

Berlin Library saves the Erfurt Bible German team restores a mediaeval masterpiece

FROM REGINE WOSNITZA BERLIN

BERLIN'S State Library has embarked on a delicate project to save one of the world's most important Hebrew manuscripts the 14th century "Erfurt Bible." "This is a unique Jewish cultural artefact and an extraordinary textual, material and artistic product of Ashkenazi heritage," commented Malachi Beit Arie, professor of codicology and palaeography at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, who examined the text last December. "It is impossible to exaggerate the need to restore the damaged manuscript to its original glory." After eight months of painstaking work at a laboratory especially established for the purpose, the original beauty of about one third of the manuscript severely fire damaged in the Second World War has returned. The two volume Bible, which contains the text in both Hebrew and Aramaic, as well as commentary and ornamented pages with micrographic illustrations, is the largest known Hebrew manuscript. It weighs 50 kilograms, and each of its 1,068 pages is so large 629mm long and 470mm wide that it needed to be written on a whole goatskin. But while these details can easily be discerned, experts have not determined the work's exact origin. As far as is known, it was commissioned by a "Rabbi Shalom," but nothing precise is known either about him or his whereabouts. So the Bible has been named after the town of Erfurt, where after the destruction of the Thuringian Jewish communities in 1349 it was kept for five centuries in a monastery. Together with 14 other Hebrew Bibles and Sifrei Torah, the Erfurt manuscript was handed over to the Royal Library in Berlin in 1880. During the Second World War, the Bible was kept in the archives of the Ministry of Economics, where on February 3, 1945, bombs and the ensuing attempts to extinguish the resulting fire severely damaged it. After the war, the Erfurt Bible remained in East German archives for more than 50 years, before going on display at an exhibition on Jewish life and culture in West Berlin in 1991. "It was one of the most valuable and magnificent pieces of the exhibition," recalled Andreas Nachama, the show's curator and today head of Berlin's Jewish community. But it took another six years until the State Library decided to launch its DM350,000 £120,000 project to save the Bible, which is today insured for DM7 million. In highly complicated work, eight experts experimented for six months on specific methods to separate the stiff pages, to remove the animal glue, to moisten the pages carefully without damaging the ink, and to find the right technique to flatten the pages slowly, first by hand and then with the help of weights. "The parchment has to learn how to lie flat again of its own accord," explained Margit Hundertmark, who is supervising the restoration. "We needed an unbelievable number of test runs, because every piece of parchment reacts differently." In addition, the restoration process is being meticulously documented, and even the bodies of the tiniest insects, which had chewed holes into the manuscript and made the Bible their home in the 55 years it was stored in archives, have been kept. It is only in the most severe cases, though, that new materials are used to repair the original piece of work. "We are aiming at preserving the historical substance, and only add in an emergency," Ms Hundertmark said. "We want history to remain visible." If all goes to plan, she and her colleagues hope to conclude their work by the end of next year.