BEDE THE SCHOLAR

Edited by PETER DARBY and MÁIRÍN MacCARRON

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In memory of Nicholas Brooks (1941–2014) and Jennifer O'Reilly (1943–2016)

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Bede and the Hebrew alphabets

Damian Fleming

Bede, as a scholar, was deeply concerned with the physical transmission of Scripture, languages, and language difference. As Paul Meyvaert highlights, Bede took serious effort to 'master Greek', exemplified in his word-by-word *Commentary* and *Retractions* on the Acts of the Apostles.[1] Bede and his community were also amongst the greatest champions of Jerome's biblical translation according to the 'Hebrew truth', that is Jerome's new translation which departed from the tradition of the Greek Septuagint to translate into Latin directly from Hebrew (the 'Vulgate').[2] Bede's interest in Hebrew has been long recognised, but often minimised. Meyvaert, following E. F. Sutcliffe, points to the care Bede took in collecting 'scraps of information about Hebrew' that came his way primarily from the Latin works of Jerome, and 'how eagerly he would have embraced the study of the language had he had any opportunity of doing so'.[3] Since he lacked these resources, however, much of Bede's 'knowledge' of Hebrew has been dismissed as purely derivative – not language engagement, but 'simply Jerome abbreviated'.[4] I have shown elsewhere the critical attention Bede paid to these 'scraps', not just internalising what he could about Hebrew, but even synthesising new

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1   P. Meyvaert, 'Bede the scholar', in G. Bonner (ed.), *Famulus Christi: essays in commemoration of the thirteenth centenary of the birth of the Venerable Bede* (London: SPCK, 1976), pp. 40–69, at 50. See W. F. Bolton, 'An aspect of Bede's later knowledge of Greek', *The Classical Review* 13 (1963), 17–18. A. C. Dionisotti, 'On Bede, grammars, and Greek', *Revue Bénédictine* 92 (1982), 111–41; K. Lynch, 'The Venerable Bede's knowledge of Greek', *Traditio* 39 (1983), 432–9.

2   M. MacCarron, *Bede and time: computus, theology and history in the early medieval world* (New York: Routledge, 2020), p. 82.

3   Meyvaert, 'Bede the scholar', p. 50. E. F. Sutcliffe, 'The Venerable Bede's knowledge of Hebrew', *Biblica* 16 (1935), 300–6, at 302.

4   C. Jenkins, 'Bede as exegete and theologian', in A. H. Thompson (ed.), *Bede: his life, times and writings: essays in commemoration of the twelfth centenary of his death* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1935), pp. 152–200, at 163.

conclusions about the Hebrew language, going so far as to take Jerome to task for perceived linguistic errors.[5]

   All of this, however, has been explored in terms of Bede's use of transliterated Hebrew words in Latin texts, that is, the abstract idea of Hebrew as transmitted through the writings of Jerome. Genuine Christian Hebraism is generally seen as an innovation of the later Middle Ages, and the period of time between Jerome and the twelfth century is one in which 'real' Hebrew was more or less inaccessible to Christians.[6] While this is broadly true, Christian engagement with Hebrew, while limited, was a genuine scholarly concern in the early Middle Ages, and has received very little modern scholarly attention.[7] This inattention has led to confusion over basic information about Hebrew which was commonplace for Bede's scholarly mind. In this chapter, I will explore the evidence of Bede's knowledge about the Hebrew alphabet as well as the possibility that he may have encountered Hebrew script. Exploring this topic will allow us to delve deeper into Bede's scholarly mind. Bede was aware of the essential place of the Hebrew language in the transmission of Scripture, as well as the textual and physical reality of the change in script in the history of the Hebrew alphabet. Contextualising Bede's scholarly knowledge about the Hebrew alphabets helps to illuminate assumptions that have been made regarding his role in the production of the

5 D. Fleming, '*Hebraeam scire linguam*: Bede's rhetoric of the Hebrew Truth', in S. Zacher (ed.), *Imagining the Jew: Jewishness in Anglo-Saxon literature and culture* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2016), pp. 63–78, at 66–70. See also T. Major, 'Words, wit, and wordplay in the Latin works of the Venerable Bede', *The Journal of Medieval Latin* 22 (2012), 185–219, esp. 214–18. See also Gallagher, 'Biblical-textual criticism in Bede's commentary *On Genesis*' in this volume.
6 The classic work on the later period is B. Smalley, *The study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941); see also J. Olszowy-Schlanger, *Les Manuscrits hébreux dans l'Angleterre médievale: étude historique et paléographique* (Paris: Peeters, 2003); D. Goodwin, '*Take hold of the robe of a Jew': Herbert of Bosham's Christian Hebraism* (Leiden: Brill, 2006).
7 Studies of the earlier period include S. Berger, *Quam notitiam linguae hebraicae habuerint Christiani medii aevi temporibus in Gallia* (Paris: Hachette et Socias Bibliopolas, 1893); C. Singer, 'Hebrew scholarship in the Middle Ages among Latin Christians', in E. Beven and C. Singer (eds), *The legacy of Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927), pp. 283–314; M. Thiel, *Grundlagen und Gestalt der Hebräischkenntnisse des frühen Mittelalters*, Biblioteca degli Studi Medievali 4 (Spoleto: Centro Italiano di Studi sull'alto Medioevo, 1973); S. L. Keefer and D. R. Burrows, 'Hebrew and the *Hebraicum* in late Anglo-Saxon England', *Anglo-Saxon England* 19 (1990), 67–80; T. Hilhorst, 'The prestige of Hebrew in the Christian world of late antiquity and middle ages', in A. Hilhorst, E. Puech, and E. Tigchelaar (eds), *Flores Florentino: Dead Sea Scrolls and other early Jewish studies in honour of Florentino García Martínez* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 118–27.

Codex Amiatinus. It also allows us to raise questions about the proliferation of alphabetic lore that flourished after Bede.

Ezra and the Hebrew alphabets

Bede has long been associated with the Codex Amiatinus, which preserves the oldest complete text of the Vulgate. The scholarship focused especially on the front matter of this impressive book has uncovered much about the world of early eighth-century Northumbria, the influence of the twin monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow under the leadership of Abbot Ceolfrith, and Bede's role in early medieval intellectual history.[8] Richard Marsden has gone so far as to suggest that the Vulgate text of Amiatinus and its related sister pandects could be referred to as a 'Bedan-Ceolfrithian' recension, since many of the emendations found in the text were made 'surely under Bede's influence'.[9] Meyvaert has argued most vocally for Bede's direct involvement in the creation of the front matter of this impressive book.[10] Both have suggested that Bede's own handwriting might be found in this manuscript.[11] One of the two figural illuminations in this pandect is a full-page image of a scribe on folio 4/Vr. This figure is often thought to be the prophet Ezra, seated and dressed in some of the regalia of a Jewish high priest and surrounded with the accoutrements of a scribe in the act of writing in a book. Behind him, an open bookcase holds separate volumes of Scripture in nine labelled codices. Ezra's role here is relatively clear: in Jewish and Christian traditions, he is said to have restored the text of Scripture following the Babylonian exile by rewriting it all in a new script that he himself had devised. Bede was well aware of this tradition, and very likely composed the verses written at the top of the folio: 'When the sacred books had been burnt through foreign attack / Ezra, burning with love for God, restored this work.'[12] From the fact that Bede elsewhere describes Ezra as having rewritten Scripture with newly-invented 'lighter letters' (*leuiores litterae*),

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8   C. Chazelle, *The Codex Amiatinus and its 'sister' bibles: scripture, liturgy, and art in the milieu of the Venerable Bede* (Leiden: Brill, 2019).

9   R. Marsden, '*Manus Bedae*: Bede's contribution to Ceolfrith's bibles', *Anglo-Saxon England* 27 (1998), 65–85, at 84.

