JEWISH TREASURES
FROM OXFORD LIBRARIES
EDITED BY REBECCA ABRAMS
& CÉSAR MERCHÁN-HAMANN
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DORIT RAINES
In October 1640 a fearful and disappointed man tried in vain to find solace in his collection of manuscripts:

Tuesday, Simon and Jude’s Eve, I went into my upper study, to see some Manuscripts, which I was sending to Oxford. In that Study hung my Picture, taken by the Life; and coming in, I found it fallen down upon the Face, and lying on the Floor, the String being broken, ... I am almost every day threatened with my Ruine in Parliament. God grant this be no Omen. 1

The downfall of Archbishop William Laud, his unattractive personality and his controversial role in politics and religion, which culminated in his own imprisonment and execution, have tended to obscure his achievements as a patron of learning and generous benefactor of libraries, as well as his ambition for the University of Oxford. Born in Reading in 1573, the son of a prosperous clothier, Laud was educated at the local grammar school and then at St John’s College, Oxford. St John’s had been founded in 1555, during the reign of Mary Tudor, and still retained some lingering Catholic sympathies. It was here that Laud formed his deeply conservative view of religion and church government and his enthusiasm for a Protestant church which nevertheless exalted hierarchy, traditions and ceremony. These were contentious views at a time when England had so recently been torn apart by religious conflict and when many English clergy looked to the Continental reformed churches for a future model of the English church. They became dangerous views, as Laud climbed the ladder of promotion in the church, when combined with his tactlessness, impatience and reluctance to compromise, his prickly self-righteousness and sensitivy to criticism.

‘A very forward, confident and arzalous person’, as the Oxford historian Anthony Wood (1632–1695) later described him, Laud made many enemies and relied on powerful friends, who valued his determination, intelligence and administrative abilities, as well as his loyalty and capacity for very hard work. ’Laud was protected and promoted by Richard Neile (1552–1640), a future Archbishop of York, by George Villiers (1592–1628), Duke of Buckingham and favourite of both James I and Charles I, and finally by Charles I (1600–1649; king from 1625) himself. As Archbishop of Canterbury from 1633, Laud was the senior bishop in the English church during the period when Charles I ruled without Parliament. A hostile observer, Sir Simonds D’Ewes, described him at this time in very unflattering terms: ‘a little, low, red-faced man, of mean parentage’.2

Laud used his influence at court to rebuild the institution of the church, to improve its finances and administration, and to enforce order and conformity in matters of liturgy and ecclesiastical policy.
This precipitated a crisis in 1638, when the largely Presbyterian Scots defied an attempt to impose the prayer book and rituals of the English church. Parliament was summoned to raise the funds needed for military intervention in Scotland and in December 1640 Laud was impeached by the House of Commons on a charge of high treason, accused of supporting arbitrary government and influencing the king against his godly subjects, with an underlying agenda to re-establish popery in England. In March 1641 Laud was imprisoned in the Tower. By the time of his trial, three years later, Parliament was at war with the king. Still deeply unpopular, Laud was offered scant justice, let alone the royal pardon sent by the king, and he was executed on Tower Hill in January 1645. After the restoration of the monarchy, he was reburied in the chapel of St John’s College, Oxford, in 1663.

Laud and Scholarship

Laud was elected chancellor of his old university in 1630, while Bishop of London. His determination to reform and advance the University was given further momentum by the influence, wealth and powers of patronage he acquired as Archbishop of Canterbury. Laud himself was by then thoroughly caught up in public affairs, but he valued scholarship – partly for its own sake, but also for its role in training an educated, disciplined and reformed clergy and thereby promoting the status and reputation of the English church. In addition, Laud believed that the future security of both the English church and the state depended, in part, on the power of scholarship to refute the arguments both of his puritan opponents and of the Roman Catholic Church. This was a period of religious and political conflict in which, across Europe, states, cities and universities were competing to stock the shelves of their libraries with books and manuscripts, in what amounted to an intellectual arms race.

