HEBREW MANUSCRIPTS: JOURNEYS OF THE WRITTEN WORD

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Jews have lived across many lands for millennia. But when the Romans sacked Jerusalem and expelled the Jews in 70 CE, they put an end to the Jewish state of Judea.

Living in dispersed communities, Jewish people have always interacted with their neighbours, creating a mosaic of diverse traditions.

But Jews all around the world have maintained a strong sense of cultural and religious identity. Hebrew language and script have been central to linking scattered Jewish communities and documenting their experiences.

This exhibition provides a snapshot of the diverse Hebrew manuscripts in the British Library’s collection and showcases the power of the written word to bring people together.

(right) Map showing the origins of manuscripts in this exhibition
Introduction

Generously supported by the Dr Michael and Anna Brynberg Charitable Foundation.
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The Bible and beyond

Judaism is one of the world’s oldest religions.

The core texts of Judaism – the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud – are the foundation of both Jewish religious practice and Jewish culture around the world.

The Torah is the first and holiest part of the Hebrew Bible. The Talmud contains the Mishnah, the first major written collection of old Jewish traditions, and the Gemarah, related commentaries. Written in Hebrew and Aramaic, they have long provided a common touchpoint for dispersed Jewish communities.

In this section, discover Jewish religious texts from around the world and how they are used in worship and everyday life.
Sacred scroll of a remote community

The Torah Scroll, the holiest object in Judaism, contains the Five Books of Moses, believed to have been dictated by God. Chanting aloud from the Torah is a central part of synagogue services around the world.

This scroll belonged to the Jewish community in Kaifeng, China. Established around the 10th century by merchants arriving from western Asia, the community maintained Jewish customs and traditions until their synagogue was demolished around 1860. Today, descendants of this community are reviving Jewish customs and traditions in the area.

Torah Scroll. Kaifeng, China, 17th century. Add MS 19250
A guiding hand

Reading or chanting aloud from the Torah scroll during synagogue services is known as ‘cantillation’. To honour the holiness of the Torah and avoid touching the scroll with their bare hands, readers use a pointer or yad, which translates as ‘hand’.

Silver-gilt Torah pointer. Germany, late 17th century. Jewish Museum London, JM 152
The Bible and beyond

Young people often read from the Torah as part of their Bar Mitzvah ceremony
iStock.com/edelmar
The Bible and beyond

A Hebrew Bible from a Muslim land

The Hebrew Bible, or Tanakh, includes the sacred texts of the Jewish people. It has 24 books split into three parts – the Torah, Prophets and Writings.

The golden patterns decorating this very early, fragmentary Hebrew Bible show the influence of Islamic art on Jewish manuscripts produced in Muslim countries, including Babylonia and Egypt. There are no illustrations depicting people or animals. Instead, the manuscript is decorated with geometric and floral patterns.

First Gaster Bible. Egypt (?), 10th century. Or 9879
From Temple rituals to the Book

After the Romans destroyed the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE, worship became centred on sacred texts instead of services in the Temple.

Some Hebrew Bibles from medieval Spain illustrated the Temple implements used to perform rituals. The images at the beginning of this Bible turn it into a symbolic substitute for the destroyed building. They also act as a reference point for the future Temple, which most Jews believe will be rebuilt when the Messiah comes.

Harley Catalan Bible.
Catalonia, Spain, 14th century.
Harley MS 1528
1 Menorah
2 Tongs
3 Firepans
4 Stone steps
5 Aaron’s flowering rod
6 Ark of Covenant with tablets of Law
7 Copper laver
8 Shovels
9 Shofar
10 Altar of burnt offering
11 Jar of manna
12 Trumpets
13 Flesh hooks
14 Table of shewbread
15 Incense altar
16 Mount of Olives
Art and scholarship

Between the 6th and 10th centuries, scholars made annotations on the pronunciation, spelling and intonation of the biblical text. These annotations (masorah) ensured the Bible’s correct transmission. Later, medieval bibles often included the masorah in tiny script written in geometric or figurative designs called micrography.

In this 700-year-old bible, the story of Abraham sacrificing a ram instead of his son Isaac is accompanied by masorah in the shape of the ram.

Duke of Sussex’s German Pentateuch. Lake Constance, Germany, 14th century. Add MS 15282
Zooming in on the Bible

Explore and zoom in on more manuscripts at bl.uk/manuscripts.