10 P. Meyvaert, 'Bede, Cassiodorus and the Codex Amiatinus', *Speculum*, 71 (1996), 827–83; P. Meyvaert, 'The date of Bede's *In Ezram* and his image of Ezra in the Codex Amiatinus', *Speculum*, 80 (2005), 1087–1133.

11 Marsden, '*Manus Bedae*', 78. Meyvaert, 'Bede, Cassiodorus', 841 note 75.

12 M. Lapidge (ed. and trans.), *Bede's Latin poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2019), 348–9: 'Codicibus sacris hostili clade perustis / Esdra Deo fervens hoc reparavit opus'; on Bede's authorship of these verses, see pp. 108–9.

Meyvaert posits that Bede understood this to be some kind of 'shorthand' and then suggests that the writing which is clearly visible in Amiatinus on Ezra's open book could be Tironian *notae* – the ancient Roman system of abbreviations which later gained some popularity in Carolingian circles.[13] Although this is an ingenious suggestion, which does, as Meyvaert suggests, fit with Bede's clever mind, it obscures an obvious solution, that Ezra's heroic act of writing is the origin story for the Hebrew alphabet, which Bede knew well and showed a particular interest in. Accordingly, Bede could have only understood Ezra to be writing Hebrew: either the new Hebrew alphabet which Ezra himself had invented for this task, or copying the old Hebrew alphabet in which Scripture had been preserved up to that point. Attention to Bede's capacious scholarly mind as well as the material sources that were available to early medieval Christians makes this clear.

The association of Ezra with the rewriting of Scripture and the invention of the Hebrew alphabet is widespread in textual material known to Bede. The fullest and most important text that details Ezra's role in the rewriting of Scripture and the creation of the Hebrew alphabet is Jerome's Prologue to the Book of Kings. This prologue is Jerome's most passionate introduction to his project of translating the Old Testament from Hebrew, rather than relying on the Greek Septuagint as previous translators had done. Jerome called this his 'Helmeted Prologue' (*Prologus galeatus*) because he envisioned himself going into battle on behalf of his prioritisation of the Hebrew.[14] One cannot underestimate how controversial this issue was and how forcefully he defends it.[15] Bede takes up the mantle. This prologue would have been central to Bede's understanding of the project of the Vulgate – or the Hebrew Truth, as he calls it – and this prologue grounds its argumentation in the literal Hebrew alphabet.

The first third of the Prologue to Kings is a detailed discussion of Hebrew and cognate languages that differ in their written form. The beginning of the prologue sounds more like a grammar than a biblical preface:

> That there are twenty-two letters among the Hebrews is shown by the language of the Syrians and Chaldeans, which is very close to Hebrew; for they also have twenty-two letters with the same sound but different characters. The Samaritans also write the Pentateuch of Moses with the same letters, differing

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13 Meyvaert, 'Bede, Cassiodorus', 873–4; Meyvaert, 'The date of Bede's *In Ezram*', 1097–8. On Tironian *notae* generally, see D. Ganz, 'On the history of Tironian notes', in P. Ganz (ed.), *Tironische Noten* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1990), pp. 35–51.

14 See M. H. Williams, *The monk and the book: Jerome and the making of Christian scholarship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 89–91.

15 For a succinct overview, see Goodwin, *Herbert of Bosham's Christian Hebraism*, pp. 73–94.

only in the shapes and tittles. It is certain that Ezra, the scribe and teacher of
the law, after the captivity of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the temple under
Zerubbabel, devised different letters, which we now use, since up to that time
the letter shapes of the Samaritans and the Hebrews were the same.[16]

Jerome begins his prologue this way because the number of letters in these
languages justifies his adherence to the Hebrew canon of books in the Old
Testament, which he counts as twenty-two. Jerome pushes this literal con-
nection between the Hebrew alphabet and the canon of Hebrew Scripture
even further, noting that just as there are five 'double letters' (the five Hebrew
letters which have different forms when appearing at the ends of words
[צ/ץ;פ/ף;נ/ן;מ/ם;כ/ך]) so too there are five 'double books' of the Old Testament: 1
and 2 Samuel; 1 and 2 Kings; 1 and 2 Chronicles; Ezra-Nehemiah; and
Jeremiah-Lamentations. The creators of the Codex Amiatinus were certainly
aware of Jerome's Prologue. Not only is it included, naturally, as a Prologue
to the Book of Kings within this manuscript, but Jerome's scheme for reck-
oning the canon of Hebrew Scripture is also graphically represented on folio
5/VIr, immediately following the scribal portrait.[17] Although the Hebrew
canon as laid out by Jerome was never adhered to by medieval Christians,
there is no question that the Wearmouth-Jarrow community involved in the
production was well aware of Jerome's thoughts, which are fully articulated
in the Prologue to Kings and based on the Hebrew alphabet.

Within the Prologue to Kings Jerome also explains Ezra's connection to
the Hebrew alphabet: 'it is certain that Ezra, the scribe and teacher of the
law … invented other letters (*alias litteras repperisse*) which we now use,
although up to that time the Samaritan and Hebrew characters were the
same'. This change in script is a historical reality. The 'square' script that
most associate with Hebrew writing was an innovation of the fifth century

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16 *Biblia sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, ed. R. Weber (Stuttgart: Deutsche
   Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), p. 364; trans. E. Gallagher and J. Meade, *The biblical canon
   lists from early Christianity: texts and analysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press,
   2017), pp. 198–9: 'Viginti et duas litteras esse apud Hebraeos, Syrorum quoque et
   Chaldaeorum lingua testatur, quae Hebraeae magna ex parte confinis est; nam et ipsi
   viginti duo elementa habent eodem sono, sed diversis caracteribus. Samaritani etiam
   Pentateuchum Mosi totidem litteris scriptitant, figuris tantum et apicibus discrep-
   antes. Certumque est Ezram scribam, legisque doctorem post captam Hierosolymam
   et instaurationem templi sub Zorobabel alias litteras repperisse, quibus nunc utimur,
   cum ad illud usque tempus idem Samaritanorum et Hebraeorum caracteres fuerint.'
17 Meyvaert in fact has suggested that Bede himself is responsible for the prominent
   placement of Jerome's canon list, which likely required a dismembering and reorder-
   ing of the initial folios of the manuscript after it had already been bound: 'Dissension
   in Bede's community shown by a quire of Codex Amiatinus', *Revue Bénédictine* 116
   (2006), 295–309.

BCE, while a descendant of the older Hebrew script is retained to this day among the Samaritan community.[18] The connection of Ezra to this change in scripts is preserved in Jewish tradition, which Jerome here repeats and makes widely available for Christian audiences in his Prologue to Kings.

Bede was particularly interested in Ezra's special role in rewriting the books of Scripture after the Babylonian exile and refers to it in a number of his other works. In his *Thirty questions on the Book of Kings*, Bede writes, 'It is written of him … *he was a nimble scribe in the Law of Moses*, nimble, that is, because he devised shapes of letters that were more easily written than those that the Hebrews had used up until that time.'[19] Following the language of Jerome's Prologue, he uses the verb '*repperire*' ('to discover, find out, invent') to describe Ezra's creation of the new alphabet. Similarly, in his commentary on Ezra he notes, 'The Hebrews also say, and there is no doubt among them, that the same Ezra invented the letters that were lighter, using the names they had previously, so he could write very quickly the many books that had been destroyed.'[20] Meyvaert mistakenly asserts that

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18 J. Naveh, *Early history of the alphabet: an introduction to West Semitic epigraphy and palaeography* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), pp. 112–24. On the tradition that Ezra invented new Hebrew letters in Jewish and Christian texts, see S. Birnbaum, *The Hebrew scripts* (Leiden: Brill, 1971), pp. 70–5. The Samaritan alphabet has its own tradition and development and assumed its modern form in the fourth to seventh centuries CE. On the Samaritan alphabet, see R. Pummer, *The Samaritans: a profile* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), pp. 213–18; D. Barag, 'Samaritan writing and writings', in H. Cotton *et al.* (eds), *From Hellenism to Islam: cultural and linguistic change in the Roman Near East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 303–23.

