




4-2010

Review of Piet Van Boxel and Sabine Arndt (Eds.),  
*Crossing Borders: Hebrew Manuscripts as a Meeting  
Place of Cultures*

Arthur Kiron

University of Pennsylvania, kiron@pobox.upenn.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [http://repository.upenn.edu/library\\_papers](http://repository.upenn.edu/library_papers)

 Part of the [Jewish Studies Commons](#), and the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kiron, A. (2010). Review of Piet Van Boxel and Sabine Arndt (Eds.), *Crossing Borders: Hebrew Manuscripts as a Meeting Place of Cultures*. *The Bodleian Library Record*, 23 (1), 12-17. Retrieved from [http://repository.upenn.edu/library\\_papers/104](http://repository.upenn.edu/library_papers/104)

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. [http://repository.upenn.edu/library\\_papers/104](http://repository.upenn.edu/library_papers/104)  
For more information, please contact [repository@pobox.upenn.edu](mailto:repository@pobox.upenn.edu).

---

Review of Piet Van Boxel and Sabine Arndt (Eds.), *Crossing Borders: Hebrew Manuscripts as a Meeting Place of Cultures*

**Disciplines**

Jewish Studies | Library and Information Science

## REVIEWS

*CROSSING BORDERS: HEBREW MANUSCRIPTS AS  
A MEETING PLACE OF CULTURES*

ED. PIET VAN BOXEL AND SABINE ARNDT  
(BODLEIAN LIBRARY, OXFORD, 2009)

ARTHUR KIRON, Schottenstein-Jessleson Curator of Judaica Collections, University of Pennsylvania, writes:

What is a Hebrew manuscript and for whom is it written? If the short answer is a handwritten book in the Hebrew language addressed exclusively to Jewish readers, this brilliantly conceived collection complicates that definition from the start. The central argument that binds together these ten studies is that Hebrew manuscripts are above all forms of evidence that bear witness to a rich history of cultural interaction among Jews, Christians and Muslims across the centuries. In this sense, Hebrew manuscripts as cultural artifacts belong to everyone who seeks them out. They are not the exclusive possession of any faith community. Indeed, if Hebrew manuscripts do not belong exclusively to Jewish readers, we also learn that the very form of these Hebrew books – the codex – was first introduced by Christians as early as the second century, and only belatedly adopted by Jews living under Muslim rule some seven centuries later. In short, it is in the analysis of the making of these Hebrew manuscripts, and of the historical contexts in which they were made, as much as through the meanings their texts are intended to convey, that we learn what is distinct from and what is integrally related to the non-Jewish communities in which they were produced.

This book was published in conjunction with an exhibition of Hebrew manuscripts held at the Bodleian from December 2009 to May 2010. The exhibition was conceived by Dr Piet van Boxel, Hebraica and Judaica Curator at the Bodleian Library, Librarian at the Oxford Centre for Hebrew and Jewish Studies, and Fellow in Early Judaism and Origins of Christianity. It was mounted with the expert assistance of his talented co-editor, Sabine Arndt, a doctoral candidate specializing in medieval Hebrew astronomy. This accompanying volume, however, is not an exhibition catalogue. It does

## Reviews

not, for example, provide a list of all the items that were selected for display and does not merely re-capitulate what was exhibited. Rather, like many of the glossed and richly illustrated Hebrew manuscripts it discusses, this book provides independent readings which comment upon and transform our understanding of the works they discuss.

The fact that one of the world's finest collections of Hebrew manuscripts has been gathered together under the roof of the Bodleian Library at Oxford University reflects the humanist legacy at the heart of this book. As Bodley's Librarian Sarah Thomas notes in her Foreword, the man after whom the library was named, Sir Thomas Bodley, was a tri-lingual Protestant Christian Hebraist whose personal collection encompassed Greek, Latin and Hebrew texts (p. 6). In his introduction, van Boxel reviews the growth of the Bodleian's Hebraica manuscript holdings in a way that combines the institutional history of the Library with the legacy of academic Oriental studies at Oxford, in order to narrate the main story he wishes to tell, namely, one of 'intellectual transmission, cultural exchange and practical cooperation, social interaction and religious toleration' (p. 13).

The origins of the book form are surveyed by Anthony Grafton as he traces the physical and intellectual transition 'From Roll to Codex' in the emergence of the Christian Bible as a codex and in the exegetical works of four centuries of early Church Fathers. The key figures in Grafton's account, both of whose works have survived in codex form, are the pre-Christian Alexandrian Jew Philo and the Church historian and exegete Eusebius who gave new life to Philo's allegorical methods of reading. We learn how early Church Fathers, represented by the second-third-century Alexandrians Clement and Origen and later by Jerome and Augustine in the fourth and fifth centuries CE also turned to their Jewish forebear in positive and critical ways to interpret their sacred literature. Grafton makes the point that while the expansion of the Christian religion and its official adoption by the Roman empire in the fourth century transformed the codex into the standard book form for most peoples living under its rule, 'the late adoption of the codex by Jews may well reflect an effective means of dissociating themselves from the Christians, who first used the codex for disseminating the New Testament and the Translation of the Old Testament' (p. 16).

