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"I Have Worn No Shoes upon This Holy Ground": Hebrew and Religious Authority in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Poems (1838, 1844)

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Abstract: This paper will delineate Elizabeth Barrett Browning's (EBB) allusions to Hebrew in her writing, both personal and public, and her ambivalent attitude towards the Hebrew language and how it is related to her views on poetry and religious identity. Although most critics have focused on EBB's knowledge of Greek, her use of Hebrew, whether translated, transliterated, or presented in the original Hebrew characters, reveals her concept of poetic language and her core religious beliefs. In her collections of poems published in 1838 and 1844, EBB reiterates her concept of Hebrew as a sacred language, a language endowed with what Bourdieu would term symbolical capital, and superior to other languages. However, her correspondence reveals an ambivalence towards Hebrew: it is a "primitive" language that she does not wish to be associated with on the one hand and revered in relation to Spiritualism and the medium George Bush on the other. Finally, the appearances of Hebrew in her works constitute what Derrida terms a poetic Shibboleth, meant to define who is to be accepted into the realm of sacred poetry and who is to be left out. Ironically, it is the anxiety around this double-edged Shibboleth that ultimately brings about the disappearance of Hebrew letters from EBB's poems written after 1844.

Keywords: Elizabeth Barrett Browning; Hebrew; Spiritualism; Shibboleth; religious poetry; symbolical capital

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1. Introduction

Elizabeth Barrett Browning (EBB),[1] considered one of the greatest English poets of her time by both her contemporaries and later critics, has often been studied in relation to the figure of the poet–prophet on a Christian mission.[2] A biblical scholar, she studied, translated, and incorporated the Hebrew language into her personal and poetic works, creating a recurring motif reflecting her attitudes towards poetic language, religion, translation, and Spiritualism. Her first two major collections of poems, *Seraphim and Other Poems* of 1838 and *Poems* of 1844, contain Hebrew words that create suggestive linguistic constructions. In these poems, what was experienced by most readers at the time as a foreign and incomprehensible Hebrew script is embedded into the English verse to create religious authority.

This paper will show how EBB's ambivalent position on Hebrew explains her choice of using a prophetic voice and reveals some of her principal poetic and religious stances. I will attempt to show how EBB employs Hebrew as what Derrida (2005) terms a Shibboleth: it is used as "a password, a mark of belonging, the manifestation of an alliance" (p. 20) within the poem, a gateway for sacred, divinely inspired poetry. Critical reactions and the ambivalence revealed in her letters led her to stop using Hebrew in her poems after 1844.

Nevertheless, references to Hebrew in her correspondence after 1844 reveal that she still thought of it as a sacred, divine language, especially in relation to Spiritualism.

More than two decades have elapsed since the seminal publication of Cynthia Scheinberg's (2002) exploration of EBB's "Hebraic roots", yet the function of Hebrew in EBB's work has yet to be further studied (p. 63). Donald Hair's (2015) thorough book on EBB's language aims to touch upon most of the main themes and conflicts associated with the writer's poetic visions and conceptions of language but mentions Hebrew only in passing (pp. 266–67). Matthew Reynolds's (2011) exploration of translation in Victorian poetry in general and in EBB's works more specifically also overlooks Hebrew as a topic in its own right. In response to this critical lacuna, this paper will employ a post-structuralist approach in order to show EBB's conflicted attitudes towards the Hebrew language and how they reveal her stance towards translation, poetry, and religious identity.

In "Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the 'Hebraic monster'" (2002), Cynthia Scheinberg suggests that EBB strove "to create a prophetic female poetic identity through reference to Jewish identity and "the Hebraic" throughout her poetry" (p. 66). She continues to argue "that Barrett Browning sought to transform the potentially monstrous implications of her Hebraic knowledge into a specific poetic and theological authority" (p. 67). Following this emphasis on EBB's ambivalence towards Hebraism while harnessing it to her poetic identity, I will offer an analysis of EBB's conception and use of the Hebrew language in her poetry and private correspondence, explaining it in terms of Bourdieu's definition of symbolical capital and Derrida's definition of Shibboleth.

EBB was raised in a dissenting family that attended a Congregationalist church which "valued scripture as the highest authority and intellectual and spiritual independence as necessary for every believer and congregation" (Dieleman 2012, p. 24). From her teenage years onward, she consistently resisted aligning herself with any established church (Lewis 1998, p. 9). She saw herself as belonging to "Christ's invisible Church as referred to in Scripture", avoided institutionalized religion, and rather sought after the Scripture itself and a direct connection with God (Lewis 1998, p. 13). Hebrew, in its various manifestations in EBB's poetic works and correspondence, is often regarded as the original, sacred language of the Scripture and placed in a hierarchical fashion as superior to other languages, including English, Greek, and Latin. However, in other cases, especially in her private writing, it is often considered a "primitive" language and a topic which raises anxiety.

