The John Fell Collection of Hebrew MSS
at Christ Church Library

An entry dated 1683 in the Christ Church Library Donors Book (p.194) records the gift of thirteen Hebrew manuscripts by John Fell, Dean of Christ Church and Bishop of Oxford (Fig. I). The items are described as *Tredicim Mss Hebraice Scotum de divisione Naturae, Ptolemaei Harmonica* (Thirteen Scotist Hebrew Manuscripts on branches of Nature, Ptolemy's Harmonica).

Fig. I: The entries, bottom left and top right, on p.194 of the Christ Church Library Donors Book read (in translation): "The Reverend Father in Christ, John, Bishop of Oxford and Dean of this Church. Thirteen Scotist Hebrew Manuscripts on classes of Nature, Ptolemy's Harmonica."

1 The entry recently came to light and was brought to our attention thanks to the diligence of Dr. David Rundle and Mr. Brian Deutsch. It is one of a series of entries in the Donors Book written in a professional calligraphic script that starts on page 195 (1682) and runs unbroken through to page 201 (1689). The series also includes an entry on pages 197 & 198 dated 1686, the year in which he died, for a gift of books made by the executors' of Fell’s estate.

2 Scotism is the philosophical system derived from Arabic Aristotelianism named after John Duns Scotus (1266-1308), whose *Opus Oxoniense* set the agenda for much of medieval Christian and secular thought.

3 The ancient astronomer Ptolemy developed a mathematical theory of musical harmony which he applied to the zodiac and the movement of heavenly bodies in order to account for the “Music of the Spheres.” In
The catalogue of the Library's manuscripts prepared by G.W. Kitchin in 1863, *Catalogus codicum MSS qui in bibliotheca Aedis Christi adservatur*, lists thirteen codices containing Hebrew manuscripts from the early fifteenth to the mid seventeenth century (Nos. 187 to 190 and 193 to 201) and although there is no reference to their provenance – Kitchin was quite possibly unaware of the gift – the simplest assumption is that these are the thirteen that Fell gifted to the Library, although, as we shall see, it might not be quite that straightforward.

As befits Hebrew texts, the codices all open from right to left and the folios are numbered accordingly. Several are composites and contain more than one manuscript, the works of different authors and scribes, not necessarily on related subjects. Some bindings may be as old as the manuscripts they contain, others are from a later date; some are simple, others ornate. Unfortunately, the collation was not always carried out with due regard for the integrity and logical sequence of the folios; in a number of codices pages were mindlessly cropped and from others even lost. Nevertheless, most are presently in a satisfactory state and quite readable.

The oldest manuscript in the collection is the copy of *Mordekhai HaKatan* (*The Little Mordekhai*) in codex 196; it dates from 1410 and its folios are wholly parchment. The only other manuscript with parchment folios is the second of the three texts in the composite codex 190, whose quires are of an early type in which the paper leaves are protected by parchment outer sheets or “guards”. The remaining manuscripts in the collection are all wholly paper, much of it clearly watermarked.

Although the manuscripts were all written by Jews, their content is not exclusively Jewish. Six of the codices in the collection contain secular texts, some the original work of Jewish scholars, others Hebrew translations of Christian or Arabic works, many of which are themselves versions of, or commentaries on, classical Greek writings.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Codex</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>187</td>
<td>Hebrew translations by Eli Habillo of the queries posed by John Versor (Versorius), Thomist philosopher and Rector of the University of Paris (d. 1485), on works by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>189</td>
<td>Moses ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation of Abu Bakr al-Hassar’s seminal 12th century Arabic treatise on arithmetic, <em>Kitāb al Bayān</em>.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| 190     | (i) An exposition by R. Levy ben Gershon of Averroes’ commentary on Aristotle’s *De Anima*.  
           (ii) A commentary by Thomas Aquinas on Aristotle’s *De Anima*.  
           (iii) A supercommentary by R. Levi ben Gershon on Averroes’ *Commentary on Aristotle’s De Meteoris*. |
| 194     | Notes on Avicenna’s *Canon of Medicine*. |

4. Kepler published his *Harmonices Mundi* (*The Harmony of the World*) whose content parallels that of Ptolemy’s *Harmonica* and in which he introduced his Third Law of Planetary Motion.

