

The seismic history of Italy in the Hebrew sources

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Abstract

Over more than two thousands years the Italian Jews have produced an impressive quantity of documentary materials. To spot the data of the seismic events, therefore, has not been easy, and the results can still be supplemented, though the research has been carried out on a quite large and rich material both manuscript and printed in the Hebrew language. The crop was large and interesting, since documents about eleven different earthquakes in Italy have been found. They are texts of various kinds, sometimes just short notes, but very often long liturgical poems or whole writings, through which the Jewish minority traces its own historical memory and its own understanding of these exceptional tragic events. From the Middle Ages till the first half of the XIX century, Italian literature in the Hebrew language records the earthquakes of Ancona (1279), Norcia (1328), Ravenna (1468), Ferrara (1570), Lugo (1688), Ancona (1690), Mantua (1693), Leghorn (1742), Lugo (1781), Siena (1798) and Alessandria (1829). Naturally, in the towns that had a major Jewish community the data are richer and give more detailed information: this is the case, for instance, of the earthquake of Ferrara, in the second half of the fifteenth century. Here Azaryah de' Rossi gives us not only a vivid account of the reactions of his fellow Jews, but also the fullest and most organic essay on the causes and the meaning of the earthquakes. We also possess a remarkable abundance of Hebrew sources on the earthquake that struck Leghorn in January 1742: among other very interesting documents, there is also a true daily diary, in which the strength and the nature of the shakes are recorded, during the quite long period the earthquake lasted, that is till the end of March of the same year.

Key words *historical seismology – Italy – Hebrew sources*

Among the many accusations made against the Jews during history, there is also the one – most improbable but pertinacious – of being cause of earthquakes. Some Christian documents of the Middle Ages record this prejudice: for instance in Rome, around 1020, when an informer maintained that the Jews were scoffing at a crucifix inside the synagogue right at the moment the town was shaken by a tremendous earthquake. The source tells that when the supposed culprits were put to death, the earthquake immediately came to a miraculous end (Ademarus of Chabannes, 1880, col. 64; Guidoboni, 1985). Another ritual accusation is recorded in Ancona, in April 1279 (this

charge can be deduced from some hints in a poem by Shelomoh de' Rossi described below: see Elia, 1960), while, in the mid-sixteenth century pope Pius V, well-known for his anti-Judaism, publicly attributed the cause of the earthquake of Ferrara (1570) to be the town inhabited by «Jews and marranos» (see Guidoboni, 1984, p. 117).

Thus we face a very ancient prejudice, with strong roots in the Christian majority which was happy to unburden its conscience of the suspicion of a divine punishment, putting the blame for such an incomprehensible calamity on the traditionally uneasy Jewish minority. In this context, therefore, we find the voices coming from the other side very interesting, especially as up to now they have been almost completely unpublished. We are talking about

the writings of the Italian Jews about the earthquakes which, during the centuries, wrought havoc in our peninsula. They are texts of various kinds, mostly private, through which the Jewish minority traces its own historical memory and its own understanding of these exceptional tragic events. It so happens that, facing the accusatory voice of others, we can listen to the voice of Judaism: our knowledge of the seismic history of Italy is therefore improved, and, in the meanwhile, the Jewish identity becomes more clear-cut, sometimes in parallel and sometimes in alternative to the culture of the majority.

The Italian Jews have produced, over more than two thousand years, an impressive quantity of documentary materials. If you realize that more than one third of all dated Hebrew manuscripts existing in the world were copied in Italy (Beit-Ariè, 1991, p. 169), you will understand how difficult it is to spot the data of seismic events: the results I state here are therefore provisional and can be supplemented, though the research has been carried out on a quite large and rich material both manuscript and printed in the Hebrew language.

The oldest Hebrew document which records an Italian earthquake is a liturgical poem of Shelomoh ben Mosheh de' Rossi, written on the occasion of the earthquake of Ancona in 1279 (Zunz, 1865, p. 650; Davidson, 1924-1933, No. alef/6367). At that circumstance the Jews established one day of fast and penitence and the poem of de Rossi was recited in the ancient Italian synagogue in the centre of Ancona.

A Hebrew statement of an earthquake has been found in an appendix to a liturgical codex, copied in the fourteenth century by Avraham rofe ben Yehi'el da Bolsena (Jerusalem, Jewish National and University Library, ms 1391 [Heb 8°-4281]; this text was identified and translated by Cesare Colafemmina). It is a detailed description of the consequences of the earthquake which happened in December 1328, with epicentre in Norcia. The Jewish witness lively describes the effects of the earthquake: «... the bases of the house were shaken like a hut. The recesses of the basement hit here and there and sounded for the roar like a bell»; he tells also, with the same liveliness,

of the tremendous consequences: «a quantity of corpses everywhere, there was no limit to the horror. In the wrath of the Lord of hosts the earth obscured. Because of this earthquake in one house seven Jews died. Five of them were children of the same mother; the wretched woman breathed her last while giving birth to the sixth. Only one son of hers, who was in Rome, escaped, as well as a daughter who was taken out from under the fallen woman». It is worth noting that this Hebrew text dates the earthquake from «the first day of the month of Tevet in the year 5089 from the creation», corresponding to December 4, 1328. Instead, according to the *Catálogo dei Terremoti Italiani dall'anno 1000 al 1980* (Postpischl, 1985, No. 215), this earthquake happened on the first day of December.

