

# Shakespeare's Little Hebrew

Gary Goldstein

“...Oh, now I do remember I heard a report of a Poet  
newly come out in Hebrew; it is a pretty harsh tongue,  
and relleth [bespeaks] a gentleman traveller;...”

*The Return From Parnassus* (III.iii)

Publicly Acted by the Students in  
St. John's College in Cambridge, 1611<sup>1</sup>

No play is more revealing of Shakespeare's Hebrew knowledge than *The Merchant of Venice*, especially the names of the four Jewish characters and particularly that of Shylock. For hundreds of years, the etymology of Shylock, Jessica, Tuball, and Chus have engaged the attention of Shakespeare scholars.

In 1871, the German philologist Karl Elze discovered that the names Jessica, Tuball and Chus were to be found in *Genesis*, X and XI.<sup>2</sup> Most interesting is the Hebrew source for Shylock. One turns to the book of *Genesis* in the Old Testament unable to find the word Shylock—until one consults a Hebrew text.

Transliterating the proper names correctly, one reads in the Hebrew text of *Genesis*, X, 24: “Arpachsad begat Shalach [sic], and Shelach begat Ever.”<sup>3</sup>

All the Jewish characters in *Merchant*—Shylock, Jessica, Tuball, and Chus—are found together within the narrow compass of the two consecutive chapters, *Genesis* X and XI. Jessica occurs nowhere else in the Bible, and, up to Shakespeare's time at least, in no secular literature. Shylock, Tuball and Chus all are in X; Shylock and Jessica together in XI. Shylock the chief character is in both chapters, and the Jewish father and daughter in *Merchant*

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are in the same Bible chapter, though not as father and daughter. I suggest that finding these four names in close conjunction, the principal ones excessively rare, is more than coincidence. I have not found the quartet as such paralleled in any other known source for the play.

According to the rules of Hebrew phonology, one finds Shylock's name in the Old Testament in twin forms: Shelach and Shalach. The standard Hebrew form is Shelach, with Shalach occurring as a variation. *Genesis* X and XI has Shalach twice, Shelach four times. In Greek, Latin and vernacular versions of the Old Testament, however, one finds this mis-spelled as Selah and Salah. Often these translations omit the latter spelling entirely, essentially blinding scholars to the puns that ring upon the "double" name of Shylock in *Merchant*.<sup>4</sup>

Our English playwright renders the Hebrew consonant shin by sh; the vowel segol by y; the consonant lamed by l; the vowel patach by o (a fairly near approach to an English ear); and the consonant chet by ck, as in the pronunciation of Moloch, stomach and Loch (or Lock).

I believe the original pronunciation must have been Shylock with the i vowel, not the diphthong (ei), as in the modern pronunciation. If Shakespeare was born and raised in the county of Essex, he would have pronounced the name as Shillock. The *Essex Dialect Dictionary* of 1869 supports this contention by noting that, in Essex, the short "i" takes the place of "e", as in git (for get), hin (for hen), of 'it (for yet), and of ea, as in dif (for deaf). Contemporary evidence for this proposition is to be found in Pypys Ballad I, 38, dated 1607 and entitled, "Calebbe Shillocke, his Prophesie, or the Jewes Prediction. To the tune of Brigandie."<sup>5</sup> Thus, a contemporary ballad has Shillocke, a popular phonetic spelling, representing the pronunciation as it occurred in Shakespeare's England.

In fact, the letter y was far more used in 16th Century English to represent i than is the practice today. One still writes Cyril, Syria, Sybil, and Lydia, for example. In the *Folio* text of *Merchant* itself one finds Phylosopher. Thus, the Hebrew vowel would not be rendered by the diphthong (ei) as in "Nile," but a short i, as in "bid." For instance, in Launcelet's banter of Jessica, "When I shun Scilla your father, I fall into Charibdis, your mother." (III.v.14-15), Scilla sounds like a pun on Shylock.

There seems to be a similar mistake in the transcription of the Hebrew form of Jessica, which is Yiscah. Jessica has three syllables: "But go we in I pray thee Iessica." (V.i.43). As is evident, the trisyllabic pronunciation is a departure from the Hebrew Yiscah; it is analogous to the Hebrew name of Rivcah, which becomes Rebecca in transliteration due to the dictates of Greek phonology.<sup>6</sup>

### Symbolic Names

The Elizabethan public would take the Hebrew names as untypical and unimportant, but Shakespeare had decided to play upon their original meanings.