Like many of his contemporaries, Laud recognized the importance of studying the Old and New Testaments and the works of the Church Fathers in their original Hebrew, Greek and other oriental languages. He wished to encourage the development of the linguistic skills and the apparatus of editing, translation and historically sensitive interpretation necessary to establish more reliable texts, for the better understanding of the Christian religion. The philological study of Hebrew, in particular, was seen as one of the keys to uncovering authentic biblical truths. Laud appreciated the importance of Arabic scholarship too, in preserving and building on ancient knowledge of science, mathematics, astronomy, philosophy and medicine; some of his Hebrew manuscripts are themselves translations from Arabic, reflecting the abundant cultural and intellectual exchange that took place between Islamic Spain, Provence, Italy, North Africa and the eastern Mediterranean during the medieval period. Laud would not have needed to have studied this at first hand, as he was on familiar terms with several leading English scholars of both Hebrew and Arabic, notably William Bedwell (1563–1632) and John Selden (1584–1654). In 1636 the latter presented him with an Arabic brass astrolabe and dedicated to him a book on the laws of inheritance and of the election of the High Priest in ancient Israel, thanking Laud not only for presenting Hebrew manuscripts to the Bodleian, but also for the use of Laud’s library at Lambeth. Selden’s dedication reflects on the value of the study
of ancient Jewish law, history and religion and makes an interesting distinction between two categories of contemporary Christian scholars of these subjects. The first, whom Selden disparagingly labels as deserters, are those who allow their knowledge of Jewish practices to influence and ‘taint’ (in Selden’s view) their own religion, in extreme cases even to the extent of converting to Judaism. The others, of whom both Selden and Laud would have approved, remain true to their Christian faith, but use their knowledge of the Jewish historical context to deepen their understanding and interpret difficult scriptural questions in a subtler way. 7

In the 1620s and 1630s a close dialogue was also being established between the English church and the Greek Orthodox Church. Laud supported this and took considerable interest in the primitive Greek church, founded by the Apostles, which had grown up inside the Roman and later the Byzantine empire. His reasons for this were mainly practical, in that the subsequent develop

Laud's collecting of Hebrew and Arabic manuscripts was only one aspect of this. His household accounts record payments for clothes made from "Turkey" fabrics and for eastern spices. William Cavendish, 1st Earl of Newcastle, gave him a 'Barbary' horse. His friend Lady Roe, the daughter of his first patron and the wife of the English ambassador in Constantinople, sent him a cat from Smyrna. Another trophy pet was an eastern Mediterranean tortoise. 8

Promoting the Study of Hebrew

Laud himself probably knew no Arabic, but at Reading School and then as an undergraduate at Oxford he would have gained at least a rudimentary knowledge of the Hebrew alphabet and grammar and practised some translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Latin. 9 As chancellor of Oxford University he actively promoted the study of Hebrew, as well as of Arabic and Greek studies. 10 As soon as he was elected, in 1610, Laud procured letters patent from the king to endow the post of Reader in Hebrew at Oxford with a prebend at Christ Church in perpetuity. As Laud himself explained, ‘the study of that language is too much neglected, and not without the great prejudice both of the university and the church.’ John Morris (d. 1648), who had been appointed Hebrew Reader in 1616, expressed his thanks to Laud, declaring that the study of Hebrew, and the requisite knowledge of biblical, Talmudic, rabbinical, lexicographical and grammatical texts, could not be obtained on the cheap. 11 Through Laud’s patronage, as Anthony Wood observed with wry hindsight, the Hebrew and Chaldaic Tongues which few in Oxford understood some years before… became to be so generally embraced and so cheerfully studied, that it received a wonderful proficiency, and that too in a shorter time than a man could easily imagine; so great a spur the hope of honour and preferments gave to Arts and Languages. 12

Another way in which Laud intended to advance the study of Hebrew, Greek and Arabic at Oxford was by founding a learned press. Owing to lack of suitable type, there had been very little Hebrew printing at Oxford until the 1610s: the University lagged conspicuously behind Leiden and Cambridge in this respect. Laud used his influence with the king to make provision for a press, arguing in particular that this would enable ‘many excellent Manuscripts’ to be published, ‘to the great honour of that Place, this Church and Kingdom’, although he did not live to see these plans come to fruition. New letters patent granted to the University in 1615 provided it with a privilege for the sole right to print unpublished manuscripts in its own collections and the protection of the resulting editions for twenty-one years. In 1617, in an initiative almost certainly sponsored by Laud, the London bookseller Samuel Browne, acting on behalf of the University of Oxford, bought matrices and presses for Arabic, Hebrew, Rabbinical Hebrew and Greek from the executors of the Leiden type founder Arent Corneliszoon van Hoogenacker. 13

