CHRISTIAN HEBREW IN ENGLAND
WITH AND WITHOUT JEWISH BOOKS

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THE TIME PERIOD with which this journal concerns itself—ca. 1100–1350—witnessed a number of significant changes in the intellectual landscape of England. One massive cultural difference was the introduction of a Jewish population into England for the first time in its history. It is only after 1066 that books and documents in Hebrew could have even been conceivably copied by Jews in England, although even these are rare.[1] Additionally during this time period, we find Christians engaged in the study of Hebrew for exegetical purposes, copying Hebrew as well as creating bilingual Latin–Hebrew texts in conjunction with Jewish scribes.[2] My work is concerned with the textual traces of Judaism—specifically in the form of the Hebrew language—found in Christian books in even earlier periods.[3] Despite the absence of Jews throughout the pre-Conquest, Anglo-Saxon history of England, the idea of Hebrew was present and reflected in a Christian proto-Hebraism which can be traced in English and Latin manuscripts during this period. The presence of accurate Hebrew letter forms in the magnificent the mid-twelfth-century Eadwine Psalter, therefore, is at once a culmination of a long tradition of Christian interest in Hebrew and a reflection of the new access to Hebrew by Christians in the post-Conquest period.

The Eadwine Psalter is the latest of over a dozen psalm books from the early Middle Ages which were glossed in English.[4] From the Vespasian Psalter—which preserves some of the earliest Old English—up to and including Eadwine, one could use these texts to trace the temporal and dialectal developments of the English language from ca. 900–1150. These psalters have long served as a foundation of philological and cultural study of the long Anglo-Saxon period. In addition to the linguistic content of these psalters, these books also witness palaeographical developments, artistic borrowings, calendar developments, and more. One feature that is often overlooked is the evidence of a type of Christian Hebraism which is often manifest in copies of the psalter. The book

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1 Malachi Beit-Arié, *The Only Dated Medieval Hebrew Manuscript Written in England (1189 CE) and the Problem of Pre-Expulsion Anglo-Hebrew Manuscripts* (London: Valmadonna Trust Library), 1985.

2 See Judith Olszowy-Schlanger, *Les Manuscrits hébreux dans l'Angleterre médievale: étude historique et paléographique* (Paris: Peeters), 2003.

3 Much of my work depends on digitization projects that make wide-range surveying of materials through digital facsimile possible. For this piece, special thanks are due to the British Library, Trinity College Cambridge, and Durham Cathedral Library, in whose online repositories all images reproduced here can be viewed.

4 Mechthild Gretsch, "The Junius Psalter Gloss: Its Historical and Cultural Context," *Anglo-Saxon England* 29 (2000): 85–121, esp. 85–89; and Phillip Pulsiano, ed., *Old English Glossed Psalters: Psalms 1–50*, Toronto Old English Series 11 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

of Psalms is perhaps the book of the bible which most obviously reflects its Hebrew roots even in translation.

The Psalter—the foundation of education and thus for Latin literacy throughout the early medieval period—represents a locus of language contact with Hebrew for educated Anglo-Saxons which fostered an appreciation of Hebrew by regular encounters with the very letters of the language. Two monuments of early English booksmanship—the Vespasian and the Eadwine Psalters—represent two extreme interactions with the Hebrew alphabet at the beginning and end of the Anglo-Saxon time period. Contextualizing their Hebrew content reveals the diversity of Hebrew access available in early England.

The place of the Hebrew alphabet in the Psalms has always guaranteed its inclusion in Christian intellectual life even when Hebrew was not studied per se. A number of the Psalms in the Hebrew bible are alphabetic acrostics, where each verse or stanza of verses begins with the successive letters of the alphabet. Among others, Psalms 36, 110, 111, 118, and 144 are abecedarian. St. Jerome followed the Septuagint in reflecting this essentially untranslatable feature of the Hebrew text by including the names of each of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet as section or verse headings. Thus, the names of the Hebrew letters were usually available in one of the most widely copied Latin texts of the Middle Ages. Hebrew letters have acrophonic names, most of which are readily intelligible Hebrew words: *bet*, means "house," for example. As part of his large project of sharing Hebraic knowledge with his Latin readers, Jerome showcases his understanding of the meanings of these words in two locations in his writings: in letter 22 to Paula and the *Liber interpretationis Hebraicorum nominum* (Book of Hebrew Names), where—in accordance with the rest of this "dictionary" of Hebrew names—he gives multiple meanings for each of the letters' names.[5]

Because of Jerome's writings, the names and the meanings of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet were fairly accessible in literate circles in Anglo-Saxon England. Ten out of thirteen of the Old English glossed psalters contain the names of the letters as part of the text of the Psalms. The appearance of the Hebrew alphabet was far less familiar to early medieval English readers. Not surprisingly there was a desire to see Hebrew in contexts like these but few resources to fulfil this desire. A very early Anglo-Saxon manuscript, the eighth-century Vespasian Psalter, contains a chart listing all the names of the Hebrew letters, interpretations of those names, and even letter forms.[6] But the letter forms are all more or less Greek.

