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The Footsteps of Israel: Understanding Jews in Anglo-Saxon
England (review)

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Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies, Volume 24,
Number 3, Spring 2006, pp. 152-154 (Review)

Published by Purdue University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sho.2006.0038>

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The Footsteps of Israel: Understanding Jews in Anglo-Saxon England, by Andrew P. Scheil. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004. 372 pp. \$65.00.

Centuries before Jewish people migrated to England in the wake of the Norman Conquest, Anglo-Saxon writers described their culture and its impact on Christianity in a complex mixture of respect and disgust. Scheil's study reveals how images of Jews went beyond mere negative stereotypes to illuminate both Christian and Anglo-Saxon identity, to enhance an understanding of the relationship between past and present, and to provide a basis for the harsher condemnations of the *populus Israhel* emerging in European culture after the eleventh century. Scheil intends his work for the general interested reader as well as the academic specialist, and his clear translations from Latin and Old English work towards that goal. However, the study's inevitable preoccupation with literary theory and its specific vocabulary are bound to be off-putting to those general readers whose concepts of early Christianity and biblical exegesis are shaped more by *The Da Vinci Code* than Northrop Frye or Frances Young. Historians of late antiquity and medieval culture will find much of value and interest in the work, and certain sections on Bede, Gildas, and scriptural poetry could even be of use in the undergraduate classroom.

The chapters on Bede, comprising Part One of the work, are the best in the book, no doubt because of the complexity and sensitivity of this historian monk. Scheil begins with Bede's homily on John 5:1–18, Jesus's curing at the pool Probatika in Jerusalem. He discerns Bede's exegetical intentions with the passage, and the difficulties he encountered in trying to explain the Jews' rejection of Christ's message. Like few writers before or after him, Bede presented the Jews "in a more detached fashion, with an informed scholarly curiosity that cleanly appraises them with a discerning, analytic eye, bereft of undue emotion" (p. 27). Always the teacher, Bede believed that further education could bring Jews around to the truth, and he reveals more impatience than hatred when he cites their pride and blind arrogance. Bede the historian knows that once they were God's chosen people, defending monotheism in the face of pagan idolatry, and that the Christian church was built on Judaic foundations. To Bede's mind, the English themselves have now received the calling as God's chosen, and in walking in the footsteps of Israel his people must be aware of the faults and failings, glories and honors, of those who came before.

Part Two studies the *populus Israhel* tradition, presenting it as a form of foundational myth that to the early Church writers granted Christianity a deep and noble past. British and Anglo-Saxon authors also understood the

tradition. Gildas compared his contemporaries to a latter-day Israel; scriptural poetry such as *Genesis A* and *Judith* linked Hebrew exile to Germanic epic themes; and *Beowulf* paralleled the passing glories of the Danes and the Old Testament tribes. These writers used the *populus Israhel* tradition to connect Germanic events to the great movement of history, sweeping over extended time periods and varied landscapes.

Part Three turns to evidence of hatred and irrationality in Anglo-Saxon writings evidenced by viewing the Jews in terms of the flesh, gluttony, and mental instability. The works studied here come from the Vercelli Book and the Blickling codex, composed in the late ninth and early tenth centuries and containing both prose and poetry heavily influenced by New Testament apocrypha. Although later writers condemned these works for being overly speculative, Scheil cites them as valuable evidence of Anglo-Saxon piety, communicated to the laity by sermons and homilies. The most vivid sections deal with the works that condemned the Jews for making the belly their god, resulting in “a loss of control, a type of disgusting madness, not only through immoderate portions of wine or mead, but simply in the idea that too much food addles the wits” (p. 245). Once addled, the Jewish mind becomes a slave to lust and pride, while the Jewish body becomes soft and weak, in this context comparable to that of weak women who bathe too often and indulge the body’s desires. These homilies and poems relied on stirring up emotions in the reader, emotions that enabled a communal, albeit negative, bonding.

Part Four studies the works of Aelfric of Eynsham, a leading figure of the tenth-century Benedictine reform movement in England. Unfortunately, Scheil’s stated intention to illuminate that reform movement by study of these writings is not accomplished with clarity or depth in this section: the reader learns little about the reform, Aelfric’s role in it, or the influence of his writings on tenth-century monasticism. Scheil’s close readings of the homilies *De populo Israhel* and *Maccabees* are interesting, and the latter work does assert the superiority of monks over the other elements of the Three Orders (*laboratores, oratores, bellatores*), but part of the problem is that Aelfric is just not as bright as Bede and his writings are less complex. Aelfric is conflicted about the proper view to take of the Jews, and his anti-Judaism is not quite as hostile as is found in earlier works. Far more interesting is Scheil’s uncovering of contemporary political parallels drawn by other writers of Aelfric’s day, particularly Byrhtferth of Ramsey. His *Vita Sancti Oswaldi* (c. 995) linked Jewish stereotypes to the growing threat of Danish invasion, the weak kingship of Ethelred the Unready, and the political assassination of King Edward in 978, which is depicted as a Passion narrative with the English anti-monastic conspirators cast as Jews.

We are very far here from Bede's balanced assessment, and much closer to the antisemitism that fueled the violence consequent upon the First Crusade.

Scheil succeeds in his aim of revealing the complexities of Anglo-Saxon views of Jews, their history, and their culture. The image of Jews as an elder people, ancestors of Christians, honorable and worthy of a place in Christian history, took root in the more thoughtful expressions of English writers. Before long, however, those tender shoots would be replaced by harsher and unfortunately more hardy plants with the poisonous flowers of hatred for the Other.

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Yiddish in Italia: Yiddish Manuscripts and Printed Books from the 15th to the 17th Century / Manoscritt e libri a stampa in yiddish dei secoli XV–XVII, edited by Chava Turniansky and Erika Timm, with the collaboration of Claudia Rosenzweig. Milan: Associazione Italiana Amici dell'Università di Gerusalemme, 2003. €80.

Beginning in the waning decades of the fifteenth century and continuing for somewhat more than a hundred years, there was a veritable explosion of cultural and particularly literary activity within Ashkenazic Jewish communities in northern Italy. The texts produced are written both in Hebrew and Yiddish, the vernacular brought by the Ashkenazim when they emigrated from central Europe. It was indeed in Italy that Yiddish literature both experienced its first flowering and matured into a cultural vehicle able to express the breadth and depth of Ashkenazic Jewish culture, and it was there that the "secular" first appeared—however briefly—alongside the traditional religious as a literary modality in Ashkenaz. The broad scope of Yiddish texts ranged from Arthurian courtly epic in *ottava rima* to a philosophical lyric reflecting on the ephemerality of human life, from the earliest love song in Yiddish to a biting and erudite satire worthy of a Martial or Voltaire; from a sophisticated renaissance epic of love and adventure in the style of Ariosto to a love story worthy of the author's cross-continental contemporary, William Shakespeare. In order to grasp the revolutionary aspect of this corpus, one must realize that most of these genres first appeared among Jews during this "Italian century" and they appeared in Yiddish or bilingual Yiddish-Hebrew texts. Many of the genres then disappeared with the linguistic assimilation of the formerly Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazim in the course of the seventeenth century and the consequent shift of the site of Yiddish literature back to central and then on to eastern Europe in