At the foot of this tale, another hand has written, more than one century later, a short note about another earthquake: «There was a great earthquake in 5217, and we had to lie underground. The Lord got angry. This happened at 11 in the night of the eighth day of Tevet (December 4, 1456). The earth quaked and the dwellers of the towns died: the earthquake passed through all the lands of Puglia as far as Naples and the province of Calabria».

As already noted in the above-mentioned examples, there is one common element in all the Hebrew tales of the seismic events: the bent for attributing the earthquake to divine wrath. It is the God of Israel, the Lord of hosts, who shows his grudge, who punishes his people, and the whole earth with them. Through the shakes, the destructions and the mournings God recalls the believers to faithfulness, since he wants them to repent and redeem. This is a characteristic idea of ancient Hebraism, which we find well-stated in the Bible: according to this very ancient explanatory pattern the outstanding phenomenon – in this case the earthquake – is nothing other than a form of the divine language, one of the way God lets men know his will.

If, therefore, the Jews did not consider themselves wizards able to cause calamities (of which they were instead victims), they thought they were responsible for the divine wrath, caused by their own faults and transgressions.

On the other hand, this kind of mentality is also shared by the medieval Christian culture: also Christians (when they did not unburden the responsibility on the Jews) thought they were involved, having caused a divine punishment. Thus – in the above-mentioned earthquake of Central Italy in 1328 – «a mercy was created among the Christians – it is the same Hebrew source to inform us – and they walked, moaned and wept scourging their shoulder and lashing their clothes».

Going on in the review of the Hebrew sources we find a short note – written in the flyleaf of a Hebrew codex of the Bibliothèque Nationale of Paris – which informs us about an earthquake felt in Ravenna on Monday 6th of June 1468 (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, ms hébr. 1185/1; Baratta, 1901, dates the same earthquake from June 7, 1468).

Then, for more than one century, we do not have any other news till 1558, when we find another note, about Siena. In this last note we read: «Today, Wednesday 13th of April 5318 (1558) there was a dreadful earthquake: many houses fell... blessed be the Lord, who did not withdraw his pity from us and helped us, thanks to his great mercy» (London, Jews' College, ms Montefiore 519/2, fol. 45b).

We now reach 1570, which is indeed a very important date for our review: it is the year of the earthquake of Ferrara, and this event left many important traces in Hebrew literature. A Jew from Ferrara, Azaryah de' Rossi, wrote the fullest and most organic essay about the causes and the meaning earthquakes. The long treatise of de' Rossi – which is contained in the *Me'or'enayim* (Enlightenment to the eyes), printed in Mantua in 1573 – takes as its starting point the shakes felt in Ferrara from the autumn of 1570 (see Busi, 1993). De' Rossi gives a vivid account of these events: thus we know the reactions – sometimes unbecoming and emotional – of the Jews of Ferrara: «When people were sleeping in their beds, suddenly a very strong noise was heard, which lasted about half-tenth of an hour... actually it has happened to many brave men – here in Ferrara... when the earth began to shake – to hurry away naked, without clothes, owing to fear, in the night». Together with this kind of accounts,

we find more literary parts, where de' Rossi discusses a wide range of historical precedents; he displays a great erudition and freely puts Hebrew sources near classical ancient texts and near Christian authorities, being able, nevertheless, to keep alive the attention of the reader. This long essay (of which I have just published the first complete Italian translation) focuses on the theme of the earthquake as divine punishment. It is therefore worth pointing out that this is not only a valuable source for studying the consequences of the earthquake of Ferrara, but also important evidence of the cultural wealth of Italian Judaism in the late Renaissance.

In that troubled autumn, de' Rossi's voice is the most important but not the only one that arises from the large Jewish community of Ferrara. As a witness of Jewish religious practices – which probably became much more intense under the anxiety produced by the earthquake – ten blessings also remain, written by the famous rabbi Shemu'el ben Elhanan Archivolti (Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliothek, Cod. hebr. Add. 4, fol. 197a-200b).