5. Three are in a Provencal Hebrew script (187, 189, 190), two in a Sefardic script (200, 201) and one in an Italian-Ashkenazi script (194).

6. The translations of the queries on Aristotle’s *De Anima* and the four treatises from the *Parva Naturalia* are found uniquely in this codex.
Codex 200  A supercommentary on Averroes’ *Middle Commentary* on Porphyry’s *Isagoge* and Aristotle’s *Categories, De Interpretatione* and *Prior Analytics*.

Codex 201  A supercommentary by Judah HaCohen on Averroes’ *Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s Prior Analytics*.

The remaining seven codices contain specifically Jewish texts and can be grouped under four headings.

1. Rabbinics:

   Codex 196  The Halakhic compendium *Mordekhai HaKatan* (*The Little Mordekhai*).

   Codex 199  A Controversy in the Amsterdam Jewish Community in 1650 (including two responsa by Joseph Delmedigo).

2. Esoterics:

   Codex 195  *Taamei Mitzvot*, the intrinsic reasons for the Divine Ordinances incumbent upon Jews beyond obedience to God.

   Codex 198  R. Jacob Lagarto’s personal collection of Kabbalah and Hekhalot Texts.

3. Homiletics:

   Codex 197  Torah Homilies by a R. Israel: “Bereaved since the Castilian Exile and forlorn by reason of the Portuguese Captivity”.

4. Composites of Unrelated Texts:

   Codex 188  A Mélange of Kabbalistic and Maimonidean texts, all interspersed and annotated by arcane inscriptions, sketches and images:
   (i) A 16th century commentary on *Sefer Yetzirah* by Shlomo Turiel;
   (ii) A description of the form of the Kabbalistic Tree of *Sefirot*;
   (iii) The 613 *Mitzvot* (Divine ordinances incumbent on Jews) enumerated by Maimonides, listed by the order they appear in the weekly Torah readings;
   (iv) An alphabetic subject index to Maimonides’ *Mishne Torah* or *Sefer Yad HaHazakah*;
   (v) Maimonides’ purported last testament to his son (partial);
   (vi) The twenty five queries put to Maimonides by the “wise men of Lunel” and his replies to them.

   Codex 193  (i) “Speech is Dumb.” A Renaissance style morality tale by Joshua di Viana on the culpability of Speech for the iniquities it uniquely facilitates:
   (ii) The “Khazar Correspondence.” The letters purportedly exchanged by Hasdai ibn Shaprut and Joseph, King of the Khazars.

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7 There is no colophon but the script, Italian and 16th century, corresponds with the partial watermark – Briquet 749 (Lucca 1548) or one similar – in fol.48.

8 The author’s full name is given on fol.1: יוהודה בן יצחק בן אדני משה בן יהודה בן מורנו רב שמעון חכון (Judah son of Isaac, son of my master Moses, son of Judah, son of our Teacher R. Samuel HaCohen).

9 The two Rabbinics codices are Ashkenazi; the three others are of Sefardi origin.

10 Some with a possible Christian Kabbalah connection.

11 Swearing falsely (taking God’s name in vain), calumny, gossip and slander, as well as lying, flattery, scorn, profanity, perjury and cursing.
The codices all have an 18th century Christ Church Library bookplate affixed to an inside cover or endpaper (Fig. II), and, with one exception, a handwritten Latin inscription with their contents and, in some instances, the name(s) of the author(s). In all but five codices – 187, 188, 190, 193 and 200 – the inscriptions also include Hebrew. The entries in Kitchin’s catalogue are generally little more than copies of these inscriptions.