The symbolic connection regarding Jessica is complemented philologically, for the 11th Century Hebrew commentator, Rashi,<sup>7</sup> wrote that the Hebrew name Yiscah was based on the root, *sacah*, meaning to look, "since all men looked at her because of her beauty."<sup>8</sup>

As a pun on her Hebrew etymology, Shakespeare provided his Jessica in *Merchant* the reputation of a "looker-out" because she habitually gazed into the public street. So much so, that in one short scene of the play, she is commanded by her father not to "thrust your head into the publique streete to gaze on Christian fooles with varnisht faces" (II.v.32-33). However, Launcelet immediately suggests that she was to "looke out at window for all this; there will come a Christian by, Will be worth a Jewes eye" (II.v.41-43).

In another pun, the dramatist plays upon Shylock's name in Hebrew as well as English. This involves the variant spelling of Shylock in Hebrew, which is *Shalach*. Other than in *Genesis*, X and XI, where the word is used as a proper name, *Shalach* is to be found in the Old Testament in only one place: *Leviticus*, XI, 17, where its meaning is "cormorant." A cormorant—a bird of voracious appetite which lives on fish—was a slang term for usurer in Elizabethan England. In other words, the same mind that chose Jessica, "the looker out," knew the double meaning of the following exchange between Salerio and the cormorant Shylock.

Salerio: Why, I am sure if he forfaite, thou wilt not take his  
flesh, what's that food for?  
Shylocke: To baite fish withall. (III.i.47-49)

In short, Shakespeare chose to pun upon the Hebrew in English for a select audience which knew its Bible in the original Hebrew.

By employing the Hebrew word *Shalach*, the playwright also was punning upon Shylock's name in Hebrew. Although the name *Shalach* is pronounced the same as the Hebrew word for cormorant, the noun ends in a different consonant (chaph sophit instead of chet) than the pronoun. In other words, Shakespeare found a homonym—a word pronounced the same but with a different spelling and meaning—specially suited to his purpose, but in Hebrew.

I suggest Shakespeare connected *Shalach* with the next word in the Hebrew dictionary too: *Shalach(a)*, that is, a skinner or flayer. The Bond of Flesh stories that antedate *Merchant* frequently mention a strip of skin rather than a pound of flesh. If one looks at these propositions together, it becomes clear that the writer of *Merchant* was playing with the Hebrew language as well.

The playwright's choice of the names Chus and Tuball for the other Jewish merchants in the play also points to *Genesis* X and XI as the source for all the Jewish names in *Merchant*. In the play, Jessica mentions Chus in the same breath with Tuball as Shylock's friends.

When I was with him I have heard him swear  
To Tuball and to Chus, his countrimen (III.ii.226-227)

I suggest Chus was originally spelled Cush—the correct transliteration from the Hebrew—and later misprinted by Elizabethan typesetters. Tuball, Chus and Shelach all appear in the same chapter in *Genesis*, X, and are, respectively, descendants of Noah's three sons, Japheth, Ham and Shem, who represent in Biblical mythology three of the races of man—the Indo-Europeans, the Africans, and the Semites.

### **Puritans and Prime Ministers**

In *Merchant*, Shakespeare was attacking the practice of usury, a volatile issue fiercely debated in the pulpit and Privy Council throughout 16th Century England. Condemned from the time of Aristotle, usury was first openly permitted in England under Henry VIII. The practice was repealed under Edward VI in 1552, when usury was declared to be a vice “most odious and detestable.” It was revived in 1571 while William Cecil was Elizabeth I's Principal Secretary of State, and a limit of 10 percent placed on all interest. Finally, in 1597, the date commonly given for the final version of *Merchant*, the government passed an Act declaring usury to be “very necessary and profitable.” By this date, Cecil had been Principal Secretary of State (until 1572) and then Lord Treasurer for nearly 40 years.

Cecil's person and politics resonate with correspondences in the play: first, under his leadership, usury came to be praised by Parliament and practiced by English Christians. Second, it was Cecil, not the Jews of contemporary Venice, who habitually wore a long black gabardine cloak and who carried a long staff. Third, it was Cecil who wrote the 1563 Act of Parliament declaring Wednesdays to be an enforced “fish day,” in addition to Fridays and Saturdays. Thus, the Shylock puns on cormorant usurers, and Shylock's comment on baiting fish have their contemporary relevance.

Then there are the parallels between Shylock the Jew and the Puritans of Shakespeare's time. I sense that Shakespeare was criticizing the English Puritans in the character of Shylock by declaring them, in essence, to be nothing but Jews. A scholar of the period, Peter Milward, SJ, states that *Merchant*, “in its characterization of Shylock as a Jewish hypocrite, is particularly rich in implicit references to the Puritan controversy of the time.”<sup>9</sup>

Evidence of a growing awareness and fear of Puritan influence by Englishmen in Elizabeth's reign can be found in many pamphlets circulating in England from the early 1570s through the 1590s. These aired publicly the disagreements between the Puritan wing of the Anglican Church and the Church establishment.

