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Hebrew script in Christian Art

The use of Hebrew script in Christian plastic arts is a distinct case of written signs being embedded into representational or figurative images. The majority of the intended viewers of Christian art cannot read Hebrew. The primary methods of artists illiterate in Hebrew were to imitate or copy the foreign writing. The imitations vary from a scribble and letter-like strokes or patterns to signs simulating non-Latin, mainly oriental scripts, to shapes resembling some Hebrew characters. Authentic Hebrew was often inscribed with advice or assistance from Christian Hebraists, converts from Judaism, or Jews. Copies of the true Hebrew script normatively convey readable single Hebrew and—rarely—Aramaic words or phrases among imitated signs; relatively correct complete Hebrew or Aramaic texts; or transcriptions of Latin words and sentences. Any representation of Hebrew writing in Christian art, irrespective of the legibility of the words and sentences in a particular work, is usually charged with symbolic connotations. The symbolism is derived from the ambivalent Christian perception of the Hebrew language as the sacred tongue of Scripture and the historical people of Israel, the biblical Holy Land; as the either exotic or enviable language of Judaism and the Jews; or as a tongue possessing magic power.

An early occurrence of a simulated Hebrew script is found in the 6th-century mosaics in the choir of San Vitale in Ravenna. Orderly rows of illegible signs fill the scroll held by Jeremiah and marks resembling capital script are visible in the book by St. Matthew the Evangelist (Image 1). Schapiro (1996:126–131) explained these as an imitation of the Hebrew writings by the Jewish prophet and by the evangelist, who is believed to have composed his gospel in Hebrew (Epiphanius:30.3.7). In contrast, the other three evangelists depicted on the church walls nearby display readable Latin quotations from their gospels. Unlike the proper inscriptions conveying meaningful words and sentences, however, the letter-like signs create a pictorial likeness of a foreign text.

Christian artists treat the Hebrew script as a relic evincing the Passion in accordance with Luke 23.38 and John 19.19–20, which mention the phrase “Jesus of Nazareth King of the Jews” inscribed in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin on the *titulus crucis*, the Cross title, or headboard. In an early image of the title in the mid-11th-century Psalter from Hastières—with the inscription in authentic Latin and Latin words written in Greek characters—the signs marked by the initial B for *barbarice* stand for Hebrew (Image 2). The Hebrew script is replaced here with an encoded third repetition of Latin: the signs are Anglo-Saxon runes used as counterparts of Latin characters in the words “Ihesv[s] Nazaren[us] Rex Judaeorum.” A similar substitution for Hebrew used in the title on the mid 12th-century ivory altar cross from the abbey of Bury Saint Edmunds is apparently gibberish (New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art). For most viewers, the unintelligible signs were indistinguishable from genuine Hebrew (Longland 1968).

Lenowitz (2009:441–445) proposes that Hebrew script in Christian art, along with Christian Hebraism, was an aspect of the *adversus Judaeos* polemics. Since Eastern Christianity did not construct the ideology of a Jewish enemy, Byzantine art did not contain Hebrew writing. Lenowitz points out that Hebrew inscriptions became more frequent in works of Western art during periods of disaster, Christian wars against heresies, and the Reformation, when the Catholic Church aggravated its attacks against the Jews. As a rule, the ‘ancient language of the Hebrews’ was adopted in art and theology to sustain the claim for the primacy of the new, Christian *verus Israel* over Judaism and to reinforce the Christological interpretation of the Hebrew scriptures by revealing their ‘genuine meanings‘ and ‘secret truths’. These messages were predominantly addressed to the doubting Christians rather than to Jews.

In some cases, Christian artists seem to have had an innocuous motive for representing Hebrew script in their works. Christian inquiry

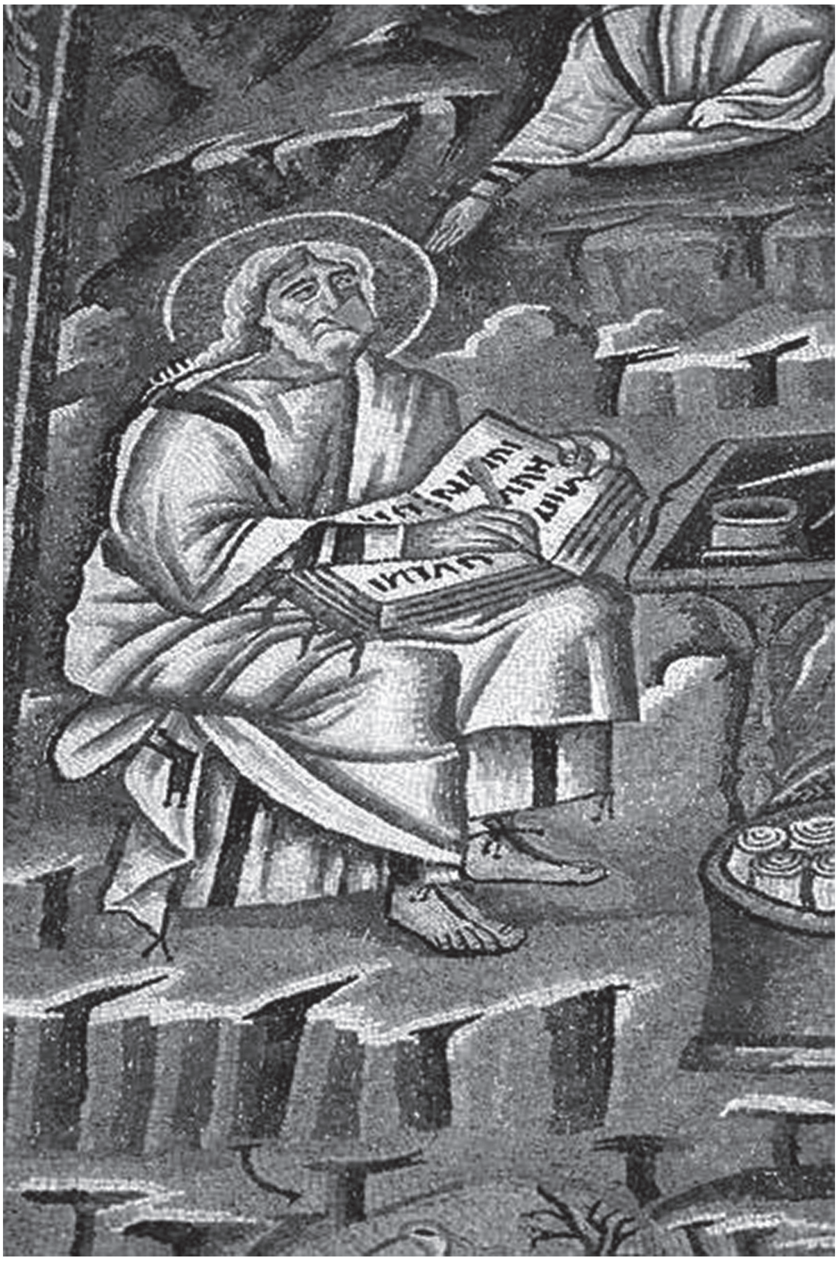


Image 1. "St. Matthew the Evangelist" (Mosaic, 6th century. Ravenna, San Vitale).