19 Bede, *In Regum librum xxx quaestiones* 7, lines 21–4, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 119 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1962); trans. W. Trent Foley and A. Holder, *Bede: a biblical miscellany* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), p. 102: 'Vnde scriptum est de eo: … ipse scriba uelox in lege Moysi, uelox uidelicet quia promptiores litterarum figuras quam eatenus Hebraei habebant repperit'.

20 Bede, *In Ezram et Neemiam* 2, lines 813–17, ed. D. Hurst, CCSL 119A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1969); trans. M. Gorman, 'The Codex Amiatinus: a guide to the legends and bibliography', *Studi Medievali*, 44 (2003), 863–910, at 888: 'Ferunt quoque Hebraei neque apud eos de hac re ulla dubitatio est quod idem Ezras leuiores litteras excogitauerit sub nominibus earum quas eatenus habuerant quibus uelocissime tantam librorum copiam quae erat consumpta reficeret.' Cf. Meyvaert's translation of *leuiores litteras* as 'a more expeditious system of graphemes', 'Bede's *In Ezram*', 1097; or DeGregorio's 'simpler letters', *Bede: On Ezra and Nehemiah* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), p. 110; and O'Reilly's paraphrase, 'smoothly flowing letters' in J. O'Reilly, 'The Library of Scripture: views from Vivarium and Wearmouth–Jarrow', in P. Binski and W. Noel (eds), *New offerings, ancient treasures: studies in medieval art for George Henderson* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2001), pp. 3–39, at 24.

'The story of a special script must go back directly to 4 Ezra … since it is not found in the Latin writers [Jerome and Isidore] just mentioned'.[21]

Jerome's Prologue, in fact, more clearly mentions the script than the apocryphal 4 Ezra does; the entire beginning of Jerome's Prologue is concerned with scripts. On the other hand, 4 Ezra – which is not even included in the Codex Amiatinus – describes Ezra *dictating* Scripture to five scribes rather than writing the text himself as depicted in the Amiatinus portrait (4 Ezra 14:23–5). In 4 Ezra 14:42 it says that these scribes wrote 'notis quas non sciebant' ('in characters they did not know') which is surely Meyvaert's 'special script', but this does not correspond to how Bede, following Jerome, understood what is being discussed: the Hebrew alphabet, as invented – and written – by Ezra.[22]

Knowledge about the Hebrew alphabet was commonplace to Bede, and he would have immediately associated Ezra with the Hebrew script. Bede uses the words *litterae* and *figurae litterarum*; he is literally talking about the shapes of the twenty-two Hebrew letters, not a shorthand. Bede does, however, expand on Jerome's brief description and seems to have a tangible sense of the difference between the writing systems, neither of which are a 'shorthand', but one of which might have seemed easier to write. Indeed a visual comparison of the two alphabets does make the characters of the square script seem both 'lighter' (*leuiores*) and 'faster', or perhaps 'handier' (*promptiores*). Bede also knew that the old Hebrew alphabet continued to be used among the Samaritans: 'For this reason he is called not just a scribe but a "swift" scribe. The former letters, however, remained in use among the Samaritans, by which they were accustomed to write down the five books of Moses, which alone they accepted from Holy Scripture.'[23] Bede – like very many medieval Christians – knew that there were two Hebrew alphabets. Anyone who read the biblical prologues would have known this. Additionally, many medieval Christians would have also seen these two alphabets in Latin manuscripts.

21 Meyvaert, 'Bede, Cassiodorus', 874.
22 Meyvaert, 'Bede, Cassiodorus', 874; Chazelle, *The Codex Amiatinus*, pp. 327–36; C. Chazelle, ' "Romanness" in early medieval culture', in C. Chazelle and F. Lifshitz (eds), *Paradigms and methods in early medieval studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 81–98, at 90–1. O'Reilly, 'Library of Scripture', p. 23, on the other hand notes that 'The Amiatinus scribal portrait is clearly not an illustration of this account [4 Ezra]', and highlights Bede's 'editorial work' in reconciling various conflicting accounts.
23 Bede, *In Ezram et Neemiam* 2, lines 817–21; trans. DeGregorio, p. 111: 'Vnde non solum scriba uerum etiam scriba uelox cognominatur. Priores autem litterae remanserunt apud Samaritas quibus illi quinque libros Moysi quos solos de sancta scriptura receperant scribere solebant.'

Hebrew in Latin manuscripts

Now how likely is it that Bede could have seen the Hebrew alphabet, old or new, or even just individual Hebrew letters? The difficulty in answering this question lies not in the general ignorance of Hebrew among medieval Christians, but rather in the paucity of surviving manuscript material from Bede's day and earlier. From the early ninth century onwards, Hebrew alphabets – albeit of varying degrees of accuracy – survive in many medieval Latin manuscripts. As far as Bede is concerned, the crucial question is whether the widespread interest in foreign alphabets generally, and the Hebrew alphabet in particular, originated in the Carolingian period or whether the large number of Carolingian manuscripts suggests an even older interest which overlaps with the life of Bede. Carolingian and later copies of Jerome's writings regularly feature Hebrew alphabets. Additionally, there is a tradition of 'alphabet collections' in medieval Christian manuscripts which preserve copies of Hebrew, Greek, and Latin alphabets together with Runic Futharks and increasingly 'fantastic' alphabets.[24] The accuracy of many of these alphabets leaves something to be desired – and indeed reinforces the ignorance of particular languages in particular places – but confirms the general awareness of these languages and their alphabets. Many of these manuscripts specifically note Ezra's role in the creation of the Hebrew alphabet and some of them contain both Hebrew alphabets, that is the ancient or 'Samaritan' Hebrew alphabet, as well as the modern or 'Jewish' Hebrew alphabet as created by Ezra. All of the codicological evidence I will explore postdates Bede. Nevertheless, the wealth of material from even the year 800

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24 The foundational work is still R. Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta: the English tradition* (Bruges: De Tempel, 1954). See also R. Marti, 'Fremde Schriften in einem lateinischen Codex' (Zu den Bamberger Hss. Patr. 130/1 und 130/2), *Scriptorium* 45 (1991), 47–83; E. Seebold, 'Mandevilles Alphabete und die mittelalterlichen Alphabetssammlungen', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, 120 (1998), 435–49; E. Seebold, 'Die Iren und die Runen: Die Überlieferung fremder Schriften im 8. Jahrhundert als Hintergrund zum ersten Auftreten von Manuskript-Runen', in W. Haubrichs *et al.* (eds), *Theodisca: Beiträge zur althochdeutschen und altniederdeutschen Sprache und Literatur in der Kultur des frühen Mittelalters* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), pp. 10–37; A. Zironi, 'Marginal alphabets in the Carolingian Age: philological and codicological considerations', in P. Lendinara, L. Lazzari, and C. Di Sciacca (eds), *Rethinking and recontextualizing glosses: new perspectives in the study of late Anglo-Saxon glossography* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), pp. 353–70; K. Dekker, 'Alphabets in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts', in C. Giliberto, L. Teresi (eds), *Limits of learning: the transfer of encyclopaedic knowledge in the early Middle Ages* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013), pp. 81–108; M. Kupfer, ' "…Lectres… plus vrayes": Hebrew script and Jewish witness in the *Mandeville* Manuscript of Charles V', *Speculum* 83 (2008), 58–111.

demonstrates how widespread this knowledge was. From the textual sources we have already examined, we can confidently assert that Bede would have known that Ezra transcribed Scripture from the old Hebrew script to the new Jewish script. Manuscript material suggests that Bede could have had a very tangible sense of what he thought these alphabets looked like.