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5 Letter 30: *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi epistulae, pars I: epistulae I–LXX*, ed. I. Hilberg, 2nd ed., Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 54 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), 243–49. "Book of Hebrew Names": *S. Hieronymi presbyteri liber interpretationis Hebraicorum nominum,* ed. P. de Lagarde, CCSL 72 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1959), 57–161.

6 For discussions of the text and gloss, see David H. Wright with a contribution on the gloss by Alistair Campbell, *The Vespasian Psalter: British Museum Cotton Vespasian A.I*, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile 14 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1967); on the manuscript, see J. J. G. Alexander, *A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles*, vol. 1: *Insular Manuscripts 6th to 9th Century* (London: Harvey Miller, 1978), 55, no. 29. The Latin text and Old English gloss are edited in Sherman M. Kuhn, ed., *The Vespasian Psalter* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965). On the unusual "interpretations" of the letter names, which are not based on Jerome, see Alan

Figure 3. British Library, MS Cotton Vespasian A 1, fol. 6v.
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This replacement of Hebrew script using Greek letter forms is genuinely surprising since knowledge of the Greek alphabet was not uncommon in this time period. This manuscript shows a strong desire to fill an obvious void concerning the appearance of Hebrew letters, even when scribes had no recourse to Hebrew books.

Most of the other early English Psalters simply have the names of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet transliterated into Latin characters, usually written in a display hand in a different colour than the main text. Table 1 shows that ten out of thirteen psalters which bear an Old English gloss contain at least some of the Hebrew letter names, and nine of those also contain the letter interpretations. However, the desire to see actual Hebrew characters manifests itself in related texts from this period, such as in manuscripts containing Jerome's biblical scholarship. Copies of Jerome's huge *Book of Hebrew Names*—in which Jerome gives a literal translation of every single proper name in the Bible—often contain a short text explicitly dealing with the letters of the Hebrew alphabet. This "Interpretation of the Hebrew Letters" is an edited excerpt from *The Book*'s entries for the Psalms, which comprise a list of each of the names of the Hebrew letters and their "meanings."[7] One English copy of this text from Durham, which dates from

Griffiths, "The Canterbury Psalter's Alphabet Glosses. Eclectic but Incompetent?," in *Foundations of Learning: The Transfer of Encyclopaedic Knowledge in the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Rolf H. Bremmer Jr. and Kees Dekker (Paris: Peeters, 2007), 213–51.

7 See Bernard Lambert, *Bibliotheca Hieronymiana manuscripta: la tradition manuscrite des Œuvres de saint Jérôme*, 4 vols., Instrumenta Patristica 4 (Steenbrugge: Sint Pietersabdij, 1969–70), 255–257, no. 400. Paul de Lagarde, *Onomastica Sacra* (1887; reprint, Hildesheim: Olm, 1966), 191–192; see also PL 23, col. 1365–66.

Table 1. Hebrew Letter Names as Titles to Psalm 118 in Old English-glossed Psalter MSS.[8]

Abbreviation	Psalter (Date)	Letter Names	Interpretations
PsGlA	Vespasian Psalter (viii$^{2/4}$)	yes	yes
PsGlB	Junius Psalter (x$^{1/4}$)	yes	no
PsGlC	Cambridge Psalter (ca. 1000)	no	no
PsGlD	Royal Psalter (x^{med})	no	no
PsGlE	Eadwine Psalter (xii^2)	yes	yes
PsGlF	Stowe Psalter (xi^{med})	yes	yes
PsGlG	Vitellius Psalter (xi^{med})	yes	yes
PsGlI	Lambeth Psalter (xi^1)	yes	yes
PsGlJ	Arundel Psalter (xi^2)	yes	yes
PsGlK	Salisbury Psalter (x^2)	yes	no
PsGlL	Bosworth Psalter (x$^{3/4}$)	no	no
PsGlM	Blickling Psalter (viii^{med})	yes	yes
PPs	Paris Psalter (xi^{med})	yes	yes

(Note: PsGlH, the Tiberius Psalter, ends at Psalm 113.)

immediately after the Norman Conquest, contains something that looks like Hebrew (now Durham Cathedral MS B.II.11).[9] At first glance it seems like nonsense, but closer examination reveals it to be a crudely copied Hebrew alphabet.