The historical geographies and typologies of medieval Hebrew manuscript production are the subject of Malachi Beit-Arie's essay on 'The Script and Book Craft in the Hebrew Medieval Codex'. Beit-Arie, the world's foremost authority, indeed the veritable creator of the modern field of academic Hebrew codicology and paleography, explains what is different



about the conditions that affected the production of medieval Hebrew manuscripts. Jews, with high rates of literacy, living in a far-flung diaspora that extended across the Christian and Muslim empires, lacked a central political authority. Such analytical insights make it possible for Beit-Arie to clarify what is different about medieval Hebrew manuscript consumption, namely that these handwritten books were mainly copied for private use and were not made in professional scriptoria as was typical of Christian book-making. Beit-Arie proposes another possible explanation for the belated adoption of the codex form by Jews, namely that the oral nature of Jewish traditions of learning remained the primary mode of transmitting Jewish teachings. He also contends, against the popular assumption that most Hebrew manuscripts were lost due to persecution, that in fact the reason the majority did not survive was overuse. At the same time, Beit-Arie has convincingly demonstrated in his scholarship and rehearses here his typological identification of the five geo-cultural zones, and additional sub-zones, in which Jewish manuscript production occurred and how the anatomy of these codices reveals where and when they were made.

Moving beyond format, exegesis, and anatomy, we encounter the role of Hebrew manuscripts as agents of cultural transmission via translation in the third essay by Cesar Merchan-Hamann. In his 'Fables from East to West', he shows how this literary genre 'crossed borders all the way from India to Iceland'. Fables, Merchan-Hamann explains, were popular sources for medieval sermons and in their literary history of transmission may be viewed as medieval travellers. They spanned the known world through copying, re-copying, adaptation, translation, and possibly oral recital and Jews played a critical role in this informal system of cultural re-circulation.

From the popular world of fables, we next delve into the annual cycle of liturgical practices with Eva Frojmovic, who explores the role of Christian artists in the making of Ashkenazic prayer books in the High Middle Ages. She demonstrates how aesthetic appreciation, Jewish patronage and intercultural permeability literally illuminate the pages of Jewish daily and festival worship. In his contribution, Piet van Boxel invites us on a detective hunt that reveals how explicitly Christian, indeed Christological imagery found its way into the heart of one of the Bodleian's most beautiful Hebrew manuscript treasures: MS. Canon. Or. 62. This illuminated, late fifteenth-century Hebrew Pentateuch, accompanied as it is by the classical Jewish Aramaic paraphrase as well as by medieval Jewish glosses, and additional Biblical lectionaries for the Sabbath and holidays, clearly locates it, van Boxel explains, within the sphere of Jewish liturgical use. Through a careful comparison of the symbols found in medieval bestiaries and the social contexts in which Renaissance illuminators worked in the

northern Italian city of Ferrara, van Boxel helps us understand that cultural permeability went beyond patronage to affect the very content of the messages symbolically encoded on the leaves of the Jewish liturgical cycle.

Suzanne Wijsman takes us further into the ongoing debate among art historians over the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish artisans in the production of medieval Hebrew manuscripts. Her example is MS. Opp. 776, the Oppenheimer Siddur, from the collection of the eighteenth-century Chief Rabbi of Prague, David Oppenheimer, whose library was purchased by the Bodleian in 1829. Of particular interest here is Wijsman's discussion of the unprecedented appearance in this late fifteenth-century Ashkenazic daily prayer book of the motif of 'wild men', otherwise only known from Christian sources. Her point, however, is to argue that the Jewish copyist of the manuscript was also the artist, and that in this case the penetration of Christian imagery into a Jewish text comes from a Jew familiar with and appreciative of the non-Jewish artistic world in which he lived.

Among the most arcane and difficult fields of Hebrew manuscript study, the world of medieval science must stand out as uniquely difficult. In order to read these manuscripts, one must first possess excellent linguistic and paleographical training, both in multiple languages and in how to read semi-cursive and barely legible cursive scribal hands; this undertaking requires a clear grasp of the technical terminology employed in the texts; it demands a critical understanding of the state of scientific knowledge in the time of a given work's composition as well as familiarity with the historical contexts in which that text was produced; and to read these texts well one must have what the late historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi described as the ability to 'sniff out' the reading between the lines. All of these skills are amply demonstrated in Sabine Arndt's remarkable study of Judah ben Solomon ha-Kohen's translation from Arabic into Hebrew of the medieval encyclopedia of science and philosophy entitled *Midrash ha-hokhmah*. Arndt explicates and argues for the historicity of a series of scholarly exchanges between Judah ben Solomon and scholars from the court of the inquisitive polymath and Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, while detecting along the way notes of humour, sarcasm and disdain in the language of these exchanges.

