Elias Levita the Lexicographer
and the Legacy of Sefer ha-Shorashim

Emma Abate*
Equipe Saprat-Ephe, Paris / Gerda Henkel Foundation

This article focuses on the reinterpretation of the lexicographic tradition of Sefer ha-Shorashim ("Book of Roots") in the Renaissance, in the context of the Christian kabbalist Giles of Viterbo (1469-1532) and of the Jewish intellectual Elias Levita (1469-1549). I provide an insight into Giles of Viterbo's interest in Hebrew exegesis, lexicons and grammar, which enhanced Levita's activity. Then, I go through some innovative aspects of the lexicographic works by Levita, Meturgeman ("Interpreter"), a dictionary of Aramaic roots from the Targum, and Tishbi, a lexicon of post-biblical Hebrew.

KEYWORDS: Dictionary; Kabbalah; Lexicography; Mystical beliefs; Renaissance; Roots.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article aims to explore some of the channels through which the Jewish lexicographic tradition of Sefer ha-Shorashim ("Book of Roots") by David ben Yosef Qimhi (1160-1235) was handed down to and reinter-
interpreted in the Renaissance.¹ I will focus on the Jewish-Christian context of the Roman intellectual circle surrounding the Augustinian reformer, Kabbalist and Hermetist Giles of Viterbo (1469-1532).² More specifically, I will home in on the works of Eliahu Bahu ha-Levi Ashkenazi (1469-1549), Giles’ master of Hebrew, better known as Elias Levita.³

Elias Levita, from Neustadt in Germany, was an expert on the Hebrew Masoretic Bible, a philologist and lexicographer, as well as a poet and copyist of mystical texts. Delivering an original point of view on most of the topics he approached, Levita contributed more than any of his Jewish contemporaries to the transmission of Hebrew linguistic and grammatical knowledge to the Christian world. In the field of lexicography, Levita was a novator. An analysis of his Meturgeman (‘Interpreter’), a dictionary of Aramaic roots from the Targum, and Tishbi, a lexicon of post-biblical Hebrew words are at the heart of this article.⁴ First, I will provide an


⁴ I take this opportunity to thank Professor Malachi Beit-Arié for sending me a copy of his article Eliyahu Levita As a Scribe, Author-Scribe And Codicologist, forthcoming.
insight into Giles of Viterbo’s involvement in the study of the Hebrew language, his interest in Sefer ha-Shorashim, and his request for Hebrew lexicons and grammars, which motivated and enhanced Levita’s activity. Then, while considering some of Levita’s models, contacts and sponsors, I will go through the dictionaries he glossed, edited, and authored. I will analyze the tradition of Meturgeman as it is preserved in two autographic manuscripts, which precede the edition in the publishing house of the Christian scholar Paulus Fagius (1504-1549) at Isny in 1541. I will also delve into some of the innovative aspects of the lexicon Tishbi, first edited at Isny in 1541, notably the occurrence of entries related to the mystical world, which is unprecedented in Hebrew dictionaries.

2. GILES’ INTEREST IN HEbrew LEXICOGRAPHY

Around 1515, when Giles of Viterbo recruited Elias Levita as his personal teacher of Hebrew, Giles was already engaged in the study of the Hebrew language and the kabbalah. He wished not only to embody the perfect homo trilinguis (understanding Latin, Greek, and Hebrew), but he was also interested in learning Aramaic, Syriac and Arabic. The desire to be acquainted with any genre of biblical exegesis, be it literal, mystical,

---


allegorical or astral-magical, kindled Giles’s interest in the study of the languages. He considered the exegetical and hermeneutic activity to be an essential instrument of power and knowledge. In Giles’ perspective, delving into the mysteries of the kabbalah would have opened men’s eyes and hearts to a renovated and at the same time original Christianity. In Zohar, Bahir, Raziel and in the other texts of Jewish mysticism, he found the actual proofs for the Christian dogmas such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, Heaven and Hell. Giles himself signed the Latin translation of some of these works, which are extant in autographic manuscripts. He also authored original kabalistic works like Scechina and Libellus de Litteris Hebraicis. The understanding of Hebrew was of pivotal importance to his cultural strategy. Hebrew letters and roots permeated the universe as the very foundation of the origins, and reflected the cosmological and moral texture of the creation, of the human soul and of the providential history.

Giles’s interest in Sefer ha-Shorashim arose independently from the encounter with Elias Levita, but was then fed by Levita’s teachings. A note in one of Giles’ registers, dating to 4 January 1513, includes his request to the Augustinian friar Gabriele della Volta (1468-1537) to provide him with a copy of Sefer ha-Shorashim together with Qimḥi’s commentary on the Bible: Scripsimus ad magistrum Gabrielum Venetum ut mitteret ad nos David super tota Biblia et eiusdem librum de Radicibus.¹³

