

I.

ATTEMPT TO EXPLAIN THE LEGEND ON A BRONZE HEBREW SEAL, FIGURED IN THE SOCIETY'S PROCEEDINGS, *ante*, p. 39; WITH REMARKS ON THE USE OF IMAGERY AMONG THE JEWS, BOTH IN ANCIENT AND MODERN TIMES. BY PROFESSOR J. SCOTT PORTER, BELFAST.

Mr Porter's learned paper was read to the meeting, and we regret being able at present to give only the following notice of its contents :—

“The letters forming the legend of the Seal, as described before (page 39), though unquestionably Hebrew, are not precisely of the kind that is common in the texts of Hebrew Bibles, whether printed or in MS.—they belong to the alphabet or class of alphabets which are called Rabbinical. In the common character they are, as I conceive, to be read thus :—

* שלמה : בר : יצחקאמעמס : אלה : ולין *

the letters being grouped and divided by points as above. If furnished with vowels, &c., in the usual manner, they will read as follows :—

: שְׁלֹמֹה בֶר יִצְחָק - אִמְעָמַס אֱלֹה וְלִי :

‘SH'LOMO, BAR YITZCHAK-AM'AMOS : ELLE VELAV.’

The English of which is, ‘Solomon son of Isaac Amamos : these are his tapestries.’ It would hence appear that the matrix was used by a Jewish manufacturer of tapestries in the middle ages, to impress a seal on the product of his looms, for the purpose of authentication ;¹ just as the manufacturers of linen, and probably of other fabrics, at the present time, use stamps with various devices, with same intent. The chief difference is, that modern linen seals are cut in *relief*, so as to stamp an impression on the web with coloured ink ; whereas the matrix is cut in *intaglio*, for making an impression with wax.”

Mr Porter's paper next entered into a critical examination of the different Hebrew characters in support of his explanation of the legend, and then concluded as follows :—

“It is highly probable that the turbaned head, seen in profile upon the impression, is a portrait of ‘Solomon bar Isaac ;’ for the features are decidedly of a Jewish cast. The head is somewhat flattened—apparently for want of room.

“The writer of the notice in the *Proceedings* seems to think that the presence

¹ Or perhaps by a merchant, in order to identify the goods which had passed through his warehouses.

of this head is adverse, if not irreconcilable, with the Jewish origin of the matrix; 'as the Jews have invariably eschewed all imagery.' I submit to the learned writer that he has fallen into a mistake in this particular. He is not singular, however, in his opinion; for many well-informed Christian authors have attributed an invariable disuse of imagery to the Jews: and I understand that some Jews at the present day feel the greatest repugnance to make or even to possess any engraved or sculptured representation of any being, whether actual or imaginary. But such is by no means the general feeling of the nation at present, still less was it so in ancient times.

"The alleged ground for this scruple is the second precept of the Decalogue, '*Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image,*' &c.; but the context shews that this precept is limited to the case of *idolatrous* images. On looking into the Rabbinical Commentaries on this text, I find that Aben-Ezra says nothing that bears on our present inquiry; but Rashi has a short scholium on the word פסל, '*graven image:*' על שם שנפסל: *i. e.*, '*for the purpose of being idolized,*' or put to an idolatrous use. The *Torath Qaton*, otherwise called *Ir Qaton* (the *Law or Guardian of the Youth*), a compilation of the 613 precepts which the Jews find in the Pentateuch, is somewhat more strict than Rashi, but yet is far from condemning all engraving or sculpture. It says that a Jew is prohibited 'from making for others, or procuring to be made by others, *any image that is worshipped*. Even when not intended to be worshipped, the making of it alone is unlawful—for it is written, *Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image,*' &c. (Precept xxvii.) Here, still, the prohibition is levelled against the making or procuring of such images as are used for idolatrous purposes. As to other images, the law given through Moses was so far from prohibiting them, that in some cases it expressly commanded them to be made. In the 25th and 26th chapters of Exodus, we find an injunction that several images, both graven and otherwise, should be made and placed in the tabernacle, some of them even in the Holy of Holies; *e. g.*, two cherubim with outstretched wings overlooking the mercy-seat; almonds and flowers on the golden candlestick; cherubim were embroidered on the curtains of the Most Holy Place, and on the hangings of the sanctuary. Moses was expressly commanded to make a brazen serpent, Num. xxi. 8. When Solomon erected the temple, he covered the walls with sculptured cherubim and other figures; the 'molten sea' rested on twelve oxen of bronze. There is a well-conceived representation of this magnificent fount in the *Pictorial Bible*, at 1 Kings, chap. vii. On the splendid throne which Solomon made for himself, of ivory overlaid with gold, there were twelve sculptured lions, two of which were placed on each of the six steps. (2 Chron. ix. 17-19.) On the Arch of Titus

