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The Provenance of the Westminster Talmud

EDGAR SAMUEL

In July 1980, the Valmadonna Trust acquired from Westminster Abbey Library, in exchange for an early-medieval forged charter of the Abbey, a nine-folio-volume set of the Babylonian Talmud printed by Daniel Bomberg in Venice between 1522 and 1538. The question of its provenance touched off a lively correspondence in *The Times*, provoked by an imaginative but improbable suggestion that King Henry VIII had imported it into England and presented it to his favourite monastery. Mr Peter Lunzer approached me and asked if I could discover the true history of the Talmud. It sounded an interesting assignment.

The volumes are in 16th-century English blind-stamped leather bindings. Each cover is decorated with a bookbinder's roll of floral design, bearing the miniature letters 'PL'. In the centre is a stamped ornament flanked by the owner's large initials 'RB'. A vellum page from a medieval manuscript is pasted inside most of the covers. It seemed probable that anyone living in Tudor England who was sufficiently rich and learned to order expensive Hebrew books from Venice, would be important enough to warrant an entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and among those listed, whose initials were 'RB', was one who was a Hebraist, a book collector and a Canon of Westminster, Richard Bancroft (1544–1610), Archbishop of Canterbury and founder of Lambeth Palace Library. He might, I argued, have bought the Talmud second-hand while he was a divinity student, stamped it with his initials, and given it to Westminster Abbey during the period when he was a canon, between 1587 and 1597. Mr Jack Lunzer, the Library Custodian of the Valmadonna Trust, wrote to the Librarian of Lambeth Palace Library, at my suggestion, who helpfully found several examples of Bancroft's books bearing the letters 'RB'. An inventory of Bancroft's books taken in 1612 showed, in addition, that he had possessed an eight-folio-volume Talmud. However, Bancroft stamped his books with gold letters and, as Mr Howard Nixon, the Librarian of Westminster Abbey, pointed out, the letter stamps were different

and several other Hebraists in the *DNB* bore the initials 'RB'. Moreover, why should an avid book collector present such a fine edition to the Abbey Library when he clearly still had use for it, rather than leave it with his other books at Lambeth Palace? Bancroft had finally to be discounted because he was a Cambridge man, whereas the Talmud, we later found, had been bound in Oxford.

Mr Bernard Middleton, the book restorer, suggested that the initials had been stamped on the binding when the leather was new and naturally moist, indicating that they belonged to the Talmud's first owner and not to a later purchaser, such as Bancroft. Reference to Dr Neil Ker's *Fragments of Medieval Manuscripts used as Pastedowns in Oxford Bindings* (Oxford 1954) showed that books bearing the 'PL' roll were bound in Oxford between 1546 and 1556. It looked as though there was an Oxford bookseller who made it his business to import academic books from the great wholesale centre at Antwerp, for, of the twenty books traced with bindings bearing the 'PL' roll, all were imported and no less than five were in Hebrew. He may have received Daniel Bomberg's catalogues and showed them to his customers.

The most likely person in Oxford to buy a new copy of such a difficult and expensive work as the Talmud was the Regius Professor of Hebrew. Of the two who held the chair between 1546 and 1556, Richard Bruarne (1519–65) seemed the most likely first owner. He was Vicar of Mapledurham, Fellow of Eton College and, from 1548 to 1559, *Regius Praelector* in Hebrew at the University of Oxford.¹ But I had been beaten to this conclusion by Professor Raphael Loewe who, with great generosity, handed me his entire correspondence file on this matter and invited me to use it as I chose. In July 1980, the Assistant Librarian of Christ Church had written to him: 'The initials R.B. on the binding of the Westminster Abbey Talmud are probably those of Richard Bruerne as its MS1 has an inscription by him dated 14th Jan. 1565.' Manuscript MS1 at Westminster Abbey proved to be a beautiful little 8vo codex Hebrew Pentateuch, written in England

in the 12th or 13th century, with two flyleaf inscriptions, one by John Grandison, a 14th-century Bishop of Exeter, and the other by Richard Bruarne, in a mixture of Latin and rather ungrammatical classical Hebrew in a very strange script. This stated that he had given the book to Christ Church, Oxford, in 1563, the year in which the college's library was founded. There was also a librarian's inscription:

Liber ecclesiae Chri Oxon
Ex dono Ricardi Bruarni
Anno 1565 Jan 14.