into the hidden meanings of the Hebrew characters led to the earliest known appearance of genuine Hebrew script in non-Jewish works in early 12th-century Latin Bibles from Norman England or France. The entire Hebrew alphabet in its proper sequence was inserted, most likely by a Jewish scribe, into the architectural frame in St. Alban's Bible (circa 1115:121r). The orderliness of the alphabet, whose letters are believed to construct the language of the Creation, hints at divine wisdom and judgement. The Hebrew script is accompanied by several parallel sets of Latin transcriptions of the Hebrew names of letters. Each transcription is accompanied by a brief explanation or lengthier commentary quoting the Christian interpretations and assigned meanings of the Hebrew letter names in the writings of ecclesiastic exegetes from the 3rd–9th centuries (Lenowitz 2009:441, 447–449). This representation poses the Hebrew script as a dual code. The display of the real script, though unintelli-

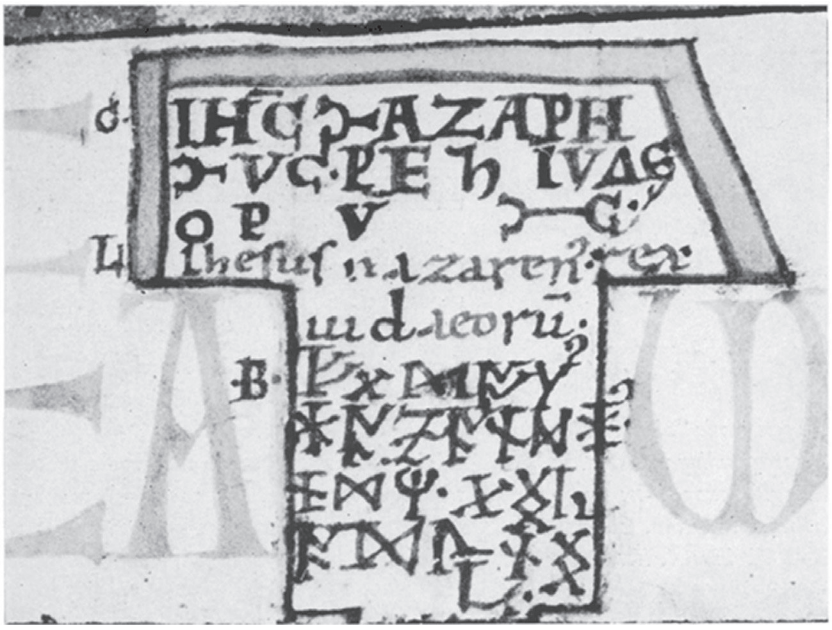


Image 2. "Cross Title," detail of "The Deposition" (Psalter of Hastières:17v).

gible to most readers of the Latin Bible, proves its historical authenticity. At the same time, the Latin transcriptions of the letter names appropriate the alien alphabet for the Christian reader and the glosses transmute the Hebrew letters into the symbols of Christian faith, now obscure to the Jews.

Mellinkoff (1993:1.105) finds early evidence for the pronouncedly negative attitude to the Hebrew language in 13th-century English manuscript illuminations. For instance, a painting in the Psalter of Amesbury Abbey (Image 3) connotes the prevalence of the Latin over the 'satanic' language of the Jews: the Latin utterance written on a bright banderol in Christ's right hand crosses the pseudo-Hebrew script on the dark banderol in the left hand of the Devil.

Only a few occurrences of Hebrew script in Italian art before the Renaissance are known. An early incident is found in the Giant Bible of Montalcino (circa 1150:5v), illuminated by a Sienese artist apparently under the influence of British and French manuscript illuminations. The painting shows Moses holding two cartouches: one contains a nearly correct quotation of the entire first verse of Gen. 1 along with a truncated second verse in Hebrew; the other translates the beginning of this quotation into Latin. The image seems to suggest that Latin has inherited the sacred status of Hebrew (Lenowitz 2009:449).

Giotto di Bondone exemplifies an artist who accepts ad hoc solutions for the representation of unintelligible script. When Giotto pursued the verity of the Hebrew text in the trilingual title in the painted cross of circa 1300 (Florence, Santa Maria Novella), he copied the Hebrew denomination ישו נוצרי מלך היהודים *yešu noṣri melex ha-yehudim*, nearly accurately, probably from a model written by a Jew (Sarfatti et al. 2001b). When Giotto focused on the assumed historical reliability of figures of Jesus, Mary, and their contemporaries who purportedly spoke Hebrew, he decorated the clothes of some of them with undecipherable oriental-looking letters, which he derived from the Arabic and the Mongol *phags-pa* script (Tanaka 1989:216–223).

These paradigmatic medieval approaches to the Hebrew script were maintained and developed in Western Christian art from the late 14th century on.

The use of imitated Hebrew and Arabic scripts, real Hebrew characters, or various meaningless combinations on costumes and objects often stamped the depicted figures and scenery as relating to the Holy Land in the times of the Christian gospel, or as Jewish. Even when it conveyed no literal meaning, the pseudo-script may have added symbolic significance. Following Panofsky's theory of a 'disguised symbolism' in early Dutch painting

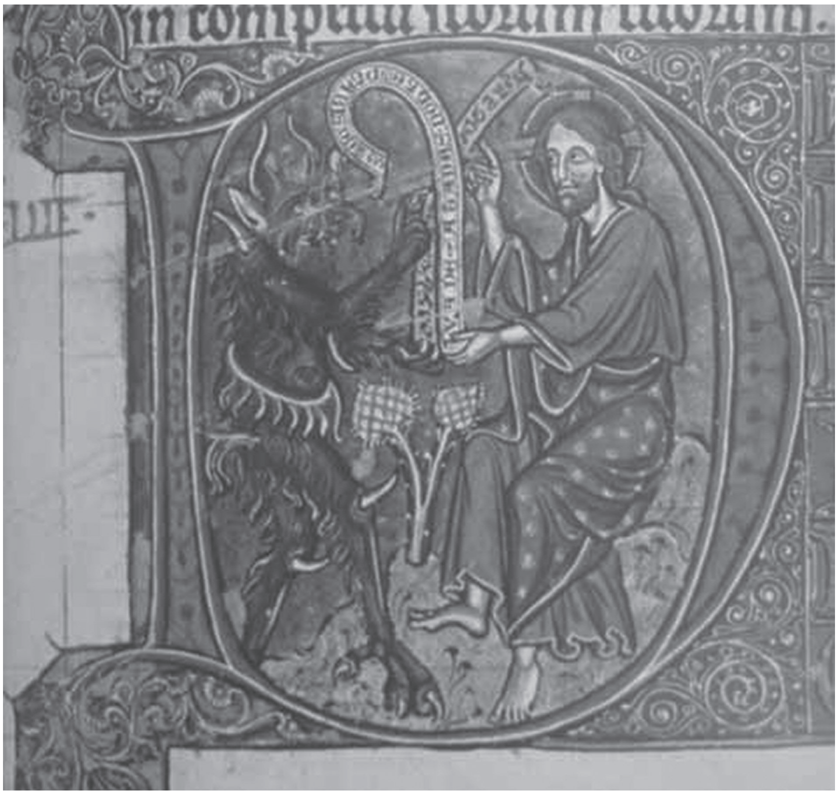


Image 3. "Devil and Christ" (Psalter of Amesbury Abbey:64v).

(Panofsky 1953), Barasch (1989:182–183) interpreted the blend of Hebrew and Kufic characters on the vase decorated with a lily in the "Annunciation" panel of the Merode Altarpiece (Image 4) as alluding to the sinful past and old Jewish law from which the white lily of the Virgin's purity sprouts and from which the new Christian gospel emerges.