Duration: 1 minute 20 seconds
From oppression to freedom

Passover, the main Jewish spring festival, celebrates the Israelites’ liberation from Egyptian slavery as described in the Book of Exodus. Hagadah, or ‘telling’, is the book used at home on Passover eve to guide the order of service.

A tapestry of blessings, commentaries, discussions and songs, the hagadah has inspired artists and thinkers for centuries. It remains one of the most cherished and frequently illustrated texts in Judaism.

Sloane Hagadah. Germany, 1740.
Sloane MS 3173
The Bible and beyond

A family sitting around the Seder table for a meal on the eve of Passover
Ilan Rosen / Alamy Stock Photo
The legal foundations of Judaism

The ultimate guide to Jewish religious law is the Talmud. It has two versions: the Babylonian and the Palestinian. It contains the Mishnah, the major written collection of old Jewish traditions, and the Gemarah, related commentaries by rabbis. Christian authorities often considered its content blasphemous. They destroyed numerous copies in the Middle Ages and early modern period. This incomplete copy of the Babylonian Talmud is one of the few to survive.

Babylonian Talmud.
Germany (?), 13th century.
Add MS 25717
People of the Book

‘When the Jewish people lost their home and God lost His,… Jews became the people of the book and not the people of the Temple or the land.’

Jonathan Rosen, 2001
The Bible and beyond

Tanakh

The Hebrew Bible is known as TaNaKh: Torah (Five Books of Moses), Nevi’im (Prophets), Ketuvim (Writings)
Living together

The Jewish Diaspora refers to Jewish communities scattered all around the world. Spread across five continents, Jews have engaged with different languages, cultures and religions. While these interactions have sometimes been harmonious, Jews and their neighbours have also experienced conflict.

As a result, many Jewish communities developed their own local traditions that incorporated elements of other cultures, from food to clothing to art.

In this section, get a glimpse into how Jews and non-Jews have lived alongside each other through legal documents, historical accounts and literature.
Living together

Consulting on legal questions

Moses ben Maimon, or Maimonides, was a legal authority, philosopher and physician, and the most influential Jewish spiritual leader of the 12th century.

Jews often wrote to Maimonides to ask for his opinion on matters of religious law. Some of his many replies have survived, preserved for nearly 1000 years in the Cairo Genizah, a vast archive in the Ben Ezra Synagogue. The last section of this document gives his ruling in his own handwriting on retracting an oath.

Moses ben Maimon, autograph response to a question. Fustat (Cairo), Egypt, 12th century. Or 5519B
‘If the teacher has repented, he shall declare his change of mind before three Israelites who shall release him of carrying out his oath.’
A medieval businesswoman

This deed of sale for a house in Norwich documents a rare example of a medieval Jewish woman engaged in business on her own terms. Miriam had to release her rights to the property before it could be sold.

Jews arrived in England shortly after the Norman Conquest in 1066, but were expelled by Edward I in 1290. The deed shows that Jewish legal documents written in Hebrew were accepted in medieval England.

Lansdowne Ch 667
Living together

1 Miriam, Wife of Rabbi Osha’yah, Son of Isaac, known as Ursel
2 William, son of Roger of South Walsham
3 Ursel, son of Rabbi Isaac
4 Jacob, son of Rabbi Jacob (witness)
Living together

**King Henry VIII and the Jews of Italy**

Christians have sometimes consulted Jews about biblical questions. When Henry VIII wanted to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon on biblical grounds, his advisors consulted Jewish scholars. Since Jews had been expelled from England in 1290, they turned to Italian rabbis.

In this reply, Rabbi Jacob Rafael does not support Henry’s position. In the end, the pope refused to grant an annulment, Henry broke from the Catholic Church and ended his marriage.

The reply of Jacob Rafael of Modena regarding the law of levirate. Italy, 1530. Arundel MS 151
Censoring Hebrew books

This guide written in 1596 contains an alphabetical list of around 450 Hebrew works. The Catholic Church considered certain passages in these books morally harmful or blasphemous. Censors deleted words they suspected referred to Christians in a negative way.

The author, Dominico Irosolimitano, censored over 20,000 copies of Hebrew books and manuscripts. This opening lists Sefer ha-Tashbets, which is displayed to the left.

