

Gutenberg and Bomberg

In the 1450s, in Mainz, Germany, Johannes Gutenberg printed the Christian scriptures using moveable type. Gutenberg's Bible, the first surviving European printed book made using moveable metal type, is dated to around 1454 or 1455. The Bible was not the first text printed by Gutenberg—that honor belongs to a Latin grammar for schoolchildren, of which no complete copy survives. His monumental Latin Bible came to symbolize moveable type's potential to reproduce texts quickly and accurately. Gutenberg printed about 180 copies, either on paper or vellum. Before coming to Yale, this copy of the Gutenberg Bible had been in the library of the Benedictine abbey at the Austrian city of Melle. Amid economic depression after World War I, the monks sold it to fund the abbey's restoration. It was acquired in 1926 by Mary Emma Stillman Harkness, who presented it to Yale in memory of her mother-in-law, Anna M. Richardson Harkness. The Yale copy is one of twenty-one complete Gutenberg Bibles known to survive.

In 1517, in Venice, the Flemish businessman Daniel Bomberg, a Christian, and his editor Felix Pratensis, a Jewish convert to Christianity, completed the printing of an innovative edition of the Hebrew Bible. Their exquisite work was a milestone in the history of Hebrew printing. They produced the first printed edition of the complete Jewish Bible in which the text of each of its twenty-four books was accompanied by rabbinic commentary and—except

for three books—by traditional Aramaic paraphrase. Only eight years later, Bomberg, this time in collaboration with a Jewish editor, published a second, improved edition of this Bible with further commentaries. It became the model for the so-called Rabbinic Bible, a new class of Jewish Bible that continues to be printed today.

From 1516 until 1549, Bomberg's printing house produced more than two hundred Hebrew books. Its editions became famous for their beauty and accuracy. Bomberg employed both Jews and Christians, and his printshop is a well-known example of Jewish-Christian collaboration in the production of early printed Hebrew books. However, one should note that such collaborations were nearly always shaped by Christian norms and regulations.

Bomberg produced Hebrew books for the Jewish market as well as for Christians interested in Jewish learning. He printed the 1517 Rabbinic Bible in two different editions: the first part of the Christian version contains a Latin dedication to Pope Leo X that is omitted in the Jewish edition. In the eighteenth century, the volume on display here belonged to a Jewish owner, Leizer ben Mordekhai Weinheim, and it eventually passed ownership to the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews in the nineteenth century; it is now part of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library's collection.