Patronage and Self-Promotion: Expanding the Library Collections at Oxford

By far the most significant aspect of Laud’s generosity to the University of Oxford was his donation of books and manuscripts to libraries. The pattern of this had first been set, in a modest way, while he was president of his old Oxford college, St John’s, between 1611 and 1614. It expanded into a much grander vision in 1619, even before Laud himself had started to buy books and manuscripts on a large scale. In that year, Laud had the idea of persuading William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke, who was then chancellor of the University, to donate to the Bodleian Library a group of 244 Greek manuscripts on a large scale. In that year, Laud had the idea of persuading William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke, who was then chancellor of the University, to donate to the Bodleian Library a group of 244 Greek manuscripts...
manuscripts collected in Venice by Giacomo Barocci, which Pembroke bought at a huge price from the London bookseller Henry Fetherstone. Not only was this the first major acquisition of manuscripts en bloc by a library that had hitherto mainly concentrated on steadily building up its printed holdings, but it was also a coup of international proportions. In Rome, Lucas Holstenius, librarian to Cardinal Barberini, lamented the loss of these manuscripts; from Dublin, Archbishop Ussher wrote to Pembroke, worrying ‘that such a Treasure should be dissipated, and the Books dispersed into private hands’ and proposing that Pembroke might persuade the king to buy them for the royal library. 17

There is a particular kind of pleasure in arranging a good home for someone else’s property, but Laud’s diary entry betrays only a hint of satisfaction: ‘The 240 Greek manuscripts were sent to London-house. These I got my lord of Pembroke to buy and give to Oxford.’ 18 It may be no coincidence that this occurred within a few months of the assassination of George Villiers, 1st Duke of Buckingham, Laud’s greatest patron and protector, an event which affected Laud deeply and which he described as ‘the saddest News that ever I heard in mye life.’ Four years earlier, in 1624, Buckingham had taken the opportunity offered by the death of the Dutch orientalist Thomas Erpenius to buy the latter’s important collection of some 84 manuscripts, 56 of which were Arabic or Persian, thereby stealing a march on libraries in both Leiden and Antwerp. Buckingham was elected chancellor of the University of Cambridge in 1626, partly on the strength of speculation that he was about to donate his manuscripts to the university library there, as his widow eventually did in 1642. 20 Perhaps Laud took inspiration from this when persuading Pembroke to make the donation to Oxford. Laud himself evidently came to believe that donating manuscripts to their libraries was what university chancellors should do.

The Barocci manuscripts, along with a smaller consignment of twenty-nine Greek and Arabic manuscripts belonging to Sir Thomas Roe (1581–1644) and collected while Roe had been ambassador in Constantinople, were sent first to London House, Laud’s residence as Bishop of London, for onward shipment to Oxford. Laud undoubtedly played a part in securing Roe’s donation too, as he was soon to do again in the case of Sir Kenelm Digby. 21 The accompanying letter sent by Laud to Accepted Frewen, the vice-chancellor of Oxford, shows that Laud was already taking an active interest in the physical condition and safety of these manuscripts, a theme which recurs later in the much more formal correspondence relating to his own magnificent donations. Laud explains that the manuscripts are being sent in three chests, all marked W.L. and either locked or nailed up, and that unbound manuscripts have been put in a separate trunk:

If they should be misplaced in the bindinge it was as much as many of them wear worth, it would be soe hard to rectifye them againe. I thinke thearfore the safest way will be to page them before they be taken asunder for newe bindinge. … I maye not omit to informe you to, that some of these Bookes ar much worn with auge, and the Leters in some places growne dimme, and if in some reasonable tyme they be not transcribed they will be lost to anye use. When they are transcribed the olde copye, and the newe maye be sett togeather. But thiss I leave to tyme and care. 22

If they should be misplaced in the bindings it was as much as many of them wear worth, it would be so hard to rectifye them agane. I think the therefore the safest waye will be to page them before they be taken asunder for newe bindings: ... I must not omit to informe you to, that some of these Bookes at much wore with age, and the Letters in some places growne dimme, and if in some reasonable tyme they be not transcribed they will be lost to any use. When they are transcribed the olde copye, and the newe maye be sett togeather. But thiss I leave to tyme and care. 22

