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SIR THOMAS BODLEY'S OWN INTEREST IN HEBRAICA  
 BEGAN THE LIBRARY'S ACQUISITION OF ITS  
 WORLD-FAMOUS COLLECTION OF HEBREW BOOKS  
 AND MANUSCRIPTS



PHOTOS: BODLEIAN LIBRARY

# TREASURED TOMES

**I**N a development of major international importance for Hebrew studies, manuscript studies, and codicology, the Bodleian Library has published a new catalogue of its Hebrew manuscripts. The Bodleian possesses what is probably still the most important collection of such manuscripts in the world. Unusually, the interest in Hebrew books stems directly from the founder of the library, Sir Thomas Bodley.

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 (1605); they are overwhelmingly from Venice, where Hebrew printing was in its prime. Bodley took a detailed personal interest in them, and at the end of the catalogue a page largely in Latin shows his own indignant corrections of some misprints in Hebrew.

In 1693 the library purchased the collections of Dr Robert Huntington and

Professor Edward Pococke, the Regius Professor of Hebrew. Among the books bought from Dr Robert Huntington 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. Huntington bought it while acting as chaplain to the English merchants in Aleppo.

A second Maimonides manuscript,



this one in his own handwriting throughout, was among the 420 manuscripts bought from Professor Edward Pococke. It is the Commentary on the Mishnah, containing the tractates *Nezikin* and *Kiddushin*.

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of these manuscripts for establishing the correct text, particularly since autograph works of any medieval Jewish scholar are exceedingly scarce. For both collections, 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 recognized its importance and bought it for fifty guineas. 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 is an

ABOVE: Carpet page (Kennicott Bible)  
 LEFT: Instruments from the Jerusalem Temple (Kennicott Bible)

RIGHT: Grammatical text appended to the Kennicott Bible

OPPOSITE TOP: Medieval German zodiac from the Oppenheimer Collection

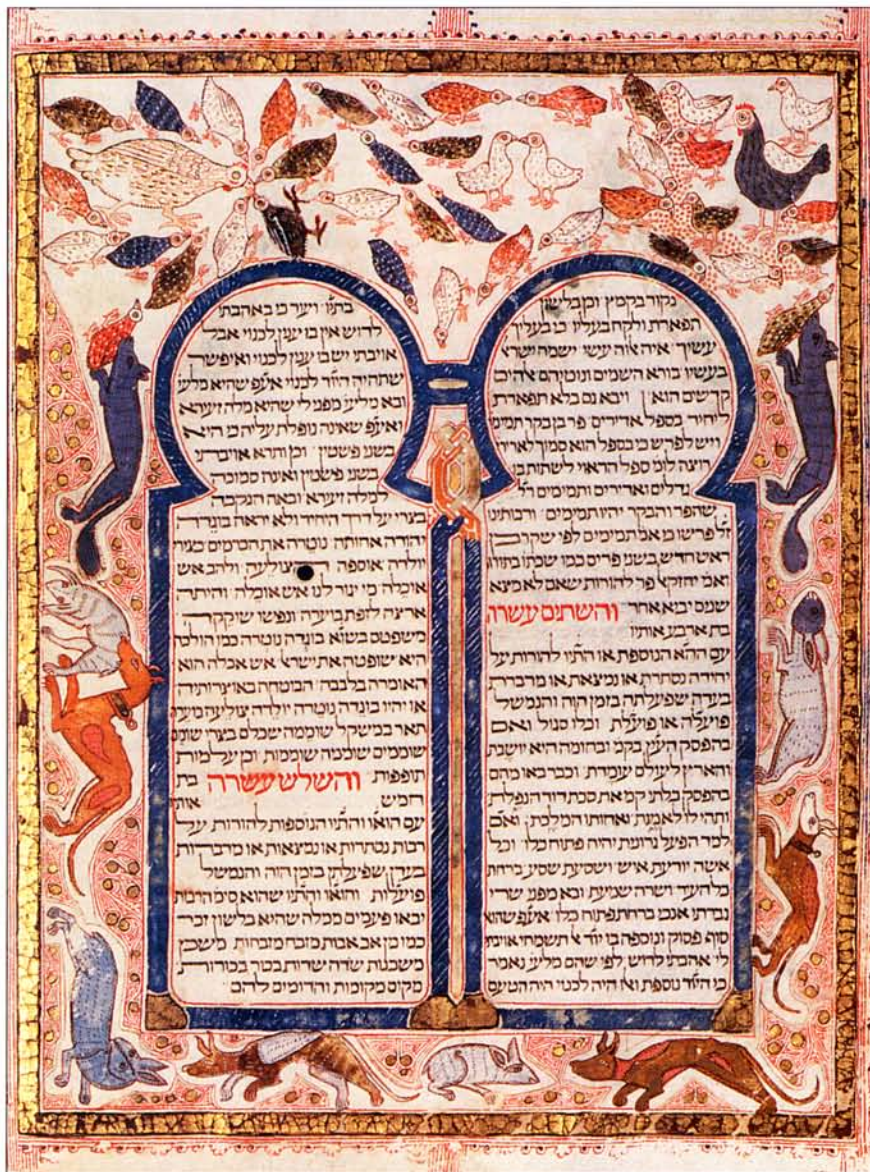
exquisite production, an exact facsimile of which was published in London in 1985. No one has any idea where the original lay between 1492 and 1771.

In 1829 the Bodleian Library bought the Oppenheimer Library, the most important and magnificent Hebraica collection ever accumulated, at 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, and 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 with a view to subsidizing their publication.

After his death, however, the collection was the subject of litigation, and was held in storage in 28 crates in a Hamburg warehouse. This was a matter of deep concern for the scholars of the Wissenschaft des Judentums, particularly

Dr Leopold Zunz, but no one could be found who was willing to donate the collection to a library. Although Moses Mendelssohn, the grandfather of the composer, had valued it at between 50,000 and 60,000 thalers, it was finally sold for the ridiculously low sum of 9,000 thalers (£2,080) to the Bodleian Library. The collection, of over 5,000 books and manuscripts, contains books from the 1530s (the beginning of Yiddish printing) onwards; in many cases it includes the only surviving copy.

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 Heubauer (1831–1907). Their great catalogues of, respectively, Hebrew printed books and manuscripts in the Bodleian 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.

It is Heubauer's manuscript catalogue which the new supplement brings up to date. Although outstanding for its time, it was over a hundred years old, and so the Keeper of Oriental Books, Mr A D S Roberts, initiated the funding for the preparation of a new catalogue, or, more accurately, a volume of addenda and corrigenda which embodied the very latest advances in the study of manuscripts.

A team of scholars, each renowned in their field and led by Professor Malachi Beit-Arié of Jerusalem, set to work in a novel way. As the manuscripts had already been microfilmed, it was possible to do the work of recataloguing the texts entirely in Jerusalem. However, this cannot be a substitute for physical examination of the codices – 'autopsy', as it is rather strangely called. Accordingly Beit-Arié spent a year in Oxford examining all of the 2,602 codices described in the previous catalogue. The final text was edited by Mr R A May of the Bodleian.

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's time to the present. The situation described in the Annals of the Bodleian Library for 1829 – that the collection is 'never without several foreign visitors engaged in its examination' – still applies.

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