Jerome's *Hebrew names*

Early medieval Christian knowledge of Hebrew always starts with, and often ends with, the works of St Jerome. Jerome's text that is most explicitly concerned with the Hebrew language is his *Book of Hebrew names* (*Liber interpretationis hebraicorum nominum*) in which he gives Latin translations of the Hebrew meaning of every single proper name in the Bible.[25] This book was so popular that in the later Middle Ages it was reordered and included in the commercially produced single-volume pocket Bibles often known as 'Paris Bibles'.[26] In the early Middle Ages, it most often circulated alone or with other works by Jerome.[27] Some of the oldest extant copies of this text have representations of Hebrew letters in the manuscripts. All of Jerome's works are written in Latin of course, but he regularly refers to words from Greek, Hebrew, and other ancient languages. Much of the Greek seems to have been originally written out in Greek majuscules. Hebrew words, however, are always written out in Latin transliteration, but Jerome frequently refers to individual letters or the Hebrew spelling of particular words. When he does so, we find the *names* of the Hebrew letters written out as words, often in majuscule letters. For example, at the beginning of the *Hebrew*

25 Ironically, Jerome's most famous work of biblical commentary is itself a translation of various Greek onomastic lists; Jerome made this translation early in his Hebrew-learning career, and within the text regularly disavows the 'creative' etymologies of Hebrew words which became associated with his name. See L. Grabbe, *Etymology in early Jewish interpretation: the Hebrew Names in Philo* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), pp. 15–17; A. Kamesar, *Jerome, Greek scholarship, and the Hebrew Bible: a study of the Quaestiones Hebraicae in Genesim* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), pp. 103–26; H. Newman, 'How should we measure Jerome's Hebrew competence?', in A. Cain and J. Lössl (eds), *Jerome of Stridon: his life, writings and legacy* (Farnham: Surrey, 2009), pp. 131–40, at 136–7.

26 E. Poleg, *Approaching the Bible in medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 118–29; E. Poleg, 'The Interpretations of Hebrew names in theory and practice', in E. Poleg and L. Light (eds), *Form and function in the late medieval Bible* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp. 217–36.

27 For manuscripts containing this text, see B. Lambert, *Bibliotheca Hieronymiana man-uscripta: la tradition manuscrite des œuvres de Saint Jérôme. Tome II* (Steenbrugge: in abbatia S. Petri, 1969), 11–21, number 201. The list is neither complete nor completely accurate.

names before the glossing proper, Jerome notes: 'It should not be thought
that all of the names that are listed under the letter A, which among the
Hebrews is called ALEPH, only begin with that letter (ALEPH). For some-
times they begin with AIN, often with HE, and even with HETH, which
have different breathings and vowel sounds.'[28]

This is also how Bede referred to individual Hebrew letters and orthog-
raphy when he needed to.[29] Bede was very familiar with Jerome's text; he
refers to dozens if not hundreds of etymologies of Hebrew names across his
works and he references this text by name on more than one occasion.[30] It is
possible that Bede may have seen Hebrew – or something purporting to be
Hebrew – while reading the Latin manuscripts of Jerome's works.

The oldest extant copy of Jerome's *Hebrew names* postdates Bede, but
has Hebrew letters throughout the text, and likely originally had a Hebrew
alphabet at the end. The marginal Hebrew letters found in the ninth-century
manuscript Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek 6228 are not perfect – they
are obviously not copied by a trained Hebrew scribe – but they are easily rec-
ognisable to anyone with a familiarity with the modern Hebrew alphabet.[31]
We find the Hebrew letters ALEPH, HE, AIN, SADE, and SIN (א,ה,ע,צ,שׁ)
written in the margins at the points where Jerome refers to these letters by
name in the text.[32] Occasionally, the Hebrew letters appear in the running
Latin text. This manuscript of the *Hebrew names* ends with a short text

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28 Jerome, *Liber interpretationis Hebraicorum nominum* preface, lines 4–8, ed. P. de
    Lagarde, CCSL 72 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1959): 'Non statim, ubicumque ex A littera,
    quae apud Hebraeos dicitur ALEPH, ponuntur nomina, aestimandum est, ipsam esse
    solam quae ponitur. Nam interdum ex AIN, saepe ex HE, non nunquam ex HETH
    litteris, quae aspirationes suas uocesque commutant, habent exordium.' It should be
    noted that this is merely a reprinting of de Lagarde's nineteenth-century edition found
    in *Onomastica Sacra* (Göttingen: Horstmann, 1887; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1966),
    pp. 25–116.

29 See Fleming, '*Hebraeam scire linguam*', pp. 66–71.

30 M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon library* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006),
    p. 217, number 161.

31 See G. Glauche, *Katalog der lateinischen Handschriften der Bayerischen
    Staatsbibliothek München: Die Pergamenthandschriften aus dem Domkapitel
    Freising, Band 1, Clm 6201–6316*, Catalogus codicum manu scriptorum Bibliothecae
    Monacensis, tom. III, series nova, pars 2,1 (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000),
    p. 39; Bernhard Bischoff, *Die südostdeutschen Schreibschulen und Bibliotheken
    in der Karolingerzeit: Teil 1, Die Bayerischen Diözesen mit 32 Schriftproben*
    (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1960), pp. 135–6; Bischoff notes the presence of accu-
    rately produced Hebrew letters in the margins of the text of Jerome's *Liber interpre-
    tationis*. The manuscript is viewable online at http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/
    bsb00064012/image_1 (accessed 4 January 2023).

32 See folios 1r, 30r, 31v, 32r, 34v, 39r, and 40v.

about the Hebrew alphabet known as the *Interpretatio alphabeti hebraeorum*: a list of the names and meanings of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, excerpted from the chapter on the Psalter in the *Hebrew names*, but rearranged in their correct Hebrew order.[33] Within the *Hebrew names*, the letter names appear in rough Latin alphabetical order, so, for example, AIN, the sixteenth letter in the alphabet, comes before BETH, the second letter. In later medieval manuscripts, the *Interpretatio* is very often followed by a complete Hebrew alphabet. It is not unlikely that this manuscript originally had such an alphabet, but the last folio has been cut in half and excised.

Also among the oldest extant copies of Jerome's *Hebrew names* is a ninth-century French book, now Oxford, Bodleian Marshall 19.[34] This is the only surviving manuscript of *Hebrew names* known to have been in England before the Norman Conquest. This copy is not complete (it ends in the middle of the chapter on Ezekiel), but in the section on the Psalms the scribe has added marginal letters next to each of the names of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet (fol. 35r–36r). These letters are far more confusing than those in the Munich manuscript. None of them are recognisable Hebrew even with the greatest imagination. Nevertheless, the names of the letters were known as such and a scribe knew that they needed forms. Medieval Christians knew about Hebrew even when they did not know exactly what it looked like. These manuscripts suggest that letterforms went hand in hand with the names of the Hebrew letters. It is not hard to imagine that Bede's copies of the *Hebrew names* likewise contained Hebrew letters, whether real or imagined.

Anonymous alphabet tracts

Additionally, short anonymous texts dealing with the Hebrew alphabet and alphabets more generally circulated in a variety of contexts in the early

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33 E. Dekkers, *Clavis patrum latinorum* (Turnhout: Brepols, 3rd edn, 1995), p. 216, number 623; J. Machielsen, *Clavis patristica pseudoepigraphorum medii aevi* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1994), number 2344; de Lagarde, *Onomastica Sacra*, pp. 191–2; see also PL 23, cols 1365–6.