---


¹³ The register is held in Archivio della Curia Generalizia degli Agostiniani Rome, Dd 12, fol. 99v; see Aegidii Viterbiensis, OSA, Resgestae generalatus I: 1506-1514, quas edendas curavit Albericus de Meijer eiusdem ordinis. With a Preface by Francis Xavier Martin, OSA (Romae 1988).
A Latin version of *Sefer ha-Shorashim*, entitled *Liber Radicum*, was prepared under the direct supervision of Giles before he became Cardinal in 1517.\(^{14}\) The first recto of the copy of this work includes Giles’ name bearing the title “friar.”\(^{15}\) *Liber Radicum* is also extant in a second manuscript completed in 1519 for the then Cardinal in a more elegant scribal hand.\(^{16}\) In section 5, the layout of this exemplar will be compared with the manuscripts of Levita’s *Meturgeman*. As regards the content, the text of *Liber Radicum* adheres to the original Hebrew. The Hebrew roots are noted in the margin of the text; Qimḥi’s commentaries are translated into Latin word by word and the Latin Vorlage of the biblical quotations is very literal; the multiple quotations from the Bible, which occur after each root, do not match St. Jerome’s *Vulgata*.\(^{17}\)

A personal and autographic notebook, in which Giles lists Hebrew roots, corresponds to the structure of *Sefer ha-Shorashim* as well. The unique manuscript, in which this text has been preserved, is penned in Giles’ informal and nearly stenographic handwriting.\(^{18}\) Though the system of entries is arranged as it is in *Liber Radicum*, the Hebrew roots are not followed by the Latin translation of Qimḥi’s commentaries. The text is organized as a concordance and each lemma matches various Latin meanings that Giles collected from Hebrew *midrashim*, *targumim* and kabbalistic texts he approached. He also added near-homophone Greek and Latin words without any real semantic connection to the Hebrew root. By


\(^{15}\) Rome, Biblioteca Angelica, Ms Lat. 3, fol. 2r, upper margin: “Curavit frater Aegidius Viterbiensis Eremita.” This work was dedicated by Giles to the monks of his monastery; see fol. 769v: “Fratris Aegidii V. ord. Eremitarum S. Augustini iussu scripta sunt haec quanquam inculcata, inversa dura et quae recte vix percipi possint. Maluit tum fratres suos his utcumque uti posse quam omnino errare.” On fol. 785v, Giles of Viterbo signed the last folio of the manuscript.


\(^{17}\) See Abate, “Filologia e Qabbalah,” pp. 434-435.

\(^{18}\) Paris, BNF, Ms Lat. 596.
connecting the Hebrew roots to and combining them with their Hebrew, Greek and Latin correspondences, Giles intended to reach a sort of basilar and primeval language.\textsuperscript{19}

By then, the study of Hebrew lexicography by Christian kabbalists was already established after that Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522) interpreted David Qimḥi’s \textit{Sefer ha-Shorashim} in his \textit{Rudimenta Linguae Hebriacae} (1506).\textsuperscript{20}

Besides mystical and kabalistic works, the major topics in Giles’ Hebrew library were grammar, lexicography and exegesis.\textsuperscript{21} The contact and exchange with the most brilliant intellectuals of his time allowed him to collect an enormous quantity of Hebrew books. Augustinian friars like Gabriele della Volta, popes like Leo X (1475-1521), Jewish scribes like Menahem, who had already copied an exemplar of the Palestinian \textit{Targum} for Giles in 1504,\textsuperscript{22} and many others – Jews, converted, humanists


and cardinals – helped him to purchase, copy, and translate Ancient and Medieval Jewish works.\(^{23}\)

Hebrew teachers were in great demand at that time; nonetheless, there is little information about Giles’ former teachers. We know, for instance, that the Jewish cabalist Baruch of Benevento (16th century) translated the *Zohar* into Latin for Giles and that the converted Felice da Prato (ca. 1460-1549) translated the mystical work *Sefer ha-Temunah*. Probably they were the first ones to instruct him to the Hebrew *rudimenta*.\(^{24}\)

In 1515, Giles was still longing for an excellent master of Hebrew; from his eminent position, he could only yearn for the best.

3. **LEVITA’S EXPERTISE**

Well-trained in the Masoretic and targumic tradition and in exegetical and philosophical literature, Elias Levita committed himself to the study of the linguistic and grammatical texts throughout his life, most notably to those of the great commentators of the 11th-13th century from the Sephardic tradition, like Avraham ibn Ezra (1089-1167) and the members of the Qimhi’s family.\(^{25}\)

Levita’s exegetical technique, as it is found in his lexicographical works, shows a predilection for philological and literal explanations, which remain close to the text; moreover, it contains passages enlightened by the symbolic interpretation and the midrashic legends. David Qimhi’s was his principal point of reference as Levita had taken an interest in the study of *Sefer ha-Shorashim* since his youth. Among the first samples of his handwriting, Levita’s Ashkenazi fast hand is recognizable in the mar-

\(^{23}\) See G. *Busi*, *Libri e scrittori nella Roma ebraica del Medioevo* (Rimini 1990) p. 91, and *Abate*, “Filologia e Qabbalah,” pp. 409-446.


gins of an incunabulum of *Sefer ha-Shorashim* printed in Naples in 1490 and held at present in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna.\(^{26}\)

Levita was also interested in the study of another outstanding lexicographical Jewish work: the talmudic and midrashic dictionary *Sefer he-‘Arukh* by Natan ben Yeḥiel from Rome (1035-1106).\(^{27}\) This is the only known Aramaic lexicon foregoing the writing of *Meturgeman*.

