

# Proposal for EAJS 2018

## Submission title:

*Early Modern Christian Hebrew: A hitherto overlooked variety of Medieval Hebrew*

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**Section:** either: 15. *Linguistics and Jewish Languages* [probably first choice]  
or: 25. *Jewish-non-Jewish Relations; Antisemitism*

## Abstract (299 words):

Medieval Hebrew can be characterized as a vibrant and colourful dead language. It was a dead language in the sense of not having native speakers. Nevertheless (or, therefore), it developed a broad range of varieties. The richness of the medieval Jewish literary output is paralleled by its linguistic richness, well documented by two centuries of Jewish studies scholarship.

Much less attention has been given to the non-Jewish literature written in Hebrew. An ongoing, NFKIH-financed project by our research group focuses on gratulatory poems written in Hebrew by Hungarian protestant students studying theology at Dutch and German universities ("peregrines") in the seventeenth century. These poems – together with similar poems written in Latin, Greek, Syriac and other languages – were recited at public events, such as theses defences, and published subsequently. Their language is argued to represent a separate branch of Medieval Hebrew.

Using sample extracts from the poems, we shall sketch the similarities and differences between Jewish and non-Jewish medieval Hebrew. Clearly, non-Jewish theologians relied primarily on Biblical Hebrew, often copying full phrases and almost entire sentences. (Some poems can be even compared to the *melitsa* style of the Haskalah literature.) Yet, the poetic forms with rhyme and rhythm they adopted, as well as the context and message of their poems all impelled the authors to depart from Biblical Hebrew. Features of post-Biblical Hebrew were also occasionally present.

As Jews in the middle and early modern ages, these theologians also acquired Hebrew to different proficiency levels, unable to avoid unintentional transfer from their first language and further second languages. However, the age, style and context of a theologian's Hebrew studies differed from a rabbi's. We suggest that not only is studying the language of these poems interesting by itself, but it also sheds light on the mechanisms underlying Medieval Jewish Hebrew.