In rare cases, the seemingly decorative inscriptions are true Hebrew texts, an example of which is the barely discernible phrase beginning with גואל של ישראל *go'el šel Isra'el* 'savior of Israel', on Mary Magdalene's turban in the right panel of Rogier van der Weyden's Braque Triptych (circa 1452; Paris, Louvre; Barasch 1967:148).

Unlike such ornamental letters, the depiction of Hebrew script on objects that normally have inscriptions (tablets, scrolls, books, shields, framed wall panels, tombstones, and the like) signals that its contents are significant, whether or not the given inscription is meaningful or the viewer is able to read or comprehend it. The conventional shapes of the Tablets of the Law are even more informative: having recognized the image of the Tablets in a Christian work of art, the viewer identifies any signs inscribed on them as the Ten Commandments.

The emergence of Hebrew printing in the last quarter of the 15th century disseminated Hebrew script wider than ever before. The Humanistic enthusiasm for ancient wisdom and history was followed by a new rise of Christian Hebraism that resulted in the appearance of lengthier and more correct citations from the Hebrew Scriptures as well as original phrases composed in Hebrew in Renaissance art. The Hebrew biblical quotations presented the figures and scenes from the New Testament as manifestations of biblical prophesies and interpreted the persons and subjects from the Hebrew Bible and classical mythology as prefigurations of Christianity.

Albrecht Dürer's woodcut "St. Jerome Curing the Lion" of 1492 (Image 5) epitomizes the re-evaluation of Hebrew as the primordial sacred language: the Hebrew Bible open on Gen. 1.1 serves as the source for both Jerome's Latin Vulgate and the Greek Bible. The artistic interest in Hebrew as one of the three co-equal

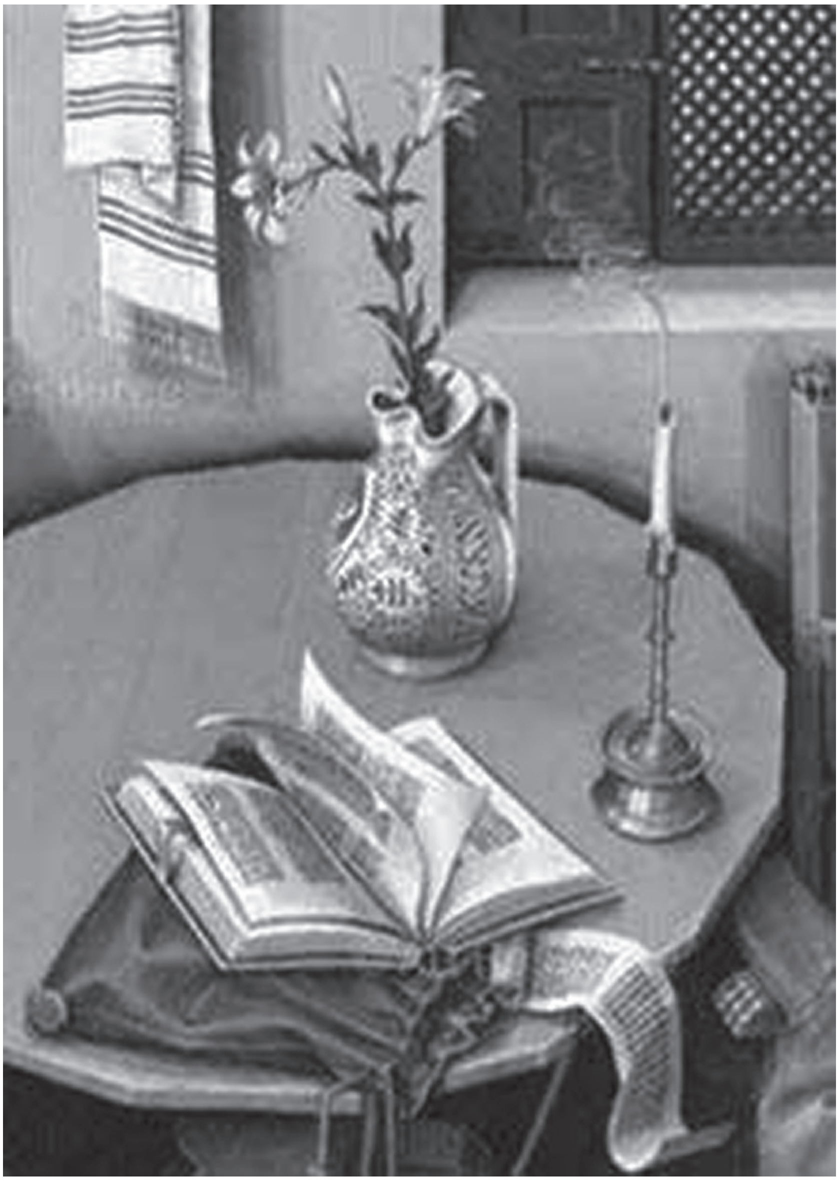


Image 4. Robert Campin and workshop, "Vase with a Lily," detail of the "Annunciation" panel of the Merode Altarpiece (oil on oak, circa 1425–1430. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art).

languages of the Passion had been fostered since the discovery of an assumed relic, the Cross's title, in the church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome in 1492. This walnut board is inscribed with the right halves of Christ's trilingual denomination: the badly damaged Hebrew stands above Greek and Latin appellations that, like the Hebrew, read from right to left. A year later, a depiction of the relic was published by Schedel in Nuremberg (Image 6). Shortly thereafter, Luca Signorelli in Siena and Michelangelo in Florence represented the Cross‘s title (Parronchi 1966), reconstructing the Hebrew and completing the words missing in the relic, yet preserving the reverse direction of the Greek and Latin rows. A philosophic and mystical, rather than theological, account of the Hebrew language, as one of the four tongues of ancient wisdom, was suggested by Francesco Colonna in his *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, and an illustration in Aldus Manutius‘s edition of this book (Colonna 1499) displays the accurate