Dominico Irosolimitano,
Sefer ha-zikuk (Book of Expurgation).
Modena, Italy, 17th-century copy.
Or 6639
Living together

Sefer ha-Tashbets
Censored by the Catholic Church

Most Jewish legal works are based on the Talmud both in content and in structure. This 700-year-old book contains two works on religious law by German Jewish scholars.

By 1599, the manuscript was in Italy, where along with numerous other Jewish books, it was repeatedly checked by the Catholic Church for anti-Christian content. There are four signatures here by censors, most of whom were converts from Judaism to Christianity.

Samson ben Zadok, Sefer ha-Tashbets, and Baruch ben Isaac, Sefer ha-terumah. Germany, 1307. Add MS 18424
Censors’ signatures:
1  Fra Gir[olamo] Durazzano 1640
2  Revised by me Fra Luigi da Bologna of the Order of St Domenico, March 1599
3  Camillo Jaghel 1613
4  Seen by me Fra Renato da Modena 1626
Questioned by the Inquisition

Jews were sometimes forced by the Christian authorities to explain Jewish views on Christianity. In 1568 in Bologna, the Papal Inquisition imprisoned, tortured and interrogated Rabbi Ishmael Ḥanina. This document is a copy of his account of the interrogation. He was forced to clarify the meaning of allegedly anti-Christian expressions used in the Talmud, effectively being put on trial as a representative of his religion. Less than a year later, the Jewish community was expelled from Bologna.

Ishmael Ḥanina ben Mordechai of Valmontano, Sheva’ ḥakirot (Seven Investigations). Italy, 18th-19th century.
Or 10740
A persecuted community

This is the only account of the persecution against Jews that occurred in 1589 in the Maghreb (North-West Africa), then in the Ottoman Empire. A local Arab religious leader, Yaḥya ibn Yaḥya, revolted and took control of the area. During his rule, he forced the local Jewish population to choose between conversion and death. He was eventually defeated by the Ottoman Sultan’s army, who overturned the decrees against the Jews.

Maʻašeḥ raʻ ya-mar (An evil and bitter trouble). North Africa (?), 17th-century copy. Or 12368
'You know that God has helped me with his good hands to abolish the kingdom of the Turks. Thus, from today onwards do not remember the name Israel any more. And if you rebel, I will do to you what I did to the Turks.'

Yaḥya ibn Yaḥya addressing the Jews of Misrata.
Living together

The rights of a wife

A Ketubah is a marriage contract. They have been an integral part of Jewish weddings for over 2000 years. Written in Aramaic, the traditional text grants women legal and financial rights if their marriage ends through divorce, desertion or death.

While the text remains constant, the decoration of a ketubah often reflects the country in which it was produced. This ketubah from Morocco uses motifs common in Islamic cultures, including geometric patterns and images from nature.

Marriage contract.
Tangier, Morocco, 1886.
Or 16520
Inspired by the natural world

A ketubah, or marriage contract, specifies the husband’s obligations to his wife. Jewish marriage contracts were probably one of the earliest documents to grant women specific legal and financial rights.

The motifs used to decorate this contract from Calcutta (Kolkata) – including the flowers and foliage, peacocks, lions and silvery fish – were inspired by India's natural world. Local artistic traditions and Moghul art, where flowers play a significant role, may also have influenced the style.

Marriage contract.
Calcutta (Kolkata), India, 1881.
Or 16942
Living together

Equal rights, equal responsibilities

Although this contemporary ketubah is based on the traditional version, the text was modified to make it more equal. Jonathan and Miriam both vow to fulfil their obligations, and there are male and female witnesses.

The decorations are inspired by medieval manuscripts, including flowers, animals and a monster. They also include arches that symbolise Cordoba synagogue and jasmine flowers that suggest the smell of summer evenings in Jerusalem.

The wedding of Miriam Lewis and Jonathan Pam. Photograph by Marianne Chua. © Miriam Lewis and Jonathan Pam
Living together

Poetry for weddings and circumcisions

This book contains poetry written by Shalom Shabazi, a 17th-century Yemeni poet, in Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic.

From the 16th century, Yemeni Hebrew poetry was strongly influenced by Arabic verse. This is evident in Shabazi’s poems, which were written to be sung. This book is unusually narrow as it was designed to be held in the singer’s left hand during a feast when there was no room on the table.

Shalom ben Joseph Shabazi, Divan (Collection of poems). Tan'am, Yemen, and Jerusalem, Land of Israel, 17th-18th century. Or 4114
Living together

A song of praise

Pereḳ Shirah is an ancient hymn of praise in which every created thing – from the animate to the celestial – thanks God for its existence. The praises are mostly biblical verses, often taken from The Book of Psalms.