34 H. Gneuss and M. Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon manuscripts: a bibliographic handlist of manuscripts and manuscript fragments written or owned in England up to 1100* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), number 659; B. Barker-Benfield (ed.), *St Augustine's Abbey, Canterbury*, Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues 13, 3 vols (London: British Library, 2008), 3, p. 1759. My thanks to the staff of the Bodleian for permission to examine this manuscript, which is among their treasures because of its original soft binding. Thanks as well to Dr Barker-Benfield for helpful guidance via email.

Middle Ages. Again, none of these manuscripts is contemporaneous with
Bede, but they are old enough and widespread enough to suggest that this
kind of material was commonplace. There are two main texts – known by
the modern titles *De formis hebricarum litterarum*[35] and *De inventione lin-
guarum*[36] – both of which tell the story of Ezra's connection to the Hebrew
alphabet and are sites of potential Hebrew language contact for early medie-
val Christians. The oldest extant copies of these texts date to around the year
800, though they are likely older. Both of these texts are always accompanied
by letterforms purporting to be Hebrew, or, in the case of *De inventione*,
Hebrew as well as a variety of other languages. In the earliest manuscripts
of both of these texts there is a particular style of 'Hebrew' alphabet that
was reproduced with surprising consistency throughout the Middle Ages,
despite its dissimilarity from recognisable Hebrew. Noteworthy features of
the alphabet are an ALEPH that resembles a Roman capital I or Z and
a T shape for the letters HE and THAU.[37] The handful of scholars who
have studied alphabet collections in medieval manuscripts follow Samuel
Berger and Charles Singer in referring to these letterforms as 'Samaritan'.[38]
Following Roland Marti, I prefer not to.[39] The relationship between these
letterforms and the Samaritan alphabet is as tenuous as that between these
letters and the square Hebrew alphabet. I prefer to call these letterforms
'*De inventione*'-type Hebrew letters because their clearest realisation is in
that tract in a manuscript from around the year 800, St Gall 876, discussed
below.[40] These letterforms have a very long life in Christian Latin texts.
Even in times and places when Hebrew texts and Jewish scholars would
have been relatively easy to consult, these letterforms are found in Christian
manuscripts.

De formis hebricarum litterarum

These same letterforms are also regularly presented as examples of Hebrew
in the text *De formis hebricarum litterarum*. This short anonymous text is

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35 *Clavis patristica pseudoepigraphorum medii aevi*, number 2361; *Clavis patrum lati-
    norum*, number 624; PL 30, cols 317–20; Thiel, *Grundlagen*, 119–21.
36 PL 112, cols 1579–83; Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, pp. 279ff.
37 See, for example, www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/csg/0876/280 (accessed 18 December
    2022); below, Figure 7.1.
38 Berger, *Quam notitiam*; Singer, 'Hebrew scholarship'.
39 Marti, 'Fremde Schriften', 65 note 75.
40 These letterforms are also found in Bern, Bürgerbibliothek 207, which is arguably a
    few decades older than St Gall 876. See Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, pp. 174–91;
    Seebold, 'Die Iren', p. 28; Zironi, 'Marginal alphabets', p. 360.

found in manuscripts dating from the ninth to fifteenth centuries, both in the context of genuine works by Jerome as well as in grammatical and computistical manuscripts.[41] This text contains information similar to Jerome's Prologue to Kings, but starts not with the number of letters, but with the tradition of the two Hebrew alphabets:

> Concerning the shapes of the Hebrew letters there are two: an ancient one, which the Samaritans use, the other later, which the Jews use …These are the Samaritans who preserve the custom of the homeland, keeping the fire and Jewish laws; Ezra handed this down in his writings … Because of the fact that they had been separated from them [*or*, in order that they might be separated from them[42]], Ezra, doctor of law, established another form of letters and passed it on to them, preserving nevertheless the same values for the letters; these are the letters which Jews now use. There are therefore 22 Hebrew letters that were handed down from Moses.[43]

This is followed by two lists: first the letters' names ('*Nomina sunt ista*') and then their forms ('*formae autem istae*'). The text concludes with a note on the writing direction of Hebrew: 'Their lines are written differently than us, from the right and they end them on the left. For this reason we have placed the letters in that way here.'[44] The oldest manuscript listed in Lambert's catalogue of works associated with St Jerome is Bern, Bürgerbibliothek 417, a computus miscellany of the first half of the ninth century.[45] This text in that manuscript occurs among a number of other short texts dealing with

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41 Lambert, *Bibliotheca Hieronymiana manuscripta*, 3B, pp. 258–9, number 401. The *Bibliotheca Hieronymiana manuscripta* list is not complete. See Thiel, *Grundlagen*, pp. 119–20; Seebold, 'Die Iren', pp. 12–13.

42 For this latter reading, that the new alphabet was adopted in order to distance themselves from Samaritans, see Birnbaum, *The Hebrew scripts*, p. 74.

43 Thiel, *Grundlagen*, p. 120; I have silently expanded ę to ae: 'Hebraicarum litterarum formae duae sunt: una antiqua, qua Samaritani utuntur, altera posterior, qua Iudaei. … Hi sunt Samaritae, qui et patriae consuetudinem servant, ignem colentes, et iudaica mandata; Ezras [hoc] nobis scire tradidit scriptis suis. … Propter quod, ut essent separati ab eis, Ezdras legis doctor formam aliam litterarum instituit atque tradidit eis, virtute tamen litterarum eadem servata, quibus litteris etiam nunc utuntur Iudaei. Sunt igitur hebraice litterae, quae per Moysen sunt traditae XXII.'

44 Thiel, *Grundlagen*, p. 120: 'Scribuntur autem versus nobis inverse a dextris, namque ad sinistram partem eos finiunt, propter quod et nos hoc eodem modo litteras posuimus.'

45 Lambert, *Bibliotheca Hieronymiana manuscripta*, 3B, pp. 258–9, number 401. H. Hagen, *Catalogus codicum Bernensium (Bibliotheca Bongarsiana)* (Bern: B. F. Haller, 1875; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1974), pp. 372–3; O. Homburger, *Die illustrierten Handschriften der Burgerbibliothek Bern: die vorkarolingischen und karolingischen Handschriften* (Bern: Bürgerbibliothek Bern, 1962), 69–71.

letters, including Hebrew, Greek, and Latin alphabets.[46] The text ends with two lists: the names of the letters (ALEPH through THAU) followed by *De inventione*-type letterforms that have been misunderstood and copied out of order despite being labelled with their names. The error is clearly the result of copying left to right a text which is meant to be read right to left.

De formis is also preserved in a Fleury manuscript of *c*. 800, now Paris, BnF lat. 1750, which contains a collection of alphabetic and computistical materials, including Hebrew and Greek alphabets.[47] Michael Lapidge argues on paleographical grounds that part of this manuscript was copied from an English exemplar from around the year 700.[48] This is one of the cleanest ninth-century copies of *De formis*; it concludes with the names of the Hebrew letters in the correct order (ALEPH through THAU) followed by a labelled list of the letterforms written in four short lines, where each line is correctly written from right to left, just as the text describes. Successfully copying an unknown alphabet in the reverse direction of Latin text was one of the greatest challenges for Latin scribes dealing with foreign alphabets. Although the text discusses both forms of the Hebrew alphabet, here as commonly it is followed only by a single set of letterforms, of the *De inventione*-type.