The final three chapters of this book return us to the Latin Middle Ages and to Northern Europe in particular as the geographical site of intensive Jewish-Christian cultural interactions. Lesley Smith unveils the related ways in which Jews and Christians imagined the Temple in Jerusalem. In this case, we find Jews being sought out by Christians to help better understand the Hebrew Bible in its literal visualization. If in the time of



the Church Fathers, allegorical exegesis was regnant, in twelfth-century Paris the Order of Augustinian Canons at the Abbey of St Victor were chiefly concerned with understanding the plain meaning of their Holy Scriptures. Smith draws upon a variety of diagrams incorporated into extant manuscripts of the eleventh-century French-Jewish exegete Rashi's commentaries on the Bible to demonstrate this shared hermeneutical interest held by Jewish and Victorine Christian scholars of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, and later by Nicholas of Lyra, a Franciscan theologian who lived in Paris in the fourteenth century.

Judith Olszowy-Schlanger presents the relatively unknown world of Christian Hebraism in medieval England. The philological approach characteristic of this scholarly group has survived in the form of various bi- and tri-lingual translations (Hebrew, Latin and Old French) of the Bible, dictionaries and glossaries. Her primary source is MS. Bodl. Or. 62, in which a text from the Book of Ezekiel serves as one example of the work of an anonymous group of thirteenth-century Christian Hebraists living in England, who systematically compared the Hebrew Biblical text with various Latin translations dating back to Origen and Jerome in late antiquity. She points out that the page layout used by them, in which parallel columns of Hebrew and Latin texts were aligned next to each other, went beyond serving as a critical apparatus and pedagogic aid, but was further meant to symbolize 'reconciliation under the leadership of Christ'. It is not clear if by this the authors intended a purely textual or also a communal reconciliation, especially given that these texts were written during the bitter century of anti-Jewish violence that culminated in the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290 (historical contexts which surprisingly are not explored here).

In the concluding essay by Eva De Visscher, we encounter another example of Christian Hebraism through a study of the works of the twelfth-century Cistercian monk, Herbert of Bosham, and his contemporaries. De Visscher poses the critical question: 'How did a Christian scholar at that time set out to learn Hebrew, and what difficulties would he (we have no evidence of female Christian Hebraists) be likely to encounter?' (p. 127). (De Visscher's paranthetical remark seems to be the only time in this book when the issue of gender is explicitly raised, save for the sensitive discussions of the figure of the Virgin Mary by van Boxel.) Practical difficulties, including the limited availability of reference tools, recurrently confounded such readers. From Jerome to Herbert we learn about Christians who resented the 'untrustworthy' readings of Jewish scholars like Rashi who 'tended to downplay messianic notions in the Psalms, sometimes explicitly "as a retort to the Christians"' (p. 128).

In these final essays we find the other meaning of 'cultural interaction' – i.e., that conflict as well as cooperation was characteristic of the Jewish-Christian encounter. It is worth noting that the weight of this book leans heavily towards the Jewish-Christian historical experience and regrettably we learn much less about the ways in which Hebrew manuscripts bear witness to Jewish-Muslim relations. Surprisingly, we learn nothing about the identities of the contributors to this volume. There is a useful index, arranged alphabetically by repository, of manuscripts cited in the book, but there is no general index for navigating the volume. These criticisms notwithstanding, this is a highly important contribution to the field of Hebrew manuscript study and an eye-opening experience for anyone who thought that Hebrew manuscripts belong to an arcane chapter of marginal significance. This book offers compelling evidence that – like the borders ruling manuscript pages – these marginal traces are intimately entangled with and often cross over into the history of the people among whom they were written.

P. D. JAMES, *TALKING ABOUT DETECTIVE FICTION*

(BODLEIAN LIBRARY, OXFORD, 2009)

HEATHER O'DONOGHUE, Linacre College, Oxford writes:

P. D. James – one of the most distinguished and successful crime novelists in Britain – has exchanged the role of creative writer for that of literary critic with the publication of *Talking About Detective Fiction*, a wonderfully wise, elegant and informative survey of crime writing from its origins in Victorian sensation literature to its most popular present-day practitioners; there is even a glimpse into its future. But *Talking about Detective Fiction* goes much further, in its very brief compass, than a mere survey. James deftly and economically – and without the least pretension – touches on the staples of academic literary criticism: historicism, reader response theories, and narratology, especially viewpoint. Her sense of the development of the genre is both assured and illuminating – for instance, her remark that Agatha Christie, though hugely popular and much imitated, had little influence on the subsequent development of detective fiction, while Dorothy L. Sayers, untypical of her time in her representation of the physical 'messiness' of murder, paved the way for much of the graphic forensic science in contemporary crime fiction. And James's literary analyses are punctuated by sudden, compelling shifts to the personal experience of the novelist herself: the difficulties of managing viewpoint in a genre in which so much must