In her collections of 1838 and 1844, Hebrew is a trope used to exert an authoritative, prophetic voice and to delineate an in-group and an out-group in relation to the sacred status of the poem. Derrida (2005), building on the biblical narrative,[3] defines Shibboleth as "at once both readable and secret, mark of belonging and of exclusion, the wound of partaking, the circumcised word reminds us also of the double edge of a Shibboleth" (p. 63):

> The shibboleth is given or promised by me (mein Wort) to the singular other, 'this one,' that he may partake of it and enter, or leave, that he may pass through the doorway, across the line, the border, the threshold. (p. 61)

Yet ironically, it is exactly this double-edged character of EBB's use of Hebrew that ends her use of the language for fear of being associated with Judaism and being excluded from her contemporary literary circle and readership.

How is the incorporation of Hebrew related to EBB's religious and poetic voice? In order to understand this inclusion of Hebrew letters and transliterated Hebrew words in her poetry, it is crucial to understand the status of Hebrew in nineteenth-century England as sacred and powerful on the one hand and as a "primitive", minor language on the other.

2. Hebrew in Victorian Britain

Along with Latin and Greek, Hebrew was considered one of the classical languages from the sixteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, and was therefore studied by learned individuals, often in order to read the Bible in the original language (Engell 2017, p. 241). For EBB, as for other female writers at the time, knowledge of these languages was "a gateway both to literary culture and to social and political power, a world that rarely welcomed women" (Mermin 1989, p. 19). Hebrew, which was not used as an everyday tongue since the second or third century BC, was a dormant language used by Jews mostly for prayer and study (Sáenz-Badillos 2012, p. 542). In the Christian context, Hebrew was often considered a sacred language, the "Hebraica Veritas" of God and the Bible, and was associated with Kabbalism, Renaissance magic, and other mystical theories (Eco 1995, p. 15; Coudert and Shoulson 2004, p. 118). The theory of Adamic language, popular well into the first half of the 19th century, refers to a language, most often Hebrew, which was spoken by Adam in the garden of Eden and maintains an innate, divine connection between signified and signifier (Aarsleff 1982, p. 25; Eco 1995, pp. 83–84; Hair 2015, p. 281). The effect of this theory on English literature is apparent to critics who have studied the works of John Milton, Christopher Smart, William Blake, Samuel Coleridge, Alfred Tennyson, George Eliot, Robert Browning, and other authors who studied and explored Hebrew as part of their linguistic and artistic explorations.

Robert Lowth's *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, delivered between 1741 and 1750 at Oxford, was a major influence on nineteenth-century writers and the intellectual elite in general, and on EBB, who had read Lowth, in particular (The Brownings' Correspondence 1998, vol. 14, pp. 44–46). Lowth (1816) contends that the highest form of poetry is religious, and that this association is "remarkably exemplified in the Hebrew poetry, than which the human mind can conceive nothing more elevated, more beautiful, or more elegant; in which the almost ineffable sublimity of the subject is fully equalled by the energy of the language, and the dignity of the style" (1816, p. 18). He continues to note that Hebrew biblical poetry is "superior" to Greek poetry: "in sublimity they are superior to the most finished productions of that polished people" (p. 38). Hebrew poetry is for Lowth the origin "in which the only specimens of the primeval and genuine poetry are to be found" (p. 50).

Another major influence on EBB's conception of Hebrew is the writing of the Swedish theologian and mystic Swedenborg, whose work EBB was first acquainted with in the 1840s and read extensively in 1853 and 1854 (Hair 2015, p. 266; Lewis 1998, p. 11; Scheinberg 2002, p. 67). Hair (2015) has shown that EBB was aware of Swedenborg's mystical thinking on the divine secrets attributed to Hebrew letters and words, as well as his claims about Hebrew's sacred nature and the language of angels (p. 267). In *A Treatise of Heaven and Hell*, with which EBB was greatly impressed (Hair 2015, p. 267), Swedenborg tells of a piece of paper received from heaven "on which were written some words in Hebrew characters, and it was told me that every letter contained some secrets of wisdom, nay the very flexures and curvatures of the letters, and the sounding of them from thence; which gave me to understand the meaning of those words of the Lord" (Swedenborg 1789, p. 178).

