

JUDAISM
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Bodleian's unbroken Hebraica tradition

THE ORIGINS of the great collections of the world, in Hebraica just as in other subjects, usually lie in the efforts of individual collectors.

After a lifetime of single-minded collecting, the individual decides to place his treasures in an institution so that they can be preserved intact. Or sometimes, after his death, his family present the collection so that it can be named after him.

The Bodleian Library in Oxford has received benefactions in many subjects through such channels, but its Hebraica collection is unique in that it was a principal constituent of the library from the outset.

At first sight, it may seem odd that such a substantial collection of Jewish books should have been started in 1600, when officially there were no Jews in England. But Sir Thomas Bodley, who refounded the university library in 1598, was a type of man now almost, though not entirely, extinct.

A fervent Protestant, he was an accomplished linguist who knew the classical and modern languages, "but Hebrew particularly, the parent of all the others."

It is astonishing how many Hebrew books are listed in the first catalogue of the library, printed in 1605; they are overwhelmingly from Venice, where Hebrew printing was then in its prime.

Bodley took a detailed personal interest in these books, and one can still see at the end of the catalogue a page largely in Latin where he indignantly corrects some misprints in Hebrew.

The continued policy of collecting Hebrew material bore sensational fruit in 1693, when the library purchased two different collections which still attract a continuous stream of Jewish readers.

Item 80 in the collection of manuscripts bought from Dr Robert Huntingdon is Maimonides' "Mishneh Torah," with the author's signature, attesting that the text had been corrected against his original.

This manuscript is supremely important both for historical reasons and for the accuracy of its text; it is treated with great reverence by scholarly readers. Huntingdon bought it while acting as chaplain to English merchants in Aleppo.

The Prince of Wales is guest of honour at a dinner at the Bodleian Library, Oxford, next Tuesday to launch a £12 million appeal to renovate and modernise the library and endow new appointments to its research staff. Presiding over the dinner will be Lord Jenkins, Chancellor of Oxford University.

A second Maimonides manuscript, this one in his own handwriting throughout, came as number 295 of the 420 manuscripts bought from Professor Edward Pococke, the Regius Professor of Hebrew. It is the "Commentary on the Mishna," containing the tractates *Nézikin* and *Kiddushin*.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of these manuscripts for establishing the correct text, particularly since autographs of any medieval Jewish scholar are exceedingly scarce. It is sobering to reflect that, for both collections, comprising 1,020 manuscripts in all, the university paid only £1,300.

One of the most sumptuous Hebrew illuminated manuscripts in existence, and a masterpiece of medieval Sephardic art, came to the library in bizarre circumstances in 1771.

A young gentleman, Patrick Chalmers, entered the library carrying a Hebrew Bible written in 1476. Dr Benjamin Kennicott immediately recognised its importance and bought it for £52.10s.

The Bible had been copied by Moses Ibn Zabarrah and lavishly illustrated by Joseph Ibn Hayyim on behalf of their patron, Isaac di Braga. It was truly an exquisite production, an exact facsimile of which was published in London in 1985. No one has any idea where the original lay between 1492 and 1771.

In 1829 an event occurred which was to turn the Bodleian Library into a depository for the most important and magnificent Hebraica collection ever accumulated. This was the purchase of the famous Oppenheimer Library for £2,080, a price later described as "the best bargain in the history of bookselling."

Rabbi David ben Abraham Oppenheimer (1664-1736) was the Chief Rabbi of Prague, who devoted more than half a century to building up his library. A bibliophile from

his early youth, he went on long journeys to obtain rare manuscripts or books.

Oppenheimer visited the fairs at Leipzig, was in close touch with printers and dealers and spent lavishly from his great wealth (inherited and received from his wives). He collected manuscripts with a view to subsidising their publication.

After his death, however, the collection was the subject of litigation, being held in storage in 28 crates in a Hamburg warehouse. This deeply concerned the scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, particularly Leopold Zunz, but no one could be found who was willing to donate the collection to a library.

Although Moses Mendelssohn had valued it at between 50,000 and 60,000 thalers, it was finally sold for the ridiculously low sum of 9,000 thalers (the £2,080 in question) to the Bodleian Library.

This collection, of over 5,000 books and manuscripts, contains the best library in the world of Old Yiddish books from the 1530s (the beginning of Yiddish printing) onwards; in a number of cases, it includes the only surviving copy.

When the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies was founded in 1972, the founders hoped that the Centre would facilitate and co-ordinate the essential research on the collection, which also contains a vast amount of rabbinic writing, particularly responsa, some of it by Oppenheimer himself and much of it still unpublished.

The situation described in the "Annals of the Bodleian Library" for 1829 still applies — that the library is "never without several foreign visitors engaged in its examination."

Subsequently, the Bodleian has been continuously active in acquiring Hebrew material. It had the good fortune to have on its staff two of the greatest Hebraists of all time — Dr Moritz Steinschneider (1816-1907) and Dr Adolf Neubauer (1831-1907). Their great catalogues, of respectively Hebrew printed books and manuscripts in the Bodleian, will remain standard works for the study of Hebraica.

Further significant collections of Hebrew manuscripts were added in 1848, 1890 and 1981, while many incunabula — books printed in the fifteenth century — were acquired in Victorian times.

Even today, the library selects and acquires hundreds of the latest Hebrew books from Israel every year, so that there is an unbroken tradition of collecting Hebrew books from Bodley to the present.

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Detail from the Kennicott Bible at the Bodleian Library, Oxford



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