As witnessed by the ownership note in lower margin of the frontispiece - *Fratris Egidi Viterbiensis* (“Friar Giles of Viterbo’s”), one of the first incunabula of *Sefer he-‘Arukh*, printed in Rome between 1469 and 1472, entered Giles’ library before his election as cardinal in 1517.\(^{28}\) Levita added his own glosses, which are easily identifiable in the margins as they are introduced by the formula אַמְרָא אליאוֹ ‘, “Eliahu said.” Later, this phraseology became common in Levita’s nimuqim (‘explanations’), e.g. to the Giustiniani Venetian edition (in-folio) of *Sefer ha-Shorashim* of 1546. Bomberg’s edition (in-8°) of the 1546 *Sefer ha-Shorashim*, which remained the most popular reference for this work throughout the following three centuries, used Levita’s commentaries as well.\(^{29}\)

After migrating to Italy in 1495, Levita first lived in Padua; in 1509, he went to Venice, and worked (there) as copyist and Hebrew teacher until 1515. His copy of the Hebrew version of *Mozne ha-‘Iunim*, a philosophical work by Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111), dates back to this

\(^{26}\) Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Inc. K. 25 F. 2. Levita’s glosses are readable in the upper margin of the first recto of the copy, which belonged to the son of Asher Levi, the father of his pupil Mordekhai. On fol. 143r, the date “7th of April 1492” is noted; see Weil, *Elie Lévita*, p. 3.


\(^{29}\) *Sefer ha-Shorashim* was published first in Rome (1469), then in Naples (1490), and in Venice (Bomberg, 1529). The last edition was prepared by J. H. R. Biesenthal and F. Lebrecht, *Sefer ha-Shorashim: Rabbi Davidis Kimchi Radicum Liber sive Hebraeum Bibliorum Lexicon* (Berlin 1847, facsimile, Jerusalem 1967).
time and is now preserved in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna.\footnote{Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Ms 47 (fols. 60r-81r); see A. Z. Schwar\, Die hebräischen Handschriften in der Nationalbibliothek in Wien (Leipzig 1925), and Bejt-Arié, Eliyahu Levita, forthcoming.}

The first text Levita copied for Giles dates only to 1515 and consists of a compilation of Hebrew mystical texts.\footnote{London, British Library, Ms Add. 27199 witnesses the full text of Sode Razayya (“The Secret of Secrets”) attributed to the German mystic Eleazar of Worms (ca. 1176-1238) and includes the following works: Sod Ma’aseh Bereshit (“Secret of the Work of Creation”), Sod ha-Merkavah (“Secret of the Chariot”), Sefer ha-Shem (“Book of the Name”), Perush Sefer Yetzirah (“The Commentary on the Book of the Formation”) and Hokhmat ha-Nefesh (“the Wisdom of the Soul”); see G. Margalioth, Catalogue of Hebrew Manuscripts and Samaritan Manuscripts in the British Museum, part III section I, Kabbalah (London 1909) pp. 4-8; S. Weiss (ed.), Sefer Sode Razaya (Jerusalem 1988), and E. Abate, “Raziel a Roma, le copie di Egidio da Viterbo (1469-1532),” in L’eredità di Salomone. La magia ebraica in Italia e nel Mediterraneo, eds. E. Abate and S. Campanini (Ferrara forthcoming).}

In the colophon of this manuscript, Levita remarks on Giles’ zeal in the study of Jewish literature:

I wrote this book for a wise man among the Gentiles, a righteous and upright man, priest of the order of St. Augustine and his name is Giles. General of all the priests of this Order in all the Christian countries. May God grant him the study and understanding of this book and the rest of his sapphire books that he has purchased and commissioned and in which he invested great money and intends to invest more until he will possess all of our books.\footnote{London, British Library, Ms Add. 27199, fol. 601r: וכתבתי הספר הזה לאחד מחסידי אומות העולם איש תם וישר מכהני במות שנטו אגושטינו שמו אדון זידייו ראש וקצין על כל כהני הבמות הנזכרי׳ אשר בכל מדינות ארץ הנוצרים. השם י维奇ו להגות בו ולהבין מה שכתוב בו ובשאר ספירי ספריו אשר קנה והכתיב והוציא ממון רב עוד ידו נטויה להוציא ממונו עד שיהיו לו כל הספרים הנמצאים אצלינו; see Weil, Elie Lévita, p. 75, and Bejt-Arié, Eliyahu Levita, forthcoming.}

Many years later, in 1538, in a sort of apologetic foreword to his work on Biblical masorah, the Masoret ha-Masoret, Levita recalled the first meeting with Giles. Some extracts from this text underline the prestige which Levita held as the major expert of Hebrew grammar and language of his time in the eyes of the prior of the Augustinians:\footnote{See C. D. Ginsburg, The Massoreth ha-massoreth of Elias Levita: being an exposition of the Massoretic notes on the Hebrew Bible: or the ancient critical apparatus of the Old Testament in Hebrew (London 1867) pp. 96-97, and G. E. Weil, L’archétype du Massoret ha-Massoret (Strasbourg 1961).}
I left my place and went to Rome, where resided a very distinguished nobleman, a prince of great dignity and wise like Solomon, and his name was Cardinal Giles. When I heard his fame, I paid him a visit. When he saw me, he asked me about my affairs. I said, “Know, my Lord that I am the German grammarian, who possesses the sundry secrets connected with the grammar and the Scriptures, for I have always been occupied with this work, therefore, is no man to be found who is more conversant therewith than I am [etc.].”