The illustration on this page, which shows 13 different animals, starts the chapter on the four-legged beasts. The style reflects 18th-century European art and the text is in Hebrew and Yiddish, a German dialect using Hebrew script.

Pereḳ Shirah (Chapter of Song). Vienna, Austria, or Pressburg (Bratislava), Hungary (Slovakia), around 1740. Or 12983
A Jewish Persian-style epic

Imrani of Shiraz’s Fath Nama is a Judeo-Persian poem inspired by biblical tales from the Books of Joshua, Ruth and Samuel. Drawing on Jewish and Islamic literature, Imrani’s style was influenced by the genre of the Persian epic.

Written in Hebrew characters, Judeo-Persian dialects combine Persian with Hebrew and Aramaic words. Using Hebrew script to write local languages preserved Jewish identity and cultural heritage in scattered Jewish communities.

Imrani of Shiraz, Fath Nama (Book of Conquest). Isfahan (?), Persia, 17th-18th century. Or 13704
A fairytale romance

Indar Sabha is a 19th-century verse play by Agha Sayyid Amanat, an Urdu poet of Iranian descent.

Set in Indra, the Indian gods’ celestial court, the central theme is the romance between a prince and a fairy. The play draws on Persian epics and Urdu and Indian poetry. Written in Judeo-Urdu, or Urdu in Hebrew script, it was probably produced for an actor from the Baghdadi Jewish community in India.

Agha Sayyid Amanat, Indar Sabha (The Court of Indra). Calcutta (Kolkata), India, 1887. Or 13287
Living together

**Censorship**

‘Censorship is the regulation… whereby books were examined for the purpose of ascertaining whether they contained heretical or other objectionable passages.’

Jewish Encyclopaedia, 1906
Living together

Diaspora

Jewish communities outside of Israel
The power of letters and words

Kabbalah, or ‘received tradition’, is seeking ancient, secret wisdom to better understand the world and the Divine.

It first emerged in the 13th century in Spain and southern France, and later spread to other Jewish communities.

Some kabbalists seek to use their knowledge for more practical uses to influence people or events. This practice has adopted many elements of older Jewish lore and non-Jewish magical traditions.

In this section, discover how the power of Hebrew letters and words are at the centre of kabbalistic theory and practice.
The power of letters

The Hebrew alphabet has a central role in kabbalah. God is said to have created the world through speech, so letters form the building blocks of creation.

In this book, early kabbalist Jacob ha-Kohen, who lived in Spain in the 13th century, analyses the shape of each letter. Studying the shapes of the letters can reveal truths about the creation and God. These pages analyse the letters Ayin (א) and Peh (פ).

Jacob ben Jacob ha-Kohen, Perush tsurat ha-otiyot (Explanation of the shape of the letters). Spain (?), 15th-century copy. Or 10324
Mystical meditation

Abraham Abulafia, a kabbalist from Spain, founded Prophetic Kabbalah, a unique mystical method to reach a state of union with God. These circles contain Abulafia’s instructions for mystical meditation, reminiscent of practices in Buddhism and Hinduism. The techniques included combining letters, reciting and visualising the Divine names, breathing exercises and poses. Latin translations of Abulafia’s writings influenced many Renaissance Christian kabbalists.

Abraham Abulafia, Ḥaye ha-’olam ha-ba and other kabbalistic works. Italy, 15th-century copy. Or 4596
The power of letters and words

1. **Yod** – 10th letter of the Hebrew alphabet and another name for God

2. **Dalet** – 4th letter of the Hebrew alphabet and used to represent the Divine name

3. **Shin** – 21st letter of the Hebrew alphabet and represents Shaddai, another of God’s names
The power of letters and words

**Christian kabbalists**

Translated into Latin, Spanish kabbalist Joseph Gikatilla’s Gates of Light became a handbook for Christian kabbalists. It explains important kabbalistic concepts like the Ten Sefirot, which symbolise different attributes of the Divine, including Wisdom, Greatness, and Power. The title page of this first Latin edition shows Gikatilla holding the Tree of Life, which represents the Sefirot. The translation was actually published in print several decades before the original Hebrew.