26 The Bodlean register of benefactors, showing the 1635 donation of Hebrew manuscripts with Laud’s coat of arms. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Library Records b. 353, p. 359.
Laud succeeded the Earl of Pembroke as chancellor of Oxford in April 1630, and from this point seems to have begun to collect manuscripts himself with the Bodleian Library specifically in mind, reminding friends, colleagues and agents abroad to look out for suitable material. The manuscripts which he donated to the library in the course of the next decade mostly contain a formal calligraphic inscription by one of his secretaries, recording Laud’s ownership and the year of acquisition; the earliest of these inscriptions, dated 1630, seems to have been entered also in books that were already in his possession by that year, having accumulated over previous years. Prior to 1630, Laud does not appear to have actively collected books or manuscripts on a large scale for his own personal interest, or for their aesthetic appeal or historical importance, although he had ample opportunity to do so and some would regularly have come his way for professional reasons, in acknowledgement of his patronage and as gifts. What he now embarked upon was more of a deliberate programme of aggrandisement of the Bodleian collections, driven by the same combination of ambition, obligation and self-promotion that would also lead him to endow posts at Oxford and establish a learned press.

Transforming the Bodleian Collections

In a series of four donations, between May 1635 and November 1640, Laud almost doubled the size of the Bodleian’s manuscript collections, adding some 1,250 manuscripts in more than twenty different languages. There may have been an element of sheer one-upmanship about some of these, such as the pre-Columbian Mexican codex which was misidentified by William Dell, Laud’s secretary, as a manuscript of Egyptian hieroglyphics. There was also undoubtedly a strong element of opportunism in Laud’s acquisitions: the seventh-century uncial manuscript of the Acts of the Apostles, for instance, was one of several manuscripts belonging to St Kylan’s Cathedral, Würzburg, which were acquired in obscure circumstances from war-torn Germany. This manuscript is in all likelihood the very copy used by Bede himself when writing his commentaries and is still the Bodleian’s most important biblical manuscript. Laud’s donations included many English historical and literary manuscripts of outstanding significance, such as the Peterborough Abbey version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the only surviving text in Middle English of The Lay of Havelok the Dane, but the fact that a quarter of the total were manuscripts in oriental languages points to a more deliberate agenda.

Before Laud’s donations, the Bodleian had possessed fewer than 30 manuscripts in Arabic and some 160 or so works in Hebrew, both printed and manuscript. Laud gave the library 147 Arabic manuscripts, 74 in Persian or Turkish, and 47 in Hebrew, together with others in Ethiopic, Bali and Malay, transforming the Bodleian as a library for the study of oriental languages. These numbers perhaps suggest where Laud’s priorities lay. Exactly how and when the manuscripts were obtained is frustratingly difficult to reconstruct: Laud’s household accounts survive only from December 1635 onwards, and most of the books themselves were rebound (and sometimes consoli- dated into composite volumes) before being presented by Laud, in uniform plain calf with linen ties, with the archbishop’s arms stamped in gilt on the front and back covers. What little evidence there is of Laud’s personal involvement in an organized campaign of collecting relates almost entirely to Arabic manuscripts. Some of these may have come through the Levant Company, which had been instructed by a letter in the king’s name in 1634 that ‘every Shippe of yours at every voyage … should bring home one Arab: or Persian MS Booke to be delivered presently … to the Lord Archbishop of Cant.’ More were probably obtained on Laud’s behalf by the oriental scholars Edward Pococke (1640–1696) and John Graeves (1602–1642) on their travels in the eastern Mediterranean in the 1630s. As early as 1631 Laud had commissioned Pococke in Aleppo to buy ‘such antient Greek coins, and such manuscripts, either in Greek or in Oriental languages, as in his judgement may best befitt a university library.’ Laud’s accounts record payments of £12 7s 6d for ‘Arabian bookes’ in May 1636, the large sum of £50 to the Levant Company merchant Daniel Harvey for manuscripts in October 1636, and 21 ls for ‘4 Arabishke bookes’ in November 1636. Laud also used his contacts in Europe, such as his protégé Samson Johnson, the chaplain to the English embassy in Frankfurt am Main in the early 1630s and later to the Queen of Bohemia’s court in The Hague. In early 1630, for instance, he wrote to Johnson to enquire about an auction sale of ‘Arab bookees’ from the library of the Dutch orientalist Johan Elichman, planning to bid through Sir William Boswell, the English Resident at The Hague. This fragmentary evidence gives some flavour of the overall scope and direction of Laud’s collecting of oriental manuscripts, but almost all of his Hebrew manuscripts can in fact be shown to have come by different routes.
The First Bodleian Donation