Fig. II: The codices all have this 18th century Christ Church Library bookplate glued onto an inside cover. The hat above the crest is that of Cardinal Wolsey, the founder of Christ Church: it is still preserved in the Library.

The exception is codex 199, which has a full page nineteenth century handwritten explanatory note in English attached to the inside front cover and no Latin inscription. The codex is also exceptional in having modern covers and a second Christ Church Library bookplate dated 1904 affixed to the inside of the back cover (Fig. III); it was seemingly rebound early in the twentieth century.

Fig. III: The 20th century Christ Church Library bookplate glued onto the back cover of codex 199.
From the diversity of their Latin and Hebrew scripts, as well as their different formats, it is clear that the inscriptions were not all entered at the same time nor by the same person. There are, nevertheless, pointers as to when and by whom they could or could not have been written. Thus, the inscriptions in codices 187 and 195 could not have been added before 1733 since both of them cite Johann Christoph Wolf's *Bibliothecae Hebraicae* which was first printed in Hamburg only in that year. On the other hand, the very different scripts in these two inscriptions suggests that they must almost certainly have been written by different persons (Fig. IV & V).

![Fig. IV: The inscription in codex 187: Liber de Caelo & M undo, dispositus per Questiones à Sapiente Virshurio, seu, ut scribit Wolflius, Virturo dequo consule ejusdem Wolfii Bibliothec. Heb. vol. 4. p.790, No.396. (The Book of the Sky and of the World, elucidated by Questions posed by the Wise Virshurio...Wolf's Bibliothec. Heb. vol 4, p.790, No.396.)]

Conversely, the almost identical Latin and Hebrew lettering of the inscriptions in codices 189 and 194 (Fig. VI), were most probably written by the same person. The close similarity between the scripts of the inscriptions in codices 196 and 198 suggests, likewise, that they came from the same hand (Fig. VII); so too the inscriptions in codices 197 and 201 (Fig. VIII).

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13 The entry in Wolf's compendium cited in the inscription, refers to a Hebrew codex that had once belonged to Cornelius Schulting (1540-1604), a minister of the Reformed Church in Amsterdam. That codex is, however, now thought to be one held by the Staats und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg, Codex Hebr 266 (IMHM F 1065) and not this Christ Church codex. This Hamburg codex contains just one of the texts in the Christ Church codex 187, that on the queries posed on Aristotle's *De Generatione et Corruptione*.

14 The work listed on p.296 is attributed to R. David ben Solomon ibn (Avi) Zimra (c1479–c1573) and that on p.776 to R. Menahem Recanati (c1250–c1310). More recent scholarship has, however, suggested that the reasons proffered in this codex are taken from an opus by the 13th century R. Yosef of Shushan HaBirah.
Fig. VI: The almost identical scripts of the inscriptions in codices 189 and 194: ספר חשבון i.e. Liber Arithmetices and ס' בחמות הרפוא i.e. Liber de Scientis Medicis, respectively.

Fig. VII: Partials of the long inscriptions in codices 196 (above) and 198 (below), showing the similarity between their respective scripts.

Fig. VIII: The similar scripts of the inscriptions in codices 197 and 201, respectively: Hic liber inscribitur, דובר מתיישר, Loquens recte. Commentarius est R. Israelis in Pentateuchum Hebraicam. (This Book is Entitled “Straight Talking:” A Commentary by R. Israel on the Pentateuch, Hebrew); פי' הגיוון של יהודה כהן — Commentarius in Logiam, Jehuda Cohen i.e. Sacerdotis (A Commentary on Logic by Yehudah Cohen, i.e., Priest).