The Old Style date was some nine months after Bruarne's death. This holograph inscription by Bruarne proved to be the key to the problem, for inside the back covers of five of the nine volumes of the Talmud were parchment labels listing their contents in a weird Hebrew script, a distorted mixture of square and Italian Rabbinic letters. It was unmistakably in the same hand as the Pentateuch flyleaf (See Plate VIII Figs 1 and 2). 'RB' was Richard Bruarne, the second Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford.

The second question, of how the Talmud came to Westminster Abbey, remained unanswered. When Richard Bruarne died in April 1565, he left his residuary estate to two nephews in Lancashire and appointed them his executors. The supervisors of his will were two Oxford academics, John Hodson and William Marshall,² Principal of St Alban Hall.³ Such expert advisers could have seen to it that his Hebrew books were sold to advantage in Oxford, and they would, no doubt, once again have entered the library of an Oxford Hebraist, as like as not, that of another Regius Professor. But how did the manuscript Pentateuch migrate from Christ Church Library to Westminster Abbey? It seems that the Regius Professor of Hebrew, who was also invariably a Canon of Christ Church, could easily borrow from the college library. It is therefore quite likely that both the Pentateuch and the Talmud came into the hands of one of Bruarne's successors and were sold together in Oxford on his death, but here the trail of evidence peters out.

Queen Elizabeth I refounded Westminster Abbey as a college on the model of Eton and Winchester, combining a boys' school and an almshouse with a postgraduate institution for a dean and twelve

prebendaries, who dined together and enjoyed free lodgings, and the use of a very large college chapel. In 1574, Dean Gabriel Goodman founded the library of printed books with the gift of a Complutensian Polyglot Bible and a Hebrew dictionary. He must have persuaded the prebendaries to donate some of their books too, for, in 1585, William Camden was appointed librarian and a sale of duplicates was held.⁴ The second period of growth started in 1623, when John Williams, who was simultaneously Dean of Westminster, Bishop of Lincoln and Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, decided to expand the library and throw it open to the public. His biographer Bishop John Hackett wrote:

With the same generosity and strong propension of mind to enlarge the boundaries of learning, he converted a waste room, situate in the East side of the cloisters into Plato's Portico, into a goodly library, modelled it into descent shape, furnished it with desks and chairs, accoutred it with all utensils, and stored it with a vast number of learned volumes, for which use he lighted most fortunately upon the study of that learned gentleman, Mr Baker of Highgate, who in a long and industrious life had collected into his own possessions the best authors in all sciences in their best editions, which being bought at £500 (a cheap pennyworth for such precious ware) were removed into this storehouse.⁵

This Sir Richard Baker (1568–1645) was an Oxford man, and the Bomberg Talmud fitted the requirements of his collection of 'the best authors in all the sciences in their best editions'. He was no Hebraist but he might have been tempted to add the Talmud to his collection on seeing a set of handsomely bound and beautifully printed volumes stamped coincidentally with his own initials 'RB'. But whereas the *Register of Benefactors* at Westminster Abbey, which lists 2000 volumes presented to the library by Dean Williams, includes the Hebrew Pentateuch, which was rebound in London at this time, it contains no mention of the Talmud at all. We cannot be certain whether it was given by a prebendary before 1623, or whether it was given by Dean Williams, or even by another, and left out of the list because Richard Gowland, the librarian, could not read Hebrew and was therefore unable to identify it. We know that it arrived there before 1629, because on 14 July of that year John Selden wrote to his patron, Sir Robert Bruce Cotton:

I have much time here before me. There is in Westminster

Library the Talmud of Babylon in divers great volumes. If it is a thing to be obtained, I would beseech you to borrow them . . . of my Lord of Lincoln and so get me the use of them.⁶

The early Tudor professors of the 'scriptural tongues' were largely self taught. They were pioneers, but their linguistic competence was extremely limited. Many boys were beaten by their masters for making the sort of mistakes in Latin grammar which Professor Richard Bruarne perpetrated in Hebrew. But the standard at the two English universities improved rapidly in the course of the 16th century. Coverdale's 1539 Bible had been translated from the German and Latin versions, but Bishop Morgan's Welsh Bible and the English Geneva and Bishop's Bibles were translated directly from the Hebrew and Greek. By the time the Authorized Version appeared in 1611, English Hebraists had attained a high degree of skill. In the 17th century a few Englishmen were even able to master the language and method of the Talmud, quite outstanding among them being John Selden.

