# Manuscript Transmission of Medieval Hebrew Works: The discovery of a direct link in the textual transmission of Isaac Israeli's *Yesod Olam*

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#### I. INTRODUCTION:

Given the circumstances of Jewish history, it is rare to find two surviving manuscripts about which it can be shown that one was derived directly from the other. When this does occur, their comparison can serve as a case study to shed light on various dynamics of scribality: how well was the exemplar understood at time and possibly place different from those of its origin? How faithful was the copyist to his exemplar? What happened when the exemplar was problematic in various ways? Were multiple exemplars consulted?

Manuscript British Library Add. 15977 (hereafter: BL) is written in a 15<sup>th</sup> century Sephardic hand; manuscript Cambridge University Library Oo. 6.65 (hereafter: CUL) is written in a 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup> century Sephardic hand. Although 'Sepharad' is the medieval Jewish term for Iberia, the use of a Sephardic-type hand does necessarily mean that the manuscript was scribed in Iberia. Indeed, so-called Sephardic styles were used in various areas around the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, it is very possible that BL was scribed in Iberia – the place in which Israeli's *Yesod Olam* was composed a century earlier. However, it nearly impossible that CUL was scribed in Iberia – because by the time of this manuscript's scribing, the Jews had already been expelled from Iberia: from Spain in 1492; and from Portugal in 1496. And indeed, although the scribe of CUL employs a Sephardic hand, he seems to have not been fully comfortable with, for example, some Iberian-Sephardic orthographic conventions (see below, the discussion of ligatures).

# II. CONCLUSIONS TO BE SUPPORTED BELOW:

1. CUL was copied primarily from BL.

#### More specifically:

- 1.1. In Book 4, chapter 17, CUL is textually based directly and exclusively on BL (see the bulk of the discussion below);
- 1.2. Book 1, chapter 2, is ambiguous. Overall, in this chapter, too, CUL corresponds to BL. Nevertheless, there are exceptions. In the space of 39 words (in BL 38 words), CUL differs six times from BL; one of those differences is repeated later; and further on CUL has one more difference from BL. However, on close analysis, it is very possible that these differences are not textually based, viz. they are not due to the use of another exemplar. Rather, they all can be explained as projections of the mind of the scribe of CUL intentional or unintentional, sometimes for better, sometimes for worse;<sup>2</sup>
- 1.3. In the 'Introduction', for those sections that exist in both manuscripts, CUL gives no preference to BL; and,
- 1.4. Finally, in those parts of the 'Introduction' that do not exist in BL, but do exist in CUL, CUL is based entirely on another source or sources.

Thus, we can trace a progression in CUL's dependence on BL, from no particular dependence in the work's introduction, to primary dependence in the work's early chapters, to total dependence by Book 4, chapter 17.3

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> On the basis of the online catalogue of the National Library of Israel, http://aleph.nli.org.il/.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> In BL, all but the last letter of a word is illegible (some manuscripts have ענין, while others have (כענין), and the word is completely omitted in CUL; BL has the word יוְס, in the construct case (= 'lines of'), whereas CUL has קיים, in the absolute case (= 'lines'); BL does not break between the names of two lines' א'ב'ג' / ABGD, but CUL corrects this mistake by inserting a break 'א "ב ג"ד / AB GD (the same correction recurs later); CUL misreads the self-standing 'a / H used in BL as a symbol to identify a point (' נקודת ה') / 'point H') as an attached feminine possessive suffix, (השרתה) / 'her / its point'); CUL provides an alternative form of the negation 'without' –  $\pm$  instead of 'point H') as an attached sound being almost the same; CUL misconstrues the word הטייה (= 'inclination') for הטיה; and finally, later on, CUL corrects BL's ולהדבק בו (= 'and to attach to it') to | 'cand not to attach to it').

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> As my research moves into Book 2, I shall have to see whether this pattern is maintained.

This conclusion raises further questions, e.g.: Were multiple exemplars available for much of the work, or only for discrete sections? If they were available for the entire work, why, in some sections, were they not consulted – even when there were problems with BL, the main exemplar?

2. Fidelity to the exemplar was not considered essential in the case of orthographic elements (as discussed below).

Note: The claim defended below is not merely that these two manuscripts are part of the same immediate family. If the claim were merely that, then the instances of variants shared by only these two manuscripts would be sufficient proof. For example, in Book 1, chapter 2, lesson 41, in the phrase ' איה ליתר קשת ד'ב' הרי שיתר קשת ד'ב' (= 'it is indeed the case that the chord of arc AD is equal to the chord of arc DB'), these MSS uniquely add הוא (= 'and resembles') between the words שוה ליתר (= 'and resembles') between the words ליתר is equal to and resembles the chord ...'). Most of the cases below, however, show not merely the family connection, but also the direct derivation of the one from the other.

The main focus below is on demonstrating that for Book 4, chapter 17, the direct and exclusive textual basis of CUL is BL. This will be demonstrated, and then some observations about the degree of fidelity in textual transmission will be derived inductively.

