

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

By Dr Israel M. Sandman

## 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.<sup>1</sup> Although 'Sepharad' is the medieval Jewish term for Iberia, the use of a Sephardic-type hand does not 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 is 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.

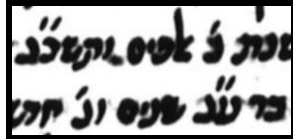
Thus, we can trace a progression in CUL's dependence on BL, from no particular dependence in the work's introduction, to primary dependence in the work's early chapters, to total dependence by Book 4, chapter 17.<sup>3</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup> In BL, all but the last letter of a word is illegible (some manuscripts have כעין, while others have כענין), and the word is completely omitted in CUL; BL has the word קוי, in the construct case (= 'lines of'), whereas CUL has קוים, in the absolute case (= 'lines'); BL does not break between the names of two lines א"ב ג"ד / 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 'ה' / H used in BL as a symbol to identify a point (נקודת ה' / 'point H') as an attached feminine possessive suffix, נקודתה / 'her / its point'); CUL provides an alternative form of the negation 'without' – בלי instead of בלא – its meaning being identical, and its look and sound being almost the same; CUL misconstrues the word הטייה (= 'inclination') for השיה; and finally, later on, CUL corrects BL's ולא להדבק בו (= 'and to attach to it') to ולא להדבק בו (= 'and not to attach to it').

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

<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: ע'ג' ב'ר', 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.



is the number 73. Image 1.2: (image © **Cambridge University Library** (MS Oo. 6.65, folio 161a [Hebrew foliation: א', קנג], lines 25 & 26)): Top line: Illustration of how by the 16<sup>th</sup> – 17<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 = בר = *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: 'ק"יב' / Q' Y' B' (= 100 + 10 + 2). In BL, the end of the bottom stroke of the ב / B curves upward, almost closing the letter, making it look similar to a



final ם / 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"ימ' / 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: א', קנג], second line from the bottom)) – rendering an incorrect numerical value, viz. 150.

4. In the phrase 'ועוד הם עושים מחזורים גדולים של כ"ח' שנה מחובר מז' מחזורים 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:

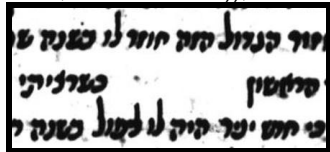
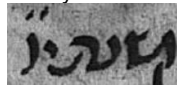


Image 3.2: (image © **Cambridge University Library** (MS Oo. 6.65, folio 161b [Hebrew foliation: ב', קנג], line 18)).<sup>5</sup> Had the scribe of CUL had an additional manuscript at his disposal, he could have filled in these gaps from there. The fact that he did not do so implies that – at least for 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 / דגנבר, 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.
8. Instead of תנאים ג' / 'three conditions', these two manuscripts reverse the word order to ג' תנאים / '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 – Image 4.1 (image © **British Library**

<sup>5</sup> The same phenomenon holds true, in both manuscripts, for the word 'ויחול' = 'falls' in the sentence (also in Book 4, chapter 17) 'ואינם מסכימים עמו מפי זה בעבור שנה זו ויחול 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 Iyyār, 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: 'ב', קנד, 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 ' / Y formed as a tail to the כ / K, inserted into כ's / K's middle:

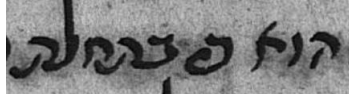
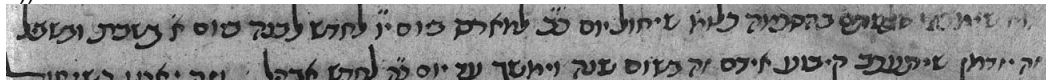


Image 5.1: (image © **British Library Board** (MS Add. 15977, folio 152a, line 12)). In CUL, this must have been misconstrued as an erasure, for the word is totally

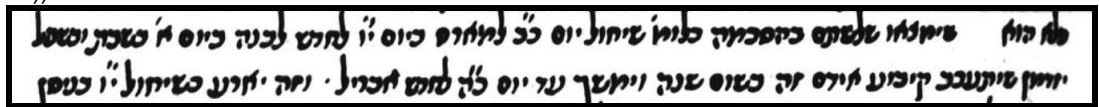


elided in CUL: Image 5.2: (image © **Cambridge University Library** (MS Oo. 6.65, folio 162b [Hebrew foliation: 'ב', קנד, line 25])), changing the meaning to 'is at the beginning of'.

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 'ובשביל זה ידמן' (= '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)):



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



#### IV: PARAMETERS OF FIDELITY:

Despite its derivation from BL, CUL sometimes varies from BL in orthographic conventions: the use of –īm / ים\_ vs. –tā / ת\_ endings, the use of abbreviations, the representation of numbers by symbol rather than prose, the change from י" to ה' to designate the Tetragrammaton,<sup>6</sup> 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.

**COPYRIGHTS:** All images are property of the owning libraries. Text: © Israel M. Sandman.

<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.