Laud’s first gift of manuscripts to the Bodleian Library was made on 22 May 1635. His accompanying letter proudly enumerated their linguistic range and laid great emphasis on their security and preservation, with the sole proviso that they might be temporarily removed from the Library to assist with their publication.32 Like the next three donations, it was recorded in the Bodleian’s massive and splendidly bound register of benefactors, with Laud’s arms at the head of the page, painted in blue and gold (fig. 26).33 The 462 manuscripts are listed here by language, beginning with fourteen said to be in Hebrew, which in fact included a printed New Testament in Syriac as well as a Hebrew manuscript Pentateuch, written using the Samaritan alphabet, which had been given to Laud by James Ussher (1581–1656), Archbishop of Armagh.34 Of the twelve manuscripts written in Hebrew letters in Laud’s first donation, two (MS. Laud Or. 27 and 105) contain Laudian ownership inscriptions dated 1634 and were presumably acquired in that year, while the other ten inscriptions are dated 1633 and suggest a pattern of rather miscellaneous acquisition over a longer period of time. They cover a range of subjects, from grammar and lexicography, liturgical and biblical texts, to Kabbalah (represented by fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italian manuscripts: MS. Laud Or. 103 and 119). At least six of the manuscripts had already been in England for some years before they passed into Laud’s hands. An early thirteenth-century Hebrew psalter (MS. Laud Or. 174) contains a note dated 1502 that it belonged to the library of the abbey of St Edmundsbury and was lent to one Richard Brynkley, a Franciscan friar and Cambridge theologian.35 Two of these manuscripts appear to have come to Laud – along with several in other oriental languages – on the death of the Arabist and mathematical scholar William Bedwell (d. 5 May 1632): one, a Syrian Haggadah (MS. Laud Or. 314; fig. 27) of 1593 contains an inscription dated 1618 recording the gift of the book, presumably to Bedwell, from one Edward Wright. The other (MS. Laud Or. 172) is Bedwell’s own copy of a printed book, Sebastian Münster’s Dictionarium Chaldaicum (Basel, 1527), acquired in 1586 during Bedwell’s time at Cambridge, interleaved and annotated for his linguistic studies.36

A further three manuscripts had been presented to Laud by Archbishop Ussher in June 1631, each containing Ussher’s Latin ownership inscription ‘Jacobi Armachani’: MS. Laud Or. 38 is a late-fifteenth-century Spanish compendium of texts on logic; there is a Judaico-Portuguese treatise on magic, c. 1460 (MS. Laud Or. 282) and another Judaico-Portuguese text, dated 1431, on mathematics and astrology (MS. Laud Or. 305). The last two, both written in Portuguese using the Hebrew alphabet, had earlier been in the library of the mathematician, astrologer and occult philosopher John Dee (1527–1609) and they contain Dee’s note of their purchase in Louvain in January 1562/3, as well as his mark of ownership in the form of a ladder (fig. 28).37 Ussher would have acquired these when Dee’s books were being sold in 1625–6 and he mentions them, finding a need to justify them, in a letter to Laud:

I have sent … sixteen Manuscripts … to add unto the store which your Lordship is providing for the University of Oxford. Among which there are two Astrological books in folio, written by a Jew in Hebrew characters (but in a vulgar language) whereof Doctor Dee did make special account, which kinds of books, howsoever for the maine argument they be but frivolous; yet have they oftentimes some Astronomical observations intermixed with them … there is also among them an Hebrew Logick.38

28 Libro di Magickah, c. 1400, with John Dee’s purchase note and ladder symbol (top left). Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Laud Or. 282, fol. 1r.
The Second Bodleian Donation

The Hebrew manuscripts contained in Laud’s second donation, of 16 June 1636, were different in character. Laud donated 184 manuscripts in all, along with five cabinets of coins (some of them Jewish), an Arabian astrolabe and a bronze bust of Charles I by the sculptor Hubert Le Sueur (intended by Laud to watch over his manuscripts with a forbidding gaze). Almost all of these had been acquired, ‘not without expense’, in the space of a single year. A close inspection of the seventeen Hebrew manuscript volumes which contain a Laudian inscription dated 1636 suggests how this feat was achieved. With a single exception, these can be matched with certainty to the manuscripts offered for sale by one London bookseller, Robert Martin, in a printed catalogue of 1635 (fig. 29).40