When the prince heard my statement, he came to me and kissed me with the kisses of his mouth, saying, “Art thou, my lord, Elias, whose fame has travelled over all countries and whose books are to be found in every corner? Blessed be the God of the Universe who brought you hither, and bade thee come to meet me. Now Abide with me and be my teacher and I shall be to you as a father [etc.].”

Not long after that encounter, Levita and his family moved to Giles’ palace in Rome, where they remained for more than ten years. Most of Levita’s grammatical works were encouraged, commissioned and financed by Giles himself: *Sefer ha-Harkhavah* (1517), *Baḥur* (1518), and *Pirqe Elijahu* (1519), all include a dedication to Giles. They were published in the Hebrew print house, which three members of the Jewish community, the brothers Isaac, Jacob and Yom Tov, sons of Avigdor Levi, opened in Rome in 1517. They could count on Giles’ direct protection against the censorship which the Dominicans had imposed on Jewish print. Since 1525, the great humanist and scholar Sebastian Munster (1488-1552) corresponded with Levita and provided Latin translations for his texts. In addition, the first recension of the Biblical concordance by Levita, *Sefer ha-Zikhronot*, still lying in manuscript form, was composed at that time. 

34 Elias Levita, *Masoret ha-Masoret* (Venice 1538) fols. 8-9: עזבתי את מקומי, ובאתי עד רומי, ושם שר גדול מאד, חשן נשא הוד, חכם כידידיה, שמו קארדינאל איגידייה, שמעי מתפלל, הכרתי בוחלק. כשמעי מהללו, בקרתיו בהיכלו. וכאשר ראני, על אודותי שאל אמרתי עז שמעי כל ימי עסוק אני בדקדוק ובפסוק כי כל ימי עסוק אני בדקדוק ובפסוק, ברוך אלהי העולם אשר הביאך עד הלום והקרה אותך الدنيا, ואתה פה עמוד עמדי, ותהיה לי לרב, ואני אהיה לך לאב...


In 1527, the sack of Rome suddenly interrupted this longstanding collaboration, and Levita was compelled to leave his Roman dwelling.

4. **Introduction to Meturgeman**

In what was to be the last of his years in Rome, Levita had already begun his major lexicographical work, *Meturgeman*, a thesaurus of Aramaic roots stemming from the *targumim* of the Bible. He completed his work in Venice in 1529. An autographic copy of this text in its entirety is held in Rome. An authorial introduction, which dates to 1531 and differs from the front matter in the edition of *Meturgeman* printed at Isny in 1541, serves as foreword to this manuscript.

The copy is dedicated to Giles of Viterbo and includes remarkable advice on text structure and the author’s historical and lexicographical perspectives.

As for the contents of *Meturgeman*, the introduction highlights the similarities and innovations in comparison with the dictionaries by David Qimḥi and Natan ben Yehiel. While *Sefer he-‘Arukh* includes Aramaic words from the Talmud, the *midrashim* and later rabbinic literature, *Meturgeman* was conceived as a *Sefer ha-Shorashim* of Aramaic roots including all the verbs, the names and the words that are found in *targumin*

---

37 Rome, Biblioteca Angelica, Ms Or. 84.

38 Besides the differences relating to the introduction, the entries in the manuscript copy (Biblioteca Angelica, Or. 84) are more longwinded. The edition is more concise and includes vernacular glosses in German and Italian to make the different meanings of a root more apparent. The use of such glosses resembles the use of vernacular glosses in the tradition of *Sefer ha-Shorashim*, in Provençal and other languages, with an exegetical and explicative purpose; cf. J. Kogel, “Le’azim in David Kimhi’s Sefer ha-shorashim: Scribes and Printers through Space and Time,” in The Late Medieval Hebrew Book in the Western Mediterranean: Hebrew Manuscripts and Incunabula in Context, ed. J. Del Barco (Leiden 2015) pp. 182-202.

39 Rome, Biblioteca Angelica, Ms Or. 84, fol. 2r: אמר אליהו ב'אשר הלוי האשכנזי המחבר את הראשת שדשהלווה תבויה הנendale ת-semibold עליון כך שיום קראתי שפר בקיחתא Localization of the script and glosses: יישר בלשון ראמי ול' אני שובד קרא השכברני שעשת עליון כלו ספרו העלם ושפתו המילול המנומכו מותרות וברות עבריאי זכותבי אלו וראתי אל ימי מקה עליון כלו ספרו העלם מלח דאתי אל כלו אדתי ומחלו מקה אדתי זכותבי וברות עבריאי זכותבי כלו ספרו העלם.

of the Torah, the Prophets and the Writings. It incorporates the biblical roots, which are disposed according to the alphabetic criterion adopted by David Qimhi. The examples used to develop the meanings of each lemma are chosen from the Bible and from the corresponding Aramaic paraphrases and exegesis in Targum Onkelos, Yonatan or Yerushalmi.  