Yosef ha-Kohen too, in his *Sefer'emeq habakah* (Almbladh, 1981, p. 105.6-7) tells of the earthquake and adds an interesting piece of information about the accusation the Pope made against the Jews of being cause of the earthquake. This charge is recorded also in some Christian sources; only this Hebrew document, however, states the objection the Duke of Ferrara is supposed to have made to the Pope: «Pay attention – said the Duke – where do you see the most number of cracks? In the churches of the priests or in the synagogues and in the Jewish schools?».

In addition to these writings, three poems on the earthquake of 1570 have reached our era: one of these – only fourteen lines, unpublished and included in one codex of the Academy of Sciences of Budapest – was written by Rabbi Yehudah Moscato, a refined Jewish literate, who lived in Ferrara in the second half of the sixteenth century (ms Kaufmann A.541, fol. 23b-24a).

The second one is a short anonymous poem, published by Hirsch Perez Chajes at the beginning of the nineteenth century. This text has

a solemn visionary tune – rich in biblical references – as was customary in contemporary Hebrew poetry: «Be handed down to the future generation the day of the slaughter, when the towers fell, / the day the Lord made the earth shake and tremble to multiply the dead. / Against Ferrara he stretched his hand, he made the people live under tents...» (Chajes, 1909).

The third poem – included in one codex of the Jewish Theological Seminary of New York – was published by Bernstein (1930): much larger than the previous two, this work in verse is distinguished by its violent anti-philosophical polemic. The anonymous author sees in the earthquake a true theophany of the God of Israel; he talks with harsh sarcasm to whom would like to give a natural explanation of the event: «How can the philosopher raise up his head, / attribute the cause of this to natural elements, and investigate, and inquire into the secrets the Lord has hidden? Woe betide his soul, because great is his evil: / with the scourge of his tongue he despises heaven, / the wicked overbearing and slanderer. / Listen now then, mad Aristotle, you that gave your signs as secure signs / and you that spread the plague through foreign ideas. / What do you say now, you dead dog, / and what do you know about the secret of He who is in the heavens?». I quote this short example in order to give an idea of a sharp position, many poles apart from the calm and well-documented thought of Azaryah de' Rossi. The different approaches to the same argument, as well as the different reactions to a dramatic and fearful event undoubtedly witness the wealth and complexity of the Jewish culture in the late sixteenth century in Ferrara. Faced with an event that upsets normal life and that makes people ask worrying questions, the answer of Italian Judaism is various and it appeals to different theoretic tools. As we have seen, the available documentation (which included learned prose as well as excited religious visions, anti-philosophical invectives as well as traditional liturgical poems), is also to be noted – especially in the important case of Ferrara – for its abundance, which was quite unexpected.

After 1570 we have to wait almost one hundred years before finding, in the Hebrew litera-

ture, other accounts about earthquakes: at the end of the seventeenth century we come across the earthquake of Lugo in 1688, the one of Ancona in 1690, and the one of Mantua in 1693.

In regard to Lugo we have a prayer written on the occasion of the earthquake by Yohanan Ghiron (1646-1719), Rabbi of Florence (Roma, Biblioteca del Collegio Rabbinico, ms 123/3: see Di Segni, 1990, pp. 110-111): note that the same prayer was taken up again in 1742, when a new earthquake – as we will see – struck Leghorn.

With regard to Ancona, in order to recall the 21th Tevet 5451 (December 23, 1690), a special purim was established, a special thanksgiving day for having escaped the danger (Lewinski, 1956, p. 312). This purim, preceded by one day of fast, is recorded in a liturgical booklet – 'Or boqer – written by Ya'aqov Yisra'el ben Shemu'el Shalom a name that corresponds to the Italian Pacifico or Pacifici), and printed for the first time in Venice in 1709 (reprinted in 1748; Steinschneider, 1852-1860, col. 2791 No. 7509). In this booklet we read a detailed and effective description of what happened on that winter day, three centuries ago: «In the year (5)451, the twentyfirst day of the month of Tevet (December 23, 1690), the night of the holy Saturday, at a quarter past eight, God shook the earth: in particular, there was in this town a very strong and mighty earthquake. Immediately in the town cries and weepings were heard, asking for the synagogue to be opened. In the twinkling of an eye the synagogue was full of men, women and children naked and barefoot... They cried then with a loud voice in front of the aron... Thanks to God in the Jewish neighbourhood only one house fell from the foundation. Inside there were six persons; digging went on all night long...».

Three years later, namely in 1693, we find a sermon given in Mantua by an anonymous Rabbi, on the occasion of the earthquake that struck the town on 6th of July (Budapest, Academy of Sciences, ms Kaufmann A 153/2). Above this we have a prayer for the earthquake by Mosheh Zacuto, which was printed the same year in Mantua, in a booklet of four pages (however, I was not able to see a copy of

this publication, quoted by Steinschneider, 1905, p. 134, No. 203).

