between 3.5% and 4.5% of dated extant manuscripts, according to the data recorded in the Hebrew Palaeography Project of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities and the National and University Library in Jerusalem.

In Hebrew manuscripts produced in Italy word division is more commonly employed in words that include a prefixed preposition, in which cases the word would be split between the prefix and the word itself. The total rate of occurrence (including those) goes up to nearly 9%. Grammatically unconditioned word division can be observed in secular literature (e.g. philosophy and sciences) and even in Biblical commentaries but is never to be found in biblical books and in liturgical texts (Siddurim and Mahzorim): those are written and copied probably in keeping with the strict old Halakhic rules rooted in the practices of writing the liturgical Pentateuch scroll (*Sefer Torah*). After having observed the high rate of occurrence of word division in Judeo-Italian liturgical texts, I found out — sifting through the codicological descriptions of some ninety Hebrew prayerbook manuscripts produced in Italy throughout the fifteenth century and recorded in the Hebrew Palaeography Project — that only one contemporaneous prayerbook in Hebrew, copied by Hananiah ben Menachem Katz in 1477, contained word division at the end of lines. No other Hebrew liturgical text would allow it.

As opposed to liturgical Hebrew manuscripts, all the Judeo-Italian prayerbooks examined contained word division (usually unhyphenated in fifteenth-century texts and hyphenated in later liturgical texts). Moreover, a scribe copying prayerbooks both in Hebrew and Italian — as did Shemaria ben Avraham Yehiel of Florence, who produced three copies in Hebrew and two in Judeo-Italian — would refrain from such practice in his Hebrew copies, while using it abundantly in his Judeo-Italian prayerbooks. Word division in Judeo-Italian liturgical texts occurs both from line to line and from page to page, sometimes even from recto to verso sides. Page-to-page word division was common among Latin scribes, but nonetheless, in fifteenth-century humanistic script, one detects a tendency to reduce such a division which interferes with the continuity of the written text (B.L. Ullman, *The Origin and Development of the Humanistic Script*, p. 130). Thus the humanistic Latin scribe would resort to other means, such as placing the syllable cut-off from the last word in the page, below the rest of the word. This device can also be observed in two out of the seven fifteenth-century Judeo-Italian prayerbooks mentioned.

In sixteenth century manuscripts, word division appears not only in the vernacular prayerbooks but also throughout the extant translations of the Bible into Judeo-Italian: a singular comparison can be made in a Pentateuch translation dated 1590 (Ms. Oxford, Bodl. 39), where the Hebrew text is laid out next to its Italian counterpart, copied (in Hebrew characters) by the same hand. As expected, the scribe employs the word division device in the vernacular text only, and never in the sacred language.

One would be tempted to conclude that such usage may indeed reflect the impact of Latin scribal practices upon Hebrew scribes, and their readiness to adopt them in non-Hebrew vernacular texts (as they did in secular texts) where copying norms were less binding. Doubtlessly, this almost trivial phenomenon can also serve as an indicator with regard to the prestige of the genre reproduced, of the scribe's professional investment in a specific piece of work, and consequently of the user's expectations from the product — all of which act as modifiers on the "functional demands" from the scribal work on a given text. Thus this indicator signals that Judeo-Italian translations — both of the Bible and of Jewish prayerbooks — were apparently conceived as "inferior genres" and did not enjoy the status and the prestige of the analogous texts in Hebrew.

And last but not least, the presence of word division in Judeo-Italian liturgical and biblical manuscripts casts a light on an angle hitherto not dealt with, namely that the Hebrew scribe is apt to modify his scribal practices, and more specifically his choice of devices — which are in essence his individual token and personal contribution to an otherwise stereotype script — as the professional or aesthetical demands dictated by the genre of his text vary. Indeed, such is the case witnessed here, in the vernacular translations of the Hebrew Bible and prayers.

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