I will now attempt to explain the double-edged status of Hebrew in the nineteenth century using Bourdieu's model of language and symbolic power. According to Bourdieu (1991), a language such as Hebrew in 19th-century England is imbued with both cultural and symbolic capital: the knowledge and skills imbued in the individual through education, status, and other experience constitutes cultural capital, whereas the prestige and superior status of Hebrew constitutes symbolical capital.

Knowledge of Hebrew within the upper class of nineteenth-century England implies authoritative linguistic power and closeness to sacredness and divinity, "[s]ince all linguistic

practices are measured against the legitimate practices, e.g., the practices of those who are dominant" (Bourdieu 1991, p. 53). English is the language of the state, the official language (Bourdieu 1991, p. 45), while Hebrew is the language of religion, of the sacred Bible, the language spoken by Adam and by Jesus (Eco 1995, pp. 15, 25). Moreover, the use of Hebrew brings in the notion of religious power and seems to associate the literary text with the Scriptures and with the religious and intellectual elite.

At the same time, Hebrew was also the "primitive", minor language of the undervalued Jews in Victorian Britain and a mere semitic language among many others according to contemporary philologists. The status of Jews in nineteenth-century England was highly problematic. After being expelled in 1290, Jews returned to England in the mid-seventeenth century, with even more arriving in the 19th century and creating anxiety over their perception as racial and religious others (Bar-Yosef and Valman 2009; Cohen 2002; Levene 2020, p. 5; Scheinberg 2002, p. 35).

The existence of real Jews in England creates an ambivalence towards the Hebrew language, as it did in other historical contexts (Dunkelgrün 2017; Wamsley 2018):

> On the one hand, Hebrew was revered as the hebraica veritas, the immaculate, original language both of Scripture and of Eden . . . On the other, a fetishization of Hebrew might dangerously blur the distinction between Protestants and contemporary Jews, whose Hebraic erudition was as much a threat as a resource. (Wamsley 2018, p. 5)

In addition to the problematic association with real, contemporary Jews, the nineteenth century's rising field of linguistics caused a dwindling of appreciation for Hebrew as a language with mystical properties, thus questioning its traditional supernatural, divine essence. According to Foucault (1970), language at this time continually loses the privileged position it held before the eighteenth century and is reduced to the "mere status of an object": an arbitrary system of signs (p. 36). Indeed, in 1842, the Philological Society of London was formed, the aim of which was to explore the structures, affinities, and history of languages (Aarsleff 1982, p. 26; Hair 2015, p. 13). In addition, England saw the rise of an influential group of thinkers who believed that all language is reducible to sense data, relying on Locke's theory of language and its development by Horne Tooke in the 18th century. This group included the Utilitarians, who saw language as a mere system of signs and undermined the idea of a sacred or Adamic language (Aarsleff 1982, p. 73).

All of the above may explain EBB's ambivalence towards Hebrew. EBB's works reflect the status of Hebrew as a sacred language, the Adamic language of God and the Bible, and a language imbued with symbolic capital on the one hand, and the "primitive", conventional language of the undervalued Jew on the other.

3. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Hebraic Reputation

EBB's study of Hebrew is apparent from documents dating back to her childhood. Her beloved brother, Edward Moulton-Barrett, wrote her a humorous poem when she was sixteen, referring to her as quoting Hebrew as early as on 28 July 1822:

> Greek, Latin and Hebrew, serve her for quotation,
> And in Justice, she brings them out in rotation,
> (The Brownings' Correspondence 1984, vol. 1, p. 162)

In spite of this reference to an early interest, six years later, at the age of twenty-two, she writes to her teacher of Greek, Hugh Stuart Boyd:

> To the question, "Am I not right?" I answer in the negative. I know very little Hebrew, & have indeed only read a few chapters in the original scriptures. I have even laid aside the study, for the present—as Hebrew roots require a great deal of ground to grow in, and my

time is continually engaged either in writing, or in reading that I may write (The Brownings' Correspondence 1984, vol. 2, pp. 104–5).