Another early ninth-century manuscript does contain two distinct versions of the Hebrew alphabet, but they have become rather confused in copying.[49] The very last folio of a deluxe pandect Bible from St Germain from the year 822, now Paris, Bibliothèque nationale lat. 11504 + 11505, contains an abbreviated version of this text, beginning at *Hi sunt Samaritæ qui*.[50] A series of alphabets in columns follows: the first is the names of the letters in order from top to bottom (*haec nomina earum*, from ALEPH to THAU); then there is a column of letterforms of the *De inventione*-type followed by the names again and the names' meanings.[51] This list is headed *forme autem*

46 See H. Hagen (ed.), *Anecdota Helvetica*, Grammatici Latini 8 (Leipzig: Teubner, 1870; repr. Hildesheim: Olms, 1961), pp. cxxxxiii–cxxxxvi, esp. cxxxxv; Thiel, *Grundlagen*, p. 120.

47 See https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8479009h/f294.double (accessed 4 January 2023).

48 M. Lapidge, 'An Isidorian epitome from early Anglo-Saxon England', in M. Lapidge (ed.), *Anglo-Latin Literature 600–899* (London: Hambledon Press, 1996), pp. 183–223, at 185–7.

49 Berger, *Quam notitiam*, pp. 5–8; see Thiel, *Grundlagen*, p. 120.

50 That is, beginning on the fourth line of the text as printed in Thiel, *Grundlagen*, p. 120.

51 Seebold, 'Die Iren', p. 34: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8426780x/f432.image (accessed 4 January 2023).

istae sunt. These forms and names appear to be lined up correctly, but are out of order from the first list. In this second list, the first letter is MEM (the ninth letter of the Hebrew alphabet), which then runs backwards through the Hebrew alphabet to ALEPH, then jumps to THAU before running backwards through the rest of the alphabet. Like in the Bern manuscript, this list was clearly created from an alphabet which was written from right to left, but this scribe has copied them from left to right. The exemplar must have had two horizontal rows, the first ALEPH to MEM and the second NUN to THAU. This sort of error is unsurprisingly common in Christian copies of Hebrew alphabets. Even when the introductory text specifies the writing direction of Hebrew, scribes regularly copied the alphabet backwards. Then follows the normal explicit of *De formis* (*Scribuntur autem* …) and the following additional sentence: 'Jewish [letters] which the Jews use with the same words, the same value, with just the forms changed, as we have dealt with above' (*Iudaicas uero quibus etiam nunc utunter Iudæi hisdem uocabulis, eadem uirtute, forma immutata tantum, ut supra taxauimus*). This is followed by yet another 'Hebrew' alphabet, with a different set of forms and no names, but Latin letter equivalents. These too have been copied out of order, though differently from the second list – again because of an exemplar that had the letters in the correct Hebrew order – now 'starting' in the middle of the alphabet with what must be NUN (נ).[52] Finally, this manuscript has a list of Greek majuscules, the names of the Greek letters, Greek minuscules, and the numbers that correspond to the Greek letters. The multiple layers of confusion in the copying of the Hebrew alphabets suggest that this text is significantly older than this manuscript copy from 822. While none of these manuscripts are as old as Bede's lifetime, they show that the tradition of copying – or attempting to copy – Hebrew letters and alphabets was certainly thriving and indeed going astray from better exemplars within a few generations of his life. These manuscripts also reinforce that knowledge of the two Hebrew alphabets and their connection to Ezra was well known.

Apart from the theoretical exemplar of Paris BnF lat. 1750, which is likely as early as 700 and possibly English, there is one intriguing but frustratingly flawed piece of manuscript evidence that suggests the presence of Hebrew and other foreign alphabetic material in England close to the time of Bede. British Library MS Cotton Domitian A.ix, fol. 8 is a single leaf written in an uncial hand that E. A. Lowe dates to the second half of the eighth century.[53] Because of this leaf's presence in Cotton Domitian A.ix,

52 Singer, 'Hebrew scholarship', reproduces the letterforms from this manuscript, p. 291, cols 7 and 8; see Berger, *Quam notitiam*, p. 6.

53 See Seebold, 'Die Iren', p. 24: www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_domitian_a_ix_f008r (accessed 18 December 2022).

'a very miscellaneous volume of English provenance', Lowe suggests that it was written 'possibly in England',[54] and is thus included in Helmut Gneuss' *Handlist*.[55] The recto of this leaf contains the conclusion of a collection of alphabets. The clearest items on the page are three alphabets labelled *Chaldeorum litterae*, *Egyp[torum]*, and *litterae graecae cum numero*.[56] The first two alphabets belong to a tradition of 'spurious alphabets' which René Derolez has studied in conjunction with his investigation of manuscript runes.[57] He points to this odd folio as one of the earliest examples containing such material.[58] The three alphabets are written out as prose, with letterforms – not resembling any known languages – written below their names. At the very top of the folio preceding the 'Chaldean' alphabet is the end of what must have been a Hebrew alphabet. The names of the last two letters of the Hebrew alphabet – SEN and THAU – are visible at the top of the page followed by the last sentence from *De formis*, *scribuntur* autem *uersus nobis inuersę a dextris | namque ad sinistram partem eos finiunt | propter et nos hoc eodem modo littera posuimus*.[59] It can be reasonably assumed that the previous folio of the manuscript contained the beginning of the Hebrew alphabet and the rest of the text. If so, this would be the oldest known copy of *De formis* and another example with possible English connections. Despite what the text says, the letters of the Hebrew alphabet do not appear to have been copied from right to left; SEN is to the left of THAU. This marks this copy as distinct from the oldest complete copy of the text, Paris BnF 1750, where the *De inventione*-type letters are copied in the Hebrew order from right to left. As in Bern 417, Paris BnF lat. 11505, and Paris lat. 1750, a Greek alphabet 'with numbers' follows, but Domitian A.ix fol 8 is the only one among these manuscripts that also contains 'spurious' or pseudo-alphabets.

The clear and correctly ordered Hebrew alphabet in Paris BnF lat. 1750 contrasted with the confused and spurious alphabets in Domitian A. ix suggests that these manuscripts represent what must have been an active interest in alphabets likely already developed by the time of Bede. It is often

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54 E. A. Lowe, *Codices latini antiquiores: a palaeographical guide to Latin manuscripts prior to the ninth century Pt. 2 Great Britain and Ireland* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1935), p. 19, number 185.

55 Gneuss and Lapidge, *Anglo-Saxon manuscripts*, number 329.5.

56 www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton_MS_Domitian_A_IX (accessed 18 December 2022).

57 See Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, pp. 274–8.

58 Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, p. 6.

59 Cf. Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, pp. 5–6.

assumed that alphabet collections were a Carolingian interest; these manuscripts suggest that the tradition is older than that.[60] A comparison of these four eighth- and ninth-century copies of this short text demonstrates at once its popularity as well as its age. Among at least three of the four copies the order of the letters has already been confused, suggesting that these extant copies were part of a chain of transmission already subject to confusion.

De inventione linguarum

Another anonymous text on alphabets that likewise connects Ezra directly to the re-creation of the Hebrew alphabet is the so-called *De inventione linguarum*. Its title and attribution to Hrabanus Maurus (d. 856) are baseless conjectures by the seventeenth-century scoundrel Melchior Goldast; neither have any medieval provenance.[61] Nevertheless, its presence in the *Patrologia Latina* under that title and author has had an influence on those who refer to it. Derolez, who is the only modern scholar to devote any serious attention to the text, suggests *De inventione litterarum* would be a far more sensible title and he rejects the attribution to Hrabanus Maurus.[62] The text in its most basic form consists of five alphabets together with short explanatory paragraphs on the origin of the alphabets: Hebrew, Greek, Latin, the alphabet associated with Aethicus Ister,[63] and runes. Aethicus Ister's *Cosmography* is a fascinating but confusing early medieval text, purporting to be a travelogue as narrated to 'Hieronymus'. In some ways it is an eighth(?)-century precursor to the *Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. The text of the *Cosmography* describes the 'alphabet of Aethicus Ister' and manuscripts regularly end with this fanciful alphabet as well as each of its letter's interpretations.[64] Michael Herren refers to this seemingly entirely invented alphabet as 'a rather silly parody' of Hebrew and Greek alphabet collections.[65]

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60 Seebold, 'Die Iren', p. 11; though see also p. 13: 'Die Herkunft und frühe Uberlieferung der hebräischen Alphabete beider Typen ist völlig unklar'. Zironi, 'Marginal alphabets', pp. 354–6.

