
BOOK REVIEW

Ilana Tahan. *Hebrew Manuscripts. The Power of Script and Image*. London: The British Library, 2007. 160 pp. ISBN 9780712349215.

The first researcher who looked at ancient Hebrew manuscripts as works of art was Vladimir Vasilievich Stasov (1824—1906), a prominent Russian critic of arts and music. It was he, who became the initiator of the wonderful album of décor samples of Hebrew manuscripts from the collection of the Imperial Public Library in St. Petersburg “*L’Ornement Hébraïque*”¹. Basically it was this publication that has begun the thorough study of not only the content but also of the form of Hebrew literary monuments. Since then many colourful albums and monographs, dedicated to the study of one or another aspect of Hebrew manuscripts, were published. Among them, in the first place, the works of B. Narkiss, J. Gutmann, M. Beit–Arié and Colette Sirat² must be noted, but of course this list can be significantly broadened.

I, however, cannot remember any significant work concerning Hebrew manuscripts, which was written by a direct keeper of any famous collection of manuscripts. And let me emphasize it: not collection or exhibition catalogues (naturally, these works abound), and not the history of formation of a particular collection, but a re-

search or popular science work written on the basis of “his / her own” collection of Hebrew manuscripts³.

This type of work is exactly what we have before us. Ilana Tahan has been the keeper of the collection of Hebrew manuscripts of the British Library for many years and her name is well-known to researchers of Hebrew manuscripts. Her unceasing amicability and deep competence make it so much easier to search for necessary manuscripts, to order those and receive them on time in your temporal possession in the reading hall of the library. With no exaggeration it can be said that Ms. Ilana Tahan is the model of manuscript keepers. Undoubtedly, it can also be said that Ilana Tahan has been lucky to be the keeper of unique treasures. The collection of Hebrew manuscripts of the British Library is one of the most substantial in the world. The collection numbers about 2500 manuscripts. The majority of collection manuscripts are described in great detail in the catalogue of G. Margoliouth⁴. But the collection of the British Library distinguishes itself not only by, or, to be more precise, not so much by the number of manuscripts as by their quality, if the expression may be tolerated, “number of masterpieces per 100 units of storage”. The collection is especially rich with illuminated manuscripts. The book of Ilana Tahan is a story of Hebrew manuscripts with emphasis upon traditions of their decoration and illustra-

¹ D. Günzburg, V. Stasov, *L’Ornement Hébraïque* (Berlin, 1905). Concerning the history of making of this album and its importance for the development of Jewish Art see: B. Narkiss, *Illuminations from Hebrew Bibles of Leningrad. Decorations in Hebrew Medieval Manuscripts from the Imperial Public Library in St. Petersburg Now the Saltikov-Shchedrin Collection at the State Public Library in Leningrad*. Originally published by Baron David Gunzburg and Vladimir Stasov. Accompanied by a new “Introduction” with 25 additional plates by Bezalel Narkiss (Jerusalem, 1990).

² Unfortunately, so far there is no biographical bibliography of publications dedicated to Hebrew manuscripts. From my point of view the following works may be singled out as the main modern ones: Narkiss, *Hebrew Illuminated Manuscripts* (Jerusalem, 1969); J. Gutmann, *Hebrew Manuscript Painting* (London, 1979); M. Beit–Arié, *The Makings of the Medieval Hebrew Book. Studies in Paleography and Codicology* (Jerusalem, 1993); C. Sirat, *Hebrew Manuscripts of the Middle Ages*, ed. and transl. by N. de Lange (Cambridge, 2002).

³ Perhaps, the monographic album “Hebrew Treasures of Petersburg. Scrolls, Codices, Documents” (St. Petersburg, 2008) that I published may be ranked among works of this type; in it various aspects of making and existence of Hebrew manuscript books are portrayed exclusively by examples of Petersburg collections (collections of NLR and IOM RAS). I am, however, not a keeper of the stock of Hebrew manuscripts.

⁴ G. Margoliouth, *Catalogue of the Hebrew and Samaritan Manuscripts in the British Museum* (London, 1899—1915), i—iii; (reprint: London, 1965). Concerning the history of collection formation and the catalogue structure see also B. Richler, *Guide to Hebrew Manuscript Collections* (Jerusalem, 1994), pp. 108—10.