Who actually researched and entered these inscriptions is unknown; they left no remembrance.
The simple assumption that the thirteen codices referred to in the entry for Fell’s gift on p.194 of the Donors Book are the thirteen listed in Kitchin’s catalogue that contain Hebrew manuscripts dated prior to 1683, is moot. Only if a codex was actually bound prior to 1683 could it have been one of the thirteen that Fell gifted.\textsuperscript{15}

Seven codices, 187, 189, 194, 195, 196, 197, and 200, contain a 15\textsuperscript{th} or 16\textsuperscript{th} century work or works, the product(s) of a single author or copyist, bound in contemporary generic calf, sheep or goat skin covered boards (Fig. IX). A further two codices, 188 and 201, have 16\textsuperscript{th} or early 17\textsuperscript{th} century tooled leather bindings (Fig. X); a fly leaf in the former also has a Basilisk watermark dated 1602 (Fig. XI). As such, there is no obvious reason to suppose that these nine items were not part of Fell’s gift.

\textsuperscript{15} The pre-1683 dating of the manuscripts is based on the data in the Catalogue of the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts in the National Library of Israel, Jerusalem.
The remaining four codices, 190, 193, 198 and 199, all contain manuscripts of works by different authors, not necessarily on the same subject nor the product of the same抄ist. This makes determining when they were produced more problematic.

Codex 190 contains three such manuscripts: two 15th century texts in Sefardi scripts and one 16th century text in an Italian script.16 Their only common feature is that each contains a medieval exposition on a work by Aristotle. The watermarks in the codex's endpapers are variants of a group of late 17th century London marks, the earliest dated 1677 and the latest 1698, all of which comprise a stylised bunch of grapes and a monogram that contains inter alia some permutation of the letters I, A, N and D (Fig. XII). These endpapers are not an original part of the manuscripts but were presumably added when they were bound into the present codex some time between 1677 and 1698. Whether this was before or after 1683 remains an open question at this stage.

The two manuscripts in codex 193 are actually little more than fragments. The first is just the last 11 folios of what, by reference to its Hebrew foliation and content, was once a 94 page text of moral or ethical instruction. The even shorter second item, just 7 folios in all, contains the correspondence purportedly exchanged by Hasdai ibn Shaprut (915–970) and the King of the Khazars. These two manuscripts, neither of which is dated and

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16 The datings are based on their respective colophons and the watermarks in their paper.
which have almost nothing in common, were probably bound into a single codex purely for convenience. There are, however, no watermarks in the endpapers and thus no indication of when this might have been.

The uncertainties arising from the composite nature of codices 190 and 193 are compounded by the serious inconsistencies between their actual contents and their respective entries in Kitchin’s 1863 catalogue.

There are two handwritten inscriptions in codex 190, one on the inside of the front cover and the other stuck onto the inside of the back cover: Expositio Rabbi Levy Ben Gershon super Commentarium Avernois in Librum Aristotelis de Anima (An exposition by R. Levy ben Gershon of Averroes’ supercommentary on Aristotle’s de Anima) and Expositio in librum (Aristotelis) de Meteoris; respectively (Fig. XIII).

![Fig. XIII: The two inscriptions in codex 190.](image)

The original entry in Kitchin’s 1863 catalogue codex 190 lists just these two works (Fig. XIV) But, as noted above, the codex actually comprises three separate and physically very different manuscripts.

![Fig. XIV: The original entry for codex 190 in Kitchin’s catalogue with just two listed items. The third manuscript in the codex, does not appear.](image)

The manuscript missing from the original catalogue entry is a Hebrew translation of a commentary by Thomas Aquinas on Aristotle’s De Anima; it is in fact the second work in

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17 The similarity between the handwriting and format of these two inscriptions and those of the inscription in codex 187, whose subject matter is also medieval philosophy, suggests that they were most probably entered by the same person and, likewise, after 1733.
the codex. It has a colophon, but the name Thomas Aquinas has been erased from it (Fig. XV). The colophon in a copy of this same text in the Vatican Library reads (in translation): “Completed, the interpretation and commentary on the book De Anima which Thomas Aquinas expounded…” For whatever reason, the reference to Aquinas was deleted from the colophon in codex 190. The translator is not named in either manuscript.