61 Goldast was charged with stealing and defacing manuscripts held by the Abbey of St Gall; Derolez suspects that he may have excised a now-missing runic alphabet from the oldest manuscript of *De inventione linguarum*. See Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, pp. 294 and 303.

62 Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, p. 285.

63 M. Herren, *The Cosmography of Aethicus Ister: edition, translation, and commentary* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013).

64 See Herren, *Aethicus Ister*, pp. 164–5 and 214–17 (with plates).

65 Herren, *Aethicus Ister*, pp. 320–1.

De inventione survives in approximately sixteen manuscripts; due to the mutable nature of this material, it is difficult to draw a distinct line between what does or does not constitute a member of this text family.[66] Most of the manuscripts of *De inventione* are from the eleventh century or later and originate in France or Germany. There are no extant copies with clear pre-Conquest English connections. The earliest manuscript of this text, from around 800, however, deserves special attention. St Gall 876 is a large grammatical compilation containing works by Donatus, Bede, and many anonymous grammatical tracts.[67] In the middle of this manuscript is *De inventione* with a striking, unparalleled layout (pp. 278–80; Figure 7.1). The scribe planned to present all five alphabets in horizontal parallel lists running across three consecutive folios in the order Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Aethicus Ister, then runes. The first opening, for example, has the Latin alphabet from A through V; you turn the page to find the final letters completed on the verso. Running above each of the alphabets are written short introductory paragraphs explaining the origin of each alphabet. The scribe must have realised that they did not have enough space to include the runes themselves underneath the final paragraph, and they are not included here. The runes must have been written out on a following folio, but that page is now missing (Derolez suggests that Melchior Goldast, the text's first editor, stole it).[68] The monumental layout of the manuscript gives one the impression of reading from a scroll, and one wonders whether this is the scribe's innovation or reflects the exemplar of this text.

The Hebrew alphabet here is particularly noteworthy: it is correctly copied from right to left over the three pages, so that the beginning of the Hebrew alphabet appears parallel to the end of the other alphabets. The short introductory paragraph explains that the alphabet was first created by Moses and revised by Ezra: 'The Hebrew letters were invented first of all by Moses and were restored by Ezra after their captivity and return. We have labelled the forms of the letters below as we were able to find; their total is 22 letters.'[69] *De inventione* does not include the detail found in *De formis* that Hebrew is written right to left, but the alphabet here is so copied. There

66 Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, pp. 345–59.
67 G. Scherrer, *Verzeichniss der Handschriften der Stiftsbibliothek von St. Gallen* (Halle: Verlag der Buchhandlung des Waisenhauses, 1875), pp. 303–5; Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, pp. 290–9; viewable online at www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/csg/0876 (accessed 18 December 2022).
68 Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, p. 294.
69 Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, p. 349: 'Primo omnium litterae Hebraicae linguae a Moyse inventae sunt et ab Ezra post illorum captivitatem et reversionem eorum renovatae sunt; quarum elementa litterarum subtus ut invenire quivimus adnotata habemus, earumque summa XXII constat litterarum.'
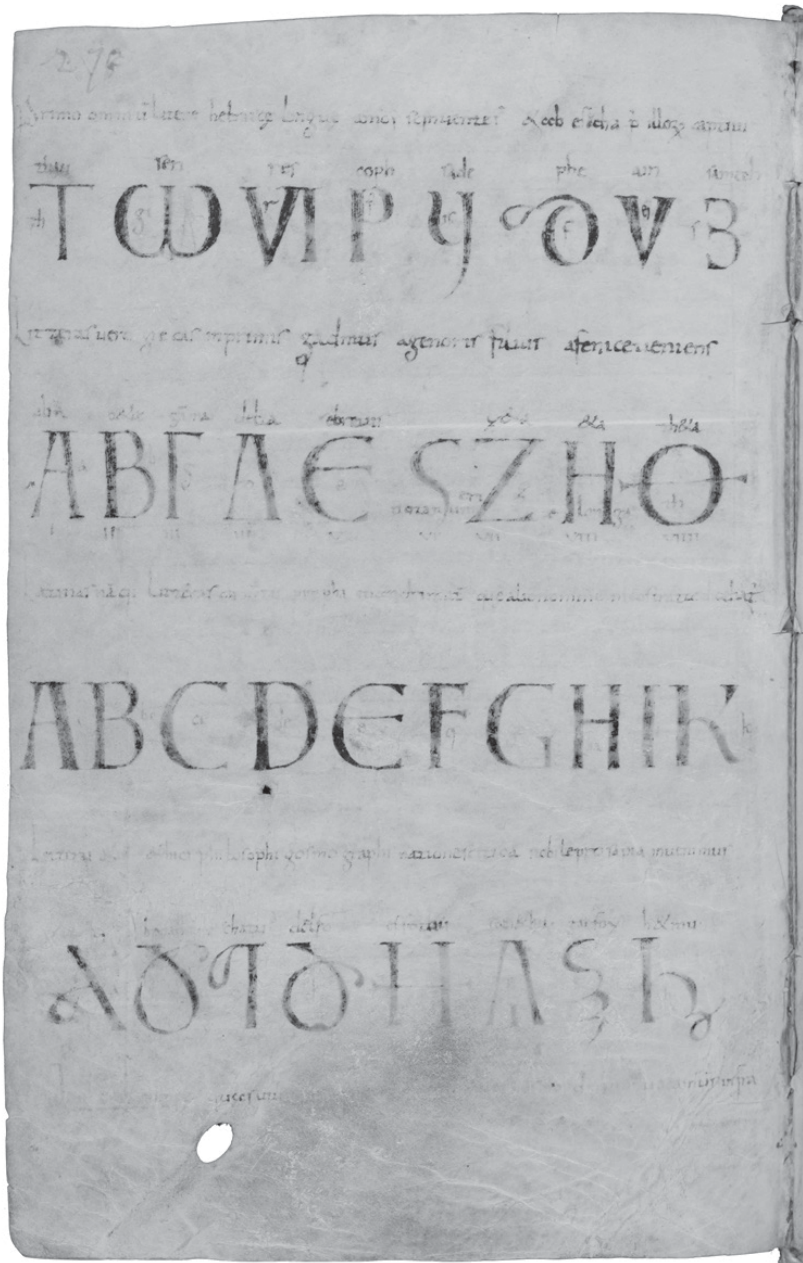
Figure 7.1. St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Codex Sangallensis 876, pp. 278–80: *De inventione*, lists of alphabets including Hebrew. Reproduced by kind permission of the Stiftsbibliothek St Gallen.
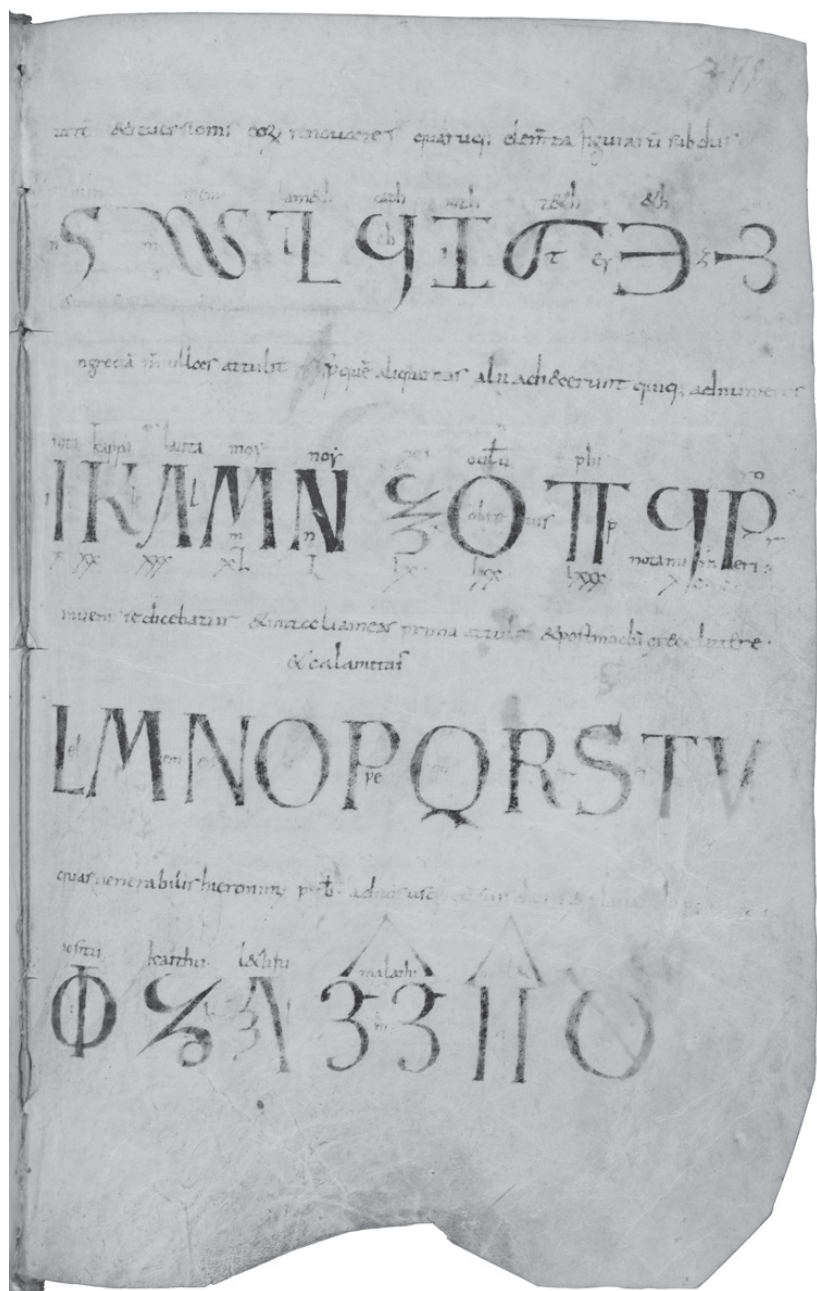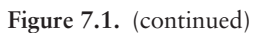
Figure 7.1. (continued)