The Christian scribe, clearly and unsurprisingly unfamiliar with the Hebrew alphabet, has copied the alphabet from the left to right instead of the correct Hebrew order from right to left. In doing so this scribe has introduced an unexpected line break, and seems to have lost confidence in their ability to make any sense out of these unfamiliar letter forms. Part of the second line ends up "left aligned" and the final letters have been put all the way to the right. This alphabet therefore features both macro and micro mistakes naturally derived from the scribe's unfamiliarity with Hebrew.

The scribe's ignorance of Hebrew and obvious confusion are almost endearing, although the result also shows that they had some kind of exemplar containing recognizable Hebrew. The free-form, unruled area where the alphabet has been written suggests our scribe was trying to process on the fly whatever they had before them. Reconstructing what the exemplar Hebrew may have looked like is far more difficult. Although

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8   See Jane Roberts, "Some Anglo-Saxon Psalters and Their Glosses," in *The Psalms and Medieval English Literature: From the Conversion to the Reformation*, ed. Tamara Atkin and Francis Leneghan (Cambridge: Brewer, 2017), 37–71. Abbreviations follow *Dictionary of Old English: A to H Online*, ed. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project, 2016).

9   Thomas Rud, *Codicum manuscriptorum ecclesiae cathedralis Dunelmensis catalogus classicus* (Durham, n.pub., 1825), 106–9; Heinrich Schenkl, *Bibliotheca patrum Latinorum Britannica*, (1891–1908; reprint, Hildesheim: Olm, 1969), no. 4395.

Figure 4. Durham Cathedral Library, MS B.II.11, fol. 61r.
Durham Priory Library Recreated. Reproduced by
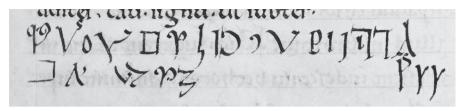permission of the Chapter of Durham Cathedral.

Figure 5. Durham Cathedral Library, MS B.II.11, fol. 61r, detail of Hebrew alphabet.
Durham Priory Library Recreated. Reproduced by permission of the
Chapter of Durham Cathedral.

Figure 6. Reconstruction of Durham alphabet
(with standard forms of Hebrew letters).

Figure 7. Reconstruction of exemplar from which Durham scribe copied.

recognizable, we cannot say whether the lost exemplar was, for example, a Hebrew alphabet copied by a Jewish scribe or perhaps Hebrew copied more or less accurately by another Christian scribe. However, we can see what other Christian scribes did with the Durham scribe's alphabet. At least four related copies of this Jerome manuscript survive, three of which are from England. In early twelfth-century examples preserved at Trinity College Cambridge, we witness later Christian scribes ruling and "cleaning up" their exemplar.[10] They create something which is far more formal and seems less out of place on a manuscript page, but has moved even further away from its Hebrew original.

One can almost feel the scribes' desire to make some sort of sense out of material which made no sense whatsoever to them. Certain letter forms begin to take on the characteristics of Latin letters; the first three letters in the new arrangement—which look like an &, *V*, *D*—were originally crude attempts at producing the letters *pe* (פ), *ayin* (ע), and *samech* (ס). As Hebrew readers know, the letter *pe*—along with four other Hebrew letters—has an alternative appearance when it is the last letter in a word. These *sofit*

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10 M.R. James, *The Western Manuscripts in the Library of Trinity College, Cambridge: A Descriptive Catalogue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900–4), nos. 77 (B.2.34) and 1238 (O.4.7).
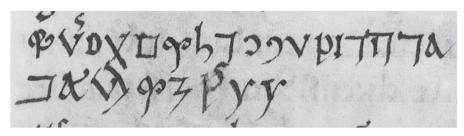
Figure 8. Trinity College, MS B.2.34, fol. 115r, detail of Hebrew alphabet.
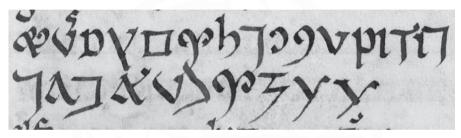Reproduced with permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge.

Figure 9. Trinity College, MS O.4.7, fol. 109r, detail of Hebrew alphabet.
Reproduced with permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge.

or "final" forms must have been present in the Durham manuscript's exemplar, but they have already become fused into a hybrid Frankenstein form in Durham, and have become less and less recognizable through the process of copying. The latest Trinity scribe may have been influenced by its accidental similarity to a Latin ampersand. All the copies show a profound ignorance of the Hebrew alphabet and a lack of corrective intervention.