A further inner subdivision of the entries of Meturgeman resembles the structure of Sefer he-'Arukh: the various meanings of a lemma do not spring from a single ideal root, like in Sefer ha-Shorashim; instead, as in Sefer he-'Arukh, they are distributed through different entries according to their semantic connotation.

It is likely that Levita collated and exploited a good deal of copies of the targumim, which Giles made available to him, for this work. In the introduction, Levita delved into the complexity and variety of the manuscript tradition of targumim and compared it with the more regular and homogeneous biblical one. The history of the transmission of the targumim is outlined for the first time, and the late rabbinic origin of the vocalization and accents signs is demonstrated to contrast with the antiquity of the biblical consonantal text.

40 Rome, Biblioteca Angelica, Ms Or. 84, fol. 2r: א לך אתך כל שורש לפי הענינים המוצאים ב ו מなどで והברך כל יום קבל אחלק לע ענינים אחלקהו לע ענינים

41 Rome, Biblioteca Angelica, Ms Or. 84, fol. 3r: והנה אהלך כל שורש לפי הענינים המוצאים ב ו מようで והברך כל יום קבל אחלק לע ענינים אחלקהו לע ענינים

42 Rome, Biblioteca Angelica, Ms Or. 84, fol. 3v-4r: כי הספרים הם מתבוססים מזא...
and more accessible to Giles, he did not hesitate to turn to St. Jerome and to enlarge upon the authority of the oldest kabalistic commentators on the Bible, ‘like Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai in Sefer ha-Zohar, and in Sefer ha-Bahir as well, the niqud is not mentioned at all.’

On fol. 4v of the manuscript introduction, Levita comments on his own title:

And I entitled this work Meturgeman which is the Aramaic translation of 'melitz [an interpreter] among them’ [Gen 42, 23], that is ‘meturgeman among them’ in Aramaic. And ‘it will be to you as a mouth’ [Ex 4, 16], and it will be for you as an interpreter.

During the ancient synagogue liturgy, the meturgeman was the ‘translator,’ the person who explained the reading of the Hebrew Bible through the Aramaic paraphrases to the audience. The title alludes, as a sphragis of Levita himself, to his work and to his life. Throughout his life, Levita played a humble role, the function of a mediator, similar to the role of the meturgeman in the liturgical service: his teaching and his enlightening reading of the Bible allowed his scholars and readers to better compre-
hend the difficult passages of the Hebrew text and language and contributed to their vulgarization.

The closing lines of the introduction recall the circumstances that caused the great delay in the drafting of Meturgeman: in fact, the work was already started in 5286 (1526); however, the catastrophic sack that took place in the following year forced Levita to leave Rome and look for a new and safer home, and delayed the work’s progress:

The town of Rome was taken and plundered, and all my books were stolen. I had already composed more than half of Meturgeman, but after the raid, I remained with only few quires and pages. 45

As most of the first quires of Meturgeman got lost during the sack, the redaction was suspended and was only begun anew two years later when Levita recovered his tranquility in Venice.

The colophon of Meturgeman dates to 10th Tishri 5290 (1529) and the last entry of the dictionary is Tishri. 46 At that time, Levita worked as reviser for the publishing house of Bomberg, taking part in the edition of both the Sefer ha-Shorashim by David Qimḥi and Sefer Arukh by Natan ben Yeḥiel. 47

45 Rome, Biblioteca Angelica, Ms Or. 84, fol. 4v: בראתי את הכתב הספר בברומא, והנה התחלתי בחבור זה רבתא,min 5588, שנכאת עולם. ויהי.Attributes: 2921 = [Jerusalem 2005; in Hebrew]) pp. 64-79.

46 Rome, Biblioteca Angelica, Ms Or. 84, fol. 425v: ותרשי שבעה, התscribe שבעה, בתקי מה לשבוע. בע הלך יב מזון, ובו הלך כב מוזון. זכרו תהילה לאל אשר ברא העולם בתשרי, אשר הואיל שיזך שרותיה עלי תשרי. וסימתי את עבודה בעשר בתשרי. והפרט אם תסיר האות האחרון מן האות השני בתשרי והיינו ד"ז לפר"ק.

47 Weil, Elie Lévita, pp. 112-115.
The introduction to *Meturgeman* was added more than a year later, at the beginning of the month of Shevat 5291 (1531). It is likely that during this interval (1529-1531) the author completed a second re-reading and a full correction of the work. After that, the manuscript was sent to Rome and became part of Viterbo’s library.⁴⁸

5. THE TRADITION OF *METURGEMAN*

The exemplar of *Meturgeman* held in Biblioteca Angelica includes 425 medium size paper folios, and is written in different brown inks with a quill pen.⁴⁹ The text was not entirely written in Levita’s book hand. The analysis of the script points to two different hands. Levita’s fast pen produced the greater part of the copy: his distinctive *ductus* and the particular shape of the letters, notably ג, מ, פ, and ש, are easily recognizable.⁵⁰ Other sections can be attributed to a second Ashkenazi book hand, probably the hand of a scribe working under the surveillance of the author:⁵¹ Levita’s revisions and corrections are readable in the margins all along the text, including the sections that were penned by the other scribe.