Fig. XV: The colophon on fol. 116v of codex 190 with the deleted reference to Thomas Aquinas. It reads (in translation): “Completed, a commentary on the book De Anima…[deletion]…year 208 (1447/8) and I, Moshe Levi, wrote it for my master, Maestro Abraham, the physician Di Balmes (Fig.190.5).”

The omission from the original catalogue entry has been corrected by a pencilled note in the Library’s present copy: “T. Aquin[as]. Comm. on de Anima, transd. from Latin into Hebrew” (Fig. XVI).

Fig. XVI: The pencilled addition in the corrected entry for codex 190 in the Library’s master copy of Kitchin’s catalogue. The supercommentary by R. Levi Gershon (Gersonides) occupies ff.1 to 34; the Hebrew translation of the commentary by Thomas Aquinas on De Anima ff. 36 to 116; folios 117 to 121 are blank and the commentary on Aristotle’s Meteoris now begins on f.122.

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19 R. Abraham de Balmes of Lecce (d. 1489), court physician to King Ferdinand I of Naples. Not to be confused with his grandson, Abraham de Balmes ben Meir (d. Venice 1523), the Italian physician and translator.

20 Folios 117 to 121 have the same watermark as f.116.
Kitchin certainly had no knowledge of the Vatican manuscript, and the simplest explanation for his error is that the subject of the commentary by Thomas Aquinas, i.e., Aristotle’s *de Anima*. Placing too much reliance on the headline inscriptions, Kitchin had perhaps overlooked the physical differences between the two manuscripts and the somewhat cryptic entry in the second inscription, “2. Authorem (2 Authors)”, and credited both works to R. Levi ben Gershon.

Turning to codex 193, according to the original entry in Kitchin’s catalogue, this codex should comprise 42 folios and not just the 18 it presently contains (Fig. XVII). It thus appears that some 24 folios that have gone astray since Kitchin’s time.

![Fig. XVII: The original entry for codex 193 in Kitchin’s catalogue, according to which it comprised 42 folios in all and the correspondence between Hasdai ibn Shapru and the King of the Khazars began on folio 35; this is, however, no longer correct. the Fragmentum operis cujusdam majoris (Fragment of a Larger Work)” now occupies fols. 1-11 and the correspondence purportedly exchanged by Hasdai ibn Shapru (915–970) and the King of the Khazars, fols. 12-18.]

Codices 198 and 199 are also problematic. In contrast to the 15th and 16th century texts in the other codices, whose subject matter is of general a nature and impersonal, the texts in these two 17th century Dutch manuscripts are directly related to actual persons.

The former is a collection of short extracts from works of Kabbalah and other esoteric texts, copied in Amsterdam by R. Jacob ben Simon Franco Legarto (c.1600-1669) for his own personal use, on the eve of his departure in 1635 for the new Dutch settlement in Recife, Brazil. The latter contains three texts – two responsa and a polemical essay – relating to a halakhic controversy in 1650 over the appointment of the son of an Anuss (Cristiano Nuevo, Converso or Marrano) and a gentile woman, a certain Moseh Roiz da Costa who had become a bone fide Jew (he had undergone giur), to the most senior lay position in the Amsterdam Jewish community. Two of the texts are anonymous: the name in the colophon is clearly fictitious. Their author was actually the 17th century Jewish polymath, Joseph Solomon Delmedigo (1591-1655), who used a pseudonym to hide his identity. The third is by the little known R. Issachar Ber Jeitless of Prague (Fig. XVIII).

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21 The *Lib. Cosar* (should be *Liber Cosri*) cited in the catalogue entry is a Latin translation of Judah Halevi’s theological treatise *Kitab al Khazari* (ספר הכוזרי) published by Johannes Buxtorf the Younger in 1660.