Robert Martin (or Martine), probably of French origin, had begun as an apprentice to another bookseller of French descent, Adrian Marius (or Marois), in London.41 He worked for Henry Fetherstone, the leading suppliers of learned foreign books to English customers, from at least 1621, and probably managed the import side of Fetherstone’s business in the 1620s.42 It was Martin who had travelled to Venice in 1628, on Fetherstone’s behalf, to buy and bring back the Barocci collection of Greek manuscripts.43 In the early 1630s Martin set up on his own, first in St Paul’s Churchyard and later trading ‘at the Sign of Venice in the Old Bailey’, and issued six catalogues of imported books and manuscripts between 1633 and 1650.44 His customers included John Selden and the Bodleian Library itself.45 His substantial 1635 catalogue included one page of Hebrew manuscripts, described or transliterated (not always correctly) in Latin and arranged by size, a total of four folio manuscripts and twenty-six described as quarto. Since few members of the London book trade could read Hebrew, each item in the list was assigned an alphabetical code which was also written in the manuscripts themselves, enabling them to be readily located.46 These letter codes are still visible in most of Laud’s purchases from this source, while others are identifiable from the descriptions.47

Martin’s catalogue explains that the books he is offering for sale have been brought from Rome, Venice and other parts of Italy, as is clearly the case with Laud’s purchases. Eight of the manuscripts bear the marks of the examination and expurgation required by the Italian ecclesiastical authorities and usually carried out by Jewish converts to Christianity.48 Most contain the signatures of multiple censors (or revisers), across a range of dates between 1595 and 1618, reflecting a process by which Jewish owners of books were required to submit and resubmit their books for examination on several occasions. MS. Laud Or. 93, for example, is a volume in which Laud’s binder has grouped together several manuscripts, including three which had been listed separately in Martin’s catalogue. It contains Hebrew translations of Arabic and Greek mathematical, geometrical and astronomical works, written in Spain and in Italy in the fifteenth century, including two treatises on the astrolabe. The component parts bear, respectively, the signatures of the censors Alessandro Scipione and Domenico Hierosolimitano (or Gerosolimitano) in 1595; Domenico Hierosolimitano in 1595; Fra Luigi [da Bologna] in 1597; Giovanni Domenico Carretto in 1618; and Clemente Renatto and Fra Luigi in 1600. MS. Laud Or. 97, a commentary on the Proverbs written in Italy c. 1500, was examined in 1596 by Alessandro...
Scipione and Laurentius Franguellus, in 1597 by Domenico Hierosolimitano, and again in 1618 by Giovanni Domenico Carretto (fig. 30). MS. Laud Or. 122, a miscellany including Kabbalah texts written in Italy in the mid-sixteenth century, was examined by Alessandro Scipione in 1597, by Domenico Hierosolimitano (undated) and by Giovanni Domenico Carretto in 1608. MS. Laud Or. 126, an early fifteenth-century commentary on the Prophets, was examined by Fra Luigi in 1600 and subsequently by Clemente Renatto. Scipione, Franguellus and Hierosolimitano were all Jewish converts, who had worked in Mantua, Ferrara and Venice respectively, before taking part in a special commission established in 1595 in the duchy of Mantua. Records they made of their work show that by the end of the sixteenth century the Jewish community in Mantua and the surrounding countryside owned more than 23,000 printed books and more than 3,000 manuscripts. But disaster struck Mantua in 1629–30: a French invasion and an outbreak of plague were followed by the sack of the city by Imperial troops and the expulsion of the Jews. When the Jewish community was allowed to return, towards the end of 1630, they found that the ghetto had been plundered and their possessions stolen.

The Third Bodleian Donation

Laud’s third and largest donation reached the Bodleian in June 1639, probably delayed by the need to fit out suitable accommodation, since it consisted of 559 manuscripts, along with coins and a magic wand. Laud’s letter accompanying the donation explains that many of these manuscripts have come from Germany and adds the valuable information that some have been collected with the help of the Earl of Arundel, who had been sent on an embassy to Vienna in 1636, acquiring manuscripts from German religious houses.

32 Hunting in the margins of Arba'ah Turim (Yoreh De'ah), the legal code by Jacob ben Asher, in a manuscript dated 1405. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Laud Or. 233, fol. 106r.

