RELIGIOUS LITERATURE

When in the eighteenth century some Sephardi rabbis came to the conclusion that most Ottoman Jews had very little knowledge of Judaism and barely understood Hebrew, they took upon themselves the task of creating new educational tools designed to reach the broadest possible audiences in order to teach them the rabbinic tradition and make accessible the Bible. Although the goals of nineteenth-century Sephardi westernizers radically differed from those of eighteenth-century rabbis, it is those rabbis who had prepared a new reading public consisting of both men and women which later became the target audience of Ladino secular literature. Furthermore, those rabbis were the first to use Ladino as a language of mass education. In an effort to indoctrinate the most ignorant readers and listeners, they translated many Hebrew texts (including some popular cabbalistic works) into Ladino and produced accessible and entertaining Bible commentaries.
The three most prominent Sephardi educators active in Istanbul in the first half of the eighteenth century were Jacob Huli (c.1689-1732), Abraham Asá (c.1710-c.1780), and Jonah Ashkenazi (d. 1745). Huli produced the first two volumes of *Meam Loez*, a comprehensive popular Bible commentary in Ladino, which, having been reprinted many times, enjoyed great and long-lasting fame among Sephardim. The *Meam Loez* series begun by Huli in 1730 continued, albeit with some interruptions, through 1899 when Haym Shaki produced a commentary on The Song of Songs.

In the Hebrew introduction to his volume on Genesis, Huli states that his goal is to explain the Torah “to all men and women and the youth of Israel.” A vernacular Bible commentary had become indispensable because the language of the few available volumes of the Ladino Bible published in earlier periods was hardly intelligible to those who did not know Hebrew.

Asá, an exceptionally prolific translator, produced the first complete edition of the Ladino Bible (1739-1745). While his Pentateuch (as one can see below) barely differed from the earlier editions, Asá's translations of the Five Scrolls used a highly readable language close to the spoken vernacular, which made them popular for generations. In 1739, he also translated the *siddur* (prayer book). Asá's translations of rabbinic works on various subjects written between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries formed a basic library of vernacular texts for the Sephardim illiterate in Hebrew.

Huli's and Asá's publishing enterprises succeeded despite various difficulties thanks to the commitment of Jonah Ashkenazi, a famous printer born in Galicia, who established a printing press in Istanbul in 1710. He not only published, in Istanbul and Izmir, 125 books including
Huli's *Meam Loez*, Asá's *Bible*, and most of his other translations, but wrote programmatic introductions to some of these volumes, such as the Pentateuch and the prayer book.

In the *hakdamah* (introduction) to Asá's Pentateuch presented here, Jonah Ashkenazi formulates the objectives of this publication: making the Bible accessible to all Sephardim; engaging women, seen as guardians of the tradition, in religious education and encouraging them to read; and warning the Jews about Christian falsehoods in the face of a growing influence of European culture. This was, in a nutshell, the program of the new educational movement. Although the language of the “Publisher's Introduction” contains many Hebrew words (marked here in bold), most of them were commonly used and eventually entered the vernacular. As one can see, this text is a lot more readable than Asá's *Genesis* but considerably more archaic than *The Golden Garden* (also presented on this website).

Some pages of the available copy are damaged, which is indicated in the translation by ellipsis. The punctuation largely absent in the original was added for the ease of reading.

Idem, "Assa, Abraham Ben Isaac" in ibid.

Avraham Yaari, "Ashkenazi, Jonah ben Jacob" in Encyclopedia Judaica.

See Me'am Lo'ez. El gran comentario bíblico sefardi, eds. Gonzalo Maeso, David, and Pascual Recuero (Granada, 1964); Relatos del pueblo ladinan (Me'am Lo'ez de ÉXODO), ed. Aitor García Moreno (Madrid, 2004).