# III. EVIDENCE FOR DIRECT AND EXCLUSIVE DERIVATION

Listed below are several of many items of evidence from Isaac Israeli, Yesod Olam, Book 4, chapter 17, that indicate that for this section of the work, CUL is derived from BL. Some items of evidence demonstrate direct and exclusive derivation. Also, some of the examples are commonalities (errors or otherwise) unique to the pair BL and CUL; while other examples are of errors in CUL that can explained by the orthography, ligatures, and lineation in BL:

- 1. Both of these manuscripts uniquely represent the phrase 'and 621' with the following mix of prose and symbols, also uniquely inserting the conjunction ושש מאות וכ'א' in the middle: 'ישש מאות וכ'א' ' and six hundred and 21'.
- 2. In some manuscripts, the following value, prefaced by attached preposition a = 'by', is written out in full words: 'במאתים ושבעים ושלש' = 'by two hundred and seventy three'; while in other manuscripts, this is indicated in symbols, in which all but the first of the Hebrew letters stand for numbers: בר'ע'ג' = 'by 273'. (In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the period of BL, each number-representing letter was topped by its own vertical apostrophe-like stroke (see illustration below); but by the 16<sup>th</sup> 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, the period of CUL, this precision was rare, in most cases having been replaced by the simplified practice of inserting two strokes between the penultimate and final number-letters (see illustration below).) In a further step of transmission, in various manuscripts, the setup of the number-letters is misconstrued. Our two manuscripts share a unique misconstrual: the four letters are separated into two units of two letters each; the first pair of letters is misconstrued, taken not as representing the preposition 'by' plus the value 200 in which case a stroke-mark would have been required at the top of the second letter, viz. the ¬ but rather as the self-standing word ¬ ± / bar, i.e. 'possessing'; and only the second set of two letters is taken as a numerical value as indicated by the stroke marks atop each of the letters, thus: בר ע"ג. This renders the incorrect statement, 'possessing 73'.

Image 1.1: (image © **British Library Board** (MS Add. 15977, folio 150b, lines 6 & 7)): Top line: illustration of the use of strokes to indicate that letters are used to represent numbers. The last word on the left actually constitutes the conjunction i / 'w' (= 'and') followed by the number 723, given in four number-representing letters ('ג'') = 400 + 300 + 20 + 3). Note that each of the four number-letter has its own stroke mark, four in total, whereas the conjunction i / 'w' does not have a stroke – since it does not represent a number. Bottom line, first word from the right, without stroke marks, is: \( \docume{bar} = '\text{possessing'}; \) and the second word, with two stroke marks,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> MS HUC 891 is similar in that it separates the four letters into two pairs of two; but it is different in that (also incorrectly) it supplies all of the letters with strokes, thus: 'ב'ר' ע'ג', indicating that all are numerical values (whereas the first one is not meant to be a numerical value). HUC 891 is part of the same broad manuscript family as BL and CUL. However, within that family, HUC often diverges. It is possible that already in their common ancestor the representation of this value was split into two pairs of two letters.

בר עב שפים וב חמים בר עב שפים וב חמים

Image 1.2: (image © Cambridge University Library (MS Oo. 6.65, folio 161a [Hebrew foliation:  $^{1}$ Γ<sub>Γ</sub>εκ,  $^{1}$ κ, lines 25 & 26)): Top line: Illustration of how by the  $^{1}$ 6<sup>th</sup> –  $^{1}$ 7<sup>th</sup> centuries no longer did each number-letter necessarily have its own stroke; rather, two strokes were inserted between the penultimate and last letters. As above in BL, here, too, the last word on the left is the conjunction '&' plus the number 723. Bottom line, as in BL: first word =  $^{1}$ 6 bar = 'possessing'; and the second word, with two stroke marks, is the number 73.

3. The value 112 is written out in Hebrew letters, thus:  $\frac{1}{2}$  / Q' Y' B' (= 100 + 10 + 2). In BL, the end of the bottom stroke of the  $\frac{1}{2}$  Curves upward, almost closing the letter, making it look similar to a

final ב / M (= 40), thus: Image 2.1: (image © **British Library Board** (MS Add. 15977, folio 150b, line 17)); and indeed in CUL the number is wrongly written 'ק'ים' / Q' Y' M' (= 100 + 10 + 40),

viz. with a final ם / M instead of a ב / B: Image 2.2: (image © Cambridge University Library (MS Oo. 6.65, folio 161a [Hebrew foliation: 'קנג, א'], second line from the bottom)) – rendering an incorrect numerical value, viz. 150.

- 4. In the phrase 'ועוד הם עושים מחזורים גדולים של כ'ח' כח' שנה מחובר מז' מחזורין קטנים, = 'They further make great cycles of 28 years each, composed of seven small cycles', only these two manuscripts miss out the word גדולים = 'great'.
- 5. In the phrases, 'שבו נפל במחזור הראשון למנינם. ואני כשרציתי לשום לחשבונם זה עיקר' = '...on which it fell in the first cycle of their count. As for me, when I wanted to set, for this calculation of theirs, an epoch ...', in BL, the words 'למנינם. ואני' (= 'of their count. As for me') are deteriorated and illegible:

Image 3.1: (image © **British Library Board** (MS Add. 15977, folio 151a, end line 1)); in CUL, these words are missing, but a blank space is left:

ופור קנות מוק חוזר לו כשנה ש פרשטון כשרליהי

Image 3.2: (image © Cambridge University Library (MS Oo. 6.65, folio 161b [Hebrew foliation: 'קנג, ב'], line 18)). Had the scribe of CUL had an additional manuscript at his disposal, he could have filled in these gaps from there. The fact that he did not do so implies that – at least for this section of the work – BL was the only manuscript before him.