33 Coloured and inhabited word panels in the Arba'ah Turim (Yoreh De'ah). Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Laud Or. 233, fol. 133v.
on his way. Laud also took the opportunity to score sectarian points against the Jesuits, criticizing them for their neglect of older learning, and to portray himself as the preserver of manuscripts, saving them from the ravages both of war and of insects.53 Germany was in chaos in this period, owing to the religious and political conflict of the Thirty Years War. In the early 1630s Swedish troops, fighting on the Protestant side, had penetrated deep into central and southern Germany, as far as Munich and Frankfurt, looting many manuscripts from both private and institutional libraries. Taking advantage of this, Laud and his agents somehow acquired a number of splendid Carolingian manuscripts that had belonged to monasteries in the regions of Würzburg and Mainz.54 Sixteen of the manuscripts donated in 1639 were described as Hebrew, though in fact two of them were in Syriac. Two of the Hebrew manuscripts were

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34 Curtains marking a break in a twelfth-century Ashkenazi biblical miscellany. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Laud Or. 326, fol. 51r.

medical texts (MS. Laud Or. 157 and 113), acquired in 1637 and 1638 respectively: the first, a translation from the Arabic, dating from the thirteenth century and written in a Spanish hand, bears the marks of the Mantuan censors; the second, a miscellany mostly written in fifteenth-century Provence, is in a French red morocco presentation binding. The remaining twelve all bear Laudian acquisition dates of 1636 and may well have again been obtained in the upheaval of war, probably in Germany. Among these were the oldest, most important and most visually striking of all Laud’s Hebrew manuscripts, but their provenance is tantalizingly difficult to establish. Almost all are large folio volumes, written on parchment and mostly dating from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Each has been stripped of its medieval binding, probably to make it easier and cheaper to transport, and has been rebound in Laud’s uniform style, thereby removing evidence of its earlier ownership and use. In just one instance (MS. Laud Or. 233), a legal code, Arba’ah Ṭurim (Yoreh De’ah) by Jacob ben Asher, signed and dated 1463 by the scribe Yamin ben Mosheh (called ‘Wolf’), subsequent owners have recorded the manuscript’s movement around central Europe in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, between Prague, Poland, Lichtenstadt (Bohemia) and Schnaittach (near Nuremberg). In the course of its travels this manuscript, already handsomely decorated with coloured and inhabited word panels, has been further illustrated with lively marginal drawings, including a hunting scene (figs 32 & 33).

These manuscripts mostly contain Bible commentaries and readings, liturgical, legal and philosophical texts, including many works by Maimonides, written in German hands; some are remarkable examples of Ashkenazi book design of very high quality. The earliest, a miscellany of readings of the prophets (MS. Laud Or. 326), dates from the twelfth century (fig 34). A commentary on the Jewish liturgy, Perush ha-Tefilot, by Aharon ben Heyyim ben Hananel ha-Kohen (MS. Laud Or. 271), dated 1226–7 and possibly originating from France, is important because it is the earliest known Ashkenazi code to be written in a semi-cursive script. Traces of fire damage on this manuscript hint perhaps at a troubled past, on the last leaf are two later ink sketches of a mounted knight and another figure who may be a leper. A huge manuscript Pentateuch (MS. Laud Or. 324) was copied in the 1270s – with the assistance of three other scribes – by Simha ben Judah, who is also known as the scribe of the celebrated Worms Mahzor, made for use probably in Würzburg and now in the National Library of Israel. A copy of the Mishneh Torah of Maimonides (MS. Laud Or. 321), dated to the last quarter of the fourteenth century, shows extraordinary scribal virtuosity in its intricate geometric layout of the text and commentaries, sustained for page after page (fig 36). Pride of place, however, must go to the Laud Mahzor (MS. Laud Or. 321), containing festival prayers for use in a synagogue, written and illuminated in south-west Germany, and datable on stylistic grounds to the 1270s. This very large volume is one of the finest surviving examples of an early prayer book made for a medieval western Ashkenazi community, with lavish decoration to mark the best-known prayers and locally popular hymns and poems (piyyutim). Probably commissioned by a wealthy Jewish layman, as a very visible demonstration of his generosity.

