

# A Jewish Treasury

A review of Rebecca Abrams's new book *Jewish Treasures from Oxford Libraries* by Victoria Bentata Azaz.



*Jewish Treasures from Oxford Libraries* is a truly magnificent tome showcasing some of the most beautiful and significant Jewish books in Oxford's collections. Since Oxford has some of the best collections of Jewish books in the world, make no mistake, this is world-class!

In the preface, Martin Gross describes *Jewish Treasures* as 'an exercise in bibliographical

archaeology' and it is the light the book sheds on the collectors and the art of book collecting that makes it so fascinating and so original. It is not simply a collection of beautiful facsimile pages from lovely books, though it is this too. It is also the story of the people who loved them – who produced them, read them, protected them from harm, winkled them out, and tracked them down. This is not only archaeology; it is also a road trip and a quest! How did these books get from 13th-century Fustat, 15th-century Cas-tile, or 18th-century Prague to Oxford, to us? Through whose hands and to what ends?

The answers are often convoluted, fantastical, or serendipitous and many mysteries remain, but what we have in Oxford today is a priceless collection of collections of the most extraordinary diversity. Bibles, rabbinic texts, astrological enquires, calendars, and even shopping lists are all represented in the work of Hebrew scribes and both Jewish and non-Jewish illustrators. We even have a Quran in Judaeo-Arabic (Arabic written in Hebrew characters), and an autographed copy of a text by Maimonides.

Organised by collection, *Jewish Treasures* takes us on a tour, and by the end we have an appreciation of the size, scope, diversity, and significance of each collection. By placing the collectors in their religious and chronological contexts, it also

*The Kennicott Bible,*

1496, written in a

*Sephardi script by*

*Moses Ibn Zabarah and*

*illustrated by Joseph Ibn*

*Hayyim.* Courtesy of the

Bodleian Library

**"This is not only archaeology; it is also a road trip and a quest!"**

*Jewish Treasures from Oxford Libraries* (Bodleian Library, 2020, hardback, £35, available at The Bodleian Shop and all good bookshops).

examines the motivations of Laud, Pococke, Huntington, Kennicott, Bodley, Oppenheim, and others.

The Christian scholar Benjamin Kennicott wanted copies of all the Hebrew bibles in existence so that he could compare the texts and discredit the Jewish Masoretic tradition. He ended up doing the opposite and saved the most attractive Hebrew bible in existence and possibly the last to be produced in Spain before the expulsion. By comparison, David Oppenheim, the Chief Rabbi of Prague, wanted to own a copy of every Jewish book ever published and every never-published manuscript, but his was a practical collection used for his community. The books he owned were read and consulted in his work to resolve disputes and clarify points of contention.

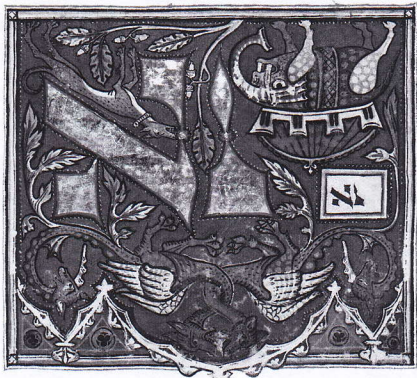
Thomas Bodley, the founder of our great mother library now housing over 13 million books, had studied Hebrew in Geneva. He started his collection with 58 Hebrew books which he had personally selected. He even chided his librarian for mixing up Hebrew letters in the catalogue.

Richard Ovenden, today's Bodley's Librarian, declares in his foreword that the Hebrew and Jewish manuscript and early printed collections are 'one of the chief glories' of Oxford's libraries.

Artfully disguised as a lavishly produced coffee-table book, *Jewish Treasures* is an assemblage of scholarly essays by experts in the field. It can therefore be enjoyed on many levels – whether your interests are primarily visual and artistic or whether you want academic depth. It is beautifully produced, accessibly written, brilliantly edited, and Rebecca Abrams and César Merchán-Hamann should be thoroughly proud of themselves. I cannot recommend more highly that this book should grace your coffee table.

Edited by Rebecca Abrams and César Merchán-Hamann

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JEWISH TREASURES