Figure 7.1. (continued)

is, however, a unique note in this oldest copy of *De inventione* appended to the very end of the description: 'but get some better letters of these' (*sed require caracteres earum uerius*).[70] The note is written in the same hand and seemingly at the same time as the main paragraph about the Hebrew alphabet. Either the scribe immediately had doubts about the accuracy of the letterforms or was copying from an exemplar which expressed these doubts. As discussed above, these letterforms are the *De inventione*-type letters which are not easily recognisable as genuine Hebrew or Samaritan. This type of comment calling for correction suggests an awareness of the reality of Hebrew that is not often associated with Singer's characterisation of the 'simple minds of the men of the Dark Ages'.[71] Indeed, the early ninth-century continental scholar Walahfrid Strabo had a collection of alphabets in his personal manuscript, including an incredibly accurate Hebrew alphabet.[72]

Conclusion

A fuller exploration of the concept of alphabet collections is necessary to contextualise this phenomenon as well as the particular interest in Hebrew alphabets among these collections. It was certainly appealing to Carolingian audiences, but this impression is skewed by the higher survival rate of such manuscripts in comparison to those from earlier periods, such as the lifetime of the Venerable Bede. The single leaf in Cotton Domitian A. ix demonstrates that collections of 'exotic' alphabets are at least as old as the eighth century, and the condition of the alphabets in that manuscript suggests that the tradition was already well established by then. The early eighth-century pseudo-travel narrative, the *Cosmography* of Aethicus Ister, describes the author writing in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and his own invented letters; manuscripts of this text conclude with this 'fantastic' alphabet that was apparently quickly incorporated into *De inventione linguarum*.[73] The fact that this author seems to parody the idea of foreign alphabets in the early eighth century likewise suggests that it was already an existing genre of intellectual knowledge. It has even been suggested that Bede himself could have

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70 Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, p. 294.
71 Singer, 'Hebrew scholarship', p. 289.
72 St Gall 878; see B. Bischoff, 'Eine Sammelhandschrift Walahfrid Strabos (Cod. Sangall. 878)', in *Mittelalterliche Studien: Ausgewählt Aufsätze zur Schriftkunde und Literaturgeschichte*, 3 vols (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1966–1981), 2, pp. 34–51. Online at www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/csg/0878/320/ (accessed 18 December 2022).
73 Herren, *Aethicus Ister*, pp. 162–5 and 320.

been responsible for promoting an interest in alphabets and other similar lists.[74] Early in his *Reckoning of time*, Bede describes how the Greek alphabet can be used as a clearer system of counting than the Roman system of numbers.[75] Thus the Greek alphabet is contained in most copies of Bede's influential text. As Faith Wallis points out, however, Bede's inclusion of the alphabet really 'has nothing to do with the calendar, or even with calculation'.[76] Bede also gives the names of the months according to the Hebrew, and the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, and English.[77] Lists like these reflect an interest in collecting 'ethnographic' encyclopaedic information; alphabets were a key component of this type of information, and knowledge about the Hebrew alphabet in particular was central to it.[78]

Although Bede would never have had anything we would consider a reading knowledge of Hebrew, he knew a lot about Hebrew, and he was confident in his knowledge. He used the knowledge *about* Hebrew which he gleaned from Jerome – information about the alphabet, its sounds, its grammatical structures – to make original deductions and arguments about the text of the Bible which sometimes even diverge from Jerome. Some of this information is strikingly vivid. In his commentary *On Genesis*, he gives the impression of consulting Hebrew manuscripts – and thus avoiding mistakes that Jewish scribes make: '*The Dodanim are the people of Rhodes*: … the similarity of the letters DALETH and RES often creates this mistake among Hebrews, as the one is read for the other.'[79] As I have shown elsewhere, this is not 'simply Jerome abbreviated'; indeed here Bede suggests an emendation to Jerome's text.[80] Furthermore, Bede might not just be repurposing knowledge he derived from Jerome, but could very well have been familiar with the Hebrew alphabet, and might have genuinely understood the similarity between the letters dalet: ד and resh: ר. Information about, and interest in, the Hebrew alphabet was not esoteric knowledge for Christians in the time of Bede or later; rather, these were essential and mainstream facts for any medieval scholar with an interest in the text of the Bible as translated by Jerome. Bede, the scholar, knew that.

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74 Seebold, 'Die Iren', p. 11.
75 Bede, *De temporum ratione liber* 1, ed. C. W. Jones, CCSL 123B (Turnhout: Brepols, 1972).
76 F. Wallis, *Bede: The Reckoning of time* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), p. 263.
77 Bede, *De temporum ratione* 11–15.
78 Dekker, 'Alphabets in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts'.
79 Bede, *In Genesim* 3, lines 40–4, ed. C. W. Jones, CCSL 118A (Turnhout: Brepols, 1967): 'Dodanim Rhodii: … similitudo enim litterarum DALETH et RES hunc apud Hebreos saepe facit errorem, ut alia legitur pro alia'.
80 Fleming, '*Hebraeam scire linguam*', pp. 68–9.