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towards his synagogue, the Laud Maḥzor was the product of several hands. Its illustration follows a carefully planned iconographic programme, in which the illuminations mostly depict biblical subjects which would have been immediately recognizable as relevant to specific festivals. It contains text illustrations, initial word panels and beautifully coloured and detailed full-page scenes of animals, mythical beasts, and human figures with the heads of animals and birds, the last a consistently used motif in maḥzorim made before 1300. Adjacent to a few of the images are faint traces of instructions in Latin, giving directions to the painters, which suggest that Christian professional artists were employed, working within traditional conventions and presumably under the supervision of Jewish scribes (figs 36, 37 & 38). 58

The Fourth Bodleian Donation
Laud’s fourth and final donation to the Bodleian arrived in November 1640, by which time Laud was already hemmed in by his enemies. The following month he was impeached for high treason by the House of Commons. The letter accompanying this donation refers to the uncertain future facing the church and Laud himself, and expresses Laud’s hope that, while all else is in flux, his manuscripts will find a safe home in the Library. 59 Of the forty-six manuscripts donated by Laud, six are described in his letter as being in Hebrew. For whatever reason, Laud appears to have tried to take the credit for five Hebrew manuscripts, along with thirty-one Arabic manuscripts, which were in fact a donation from the courtier and philosopher Sir Kenelm Digby (1603–65), supplementing Digby’s larger gift which Laud had already steered (with due acknowledgement) into the Bodleian in 1634. This time Laud’s letter makes no mention of Digby; in each manuscript, an inscription originally recording Digby’s ownership has been heavily crossed out and replaced with a calligraphic inscription, in the usual style, recording Laud’s acquisition in 1639. 60 Only one Hebrew manuscript (MS. Laud Or. 36) was in fact given by Laud himself, a copy of Johannes Buxtorf’s Manuale Hebraicum et Chaldaicum (Basel, 1619), interleaved and extensively annotated by the linguist William Lamplugh (d. 1636) to create a ‘Lexicon Harmonicum’ of Greek, Latin, English and Hebrew. 61 One last Hebrew manuscript, a Bible commentary dated 1485, of Spanish or Portuguese origin (MS. Laud Or. 84), arrived later, following Laud’s resignation as chancellor of Oxford University on 25 June 1641, by which time he was in the Tower of London.

Such a liberal benefactor also he was towards the advancement of learning, that he left himself little or nothing for his own use; and by what his intentions were, we may guess, that if the severe stroke of the rebels had not untimely sequestred and cut him off, ‘S. Paul’s cathedral had silenced the fame of the antient wonders, our English clergy had been the glory of the world, the Bodleian Library at Oxon had daily outstript the Vatican, and his public structures had o’ertop the Escorial’, &c. 62

Anthony Wood’s tribute to Laud, with its allusions to grandiose architectural schemes and the competitive quest for glory on an international stage – all violently cut short – catches some of the spirit of Laud’s intentions and aspirations. Laud’s work to reform and promote the University of Oxford should be seen in...
the context of his larger project to enhance the dignity and influence of the Church of England – and of himself, as chancellor and archbishop. His acquisition of Hebrew manuscripts played a relatively small part in a much broader campaign of collecting on behalf of the Bodleian Library, with a particular drive to expand the collections in oriental languages, mirrored by his support for the teaching of those languages and his attempts to provide for a learned press. Laud’s donation letters, with their obsessive recounting of the number of languages represented, may perhaps be criticized for an emphasis on quantity rather than quality, but they would have found echoes in the increasingly wide-ranging collecting aims of other libraries throughout Europe.63 In the Bodleian Library, in the wing built on to Duke Humphrey’s Library which was soon to be known as Selden End, no fewer than nineteen languages were proudly listed in gold capital letters on the frieze above the gallery containing Laud’s manuscripts.64

Numerically, Laud’s forty-seven Hebrew manuscripts were a very significant addition to the Bodleian’s existing Hebrew holdings. Collected opportunistically, over a short span of years, they comprise three main tranches: the acquisitions up to 1633, those of 1635 and those of 1636, each completely different in character. The first group is more miscellaneous, acquired gradually, by chance and from other English scholars and collectors, such as Bedwell and Ussher. The other two groups of manuscripts are more defined in place and time, providing a glimpse into the religious practices and the cultural, intellectual and spiritual life of two distinct Hebrew communities of the past: the Jews of northern Italy from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century and the medieval Ashkenazim of Germany and central Europe.