The power of letters and words

1 Crown
2 Wisdom
3 Understanding
4 Greatness
5 Power
6 Beauty
7 Eternity
8 Splendour
9 Foundation
10 Kingship
The power of letters and words

Tree of life

According to some Jewish mystical writings, the world came into existence through the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and is held in place by their continued presence. In this painting, artist Vetta Alexis has combined this idea with a painted representation of a ‘Tree of Life’. The stars near the roots hint at the kabbalistic idea of the inverted tree, with roots in heaven.

Contemplating the Divine

This parchment represents the divine world as taught by Isaac Luria, an influential 16th-century kabbalist. Luria taught that God created the universe by withdrawing his infinite light to create space for the physical world. God projected aspects of His divinity – known as ‘faces’ – in a descending chain that ultimately created the physical realm. This great chain of creation is shown here as a sequence of interlocking, tree-like diagrams.

Ilan (kabbalistic roll).
Morocco, 18th century.
Or 6996
The power of letters and words

Protecting Esther

Amulets are believed to have magical powers, bring good luck and guard against evil, sickness and other misfortunes. They have been used for centuries and are mentioned in the Talmud. The most common types were for childbirth or illness.

Hebrew amulets include kabbalistic inscriptions, angels’ names, and the Names of God, as this amulet written for Esther bat Miriam shows. It protected her from all possible misfortunes at all times of day.

Hebrew amulet.
18th-19th century.
Or 16206
The power of letters and words

1 Esther, daughter of Miriam

2 Adonai (God’s name)

Angels

3 Michael

4 Tuviel

5 Hasdiel

6 Zakhriel

7 Gabriel
The power of letters and words

A magical escape

The drawing on this page illustrates how to use magic to escape from prison. Draw a boat on the floor, step into it and spirits will appear and carry you out. Other spells on these pages make you invisible or frighten away your enemies.

This magical manual is a compilation of several magical works. It was translated to Hebrew from Latin or Italian, and contains Christian, Jewish and Arabic elements.

Mafteah Shelomoh (Key of Solomon). Amsterdam, Netherlands, around 1700. Or 14759
The power of letters and words

‘If one wishes to escape from prison in a boat, draw the image of that boat, and [this [spell] is also good] for breaking every bar and opening every lock, but for the love of the Creator, these are the secrets which cannot be handed over only to those who fear God!’

f.32v
The power of letters and words

The art of prediction

Like many other people, some Jews practise divination techniques to predict future events. This is a work on geomancy, a method of divination that interprets patterns formed by randomly drawn dots. It includes astrological references. Jews learned this technique from their Muslim neighbours, and have been using it since the Middle Ages. Many Hebrew manuscripts in the British Library collection have geomantic figures in the margins.

Attributed to Abraham ibn Ezra, Goralot ha-ḥol (Lottery of the Sand). North Africa or Middle East (?), 16th- or 17th-century copy. Or 10659
Written on your palm

One of the oldest forms of divination, palmistry is believed to reveal your personality and tell your future. This short treatise is at the end of a collection of magic charms, and explains the meaning of six lines on the palm. Palmistry became widespread in Judaism in the 13th century, popularised by kabbalistic works.

Treatise on palmistry.
Tunis, Tunisia, 1775.
Or 10357
The power of letters and words

1 Table line
2 Wisdom line
3 Honour line
4 Fate line
5 Life line
6 Wealth line
Medical and magical

Before the end of the 18th century, works on folk medicine often embraced both magical and medical elements. This Jewish spell book contains 125 recipes including spells or medicines for fever, for safe travel, for love, for pregnant women, for escaping from demons, for diarrhoea, and for catching thieves. According to the author’s introduction, he collected them during his travels. This page shows love potions and spells.

Elisha‘ ben Gad Anḳonah, ‘Ets ha-da‘at (The Tree of Knowledge). Safed, Land of Israel, 1535-1536. Or 12362
The power of letters and words

‘To increase love between bridegroom and bride – when the bride comes from the hupah [wedding canopy] after finishing saying the blessing, write their names in honey onto two sage leaves’ and give the leaves to each other to eat.
The power of letters and words

Kabbalah

‘the chain of tradition that stretches back, receiver by receiver, up to Moses from the mouth of the Almighty.’

Naḥmanides, 13th century
The power of letters and words

Secret wisdom

‘…but for the love of the Creator, these are the secrets which cannot be handed over only to those who fear God!’

