

AT \$5,500 a copy, Mike and Linda Falter's facsimile edition of the Kennicott Bible is hardly a bargain.

But when you learn that it took five years to produce, in a limited edition of 550 copies, that it contains 238 hand illuminated pages with gold and silver, that it necessitated the development of a new kind of vellum, and that the binding is fine Moroccan goat skin over wooden boards, you begin to see where the money is going.

The original Kennicott reposes in Oxford University's Bodleian Library, inaccessible to all but the most carefully vetted students of Hebrew manuscripts. It was written in Spain in the late 15th century by Moses Ibn Zabara, at the commission of Isaac Ibn Don Solomon di Braga, a La Coruna businessman who wanted it as a gift for his son.

Widely renowned as one of the most beautifully-illuminated Hebrew manuscripts in existence, its pages are adorned with a range of rich colours, burnished gold and silver leaf, in the stylized designs of artist Joseph Ibn Hayyim.

After the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, the Bible disappeared, to resurface in Oxford in 1771, where English Christian Hebraist Benjamin Kennicott purchased it from a Patrick Chalmers, for the exorbitant sum of 50 guineas.

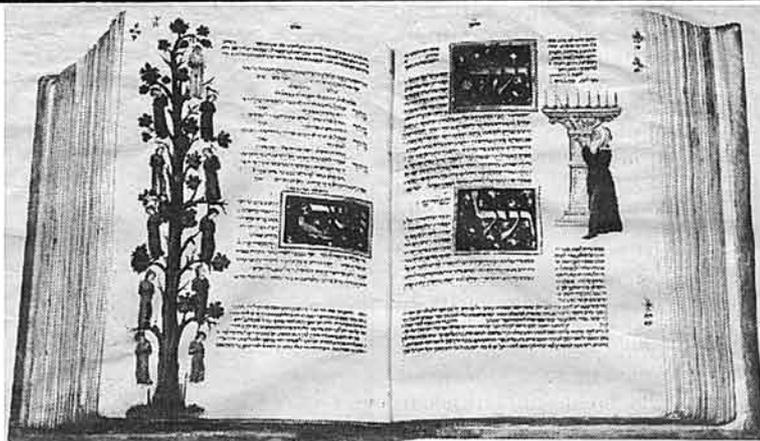
Mike Falter, a London College of Printing graduate and a micro-computer software salesman, discovered it in the Bodleian. He decided that it was an ideal vehicle for his new Sunday afternoon hobby. On numerous visits to the British Museum, in the past, he had lamented the fact that only two pages could be read of each of the beautiful Hebrew manuscripts on display. Why not produce facsimile editions of such manuscripts, he thought, reproducing every detail, down to the fingermarks and the "foxing" (discoloration caused by dampness) around the edges of the pages, so that more people would be able to look through the numerous illuminations.

He took his girlfriend, Linda, to look at the Kennicott and she was as keen on the idea as Mike. It is an understatement to say that they underestimated the difficulties; by the time they had completed the Bible, they were married, with two children.

Their first problem was persuading the Bodleian to let them photograph the Bible. When agreement was finally secured, the library insisted on using its own photographer, who shot in less than ideal conditions, thus causing trouble when it came to matching up colours later in the process.

Then came the long quest for a printer, prepared to experiment with new paper and devote his press to the painstaking work of producing what the Falters were determined would be the most accurate facsimile ever made.

There were no takers for the project in Britain, but a phone call from Italy was followed by the arrival at the Falter home of Luigi Canton, a



As good as old

David Horovitz

Milan printer who had already begun experimenting with different kinds of paper, and had also done some work on reproducing the intricate box-binding that has preserved the Kennicott so well.

"Luigi came over brimming with confidence," Mike recalls. "He was sure that this was going to be a wonderful book, and he wanted to be part of it. But when he saw all the gold in the original, his face fell. He knew he didn't have a machine that could do the delicate gilding."

Eventually, he heard of a \$400,000 machine in Switzerland that could achieve a similar finish to the original, but he decided it would be better to gild by hand. "Seven people worked for four months gilding the 550 editions." To cut a long story short, Luigi took on the job, the colour transparencies were flown to Milan, and the presses began to roll.

It took several trips to Oxford to get all the colours right, a task not helped by the sheer range of shades used by Ibn Hayyim. The real difficulties though, came with the paper. "We used uncoated paper, and the slightest variation, even in the humidity in the press, could cause it to contract or expand," Linda said. "So Luigi had his air conditioner overhauled, and we got through."

They had expected the printing to take about six weeks, but it took nearly four months, tying up Luigi's best press. On Saturdays, his staff would have to rush through all the other orders that had been building up during the week.

Finally in March 1985, the Kennicott facsimile was printed, gilded, bound and ready for sale. The Sunday afternoon hobby had eventually led to both Mike and Linda giving up their jobs, and borrowing money from every source they could find, but the final product was well worth the attention they had lavished on it.

It has the look and feel of the original; one is almost scared to turn the pages for fear of damaging them. The Bodleian itself has paid the Falters the supreme compliment of putting the facsimile on display. In the past 200 years, only 30 scholars

had been allowed to study the original. Now it is available to everyone.

Over 300 copies of the Kennicott—which comes with a companion volume of introduction by Prof. Bezalel Narkiss—have been sold, to university libraries, scholars and private individuals.

THE FALTERS were so buoyed by their success that they embarked on their second facsimile edition, that of the 944-page Rothschild Miscellany, a one-volume collection of more than 70 Jewish liturgical and secular works in Hebrew, commissioned around 1470 in Italy.

Housed in the Israel Museum, the Miscellany presents hardly less of a challenge than did the Kennicott Bible, but the Falters are old hands by now.

"When we approached the Bodleian with our idea for the Kennicott Bible, they looked at us as if we were mad," says Linda. "After all, we had no experience at all. They suggested that perhaps we should start off with a pamphlet. Now that we've got the Kennicott behind us, museums take us a little more seriously."

Again the Falters began to experiment with various papers—the original Miscellany is inscribed on foetal vellum, the skin of unborn calves—and to carefully match the 12-colour illuminations that decorate no fewer than 816 of the Miscellany pages.

Again the gold leaf is being laid by hand, and minute care is being taken to reproduce every aspect of the original, down to the tiny pricking holes made by the scribe to guide him in the writing of the text.

Despite the difficulties, the Miscellany should be completed by next year, and the Falters are already eyeing the British Museum's Barcelona Haggada for their next project.

"Over the years, we are hoping to build up a whole library of these fabulous books," says Mike, "and obviously, with each one, our experience is broadening, and the problems are more easily surmountable."

Although it is taking them less time to produce the facsimiles now, the use of costly materials and skilled craftsmen is keeping prices high: the advance price for the Rothschild Miscellany is \$5,500 but post-publication it rises to \$6,300. □



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