at Rome is a representation of the golden candlestick from the second temple, on the base of which some animal, or perhaps a sphynx, is sculptured. The coins of the Maccabean princes have the manna-pot figured on one side, and Aaron's rod that budded on the other. In the middle ages, it was quite common for the Jewish scribes to ornament their MSS., even of the Scriptures, with representations of men, angels, animals, &c. Many copies of the Book of Esther are extant having the margins filled with pictures of the events mentioned in the text:—Ahasuerus and his court; Haman, with an axe, superintending the erection of a tall gallows for Mordecai; the valiant resistance of the Jews, &c. &c. (See Tychsen, *Tentamen de Variis Hebb. Codd. Generibus*, p. 31, n.) And an edition of Esther has been published on vellum, the text being engraved in copperplate, in imitation of manuscript, with pictures of this sort on the margin, the whole having the exact form of a synagogue roll. (See Masch, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, i., p. 80.) I have myself seen many roll MSS. intended for synagogue use, to every one of which a silver pointer was suspended; and in most instances—so far as I can recollect, in *all* cases—this pointer was in the form of a human hand. Many editions of the Hebrew Bible have been published by Jews, of which Masch gives a large enumeration in the *Bibliotheca Sacra*, and several of these have engraved title-pages, ornamented with figures of various kinds. For example, he describes an edition, apparently published by the celebrated printer Gerson, at Constantinople, in the beginning of the 16th century; the title-page is a wood-cut, the upper part of which represents a hound chasing three hares, while an angel sounds a horn: on the right side is displayed a peacock standing on a hare; below is another angel on horseback; farther down, a garland or wreath, out of one side of which a dog is pursuing a stag, while from the other rushes forth an angel riding on a stag, &c., &c. That this edition was printed by Gerson is almost certain, because *this very engraving* is used as the title-page of *two other works* which were published by this Jewish printer at Constantinople,—the one in 1522, the other in 1521. Now, the Gerson family had been compelled to leave Italy some years before, on account of their religion, and undoubtedly were conscientious Jews. (*Biblioth. Sac.*, i., 14-17.) In page 72, Masch describes a Jewish edition of the Pentateuch, in which the song of Moses is decorated with an elegant ornament representing various birds and animals, while at the end of Deuteronomy is an erect figure of a lion, cut in wood; 'the same,' says Masch, 'that is found in the edition of *Orach Chajim*, 1485.' Masch describes many other Jewish editions, of which he only says in general terms that they have 'engraved titles,' or 'ornamental devices.' I presume that several, if not all of these, have pictorial representations. Indeed, this is the

case with one very celebrated edition, of which Masch, though he gives a tolerably lengthened account of it, does not even say that it has ornaments of any kind. I allude to the famous edition published by Joseph Athias at Amsterdam, in 1667, a copy of which now lies before me. In this copy, the first or general title is engraved on copper, and from the date, 'ANNO MDCLXVII.,' seems intended for the Christian purchasers; but the three title-pages which are prefixed to the Anterior Prophets, the Posterior Prophets, and the Hagiographia, are strictly Jewish, the date being given *anno mundi*, according to the shorter computation; and the ornamental design in each case shews pillars, fruit, flowers, cherubs with trumpets, a spread eagle, and a small picture of the meeting of Jacob and Joseph in Egypt, with horses, camels, and attendants. I may add to all this, that respectable Jewish families are as fond of pictures as any others, and that some of them have, to my knowledge, paid handsome sums for the portraits of persons whom they respect and love.

"On these grounds I submit that, if the interpretation which I have suggested be admissible in other respects, it is not necessarily to be rejected on the ground of any supposed law or custom of the Jews on the subject of images or imagery. Even if some among them, at the present day, are excessively strict in their interpretation of the Second Commandment, their ancestors and their learned men in former times, especially those times to which we must refer this matrix, had no such scruples.

"What, then, was the date of this seal? Here palæography, I fear, will give but little help; and, in the absence of any historical notice of 'Solomon bar Isaac,' I shall not attempt to fix any precise era. Archæology might, perhaps, gather something from the form and workmanship of the matrix; but this inquiry I must leave to archæologists. All that I am enabled to offer is briefly, that the date must be somewhere between the time when surnames came into use, and the time when the antique bronze ceased to be employed in works of art generally. As to the place, if I am right in my interpretations, Solomon must have resided in some country where the Jews enjoyed such protection and security as enabled them to engage in manufactures, or at least in commerce. This indication, together with the name of Amama,—if I have correctly read the characters,—seems to point to Spain, under the rule of the Moorish sovereigns. If M. Meyer's be the true version of the name, the native region of the matrix could scarcely be any other than Spain. How it travelled to Scotland it were fruitless to conjecture."