Mafteah Shlomoh, 16th century
Science and scholarship

Traditional Jewish education centres on studying religious texts like the Bible and the Talmud. However, Jewish intellectuals have also studied natural sciences such as astronomy and medicine.

Living scattered across the globe, many Jewish scholars were multilingual. At the crossroads of different cultures, they translated works between Arabic, Latin and Hebrew. Their most important contribution was transmitting Greek and Arabic ideas from these works to Christian Europe.

In this final section, explore how Jewish thinkers have spread knowledge and have contributed new ideas to scholarship.
Science and scholarship

The forerunner of chemistry

Alchemists seek to turn base metals like copper and lead into silver and gold and to find the elixir of life, the secret to immortality. Developed by medieval Christian scholars, alchemy incorporated Jewish kabbalistic ideas. There were a small number of Jewish alchemists and few Hebrew works on alchemy have survived.

This manuscript in Hebrew provides a comprehensive index of Greek, Arab and Latin alchemists and their writings. It includes recipes to make gold. This page shows diagrams of alchemical equipment.

Alchemical writings. Morocco (?), 1690. Or 10289
Translation and terminology

Jewish scholars from southern France, Spain and Italy translated many scientific works from Arabic to Hebrew. In 1279, the Italian Jew, Nathan ha-Méati, translated the 11th-century Canon of Medicine by Ibn Sina (known as Avicenna) from the original Arabic. The Canon was the most influential work of medieval medicine and the translation created new Hebrew medical vocabulary. This page from a 15th-century copy shows the end of Book V, which lists 650 recipes for medicines.

Avicenna, The Canon of Medicine (Hebrew translation of Books III and V). Spain or Italy, 1479. Harley MS 5680
Shared language, shared knowledge

While Jews in medieval Europe often spoke no Latin, Jews in Muslim countries spoke Arabic and could consult Arabic scientific works directly.

Many Jewish scientific works from Muslim countries were written in Judeo-Arabic. The diagrams in this book from Yemen illustrate a work on geometry. The notes in the right-hand margin are in Arabic, written in a mixture of Arabic and Hebrew scripts.

Kitāb al-miṣāḥah (Book of measuring).
Yemen, 15th century.
Or 4104
Multiple languages, multiple sources

Jewish translators sometimes consulted the same work in more than one language. In 13th-century Naples, Jacob Anatoli translated al-Farhānī’s Compendium into Hebrew using both the original Arabic text and a Latin translation. The Compendium was an Arabic summary of Ptolemy’s Almagest, and it played a key role in spreading Greek astronomical knowledge in medieval Europe. These diagrams illustrate the planets and stars and their relationship to each other.

Add MS 27107
Science and scholarship

1 Earth
2 Moon
3 Mercury
4 Venus
5 Sun
6 Mars
7 Jupiter
8 Saturn
9 Zodiac signs
From Latin to Hebrew

In 1399, Solomon Avigdor of Provence translated Johannes de Sacrobosco’s De Sphaera mundi (On the Sphere of the World), the core Latin textbook on astronomy in Europe, into Hebrew. This page shows a Ptolemaic armillary sphere, with Earth in its centre. Images of this sphere were often included in Latin printed editions of the text. Illustrations in this manuscript were strongly influenced by these Latin editions.

Johannes de Sacrobosco (John of Holywood), Mar’eh ha-ofanim (De Sphaera mundi). Italy, 16th-century copy. Or 10661
Science and scholarship

Astronomers used armillary spheres to model the universe. The set of rings on this brass model from 1624 represent a series of moving spheres around a stationary Earth. The stylised illustration in the manuscript was probably based on an armillary sphere very similar to this one.

An astronomical pioneer

Abraham bar Ḫiyya was one of the greatest Jewish astronomers, writing in 12th-century Spain about astronomy, astrology, and the development of the Hebrew calendar. In Tsurat ha-arets, or ‘Shape of the Earth’, he explored the creation of the earth, heavens, moon and stars.

He always wrote in Hebrew, pioneering the use of the language for scientific purposes. His translations of Arabic scientific works into Hebrew and Latin spread new learning among European Jews and non-Jews.

Abraham bar Ḫiyya, Tsurat ha-arets (Shape of the Earth) and other works. Byzantium (now parts of Turkey and Greece), 15th-century copy.
Or 10721
Science and scholarship

An astronomical chart

In ancient and medieval times, astronomy was important to Jews for both navigation and setting the Hebrew calendar.