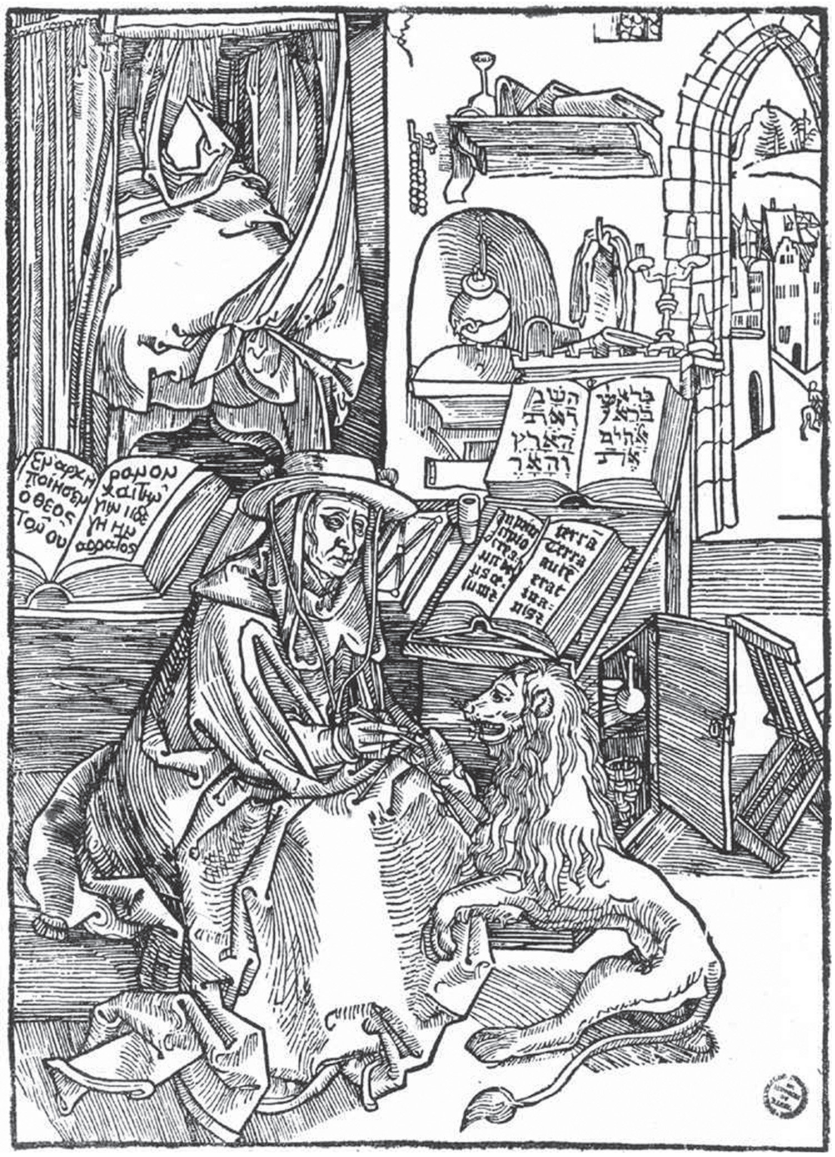
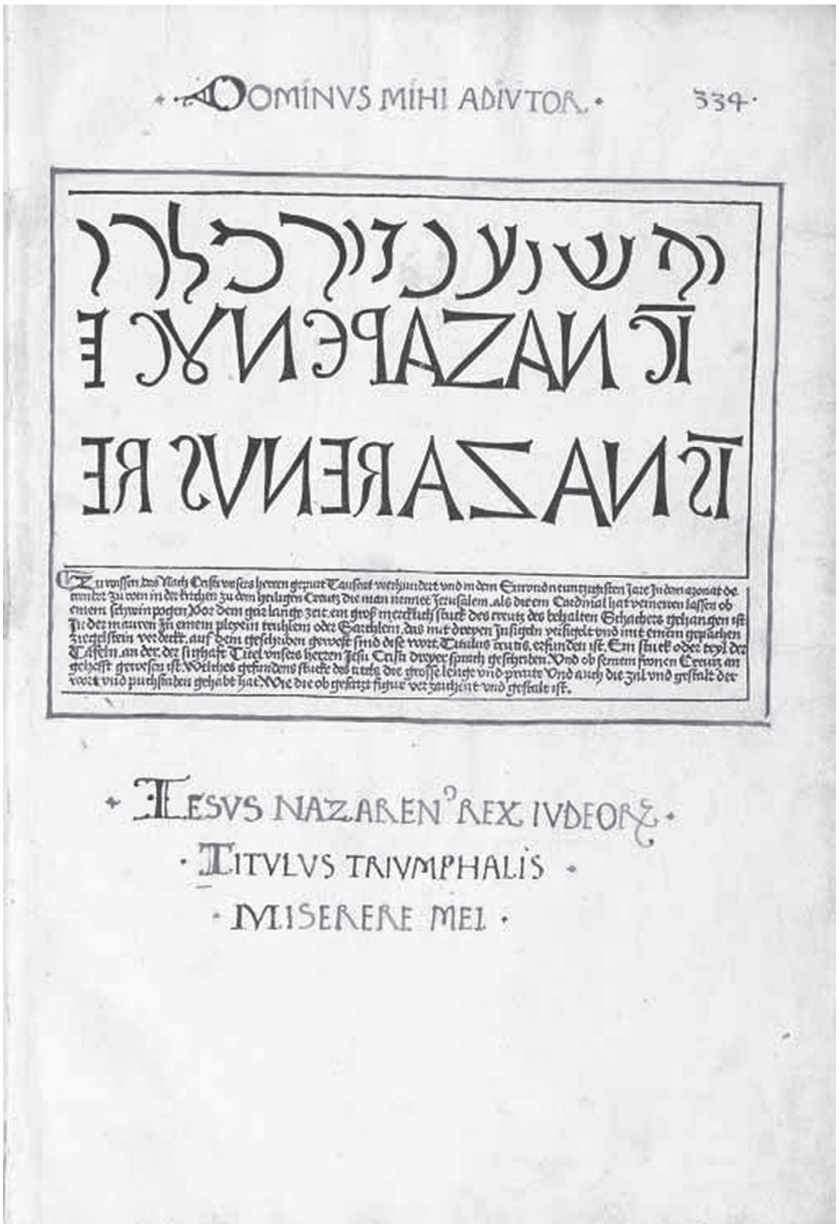


Image 5. Albrecht Dürer, "St. Jerome Curing the Lion" (woodcut and letterpress text, 1492. Basle: Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Kupferstichkabinett).

Hebrew script along with correct Latin, Greek, and Arabic inscriptions.

Raphael's "Isaiah" (Image 7) demonstrates the complex interplay of the Hebrew and Greek inscriptions that were addressed to the Humanist literati of the high Renaissance in Rome. The patron's Greek dedication of the fresco to St. Anne evokes a reference to the virgin mentioned in Isa. 7.14, and suggests reading the Hebrew verses (Isa. 26.2–3) on the scroll in Isaiah's hands as a prophesy of Christian salvation.

From the early 16th century on, Hebrew script was engraved on Christian coins and medals (Marquardt 2004). The Paleo-Hebrew and Hebrew lettering were meant to impart historical authenticity to the imitation ancient Jewish shekels that were minted until the 1920s, falsely represented as the very coins paid to Judah Iscariot or as relics from the Holy Land (Hill 1920:76–90), or used as tokens in Masonic lodges (Kisch 1941:92). The Hebrew legend on Italian portraits of Christ praises him as the Messiah and Man-God (Hill 1920:45–68). The impact of the Kabbalah on Renaissance thought reinforced the contemporary Christians' belief in the supernatural power of the Hebrew script, which, in turn, was embodied in Christian



· DOMINVS MIHI ADIVTOR · 334 ·

· IESVS NAZAREN⁹ REX IVDEORꝝ ·
· TITVLVS TRIVMPHALIS ·
· MISERERE MEI ·

Image 6. Georg Glockendon, "Title of the Cross" (Schedel 1493:333r).

kabbalistic amulets. One of them (Image 8) is a metal-cast medallion combining the face of Christ and the names of Jesus in Hebrew on the obverse and in the twelve-box square with the systematically transposed Hebrew letters of the tetragrammaton, יהוה *yhwh*, surrounded by the names of four angels on the reverse (Schrire 1966:71, 165). Relevant quotations from the Hebrew Bible are given on the reverse of medals depicting Biblical heroes and scenes that were minted in Bohemian Jáchymov (Joachimsthal) during the period of the Reformation (Friedenberg 1970:92–93). Hebrew and Greek translations of the Latin proclamation of the king as the head of the Church of England were added onto the reverse of the medals portraying Henry VIII and Edward VI to affirm the legitimacy of their appointment (Roth 1963:18).