We possess also a remarkable abundance of Hebrew sources on the earthquake that struck Leghorn in January 1742. The abundance of documentation is strictly related to the great importance reached by the Jewish community of Leghorn during the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. Among the private texts we find a short tale by Yediyah ben Nahman Nahmani – published by Isaac Rivkind (1953). Here the author tells the misfortunes which happened to him on the night of Wednesday 12th Shevet 5502 (January 1742) (24). No doubt, it was a very troubled night for our Jew: in a few hours he was assailed by an outlaw who – wanting his money – almost killed him, and straight after he was victim – as well as the other dwellers of Leghorn – of the earthquake. Nahmani wrote a lively and unusual account of these frightening happenings; in the tale his private misfortune is mixed up with the general disaster, till the happy end, which follows after violence and anxiety: the teller was able to escape the outlaw, and the Jewish community was able to escape the destruction caused by the earthquake.

Among the public documents on the earthquake of Leghorn, we find a quite long text in Hebrew, entitled Shever ba-Metzarim and written by Refa'el Meldola (printed in Leghorn, 1742: see Steinschneider, 1905, p. 140, No. 240). One copy in the JNUL in Jerusalem: R67A455), and a writing in Spanish (*Fiel relacion de los terremotos*) composed by Abraham de Bargas (Leghorn, 1742: one copy in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in New York); the two small works look very much alike, the second probably depending on the first. They are a true daily diary, in which the strength and the nature of the shakes are recorded, during the quite long period the earthquake lasted, that is the end of March of the same year. It is for many reasons noteworthy material: the particulars of the earthquake being recorded with the utmost precision (even the minutes each shake lasted are noted down), while the emotional reactions of the Jewish people are described: we can see almost a counterpoint between the

earthquake itself and the public demonstrations of contrition and piety, the rites held at the synagogue and the sermons that called the believers to repentance and devotion. To give an idea of the atmosphere of those days in the Jewish community we can point out the symbolic explanations given by the Hebrew preachers about the word *ra'ash* (earthquake in Hebrew). According to a typical method of the Hebrew exegesis, they read *ra'ash* as the acrostic of *riv*, *'eryut* and *shevu'ah*, which means quarrel, impure act and blasphemy, three deadly vices, which cause divine punishment. Or else they related the word *ra'ash* with *se'ar*, hair (that contains the same letters, written in the inverse order), to signify that the world is hanging on a hair and it is held up by the strong arm of the Lord.

Still on this earthquake of Leghorn we recall the thanksgiving prayers for having escaped the danger, written by Malaki ben Ya'aqov ha-Kohen and published in the booklet *Shivhe todah* (Leghorn 1743: see Steinschneider, 1905, p. 155, No. 273; one copy in the JNUL, S23V3392).

Between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries the Hebrew sources give us more information on earthquakes. A commemorative text – held in a codex now in Warsaw (National Library, ms 78/7, fol. 178b-185a) – was written on the occasion of the earthquake of Lugo which happened at the third hour and a half in the night of the 10th Nisan 5541 (April 4, 1781): the Rabbi of the community tells about the shake that troubled the small town in Romagna and about the Jewish believers running to the synagogue: the sermon followed in an atmosphere of emotion and it lasted all night long.

With regard to the earthquake of Siena of 11 Siwan 5558 (May 26, 1798), we have a thanksgiving prayer which was recited by the believers for having escaped the danger: the text has been preserved in a manuscript of the Cecil Roth collection now in the Brotherton Library in Leeds (see Roth, 1950, p. 521, No. 257). Furthermore, we possess a *Seder utefillah* written in Siena by Shimshon Hayyim Nahmani and included in the ms 267 of the Library of the Hebrew Union College in Cincin-

nati: however, since Shimshon Nahmani died in Reggio Emilia on August 9, 1779 (see Busi, 1992, p. 16), the earthquake that caused the composition of this Seder cannot be the same seismic event of 1798.

The last document I could trace concerns the earthquake that struck Alessandria during the night of 1st Heshwan 5589 (October 9, 1828): it is a liturgical booklet with a praise song composed by the Rabbi of the town Matityah ha-Lewi, and published in Leghorn the same year (Zevah todah, Leghorn 1828-1829; one copy in the JNUL, 23V3164).

After this date the Hebrew sources keep silent: this means that we are at the beginning of the emancipation era and that the Italian Jews slowly begin to leave their own linguistic heritage. While the minor Jewish communities vanish, the Italian language is more and more used to record the memories of the remaining major ones.

Acknowledgements

Researches have been carried out by SGA of Bologna and coordinated by E. Guidoboni, as part of the studies promoted by ENEL during the years 1983-87. Sources have largely been identified thanks to the consultation of the indexes of the Jewish National University Library of Jerusalem.

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