- 6. The spelling of December: in the list of month names, BL has D'GNBR / ד'גנבר, and CUL has DGNBR / גנבר, differing only in the presence or absence of a diacritic mark. Later on, when listing the Christian festivals by month, December is listed again (for it contains the festival of Navidad). Here, both manuscripts have changed from the spelling that they used above, to an identical new (and unusual) spelling: DN'GNBR / דנ'גנבר.
- 7. In the list of Christian Saints' Days, these 2 MSS are missing the day of S. Nicholas, 03 December. These MSS likewise share a number of other haplographies.
- Instead of ג' תנאים ג' (three conditions', these two manuscripts reverse the word order to תנאים ג' (conditions three'.
- 9. The scribe of CUL seems to have had difficulty understanding some ligatures that occur in BL,

misconstruing them. The W-Š ligature -

ושעניו

Image 4.1 (image © British Library

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> The same phenomenon holds true, in both manuscripts, for the word 'וימול' = 'falls' in the sentence (also in Book 4, chapter 17) אינם מסכימים עמנו מפני זה בעבור שנה זו <u>ויחול</u> היום הראוי לקבוע אידם זה בחדש אייר י'ט' לאבריל' ('On account of this, they do not agree with us regarding the intercalation of this year. The day that is fit for the fixing of this festival of theirs falls in the month of 'lyyār, on the 19<sup>th</sup> of April'.

Board (MS Add. 15977, folio 152a, line 9)) – was misconstrued as MŠ: Image 4.2 (image © Cambridge University Library (MS Oo. 6.65, folio 162b [Hebrew foliation: 'στις, τρ΄], line 23)).

10. In the phrase 'הוא כי בתחלת' (= '... is because at the beginning of ...') in BL, the word כי / KY (= 'because') is written with the י / Y formed as a tail to the course. K, inserted into control is written.

Image 5.1: (image © **British Library Board** (MS Add. 15977, folio 152a, line 12)). In CUL, this must have been misconstrued as an erasure, for the word is totally

elided in CUL Image 5.2: (image © Cambridge University Library (MS Oo. 6.65, folio 162b [Hebrew foliation: קנד, ב'], line 25)), changing the meaning to 'is at the beginning of'.

11. Omissions: of the words omitted in CUL, many occur at the transition from line to line – either in BL, the exemplar, or in CUL, the copied text, or in both. For example, in the phrase 'הידמן' (= 'and on account of this, what will happen ...'), in both manuscripts the word ובשביל is at the end of a line: Image 6.1: (image © British Library Board (MS Add. 15977, folio 151b, lines 1 & 2)):

וו זיונותו ששוש בהקפוד לאו שיחוליום כב לחזרק פוסין לחוש לכנד פוס ז צשבת ופושל

However, in CUL, the word a r is lost in the transition from line to line: Image 6.2: (image © Cambridge University Library (MS Oo. 6.65, folio 162a [Hebrew foliation: קנד, א'], lines 16 & 17)):

של מוא שימנאו שלשתם ביוםכמה כנית שיחוליום כב למארם כיום יו לחדש לבנה כיום א בשבת ובשם יותן שיתעבב קיבוע אידם זה בשום שנה ניתשה עד יום כב לחש אבריל יותר אות בשיחוליו בעם

# IV: PARAMETERS OF FIDELITY:

Despite its derivation from BL, CUL sometimes varies from BL in orthographic conventions: the use of -Im / pr / vs. - In / pr / endings, the use of abbreviations, the representation of numbers by symbol rather than prose, the change from "' to 'n to designate the Tetragrammaton, and the use of punctuation. This demonstrates that, in the case of the scribe of CUL, fidelity to the exemplar was not considered relevant for orthographic elements.

# V: RESPONSE TO A POSSIBLE CHALLENGE:

In Book 4, chapter 17, there is one slightly more substantial divergence between BL and CUL, which, however, can still be attributed to conventional usage; it is not strong enough to require the positing of the use of a second exemplar. This occurs in the phrase 'תעניתם נמשך מן יום\מיום ד' לפבריר' = '... their fast extends from the fourth day of February ...'. In BL, 'from the ... day' employs the self-standing form of the preposition, and is written in two words: 'מן יום'; whereas in CUL, in keeping with the reading in all other manuscripts I have examined thus far, the attached form of the preposition is employed, resulting in one word: 'מיום'.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: Many thanks to the British Library Board / Jackie Brown, and Cambridge University Library / Grant Young, for permission to reproduce herein images from their respective manuscripts.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> I have seen this in Italian manuscripts of this era. Indeed, Italy is a good candidate for the location of the scribing of MS CUL.