The Reformist revision of the Trinitarian concept and subsequent interdiction of representing God in human form inspired protestant artists to adopt a manifestation of the divine name in Hebrew (Freedberg 1982:140–141). The Hebrew tetragrammaton written within a halo or shining sun as an aniconic representation of God, apparently intended as an alternative

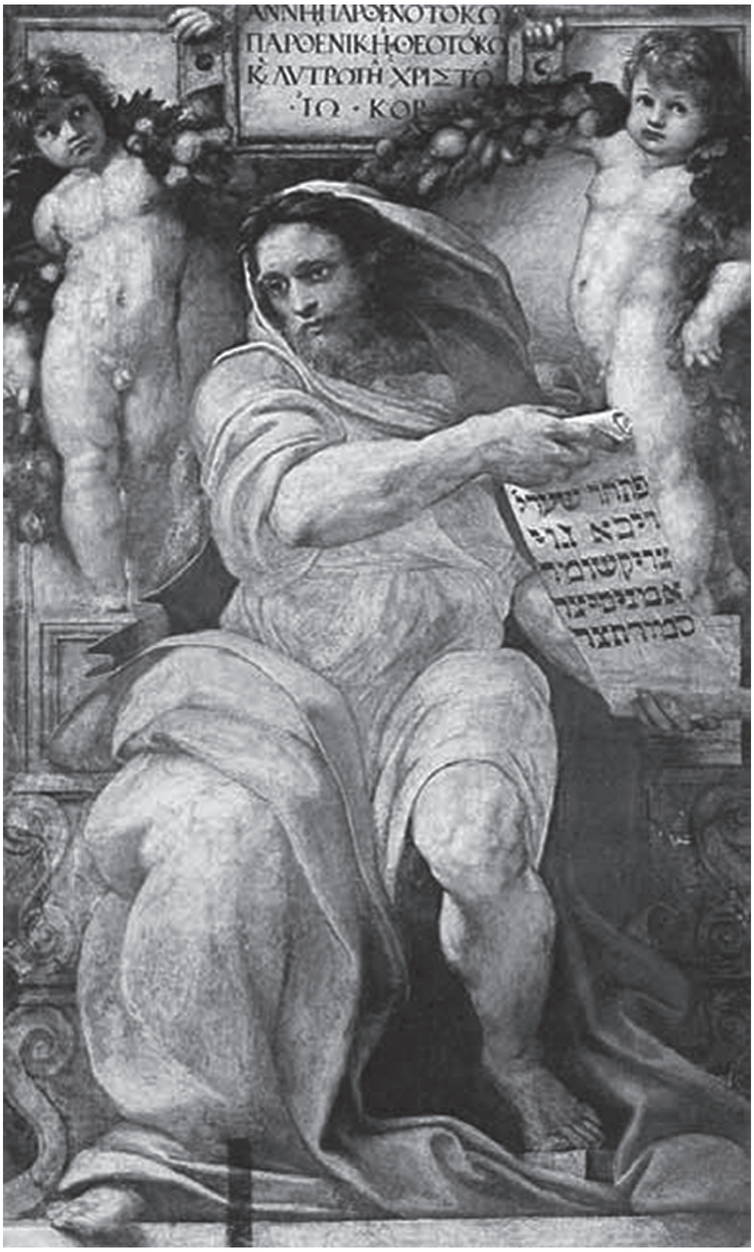


Image 7. Raphael, "Prophet Isaiah" (fresco, 1511–1512. Rome, Sant'Agostino).

to the three-letter Latin Christogram IHS, was first introduced into book illustrations and prints in Germany and the Netherlands around 1530 (Muller 1994). In early protestant imagery, the tetragrammaton appears alone or dominates other epithets and names for God in Latin, Greek, and German. English philosopher Robert Fludd introduced Hebrew into the Christian kabbalistic images of the macrocosm in his occult books—for instance, in his *Philosophia Sacra* (Fludd 1626), illustrated by Matthäus Merian the Elder (Image 9). The haloed tetragrammaton denotes God the Creator in illustrated Protestant Bibles, an example of which is the popular and frequently reprinted Lutheran Bible (1630) with Merian's woodcuts; on coins and medals issued by Protestant and Anglican rulers (Roth 1963:18); and in Reformist churches.

The extensive expansion of Christian Hebraism in Protestant Holland did not yield an upsurge of veritable Hebrew inscriptions in Dutch art, except for the mature works of Rembrandt. Rembrandt's deep interest in the

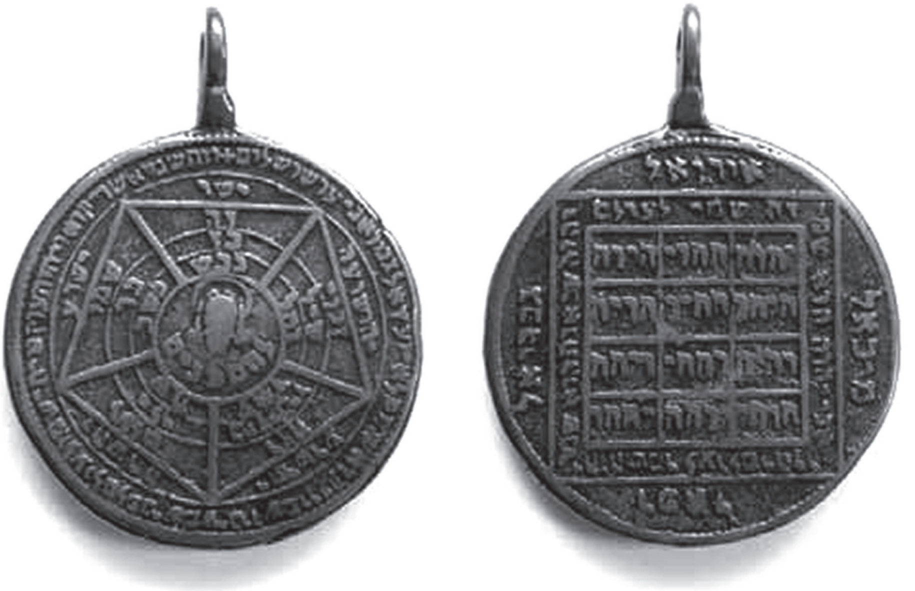


Image 8. Amulet in form of a medallion (gilded bronze; Italy, 16th century).

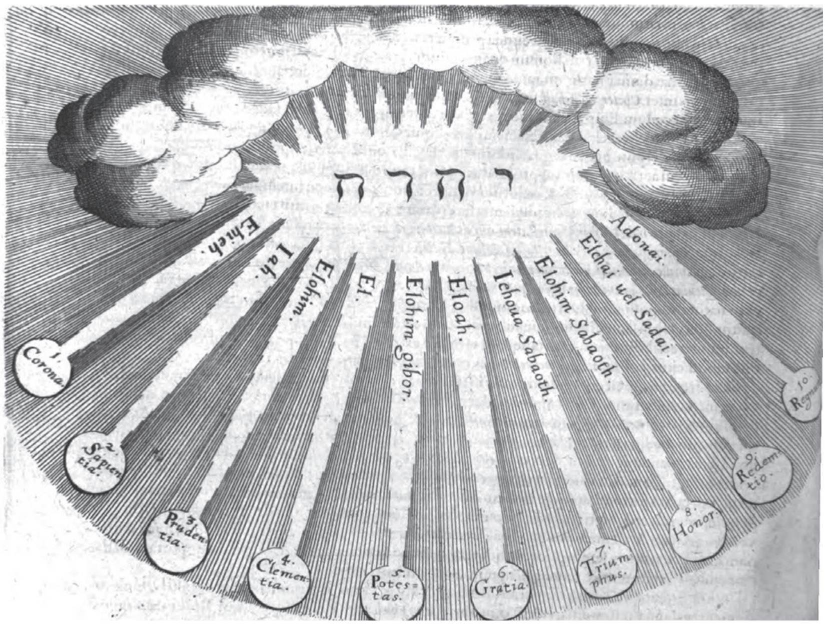

יהוה
Ehieh.
Iah.
Elohim.
El.
Elohim gibor.
Eloah.
Iehoua Sabaoth.
Elohim Sabaoth.
Elchai uel Sadai.
Adonai.
1. Corona.
2. Sapientia.
3. Prudentia.
4. Clementia.
5. Potestas.
6. Gratia.
7. Triumphus.
8. Honor.
9. Redemtio.
10. Regn