As regards the layout, the specimen displays the following scribal features: incipits and closing formulas are carved in wider square characters; the roots and some of their inflections are underlined in red ink; the vocalization is in grey ink. Along the right margin, biblical references in Latin were added by two different humanistic handwritings, probably in order to make the study of the text easier for Giles.

---

⁴⁸ Rome, Biblioteca Angelica, Ms Or. 84, fol. 5v: ויהי דבר החשמן אלי לאמר למה לא כלית את מלאכתך בחבור הספר אשר אמרתי לך וספרתי לו את כל הקורות חש ישים אלי והשלמתיו היום יום ד׳ בערב ראש חדש שבט שנת רצ“א לפרט קטן פה ויניסייא.
⁴⁹ Rome, Biblioteca Angelica, Ms Or. 84, 216x288 mm, paper, fols. 425 [424]; see E. Abate, *Catalogue and Historical Survey of the Hebrew Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Angelica, Rome* (Leiden forthcoming).
⁵⁰ The long curved horizontal bar of the ג the short descending traits of the מ, and the ש similar to a כ with a dot inside, are very typical; peculiar is the shape of the semi-cursive ש that is rounded and with a long and curved upper stroke; cf. Le Déaut, “Jalons pour une histoire,” 509-533, and Beit-Arié, *Eliyahu Levita*, forthcoming.
The copy of *Liber Radicum* in St. Andrews University Library\(^52\) resembles the described layout of *Meturgeman*. Incipits and closing formula are written in majuscule; underlining in red ink marks out different textual functions, and biblical references in Latin are noted in the right margin. Both manuscripts contain additional notes and glosses by Giles of Viterbo. The similarities are due to their content (both are lexicons) and the intellectual context of redaction (both were commissioned by Giles of Viterbo).

The exemplar of *Meturgeman* which I described above is a second redaction; according to Levita’s account, the primitive version of the work went almost entirely lost during the sack of Rome. It is unclear whether some quires of this earliest text survived the destruction. Yet, it is important to highlight that the exemplar completed in 1531 is not the only extant autographic copy. A second incomplete manuscript, which has remained nearly totally unexplored so far, is held in at the BNF in Paris.\(^53\) This exemplar lacks several pages and quires (notably between the roots starting with the letters ב and ג) and ends after the roots starting with the letter ד. At some point, the fragment was bound together with a different manuscript including some chapters of *Targum Yonatan* to Isaiah,\(^54\) and thus served more readily as instrument for interpreting the Aramaic text.

An examination of the writing, the text layout, and the content reveals this undated copy of *Meturgeman* to be an autograph by Levita as well. The Ashkenazi traits of the script correspond to the specificities of his handwriting. A second Ashkenazi hand, to which part of the entries between the roots בָּה and בֵּי are due, is also detectable. The margins also contain some corrections by Levita himself, who used to supervise the execution of his work in its entirety, including the sections that were penned by his assistant.

---

\(^{52}\) Scotland, St. Andrews, Ms BS 1158 H4 D2 C2.

\(^{53}\) Paris, BNF, Ms Hébreu 98/2, paper, fols. 40r-99v; cf. the notice in ZOTENBERG, *Catalogue des manuscrits Hébreux*, p. 10: “fragment d’une concordance hébraique et chaldaique.” In the old list of manuscripts belonging to Giles of Viterbo (Paris, BNF, Ms Grec 3074) published in ASTRUC and MONFRIN, “Livres latins et hébreux du Cardinal Gilles de Viterbe,” pp. 551-554, the content of the lexicon is described as follows: “sciarascim quorundam vocabulorum in hebreo et chaldeo.” In both cases, the author of the Hebrew-Aramaic *shorashim* is not given. In the online catalogue an updated notice mentions Elias Levita as the author of the text.

\(^{54}\) Paris, BNF, Ms Hébreu 98/1.
The layout of this manuscript closely resembles the *mise en texte* of *Meturgeman* dating to 1531 and the manuscript of the 1519 *Liber Radicum*. Red motifs mark different sections and functions of the text; the incipits and the ending formulas are executed in wider letters; in the right margin, all along the text, a Latin humanistic hand noted the biblical references. In the left margin, Latin translations of the lemmas are also noticeable, a feature which is missing in the 1531 copy.

The fragmentary *Meturgeman* does not have an introduction and does not include any trace of Viterbo’s handwriting either. Levita only provided an introduction to the completed works and it is likely that this copy was never finished. This leaves us to wonder whether this manuscript could conceivably represent an earlier stage in the redaction of *Meturgeman*, which foreran the text-form achieved in 1531.

When did the specimen reach Paris? One cannot exclude that Giles received not only the dedicated copy of 1531, but also the quires of the unfinished *Meturgeman* (which does not contain bear marks pointing to his ownership). In this case, the incomplete specimen could be in the section of the Cardinal’s collection that, after his death, came into the possession of Cardinal Niccolò Ridolfi (1501-1550), successor of Giles as bishop of Viterbo. This collection was then bequeathed to the Medici’s books heritage, which followed the transfer of Caterina de’Medici (1519-1589) to France.

