

Struggling with the Hebrew Language: Gratulatory poems by 17th century Hungarian students

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Our project examines gratulatory poems written in Hebrew by Protestant students (so-called “peregrines”) from Hungary studying – mainly, though not exclusively theology – at German, Dutch and English universities in the 17th century. Acknowledging their significance for cultural and religious history, we shall rather focus on the literary characteristics of these compositions. While students of theology engaged with Biblical Hebrew, they only had tangential exposure to postbiblical texts at best, following the footsteps of Philipp Melancthon. The peregrines’ strong background in poetics concentrated on Latin poetry, the application of which to Hebrew was certainly a challenge to them. As a consequence, the forms and contents of the ensuing compositions are very peculiar. Almost all poems contain rhymes and follow a fixed syllable count. We have discovered real epigrams in Hebrew, but also a dirge. Classical poetic forms strictly applied to Biblical Hebrew result in compositions that are often hard to interpret. Was it the poetic form that forced the authors frequently not to adhere to the rules of the language, or is their restricted linguistic competence to blame? Are dissimilarities from Hebrew poetry by medieval and early modern Jewish authors to be accounted by cultural differences, by distinct forms of literary-linguistic creativity, or rather by the ways the authors had acquired Hebrew? Interestingly, other genres by the same peregrines (such as entries in *alba amicorum*, correspondences, private diaries) only contain mere quotes from the Bible in Hebrew, whereas the gratulatory poems expose the particular text production processes.

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