Image 9. Matthäus Merian the Elder "Sephirot Flowing from the Tetragrammaton" (Fludd 1626:170).

approaches to the Bible by Christian theologians and Jewish intellectuals whom he met in Amsterdam is revealed in the multifaceted integration of Hebrew script into the subject matter of his biblical paintings, especially notable in the Aramaic inscription in his "Belshazzar's Feast" (curca 1635; London, The National Gallery) and the Ten Commandments in Hebrew in his "Moses" (Image 10). Sabar (2008) argues that in the latter painting, the unique division of the Commandments on the Tablets of the Law held aloft by Moses expresses shared Jewish and Calvinist ideas, "creating a curious and short-lived harmony between the two cultures."

Since the 17th century, the modes of Hebrew inscriptions in art have crossed the borders of a number of Christian movements. The Hebrew tetragrammaton, often enclosed within a triangle symbolizing the Trinity, was accepted into the ecclesiastic art of Catholicism (Image 11). Hebrew script also penetrated into Eastern Orthodox church art at the borderland between Eastern and Western Christianity in the eastern lands of the Polish kingdom. The customary depiction of Christ's Hebrew appellation on the Cross title appears among Greek and Old Orthodox Slavic inscriptions on a woodcut paper icon "Christ Pantokrator" (1688–1702) produced by the Ruthenian engraver Nikodem Zubrzycki. The Hebrew names on his other printed icon (Image 12), of the Byzantine Hodegetria type (Deluga 2006), seem to be a

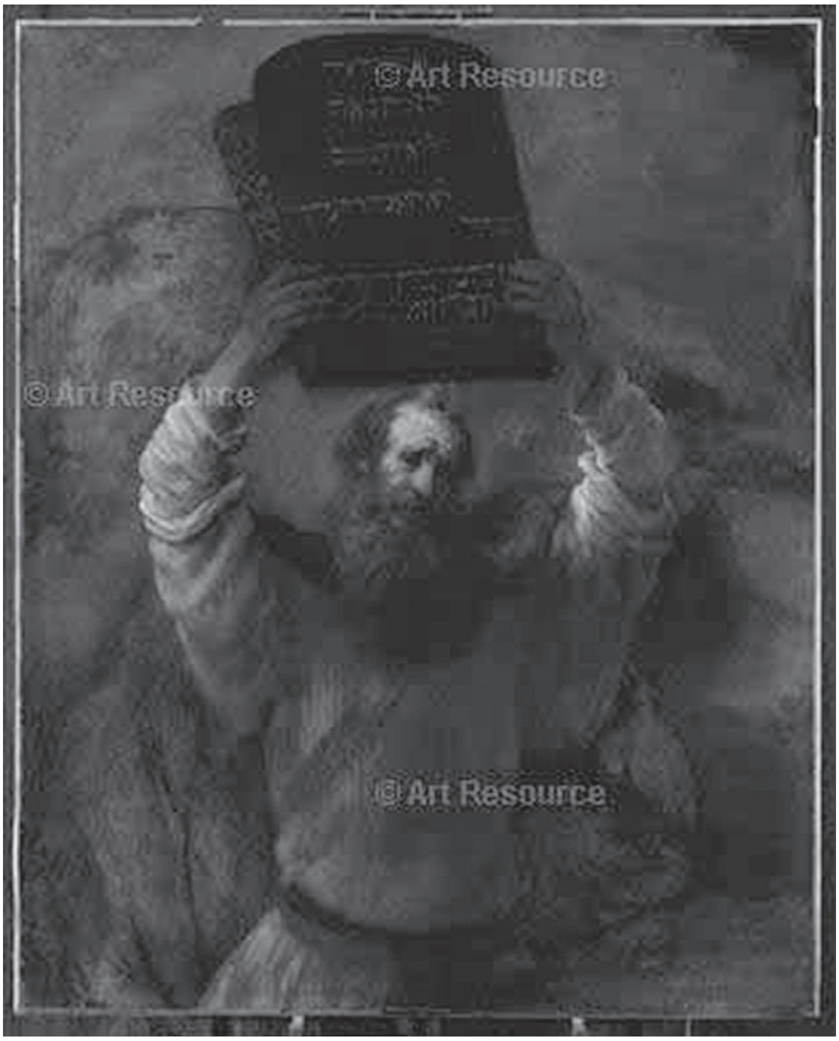

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Image 10. Rembrandt, "Moses Raising the Tablets of the Law" (oil on canvas, 1959. Berlin: Staatliche Museen, Gemaeldegalerie).