Medieval Jewish thinkers compiled astronomical tables that predicted the movements of the sun, moon and planets and their relation to the fixed stars.

This chart was produced as an educational tool to show how the sky looks different in different geographic areas at different times by mapping the Zodiac against the ancient Greek concept of the seven climatic zones.

Calendrical and astronomical tables. Southern France or Spain, 15th century. Or 11796
Keeping track of time

Calendars are essential for determining the correct dates of religious festivals. This work about calendrical calculations is written in verse so it is easy to remember. It also provides a visual aid: the human hand. It can be used to perform calendrical and astronomical calculations by assigning dates and numerical values to the bones and joints of the fingers. This method was not specifically Jewish and was also used by Christians.

Joseph ben Shem Ṭov ben Yeshuʿah Ḥai, Sheʿerit Yosef (Joseph’s Legacy). Tlemcen, Algeria, 1804. Or 9782
The science of music

This manuscript contains one of the few medieval Jewish sources on music. The Guidonian hand shows the influence of European Christian musical theory. It was named after Guido d’Arezzo, an 11th-century Italian monk and music theorist, and was used as a learning aid for singers. Different parts of the hand represent different notes. Underneath it is a diagram of the medieval hexachord system, a form of scale with six notes: ut, re, mi, fa, sol, la.

Treatise on music and other scientific works. Northern Italy (?), 15th century. Or 10878
First Biblical Hebrew dictionary

This is the earliest known dated copy of the first biblical dictionary in Hebrew. It was compiled by the 10th-century Jewish grammarian, Menahem ben Saruq. He wrote that Hebrew verbs have one or two root letters. Other scholars of Hebrew grammar disproved his theory shortly after. Despite its errors, the dictionary remained in use for many years, and paved the way for research on the Hebrew language.

Menaḥem ben Saruq, Maḥberet (Notebook). Germany or France, 1189. Arundel Or 51
A guide for the perplexed

In Moreh Nevukhim, or ‘Guide for the Perplexed’, the philosopher Maimonides attempted to reconcile Judaism with Aristotelian rationalism. In this work, completed in 1190, he addresses his disciple, Joseph ibn Shamun.

This manuscript is the earliest known copy dated by the scribe in the original Judeo-Arabic (Arabic in Hebrew script). Jews in Yemen were extremely interested in Maimonides’ ideas and this manuscript was regularly consulted for over 500 years.

Moses ben Maimon, Dalālat al-ḥāḍirīn (Guide for the Perplexed). Tawila, Yemen, 1380 copy. IO Islamic 3679
‘We have already shown that the appearance or speech of an angel mentioned in Scripture took place in a vision or dream; it makes no difference whether this is expressly stated or not, as we have explained above. This is a point of considerable importance. In some cases the account begins by stating that the prophet saw an angel.’
A guide for the translator

Jews in Europe could not read Maimonides’ original Judeo-Arabic Guide for the Perplexed. Jewish scholars in southern France asked Maimonides to translate his work into Hebrew. He was too busy, but recommended Samuel ibn Tibbon instead. Ibn Tibbon corresponded with Maimonides throughout the translation process and finished the work just weeks before Maimonides died. This luxurious copy has several images of a lion, which may suggest it was commissioned by a royal court.

Moses ben Maimon,
Moreh nevukhim (Guide for the Perplexed).
Catalonia, Spain, 14th century.
Or 14061
'We have stated several times that it is our primary object in this treatise to expound, as far as possible, the Biblical account of the Creation and the description of the Divine Chariot in a manner adapted to the training of those for whom this work is written.'
Bridge between cultures

‘…because no book existed in Hebrew on these sciences in the land of Tsorfat [France], it is for them that I have translated these [matters] from the Arabic language into the holy language…’

Abraham bar Ḥiyya, 12th century
Knowledge

‘A sage is not able to understand all this [the Bible and Talmud] if he does not study astronomy … and he cannot understand astronomy if he does not first study geometry, because it is like a ladder “resting on the earth with its top reaching to heaven”.’

Abraham ibn Ezra, 12th century
Science and scholarship

Hebrew as a living script

Artist and calligrapher Vetta Alexis, Sara Manasseh and the Rivers of Babylon band, and students Isobel Carter and Felix Tsapir discuss what the Hebrew script means to them.

Duration: 2 minutes 20 seconds

Artworks: © Vetta Alexis
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