A second hypothesis, namely that the copy remained in Levita’s hands, is equally plausible. When Levita was in Venice in 1536, he served the French ambassador and erudite Georges de Selve (1508-1541) as Hebrew teacher. Upon his departure, he presented him with the second recension of the biblical concordance *Sefer ha-Zikhronot*. Georges de Selve brought this exemplar back to France and it is at present held in the Bibliothèque Nationale. Given the circumstances, there is a possibility that the incomplete *Meturgeman* was sent to Paris as part of the ambassador’s belongings.

---

57 Paris, BNF, Ms Héb. 134-135.
As yet, these questions remain unanswered. A full philological and critical comparison of the two manuscripts of the Meturgeman with the 1541 printed edition could shed new light at least on the enigma of the re- daction, but so far, it has not been attempted. A brief sample which takes into account the parallel transcription of the first entry of the lexicon, the root אבב - clearly indicates that there must be three different Vorlagen. Paris, BNF, Ms Héb. 98/2 appears as an intermediate stage of the text, situated between the extended form preserved in Rome, Biblioteca Angelica, Ms Or. 84 and the more concise text of the edition of 1541.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rome, Biblioteca Angelica, Ms Or. 84, fol. 7r</th>
<th>Paris, BNF, Ms Héb. 98/2, fol. 46r</th>
<th>Isny 1541</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>אבא אבב כשם הבן אבב</td>
<td>אבב כשם השעורה אבב</td>
<td>אבב כשם הבן אבב</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>וכלים נורה ח маш אבב</td>
<td>נורו נורה אבב</td>
<td>כלים נורה ח маш אבב</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>בירת החב🗣ות אבב, כשם הבן אבב</td>
<td>בירת החב🗣ות אבב, כשם הבן אבב</td>
<td>בירת החב🗣ות אבב, כשם הבן אבב</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>כלים נורה ח маш אבב</td>
<td>נורו נורה אבב</td>
<td>כלים נורה ח маш אבב</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>כשם השעורה אבב</td>
<td>מועט אבב</td>
<td>כשם השעורה אבב</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>שעריא אבבך</td>
<td>אבבך</td>
<td>שעריא אבבך</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>תחתון בראשית, חנית</td>
<td>תחתון בראשית, חנית</td>
<td>תחתון בראשית, חנית</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>דואון מחבב, אבב מעריא</td>
<td>דואון מחבב, אבב מעריא</td>
<td>דואון מחבב, אבב מעריא</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>התדרמה, אבב מעריא</td>
<td>התדרמה, אבב מעריא</td>
<td>התדרמה, אבב מעריא</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>פור תבואה, פר איבא</td>
<td>פור תבואה, פר איבא</td>
<td>פור תבואה, פר איבא</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>תמק פפרא, פפרא</td>
<td>תמק פפרא, פפרא</td>
<td>תמק פפרא, פפרא</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>מאיביאו הז פריה, ודינ</td>
<td>מאיביאו הז פריה, ודינ</td>
<td>מאיביאו הז פריה, ודינ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אייבא, אייבא אימל, אימל</td>
<td>אייבא, אייבא אימל, אימל</td>
<td>אייבא, אייבא אימל, אימל</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אייבא, אייבא אימל, אימל</td>
<td>אייבא, אייבא אימל, אימל</td>
<td>אייבא, אייבא אימל, אימל</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ואיבא, ואיבא אימל, אימל</td>
<td>ואיבא, ואיבא אימל, אימל</td>
<td>ואיבא, ואיבא אימל, אימל</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>שניאו, שאן בורש איבא</td>
<td>שניאו, שאן בורש איבא</td>
<td>שניאו, שאן בורש איבא</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

58 The printed editions are properly two, as Paulus Fagius provided at the same time a second edition of Meturgeman preceded by a Latin introduction, which is addressed specifically to a public of Christian Hebraists.
6. *Tishbi and Kabbalah?*

To conclude, I wish to draw attention to Levita’s attitude towards the transmission of kabalistic beliefs to anonymous non-Jewish readers as it is reflected in his lexicon *Tishbi*.

It is generally assumed that Levita was not particularly consonant with the mystical enthusiasm of his patron Giles of Viterbo. However, he does not seem to have held particular prejudices with regard to kabalistic lore. In the second part of the aforementioned colophon of the compilation of mystical texts copied in 1515, he referred (with a touch of irony?) to a kabalistic and astrological belief that he personally happened to adhere to: “I completed this holy book today, on the fourth, that is Hoshana Rabba 5276 [1515], on which, I saw my head in the shadow of the moon. Blessed be God as I am assured not to die this year.”

Levita copied manuscripts of mystical texts mainly in the first half of his career and for Giles of Viterbo. Afterwards, he concentrated his efforts mainly on grammar, exegesis and lexicography.

Even if allusions to kabbalah are found elsewhere in Levita’s work (like in the manuscript introduction to *Meturgeman*), things changed dramatically after his departure from Rome and the death of his powerful patron in 1532. Levita seems to become more and more prudent and sensitive in his references to these topics, especially in front of his coreligionists, who could consider him to be transgressing Jewish Law. In the introduction to the *Masoret ha-masoret* of 1538, he felt the need to justify himself and his teaching activity to non-Jews in front of a hypothetical rabbinic tribunal: “The sages had not enacted a decree that whosoever teaches a Gentile commits a sin.”