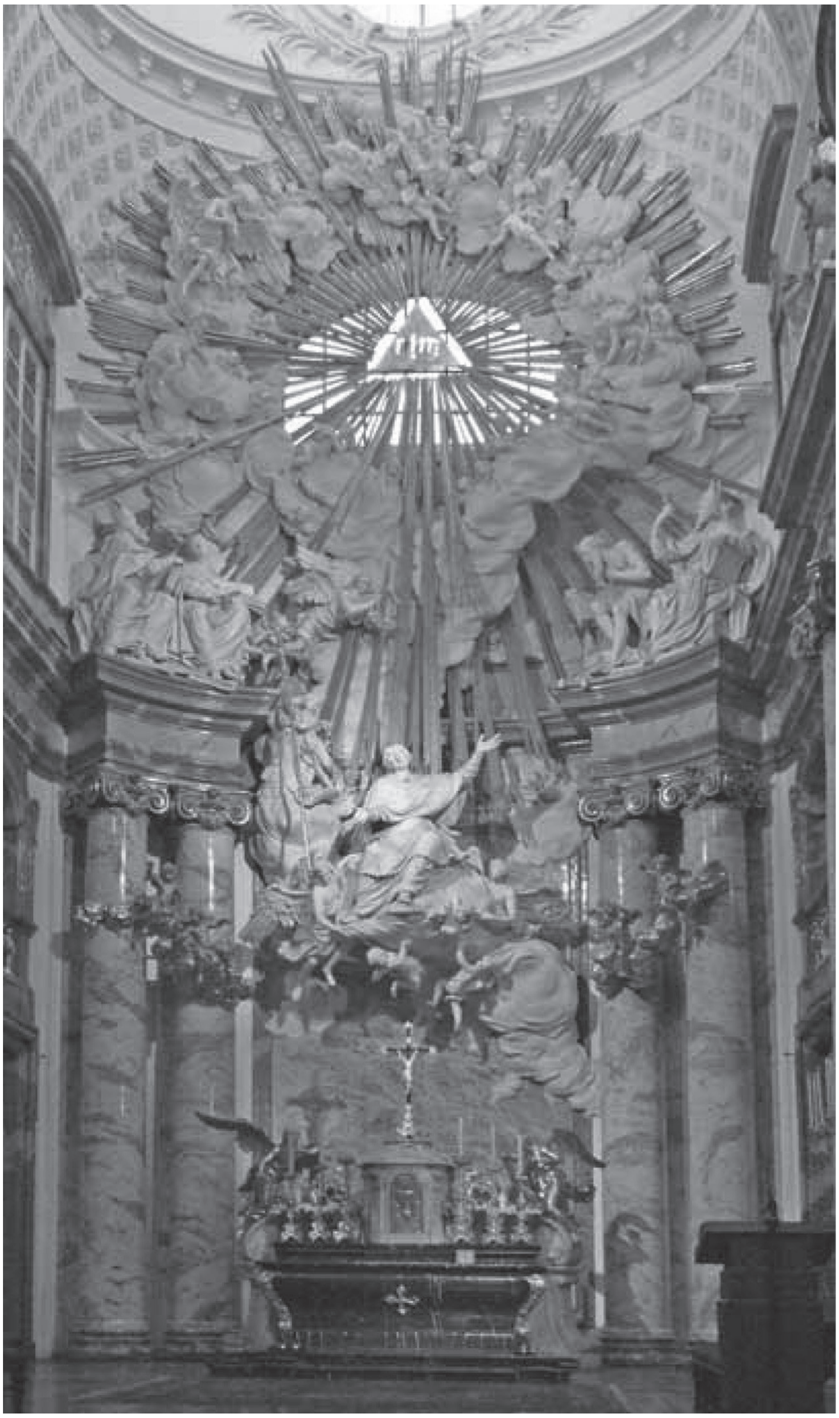


Image 11. Johann Fischer von Erlach and Ferdinand Brokoff, The High Altar "Ascension of St. Charles Borromeo" (1716–1737. Photograph by Sergey R. Kravtsov. Vienna: St. Charles' Church).

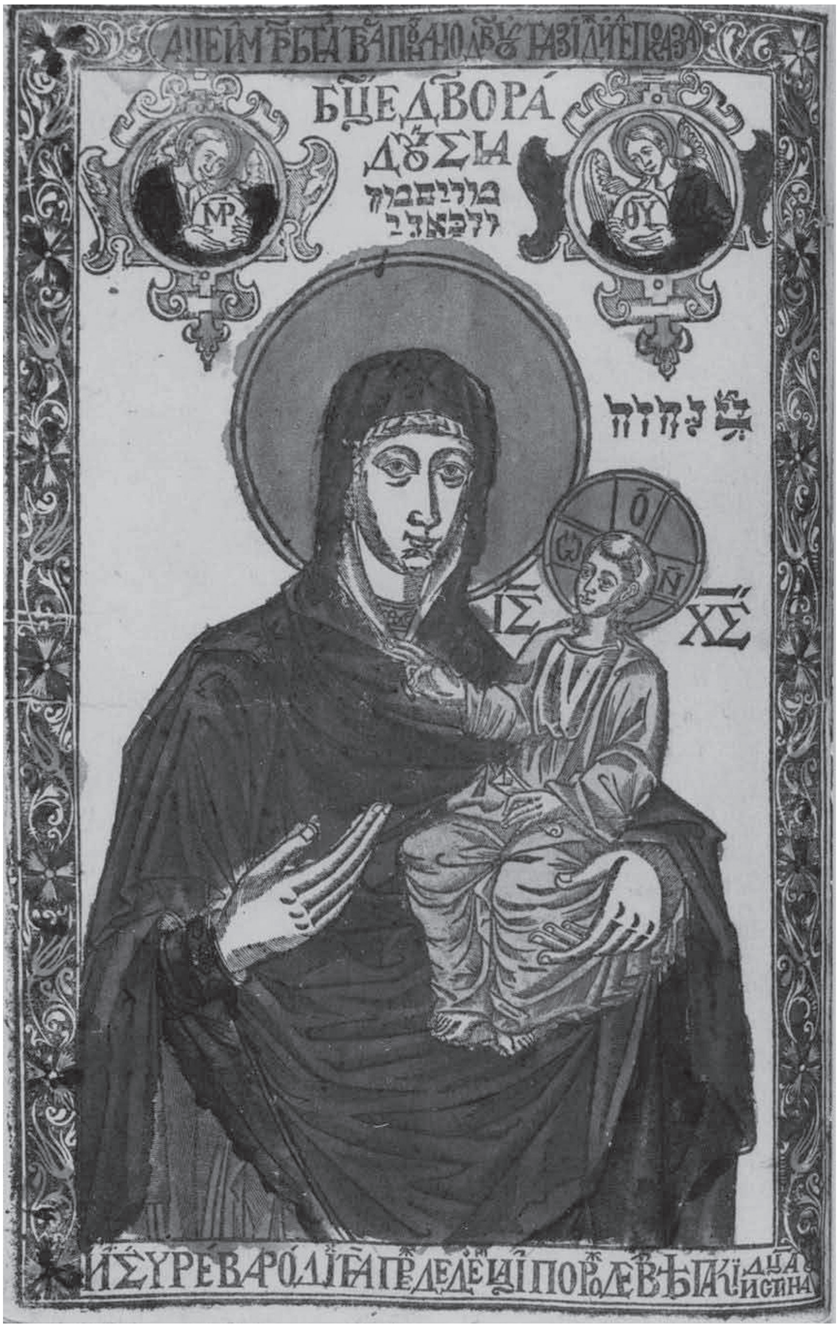
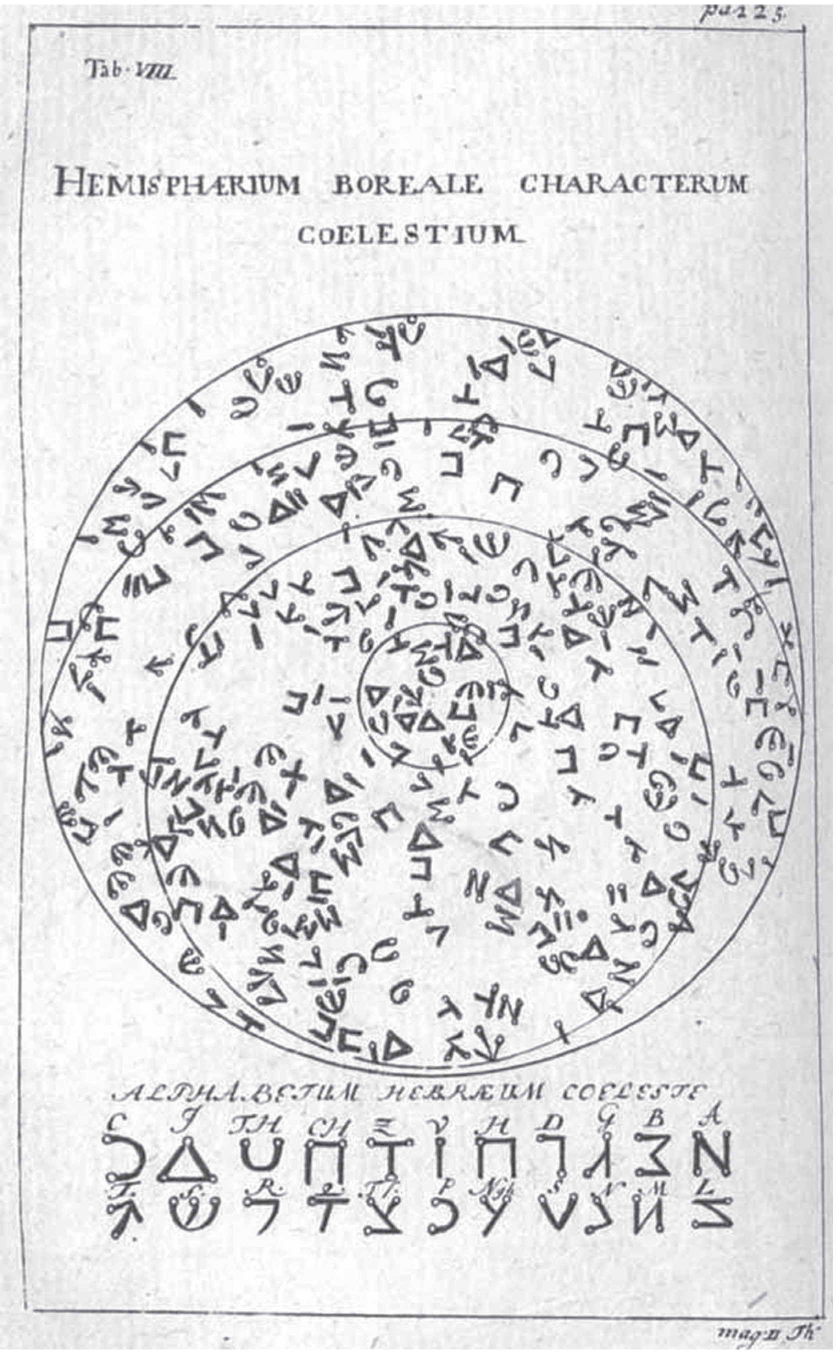