Finally, King Henry VIII does indirectly come into the story, for he refounded Christ Church, Oxford, and endowed the Regius Professorships at both Oxford and Cambridge. He was thus the nominal patron of the revival of Hebrew and Greek studies in England, and he had provided the stipend which enabled Richard Bruarne to import expensive Hebrew books.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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I should also like to thank Mr E. W. C. Bill, Librarian of Lambeth Palace; Mr H. J. R. Wing, Assistant Librarian of Christ Church, Oxford; the Librarian of Corpus Christi College, Oxford; Mrs R. M. McDonald, Assistant Librarian of Oriel College, Oxford; Miss Joan Williams, Librarian of Lincoln Cathedral and the Librarian of Eton College for help in tracing other books owned by Richard Bruarne, or decorated with the 'PL' roll; also The Trustees of the Valmadonna Trust for permission to reproduce the label in the Westminster Talmud and the Dean and Chapter of Westminster for permission to reproduce the flyleaf of Westminster MS 1.

NOTES

1 A. B. Emden, *A Biographical Register of the University of Oxford A.D. 1501 to 1540* (Oxford 1974) p.69. Bruarne was also a Fellow of Lincoln College.

2 Public Record Office; Prob. 11/48/ Morrison 13.

3 A. B. Emden, *op. cit.* p.382.

4 J. Armitage Robinson and Montague Rhodes James, *Manuscripts of Westminster Abbey* (Cambridge 1909) pp.13-20.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19, citing John Hackett, *Scrinia Reserata* (London 1693).

6 British Library, Cottonian MSS Julius Caesar III fol. 188g. cited in *Camden Miscellanies* XXIII pp.142-3. I am grateful to Mr Elisha Carlebach for drawing attention to this reference. A catalogue of Hebrew printed books at present in this library has been compiled by Dr David Goldstein and appears after this paper in the present volume.

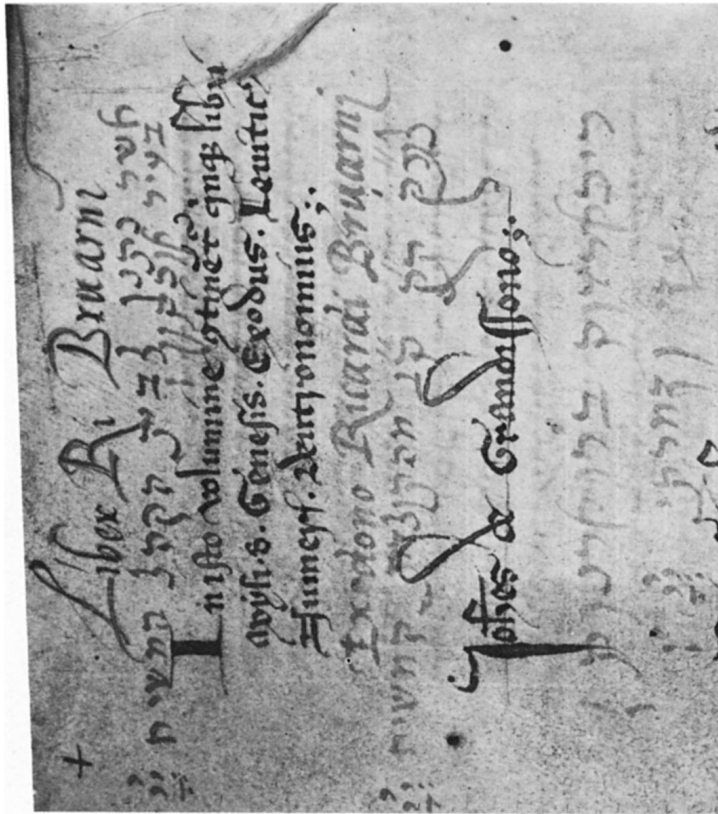


PLATE VIII

Fig. 1. Flyleaf of MSI (see p.149). Courtesy of the Dean and Chapter of Westminster.

Fig. 2. Label inside the back cover of a volume of the Westminster Talmud, listing its contents, in the Hebrew script of Richard Bruarne (see p.149). Courtesy of the Valmadonna Trust.

