

A Brief History of the du Tillet Matthew

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As is the case with many medieval manuscripts, the history of the du Tillet is shrouded in mystery. The exact date of the manuscript, as well as its provenance, is not known, though it is presumed to be a 14th Century manuscript originating in Italy. Its name is derived from that of Bishop Jean du Tillet, bishop of Saint-Brieuc, who, in 1553, travelled to Rome where he obtained the manuscript. In the preface of the publication he writes that it was

the Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew, which I would not presume to suggest Matthew wrote by divine inspiration in his own language . . . but yet I can affirm is clearly not in the rabbinic style, and is written in a pure form of the language that in no way resembles the writings of post-Christian Judaism.¹

The exact way in which the Bishop obtained the manuscript is not described, though Jean Mercier, in the preface to the Latin translation that accompanied the 1555 publication of the du Tillet Matthew, speaks of the “Hebrew Matthew recently wrested from the Roman Jews.”² Schonfield suggests that the du Tillet manuscript almost certainly came from one of the books confiscated from the Roman Jews by papal decree in 1553.³ Since it was one of the polemical works used to combat Christian evangelism of the Jews, this suggestion seems highly likely. However, Lapide notes that the royal sanction for publication (written in French) which comes at the end of the book, is dated January 29, 1552, about a year before the bishop’s supposed journey to Rome to obtain the manuscript.

The du Tillet appeared in print in 1555, accompanied by the Latin translation of Jean Mercier, and published by the firm of Martin Le Jeune. It was dedicated to the Cardinal of Lorraine, Charles de Guise. It had the long title, “Gospel of Matthew until this day hidden with the Jews and concealed in caves and now brought out by the latter from within the chambers and darkness to light again.”

As noted, the du Tillet was a polemical tool of the Jewish community, noted clearly by the fact that following the text of Matthew, there were added some twenty-three “Jewish objections to the Gospel.” Bishop du Tillet explained that he included these polemical questions in his publication “to demonstrate the waywardness of the Jews,” noting that “any Christian will find it very easy to answer them.”⁴

The du Tillet Matthew should not be confused with other Hebrew Matthews that were published during the middle ages. For instance, Sebastian Münster published a Hebrew version of Matthew in 1537 which he titled תּוֹרַת הַמָּשִׁיחַ, “The Torah of the Messiah.” In his preface, Münster states that he used a “tattered” MS, and supplemented or altered its defective text. What is exactly meant by this notice has been debated. Some think the manuscript included many lacunae which Münster supplied from other texts (Latin or Greek).⁵ Horbury suggests that the manuscript he used was interspersed with polemical comments, which he extracted in order to make the Matthew text contiguous.⁶ Since, however, Münster did not mark his editorial work, use of the Münster Matthew for text-critical purposes is dubious.

Another Hebrew Matthew is contained in the “Even Bohan” (אֶבֶן בּוֹחַן, “The Touchstone”), authored

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1. Pinchas Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church* (Eerdmans, 1984), p. 58.
 2. *Ibid.*, p. 216, n. 26.
 3. H. J. Schonfield, *An Old Hebrew Text of St. Matthew’s Gospel* (Edinburgh, 1927), pp. 3–6, noted in William Horbury, “The Hebrew Matthew and Hebrew Study” in Horbury, ed., *Hebrew Study from Ezra to Ben-Yehuda* (T&T Clark, 1999), p. 125.
 4. Horbury, *Ibid.*, p. 126.
 5. George Howard, *The Gospel of Matthew according to a Primitive Hebrew Text* (Mercer Press, 1987), p. 161.
 6. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

by Shem-Tob ben Issac ben Shaprut (sometimes called Ibn Shaprut). It is a polemical work comprising 12 sections or books (though an additional five sections were added later). It was originally written by Shaprut in 1380, and revised several times through subsequent years.

Of the original books the first deals with the principles of the Jewish faith, the next nine deal with various passages in the Bible that were disputed by Jews and Christians, the eleventh discusses certain haggadic sections in the Talmud used by Christians or proselytes to Christianity, and the twelfth contains the entire Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew along with polemical comments by Shem Tob interspersed throughout the text.⁷

When Jean du Tillet published his Hebrew Matthew in 1555, he made it clear that his text was far superior to that of Münster's, which he characterized as "barbarous and inept."⁸ In typical anti-semitic jargon, he writes:

I can assert that [this text] is for the most part removed from rabbinical parlance, and is written with that purity of speech which nothing written after the desolation of that nation enjoys.⁹

It is not certain whether the manuscript itself is the product of Christian or Jewish scribes, nor whether it is a translation from another version (Vulgate, Greek, Syriac) or combination of versions. Lapide is certain that it is a translation from a common *Vorlage* used also by the Münster Matthew.¹⁰ Howard, and Alexander Marx before him, argue for the independence of the Shem-Tob Matthew from either the source of Münster or du Tillet, though Howard notes that there are some unique or almost unique readings shared by the Shem-Tob and du Tillet.¹¹ Howard's conclusion was that the Du Tillet was a revision of a previous Hebrew Matthew, attempting to bring it into line with current Greek and Latin texts.¹²

Publications of the du Tillet subsequent to its initial publication in 1555 include that of Adolf Herbst in 1879¹³ and Hugh J. Schonfield in 1927.¹⁴

The du Tillet manuscript itself resides in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris catalogued under Hebrew Mss. No. 132. Lapide notes that the unpointed Hebrew text comprises 69 pages,¹⁵ though the copy contained in Trimm's publication¹⁶ shows 74 pages.

Thus, the du Tillet remains before us as an historical document of Matthew's Gospel. We are therefore offered the opportunity to study it and find in its pages the valuable information it may contain in terms of the text of the Gospel, and perhaps even its connection to a very early strata of the textual transmission of the biblical text itself.

7. Howard, *Ibid.*, p. ix.

8. Horsbury, *Ibid.*, p. 126.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Lapide, *Op. cit.*, p. 62.

11. Howard, *Op. cit.*, 162ff.

12. George Howard, "The Textual Nature of an Old Hebrew Version of Matthew," *JBL* 105/1(1986), 63.

13. A. Herbst, *Des Schemtob ben Schaphrut hebraeische Übersetzung des Evangeliums Matthaei nach den Drucken des S. Münster und J. du Tillet-Mercier neu herausgegeben* (Göttingen, 1879). Herbst erroneously considered the text as basically a reproduction of the Shem-Tob. Herbst's text is that used by Trimm in his publication (see next note).

14. Schonfield, *An Old Hebrew Text of St. Matthew's Gospel* (Edinburgh, 1927).

15. Lapide, *Op. cit.*, p. 59.

16. James Trimm, *B'sorot Mattai* (H/ANTRI, 1990). Trimm's current publication (1999) does not contain facsimile of the manuscript itself, but only that of Herbst's Hebrew pages.