Image 12. Nikodem Zubrzycki, "Hodegetria" (hand-colored woodcut, 1688–1702. Sanok, Poland: Historical Museum).

local invention. Two rows of the Hebrew letters atop Mary's halo מרַיִם מ ה / ללכַּא ד יַ *Miriam m h* / *llk' d y* are a combination of her name and, supposedly, a garbled מלכַּא ד יהַ *mlk' d yh* (with the *h* of the first line being read after the final *y*), which may be interpreted as Aramaic *malkā d-yeh*[*udayyā*], 'the king of the Jews', referring to Christ. The traditional Jewish abbreviation of God's ineffable name as the digrammaton יי *yy*, followed by the tetragrammaton, appears above the child.

With the progression of the Enlightenment and increasing secularization of European and American culture, the appearances of Hebrew in Christian art have dwindled but have not ceased. Interest in the Hebrew alphabet and names in occult images was revived by Romantic, Masonic, and Hermetic Christian theologians and kabbalists. An eminent exponent of all of these groups, Carl von Eckartshausen (1790), drew the stars as Hebrew characters in his celestial map (Image 13). Pursuing the reconstruction of Early Renaissance aesthetics and the assumed historical reliability of Biblical themes in art, an English painter and founder of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, William Holman Hunt, wrote down a Hebrew prophesy from Mal. 3.1 on the wall behind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ALPHABETUM HEBRÆUM COELESTE
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Image 13. "The Celestial Characters of the Northern Hemisphere; The Celestial Hebrew Alphabet" (Eckartshausen 1790: plate 8).

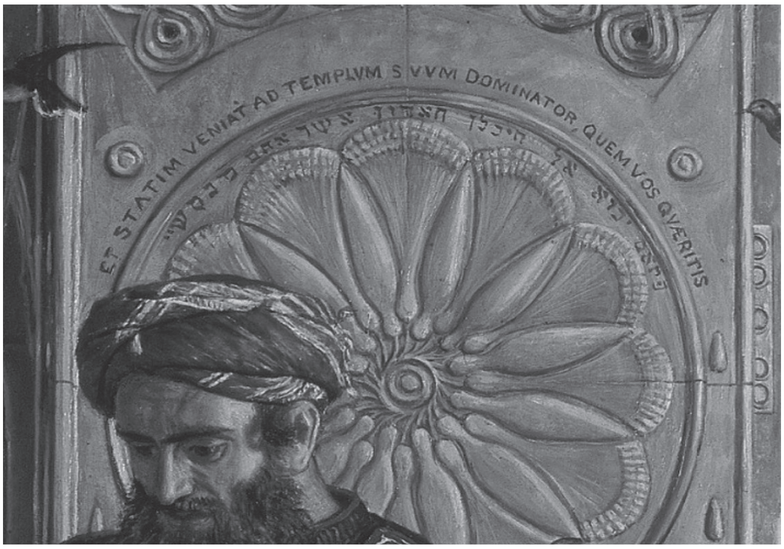

Image 14. William Holman Hunt, Prophesy from Malachi 3.1 in Latin and Hebrew, detail of "The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple" (oil on canvas, 1854–1860. Birmingham: City Museums and Art Gallery).

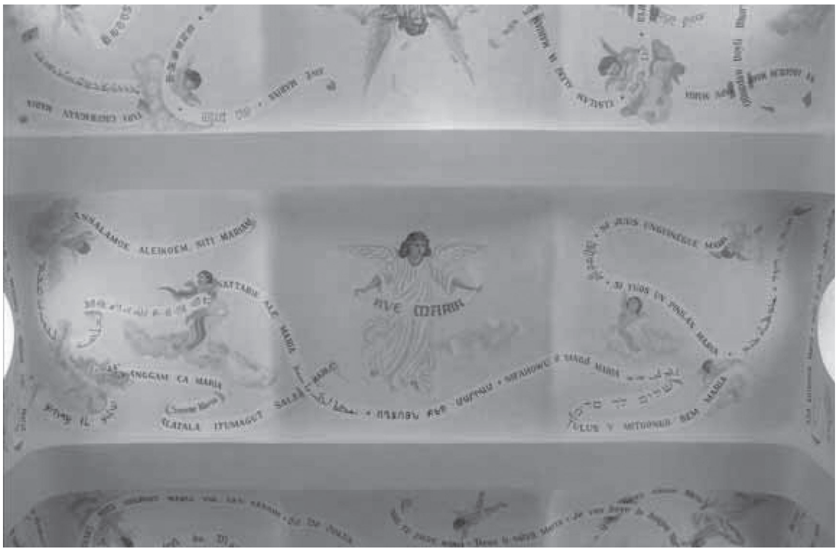

Image 15. Youssef Sa'ed Mubarak, Angels holding banderoles with the inscription Ave Maria in multiple languages (detail of the ceiling painting. 1927 or shortly thereafter. Photograph by Ilia Rodov. Deir Rafat, Israel: Church of Our Lady Queen of Palestine).

Christ in his "The Finding of the Saviour in the Temple" (Image 14). The sporadic instances of the Hebrew script in contemporary non-Jewish art denote mainly Christian messianic and neo-kabbalistic messages.

The use of Hebrew script in Christian art is not typical in the State of Israel, where the Christian population is a minority and Hebrew is widely understood. In several Protestant churches and ministries, Hebrew inscriptions address the Jewish viewer. The Ten Commandments, Biblical verses, and Christian texts inscribed in Hebrew in the altar area of Christ Church, established in 1849 in the Old City of Jerusalem, pertain to the appeal of its evangelical Anglican mission to the Jews. In the decoration of Catholic churches, the Hebrew language is found among the many dozens of different tongues repeating the same text, for example, *Ave Maria* in the ceiling paintings in the Church of Our Lady Queen of Palestine at Deir Rafat (Image 15), or the *Pater Noster* prayer (Luke 11.2–4) on colored tiles in the Church of the Pater Noster in Jerusalem. The multilingual inscriptions emphasize the universal and international character of Christianity. The absence of the Hebrew script in the churches of small Christian congregations surrounded by the Muslim majority may reflect qualms regarding the suggestion of any relationship to Israel and Judaism.

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