22 This codex has been the subject of three previous articles by this writer:
- Tracing Two Lost Works by Delmedigo, *Christ Church Library Newsletter*, Volume 6, Issue 3;
- From Eisenstadt to Oxford: The Provenance of MS 199 in the Hebrew Collection of Christ Church Library, *Christ Church Library Newsletter*, Volume 9, Issues 1, 2 & 3;
These are not the only items in the collection with a Dutch connection. The two separator folios, 81 and 81*, in codex 195 and the endpapers in codices 198 and 200 all have early 17th century Amsterdam watermarks. Fell himself also had links to Holland. Following the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660 and his own return to favour, he had taken up William Laud’s vision of establishing a University Press and had printing presses installed in the cellars of the new Sheldonian Theatre. He also acquired a stock of typographical punches and matrices from the Dutch Republic together with the services of two Dutch typefounders. Indeed, it is quite possible that he himself acquired many of the items in the collection from manuscript brokers in Holland, with whom he had dealings as part of his ambitious plans for new publications by the University Press.

The recent discovery of another entry in the Library’s Donors Book recording a gift of fifteen and not thirteen Hebrew manuscripts, presents perhaps the most serious challenge to the simple assumption that the thirteen codices listed in Kitchin’s catalogue are the thirteen that Fell gifted to the Library.

The pages in the Donors Book are numbered sequentially and configured by fine red lines into two columns, with margins above, below and on either side (Fig. XIX). Despite the formatting of the pages which indicates that the original intent was to maintain a systematic record, the actual entries are often haphazard.23

The entry for the fifteen Hebrew manuscripts is on p.134 of the Donors Book, in the right hand column which is headed A°MDCLX (1660). This was the year of the Restoration of the Monarchy and with it came John Fell’s appointment to the position of Dean of Christ Church that his royalist father Samuel Fell had held until he was imprisoned on the orders of the Parliamentary Visitors in 1647; he was later released but died in 1649 deprived of all his University offices.


23 A number of pages are blank. Furthermore, pages 166 to 173 (4 folios) are missing; there is, however, no indication that they were torn or cut out.
This change in the family’s political fortunes that came with John’s appointment is reflected in the wording of the entry at the top of the left hand column: *Ornatiss’ doctissimus vir Joannes Fell S’: Theol: Dr: Colendiss’ huius Aedis Decanus, paternarum virtutum simul et Dignitatis meritissim’ successor* (An accomplished scholar, John Fell, Doctor of Sacred Theology, revered Dean of this Church; [endowed] with both his father’s strength and dignity, a worthy successor). The entry goes on to record the gift by Fell of a six volume set of the Talmud, made perhaps to mark the occasion.

There are three further entries on p. 134, each tagged in an adjacent margin by a date later than 1660: one in the left hand margin dated 1668 and two in the right hand margin dated 1669 and 1680, respectively. Such tagged entries appear nowhere else in the Donors Book. The entry for the gift of the fifteen Hebrew manuscripts is the second of the two in the right hand column and reads: *Quindecim Manuscripta Hebraica vary Argumenti &varys Auteribus con Scripto* (Fifteen Hebrew Manuscripts on various Topics and by various Authors and Scribes).

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24 The entry above refers to a gift in 1669 of two books, *Selenographia* and *Cometographia*, by the 17th century Polish astronomer Johannis Hevelius.*
Although the entries make no specific reference to Fell, they almost certainly relate to gifts made by him: why else would they be on this page and not on the designated pages of the years in which they were given? Which begs the question of how these fifteen manuscripts became the thirteen codices in the 1683 entry on p.194?

A plausible answer to this conundrum returns us to codex 190. We have already seen that the three distinct and physically very different manuscripts it contains were most probably bound into a single codex some time between 1677 and 1698. Each of the manuscripts contains a complete work and they had probably been counted as separate items in 1680 when the entry on p.134 was presumably made. We can now narrow down the date they were bound into the present codex 190 to the three year period between 1680 and 1683, which had the effect of reducing the total number of items in the collection by two, i.e., from the fifteen on p.134 of the Donors Book to the thirteen on p.194.

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25 The Library has never possessed as many as twenty eight Hebrew manuscripts.