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To cite this version:

Elodie Attia. MBH – Manuscripta Bibliae Hebraicae. Hebrew Bible Manuscripts in Western Europe in the 12th and 13th Centuries: A Material, Cultural and Social Approach. COMST Bulletin, 2017, 3 (2), pp.97-101. hal-01784199

HAL Id: hal-01784199

https://amu.hal.science/hal-01784199

Submitted on 3 May 2018

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Projects in manuscript studies

MBH – Manuscripta Bibliae Hebraicae. Hebrew Bible Manuscripts in Western Europe in the 12th and 13th Centuries: A Material, Cultural and Social Approach

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The last decades have witnessed two main developments affecting the study of Hebrew Bible manuscripts. Firstly, the widespread availability of digitised Hebrew manuscripts on the internet: for example, the collections of the Vatican Library, the Oxford Digital Library at the University of Oxford, the British Library, the Cambridge University Library and the Bibliothèque Nationale de France are easily accessible online. Secondly, various databases have been created, which are dedicated to medieval Hebrew manuscripts in general, not specifically to biblical items. This development started in the mid-1960s with *SfarData*; in the past decade, the *Friedberg Genizah Project* and *Books within Books* databases, amongst others, have been launched. These advancements have made it possible and desirable to reassess the systematic study of the medieval Hebrew Bible manuscripts that are widely available on the web, from an equally renewed collaborative and transversal perspective.

The great biblical scholar and Masorete Gérard E. Weil commenced working on a systematic study of Hebrew Bible manuscripts, preparing in the early 1970s a *Catalogue général de la Bible hébraïque et du Targum, dans les collections publiques et privées*.[1] Unfortunately, his untimely death in 1986 prevented its continuation. A critical re-evaluation remains crucial nonetheless, both for the insight it affords into the more general phenomena connected to the production of the Hebrew book, and to improve our discernment regarding the types of Bible produced during the Middle Ages and the variety of biblical texts used in the medieval Jewish world. A general, more quantitative insight could facilitate in-depth research into specific qualitative aspects and thus determine medieval socio-cultural standards, cultural transfers and socio-cultural practices concerning the transmission of the Biblical text.

A starting point for such vast investigation is the project *Manuscripta Bibliae Hebraicae. Hebrew Bible Manuscripts in Western Europe in the 12th and 13th Centuries*: *A Material, Cultural and Social Approach* (MBH)

1 Attia forthcoming.

directed by Élodie Attia at Aix-Marseille University CNRS (CPAF TDMAM UMR 7297). The aim of this four-year project, financed by the French Organization for Scientific Research (Agence nationale de la recherche, ANR), is to provide a systematic survey of medieval Hebrew Bible manuscripts and introduce a preliminary typology of Hebrew Bibles produced before 1300 CE in Ashkenaz (England, Northern France, Germany, and Northern Italy under German authority). In order to facilitate the development of this preliminary typology, an analytical descriptive database with a multi-criteria search engine is being currently developed. Initially, the database will be limited to a corpus of circa 115 Ashkenazic manuscripts, either dated or mostly undated, which include biblical text (complete or partial). Later on, the database will enable the processing of a larger number of sources, whether late-medieval texts or manuscripts from geocultural areas other than the Ashkenazic region, in order to further the comparative approach needed for an exhaustive look at the 'Bible' phenomenon. Finally, it should be stressed that a keen interest in 'late' Bibles can be reported for Latin Studies[2] but also Hebrew Studies, as is testified by the growing number of projects explicitly reflecting on this subject, among them, the SFB 933 Subproject B4 (Heidelberg), aiming at providing an on-line edition of MS Vatican, BAV, Vat. Ebr. 14;[3] the LEGARAD project on late Sephardic Bibles initiated by Javier del Barco (Madrid); the ERC ParaTextBib project on paratexts in Greek Bibles (Munich); the Biblia Arabica project headed by Ronny Vollandt (Munich); and the Textual History of the Bible editorial project concerning the Bible in all languages supervised by Armin Lange (Vienna).