These post-Conquest manuscripts demonstrate a continuity of Christian interest in and desire for tangible Hebrew which can be evidenced throughout the Anglo-Saxon historical period. The great difference is that in the late eleventh and twelfth centuries when these manuscripts were copied, Hebrew books would have been significantly easier to find and access in England. Of course, the possibility of access does not necessarily lead to access. The Eadwine Psalter, on the other hand, represents a culminating realization of possibility. Not surprisingly to readers of this journal, this amazing manuscript has had a hard time gaining respect in certain scholarly circles, trapped as it is between the "end of Old English" and the "beginning of Middle English." It is a mid-twelfth-century triple psalter containing the Latin text of all three of Jerome's translations of the Psalms, as well as a French and Old English gloss. Some scholars have considered this masterpiece burdensome, or archaic in its own time: a showpiece, perhaps, though with no real
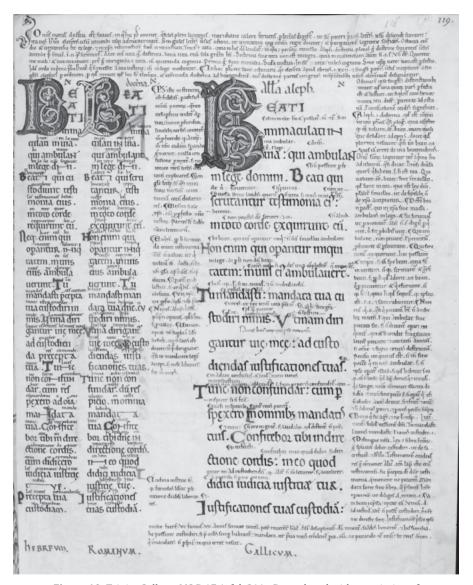
Figure 10. Trinity College, MS R.17.1, fol. 211r. Reproduced with permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge.

Figure 11. Trinity College, MS R.17.1, fol. 211r, detail of letter aleph.
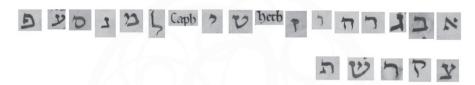Reproduced with permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge.

Figure 12. Trinity College, MS R.17.1, fols. 211r–227r,
Hebrew letters extracted from Psalm 118 headings.
Reproduced with permission of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge.

value, they say.[11] Elaine Treharne however has championed this manuscript—written in Latin and glossed in English and French—as perfectly representative of the new Anglo-Norman reality of post-Conquest England, "here for all to literally see is unanimity of the three languages operating in England in this period."[12] At Psalm 118, the Eadwine Psalter—like most medieval psalters—has the names of the Hebrew letters as headings. But unlike any other Old English-glossed Psalter—or indeed any English-made Psalter before this period—it also contains accurate Hebrew letter forms.

Each stanza of Psalm 118 is headed by the name and the form of the corresponding Hebrew letter. These are usually repeated across each of the three versions of the Latin psalms as is seen on the image of folio 211r. All of the letters are perfectly recognizable and well drawn. Although almost certainly copied by a Christian scribe, the Hebrew letters show that someone was comfortable with their form and ductus. Whoever wrote these letters had certainly seen Hebrew before and had mostly likely written it before. Such a seemingly minimal achievement need not necessitate the occasion of Jewish–Christian cooperation, though it is certainly not out of the question. While copying these letters is a humble first step towards real knowledge of Hebrew, it is nevertheless an

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11 See discussion in Elaine Treharne, *Living Through Conquest: The Politics of Early English, 1020–1220*, Oxford Textual Perspectives (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 167–72. See also Mark Faulkner, "The Eadwine Psalter and Twelfth-Century English Vernacular Literary Culture," in *The Psalms and Medieval English Literature: From the Conversion to the Reformation*, ed. Tamara Atkin and Francis Leneghan (Cambridge: Brewer, 2017), 72–107.

12 Treharne, *Living Through Conquest*, 172.

achievement which our evidence suggests exceeded the reach of English Christians for the previous 400 years. Here we see the beginnings of a Christian Hebraism not only rooted in the writings of St. Jerome, but also reaching out to the contemporary Jews as a valuable source of knowledge about their shared scriptures. The accurate Hebrew— though merely an alphabet in this case—is a crucial first step in the type of Christian Hebraism which was to be practiced in England during the post-Conquest period.

The Jews of Anglo-Norman England were always a small marginalised minority, but they had been non-existent in Anglo-Saxon England. Perhaps these very small, marginal Hebrew letters are the perfect representation of yet another new reality of post-Conquest England. This journal looks forward to examining a period in English textual history which has long been neglected. There is no absence of material, but simply a lack of attention to or even a disregard for the material we have always had. I hope to have shown that looking closely at even one of the most important and well-known texts of the Christian Middle Ages can offer new insights to the culture of Early Middle England.

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Abstract: This article briefly traces the presence of the Hebrew alphabet in Latin Psalters from England between the eighth and the twelfth centuries and gives evidence for rudimentary learning of Hebrew in late Anglo-Saxon and post-Conquest books. Although study of Hebrew among English Christians did not start in earnest until well after the Norman Conquest, proto-Hebraism can be traced in manuscripts during this period.