According to Levita’s self-defense, the rabbinic authorities did not prohibit *tout court* from teaching to non-Jews. They only forbade the di-

---


60 *Levita, Masoreth ha-masoreth,* fol. 9r: יד非遗 בו ראיה חסכמה אלא גורר נרה שולמנד: לא מין היה עבדה.
vulgarization of Jewish Law and of subjects that contained esoteric doctrines like the speculation on the Genesis, on Ezekiel’s vision, and the book *Yetzirah*, “which must only be disclosed to the pious, to men of wisdom and intelligence who are of the children of Israel.”

It is easily noticeable that the mystical speculation on Genesis, the vision of Ezekiel and the book *Yetzirah* were among the main issues of Giles of Viterbo’s interests in Judaism, which Levita himself fostered.

And yet, in *Masoret ha-masoret’s* introduction, he pretended to be “guiltless and innocent”; his teachings, “whether addressed to Christians or to Jews, were simply related to the grammar of the sacred language and to the explanation of its rules.”

Even if it is not easy to provide a final assessment of his views on the study of the kabbalah by non-Jews, it is certain that Levita could continue undisturbedly in his teaching and scholarly activities. The mystical works he copied survived unpublished, keeping their status as “secrets.” Hidden from indiscreet eyes, they continued to circulate in the esoteric collections of the Christian Hebraists, like Johann Albrecht Widmannstetter (1506-1557), who ordered a copy of the compilation produced for Giles in 1515. For centuries, Levita’s grammatical and lexicographical works provided undisputed, yet widespread references to the linguistic study of Hebrew language.

During his collaboration with Paulus Fagius at Isny in 1541, Levita completed the first edition of his *Tishbi*. The lexicon was intended as a collection of Hebrew terms and neologisms that are missing in *Sefer ha-Shorashim* and in *Sefer he-‘Arukh*, gathering the terminology that had

---


63 The manuscript owned by Widmannstetter, at present held in Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Ms Heb. 81, is an exact copy of London, British Library, Ms Add. 27199.

64 The printed editions are two, as Paulus Fagius provided at the same time two editions of *Tishbi*, in Hebrew and with a Latin introduction and a Latin translation of the text.
entered the Hebrew language in the postbiblical and medieval period, including medical and technical loan words from Greek, Latin and Arabic, and glosses in Italian and German dialects.

A set of entries in this work relates to the mystical and midrashic tradition. There are lemmas dedicated to mystical concepts and elements like Gilgul (reincarnation), Kabbalah and Pardes, to the demons Ashmedai, Lilith and Samael, and to the angels Metatron and Raziel.

In presenting such matters, Levita never gave up his caution. More than once in Tishbi, its author is keen to stress his ignorance and pretends to his lack of interest towards the kabalistic and mystical doctrines. In the final part of the entry Kabbalah, the text is as follows:

... Kabbalah is divided into two important branches, Speculative kabbalah, and Practical kabbalah. However, I can’t explain the topic because of my ignorance, as I haven’t studied this science and I don’t know anything nor I understand anything of these saint teachings.

The entry Pardes (‘Paradise’) ends with a similar statement:

... The masters of the tradition taught that four people entered the Pardes, hiding the true name of the highest throne, which is well known in the kabbalah, but I don’t take care of this here.

---

65 This entry includes a reference to Giles of Viterbo and to his exegesis of Hebrew terms as presented in section 2 of this article. Elias Levita, Tishbi (Isny 1541) s.v.


---

67 Levita, Tishbi, s.v.

68 Levita, Tishbi, s.v.

---

Under the lemma *Lilith*, Levita quotes from the well-known medieval *midrash Alphabeta of Ben Sira*, which recounts the origin of the amulet for the protection against the female demon in detail.69 Once more, in the final part, the account is suddenly truncated: “Shall continue to read in this book [Alphabeta of Ben Sira], those who believe in such things.”70

In previous Hebrew dictionaries, explicit references to the mystical tradition were hardly found; therefore, these entries can be considered as an implicit tribute to his former exchange with Giles of Viterbo and the Christian kabbalists. In spite of his caution, Levita’s attempts are an absolute innovation in Jewish lexicography and a first endeavor to investigate these topics in a modern detached perspective.71

---


70 *Levita, Tishbi, s.v. לילית / Lilith:* "Under the lemma Lilith, Levita quotes from the well-known medieval *midrash Alphabeta of Ben Sira*, which recounts the origin of the amulet for the protection against the female demon in detail. Once more, in the final part, the account is suddenly truncated: “Shall continue to read in this book [Alphabeta of Ben Sira], those who believe in such things.”"

71 "Both in the printed editions of *Tishbi* and *Meturgeman*, the last entry is dedicated to the lemma תשב״וי / Tishbi, which is one of the principal qualifications of the prophet Elias, and another *sphragis* of our author. In *Tishbi*, Levita challenged directly Qimḥi’s exegesis. The text runs as follows: "Both in the printed editions of *Tishbi* and *Meturgeman*, the last entry is dedicated to the lemma תשב״וי / Tishbi, which is one of the principal qualifications of the prophet Elias, and another *sphragis* of our author. In *Tishbi*, Levita challenged directly Qimḥi’s exegesis. The text runs as follows:..."
Recibido: 08/03/2016

Aceptado: 18/10/2016