Therefore, the MBH project is not only intended to create a directory of manuscripts as already is the case for Latin (R. Gryson) and Greek (A. Rahlfs) biblical texts, though it could contribute to it. The MBH project and its connected database aspire to facilitate cross-questioning by means of codicological and palaeographical criteria (measurements and size, writing support and material features, layout and mise en texte, decoration, structure of the books, estimated date and provenance), scribal practices and textual traditions (feature of the consonantal or Masoretic text, forms of accents, order of books and of the contents, reader annotations, cultural transfers from non-Jewish culture to Jewish book and vice versa), and the possible uses and functions of biblical manuscripts. Obviously, the project aims to take into account different kinds of sources: from dated codices (less than 40 items are described in SfarData from a codicological point of view) to a majority of non-dated codices and li-

2 See Boynton and Rilley 2011; Light and Polegh 2013; Ruzzier and Hermand 2015, Togni 2016.

3 On the basis of Attia 2015.

Fig. 1. MBH homepage, <http://mbhproject.org>, detail (accessed 20 March 2018).

turgical scrolls, whether the sources are complete, incomplete or fragmentary, which is a methodological novum.

In order to achieve its aims, the MBH project gathers corpus-based research data either 1) based on the analysis of specific library collections that are both easily accessible in situ and online (for instance in London, Oxford, Cambridge, Parma, the Vatican City, and Paris), or 2) connected to specific noteworthy elements that could be the subject of a separate study (such as Hebrew manuscripts of remarkable formats: either the very small 'Paris Bible' or the very large 'Giant Bible'). Like similar current projects conducted on manuscripts, for instance *E-Ktobe* on Syriac items, the MBH database intends to mention how its information has been collected (derived from printed catalogues or other sources), whether the information has been checked against the original or digitised images and, finally, whether it comes from codicological and palaeographical research carried out especially for the MBH project in the holding library (a budget is available for library visits). This transparency will allow other researchers to distinguish the least studied sources, the ones that are less easily accessible or the ones that require more analysis. Interoperability is a priority and establishing closer ties with a portal such as *Biblissima* should greatly facilitate this work.

Furthermore, in order to facilitate the dissemination of its research, the MBH project will develop a specially dedicated web portal and accommodate a certain number of data research tools useful for the investigation of the Bibles' materiality and history. There are plans for the development of a plug-in extension, called Graphoskop, adapted to Hebrew script (in collaboration with Maria Gurrado, IRHT Paris). A relevant bibliography and links to existing digital library collections will be included (in collaboration with Viktor Golinets, HFJS Heidelberg), but also other data or techniques that could enable future inter- or transdisciplinary investigation.

In addition, the EAJS Lab international workshop 'Research Approaches in Hebrew Bible Manuscripts', held in June 2016 in Aix-en-Provence and organised by Élodie Attia, Antony Perrot, and Samuel Blapp, stressed the benefits of cross-fertilising research approaches used to analyse sources from antiquity and those common in research carried out on medieval texts, even though these are separate fields of study. An interdisciplinary seminar in collaboration with Patrick Andrist (ERC ParaText Bib, Munich) and Marilena Maniaci (Università degli studi di Cassino e del Lazio meridionale) is planned for November 2018 at the Paul Albert Février Center TDMAM (UMR 7297) in Aix-en-Provence. A collaboration with Javier del Barco (CSIC Madrid) and his project LEGARAD is also scheduled for 2018 during his stay at the Institute for Advanced Studies (IMéRA Aix-Marseille). Last but not least, the

library of the Paul Albert Février Center TDMAM (UMR 7297) has been honoured by the donation of a new documentary collection unique in Europe: the private work library of Gérard E. Weil. This donation considerably enriches the Aix-Marseille University's holdings and the ANR MBH project has plans for a major symposium dedicated to this collection and the specialist's outstanding work on Hebrew biblical manuscripts.

For more information about the project visit the CNRS academic blog at <http://mbh.hypotheses.org>, and <http://mbhproject.org>.

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