does not see religious institutions as potentially forces for social change, rather than reflections of it. And so he does not see the reformed confraternities of Italy as the matrix in which were nurtured the aspirations towards religious reform that animated the Council of Trent. For the reformation of confraternities in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries was not just a matter of the kinds of organizational and demographic change that Weissman has so persuasively outlined. It was a spiritual reformation, one that proceeded in an uneven and piece-meal fashion before the Council of Trent, and only afterwards came to be regularized and directed by the ecclesiastical hierarchy. This spiritual transformation can be traced in a careful reading of confraternal statutes, a reading that treats them as devotional texts and seeks to recover their religious import. A study of confraternities as religious institutions would complement and in a sense complete Weissman’s social history of the Florentine confraternities, and lead us closer to an understanding of the religious history of Renaissance Italy.

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Students of fifteenth-century Italy will be interested in the existence of this curious work, which is moreover of some importance in the history of Jewish studies and in the history of rhetoric. Judah ben Jehiel Rophé was born sometime between 1420 and 1425, probably near Vicenza. He became a rabbi in Ancona, was licensed to practice medicine, directed a Jewish academy of the studia humanitatis, and received the title of Messer Leon from Frederick III in 1452. Subsequently he lived in Padua, Mantua, and Naples, fled Italy in 1495, and died in Macedonia about 1498. Among his works are Hebrew treatises on grammar, logic, and rhetoric, the latter of which has now been edited and translated into English with great learning and care by Isaac Rabinowitz. The volume is dedicated to the memory of Harry Caplan, who took much interest in its preparation.

Entitled Sêpher Nôpheth Šîphîm, or The Book of the Honeycomb’s Flow (from Psalms 19:10), the treatise on rhetoric was apparently written in Padua in the late 1460’s and was first printed in Mantua by Abraham Conat in 1475/6. The rhetorical theory it expounds is that current in Italy after the recovery of the complete text of Quintilian in 1416, but untouched by the knowledge of the Greek tradition that was being introduced by George of Trebizond and others during the course of the century. Messer Leon’s sources are primarily Cicero’s De inventione, Rhetorica ad Herennium, Quintilian, and Victorinus. He did not know Greek, but cites Aristotle from Averroes’ Middle Commentary on the Rhetoric and from the Rhetorica ad Alexandum, which he presumably knew in one of the two medieval Latin translations. He also refers twice to Boethius’ De differentiis topicis and twice to the commentary on Rhetorica ad Herennium attributed to Alanus. On the model of the Rhetorica ad Herennium the treatise is arranged in four books, called “Gates,” and treats all five parts of rhetoric.
What is interesting about the work is that all examples of rhetorical divisions and techniques are illustrated from the Hebrew Bible and the system of classical rhetoric is even used as a critical tool to interpret the scriptures. Classical rhetoric is thus treated, like Aristotelian logic, as universally valid, and the author makes no effort to identify those aspects of biblical rhetoric that were distinctive of ancient Israel or of the Hebrew language. Rather, he is at pains to show that the Hebrew Bible, as a source of all wisdom, contains within itself the entire system of classical rhetoric in its finest form. Beyond that he aimed to produce a manual of rhetoric for the training of Jews in the civic life of fifteenth-century Italy. There is some evidence that the work was so used.

Lacking a knowledge of Hebrew I cannot comment on the text or the accuracy of the translation. Rabinowitz has a fine understanding of classical rhetoric and related matters. I wish he had provided some discussion of the choice and significance of Hebrew words as translations of Greek and Latin technical terms. Messer Leon consistently translated rather than transliterated terminology.

The rhetorical corpus of the Renaissance is vast, much of it still in manuscripts or early editions. Modern critical editions are a major need for those of us interested in the history of rhetoric, and we welcome the accessibility of this unusual work, edited with such devotion.

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