Mathew Sutcliffe, in *Answer to a Certain Libel* (1592), accuses the Puritans and their leader, Thomas Cartwright, of usurious and other cruel financial

practices: "What else should we look for at their hands, seeing racking of rents, extremity of dealing, usury and unlawful practices of gain, and Turkish and inhuman cruelty, divers of these zealators of Puritanism pass both Turks and heathen."<sup>10</sup> In *Merchant*, at the opening of the trial scene (IV.i), Shylock is abused as a "stony, unhuman wretch" and compared unfavorably with "stubborn Turks and Tartars."

Shylock's rigid emphasis on the law is again paralleled by that of Cartwright in his controversy with Archbishop John Whitgift, leader of the Anglican Church. Against the Puritan leader, Whitgift declares in *Defense of an Answer* (1574), that his opinions "smelleth of Judaism," and demands with indignation: "What remaineth but to say that Christ is not yet come." Similarly, the anonymous author of *A Defense of the Ecclesiastical Regiment* (1574) supports Whitgift by saying: "I see not what can be intended by this new devised discipline [Puritanism], but only restitution of the veil, and clogging men's consciences with such Jewish observation, from the which we are enfranchised by the Gospel."<sup>11</sup>

In the anonymous pamphlet *A Survey of the Pretended Holy Discipline* (1593), there is an interesting parallel to Shylock's famous refusal to eat, drink or pray with Christians (I.iii): "Seeing our church, our government, our ministry, our service, our sacraments, are thus and thus.. therefore they [Puritans] will not pray with us, they will not communicate with us, they will not submit themselves to our church... they will have nothing to do with us."<sup>12</sup> The same characteristic is reiterated at greater length by Whitgift in his *Answer to an Admonition* (1572): "These men [Puritans] separate themselves from our congregation, and will not communicate with us neither in prayers, hearing the word, nor sacraments; they contemn and despise all those that be not of their sect, as polluted and not worthy to be saluted or kept company with; and theresome some of them, meeting their old acquaintance, being Godly preachers, have not only refused to salute them, but spit in their faces, wishing the plague of God to light upon them."<sup>13</sup>

Finally, just as Shylock is repeatedly called a devil, especially by Launcelet (II.ii) and by his opponents in the trial scene (IV.i), so the Puritans were often called devils by their enemies. The very words of Launcelet, characterizing Shylock as "the devil incarnal" (II.ii), echo the anonymous anti-Martinist tract, *Martin's Month's Mind* (1588-89), which speaks of the Puritan Martinists as "very devils incarnate, sent out to deceive and disturb the world."<sup>14</sup>

From the preceeding, it's evident the four inseparable names in *Merchant* were chosen for the purpose of a drama. In the earliest parables, anecdotes, and tales, we find a bloody minded merchant who is not a Jew; and in the Italian novel *Il Pecorone*, the most immediate source for *Merchant*, there is just one Jewish character, who is nameless.<sup>15</sup> On the stage, however, name-giving becomes imperative, and for Shakespeare, every name is telling.

### The Tempest and Titus Andronicus

In two other plays, Shakespeare's use of naming characters shows his knowledge of Hebrew. In the play, *The Tempest*, Shakespeare has his character Prospero address the sprite Ariel as as "My brave spirit! (I.ii.207). Ariel in Hebrew means hero and is derived from ari, denoting a lion, and el, denoting God, or lion of God. For Prospero to address Ariel as his brave spirit would therefore be in keeping with the exact meaning of the word.

In the play, *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare named the play's villain Aaron. Significantly, Aaron has no surname but is referred to in the play only as "the Moor." In 16th Century Europe, a Moor signified the Spanish, England's archenemy. However, the name of Aaron the Moor has religious significance in that Aaron was the brother of Moses and the first Hebrew priest.

In fact, in Shakespeare's time it was widely held that the Spanish were of Moorish and Jewish blood. They were continually depicted in contemporary political and religious pamphlets throughout Europe in precisely this way.

*The Apology of William of Orange*, 1580 (Holland): "I will no more wonder at that which all the world believeth, to wit, that the greatest part of the Spaniards and specially those that count themselves noblemen are of the blood of the Moores and Jews, who also keep this virtue of their Ancestors, who solde for readie money downe the life of our Savior, which also maketh me to take patiently this injurie layde upon me."<sup>16</sup>

*The Anti-Spaniard*, 1590, anonymous (France): "Shall the country of France become servile to the commandment of the Spaniard? Shall France be added to the title of this king... Of this demie-Moore, demie-Jew, yea demie-Saracen?"<sup>17</sup>

*A Treatise Paraeneticall (an Exhortation) by a Pilgrim Spaniard Beaten by Time and Fortune*, 1598, anonymous (published in English and French and addressed to King Henry IV of France): "The Castilians are descended of the Moores and the Jews (for these two peoples live mingled pell-mell together)..."<sup>18</sup>

For Shakespeare's audiences Aaron the Moor therefore called to mind the worst of all possibilities—the symbol of their mortal enemy, Spain, and the infidel religions of Judaism and Islam.

For these reasons, I think it highly probable that the Jewish characters in *Merchant* and characters in two other Shakespeare plays were chosen by someone who had read carefully the Old Testament in the language in which it was originally written.

### Endnotes

All spelling and citations for the plays are taken from the 1623 First Folio of William Shakespeare's Collected Plays.

1. *The Parnassus Plays (1598-1601)*. Ed. J.B. Leishman. London: Ivor, Nicholson & Watson, 1949. 301-2.

2. *The New Varvorium Shakespeare. The Merchant of Venice*. NY: American Scholar Press, 1965. Page x, fn. 12: "Tuball and Chus are taken from Genesis X, 2 and 6, without change [sic]." Page xi, fn. 15: "Jessica: to all appearance, this is borrowed from Genesis, X, 29, where Iscah of King James's translation appears in earlier editions of the Bible, in 1549, and 1551, as Jesca." Karl Elze.

Pronounced in Hebrew as Yiscah, the consonant yood is commonly transliterated as j, rather than y, because of the dominance of Greek phonology in translating Hebrew texts. The Elizabethan English, though, represented j as i; thus, Iessica for Jessica.

3. *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs (Hebrew text and English translation)*. London: Soncino Press, 1985. 2nd ed. Ed. Dr. J.K. Hertz. All Biblical references in this paper derive from this edition.

4. Apart from the Hebrew, the name Shylock is not to be found in Bibles as we know it because Greek, Latin and vernacular versions of the Old Testament conceal Hebrew proper names in a Greek disguise. While it may appear odd that English-language Bibles provide the proper names according to Ancient Greek, one should remember that the rules of Greek phonology dominate all modern transcriptions of Hebrew Bible names.

One explanation may be that extensive use has been made of the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, translated by Jewish scholars in Alexandria, Egypt over the period 283 to 135 B.C.—and in the same Greek dialect used by the writers of the New Testament. Latin and English translators of the Old Testament probably employed the Septuagint as their Old Testament source, accepting its Greek transcription of proper names in place of the original Hebrew.

In transliterating the name Shelach, for instance, the Septuagint has the letter sigma (s) for the Hebrew consonant shin because Ancient (and Modern) Greek had no "sh" sound. The final consonant of Shelach is chet (ch) and has the quality of the Greek chi, yet is incorrectly rendered in Greek by alpha (a) because a Greek word cannot end in the Greek chi. (As a rule, consonants other than n, s, and r are dropped at the end of Greek words.) As a result, we find these polygot Testaments yielding no other forms of the original Hebrew names, Shelach and Shalach, than Selah and Salah.

5. *A Pepsian Garland (1595-1639)*. Ed. Hyder Rollins. NY: CUP, 1922.

6. Another explanation for this English misrepresentation involves a misreading of the Hebrew half-vowel, shva nah, placed under the consonant samech (s) in Yiscah. While the half-vowel is silent here, it also can be pronounced as a short i or e—depending on its position within a word. Thus, Jesca easily is transformed into Jessica for someone not totally familiar with the complex rules of Hebrew grammar. The k in knife or a in please, for example, remain silent only for fluent speakers of English.

7. Solomon ben Isaac was known as Rashi, the acronym of his Hebrew name. Rashi lived in France during the 11th Century, wrote in Hebrew, Aramaic, and French and is still considered the most important rabbinic commentator of the Bible.
8. *The Pentateuch and Rashi's Commentary (A Linear Translation)*. Rabbi Abraham Ben Isaiah and Rabbi Benjamin Scharfman. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society Press, 1976. Genesis, XI, 29. The same Hebrew root, *sacah*, denotes princeliness, for only those "who looked into the future in Holy inspiration" could be a prince.
9. "Shakespeare and the Religious Controversies of His Time." Peter Milward, SJ. *The Bard*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1976).
10. *Shakespeare's Religious Background*, Peter Milward, SJ. London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1973. 159-160.
11. Op cit 160
12. Op cit
13. Op cit 160-1
14. Op cit 161
15. *The Merchant of Venice*. Ed. David Bevington. NY: Bantam Books, 1988. "Shakespeare's probable chief source for *The Merchant of Venice* was the first story of the fourth day of *Il Pecorone* (*The Dunces*), by Ser Giovanni Fiorentino. This collection of tales dates from the late 14th Century, but was first published in 1558 in Milan, and was not published in English translation in Shakespeare's time."
16. *Othello as the Tragedy of Italy*. Lillian Winstanley. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1924. 65.
17. Op cit 66
18. Op cit 69