In June 1832, EBB informs Hugh Stuart Boyd that she has taken up the study of Hebrew but is not progressing very well, and that her father, who is worried about her health, would scold her for doing so if he knew (The Brownings' Correspondence 1985, vol. 3, p. 25).[4] In July 1832, she reports to Boyd that she had made some progress, with the goal of reading the Hebrew Bible in the original language:

> I have read Hebrew regularly every day since I told you of my beginning Genesis,—and I am now more than half thro' Genesis, & begin to relax a little from the lexicon. From its being a primitive language it is very interesting in a philosophical point of view. I like to find the roots of words & ideas at the same time. The syntax seems to be simple; & there is apparently no copiousness in synonyms & expletives, as is the case in Greek—yet it is an expressive language. I am glad I thought of having recourse to it, for if it had no other advantage, it has at least given a kind of change of air to my mind. (The Brownings' Correspondence 1985, vol. 3. pp. 30–31)

This letter reveals EBB's ambivalence regarding the language, on the one hand calling it "primitive" from a developmental perspective, as well as inferior to Greek in the richness of its vocabulary, but on the other hand naming it "philosophical" and "expressive", adjectives reminiscent of Lowth's (1816) admiration for Biblical Hebrew as the highest form of poetry. As I will later show, her interest in "the roots of words and ideas" manifests itself in the 1838 preface to *The Seraphim and Other Poems* and in the two volumes of *Poems* (Barrett 1844).

In November 1845, one month into their correspondence, EBB and Robert Browning divulge their attitudes towards Hebrew in their letters. Robert Browning refers to a passage from Proverbs that he wrote in Hebrew on the back of a letter from the Poet Walter Savage Landor:

> Bless you once more and for ever! That scrap of Landor's being for no other eye than mine—I made the foolish comment, that there was no blotting out—made it some four or five years ago, when I could read what I only guess at now,—thro' my idle opening the hand and letting the caught bird go—but there used to be a real satisfaction to me in writing those grand Hebrew characters—the noble language! (The Brownings' Correspondence 1993, vol. 11, p. 196)

The following day, EBB remarks:

> But how, 'a foolish comment'? Good & true rather! And I admired the writing . . . worthy of the reeds of Jordan! (The Brownings' Correspondence 1993, vol. 11, p. 198)

Here, there seems to be a mutual understanding that Hebrew is a common highly regarded sphere into which both have succeeded to enter, a Shibboleth which had allowed them both into a sacred space. EBB puts special emphasis on the writing of the Hebrew letters, creating a visual image associated with the actual setting of the River Jordan. In the Old Testament, the Jordan River is mainly associated with the crossing of the Israelites into the promised land after the long journey from Egypt, and in the New Testament, it is associated with baptism and miracles. Indeed, inscribed on the portfolio in which Robert Browning kept their correspondence, there are four Hebrew words written in Hebrew letters which can be translated as "eternal kingdom" (אחזת עולם) and "God's place" (מקומאל) (Markus 1995, p. 183). In their correspondence, Hebrew is thus used as a metaphor for a consecrated space which they both highly value.

These initial venerating attitudes towards Hebrew mark only the beginning of a long-winded path in which the status of Hebrew alters and is questioned by EBB, revealing some of her most important poetic and religious stances. For despite her numerous references to Hebrew, EBB's letters show that she wished to detach herself from the association to Judaism (Scheinberg 2002). In 1844, Richard Horne writes in *A New Spirit of the Age* of EBB as a mysterious poetess well acquainted with "the Hebrew Bible from Genesis to Malachi" (Horne [1844] 1907, p. 339). As Cynthia Scheinberg (2002) has shown, EBB resented this association with Hebrew and in a letter to her friend Mary Russell Mitford wrote that she was worried her position as a "Hebraic monster" would frighten away her friends and acquaintances (Scheinberg 2002, p. 62). Her worries about her "Hebraic" association recur in her letters of this period, as she repeats them in no less than four different letters. Indeed, following this incident, EBB stops using Hebrew letters in her poetry, while continuing her multiple references to the Scriptures. It seems that EBB does not wish her own personal life to be associated with Judaism and real Jews. She resents the connection that Horne puts forth and does her best to disengage herself from any rumors referring to her "Hebrew" knowledge while focusing on her goal of being a "Christian woman poet" (Scheinberg 2002, p. 63).

In spite of her wish to disconnect herself from Hebrew in the public sphere, EBB's attraction to the language reemerges in her letters in 1853. From 1853 to 1854, EBB's interest in Spiritualism brings up the notion of mediums speaking in "tongues" with an emphasis on Hebrew, mentioned in four different letters with relation to the American Professor and medium George Bush.[5] EBB seems to return to the idea of Hebrew as a sacred language mediating between God and humanity and connects Spiritualism to biblical prophecy (Mills 2012, p. 483). This insistence on the connection between religious prophecy and Spiritualism caused fierce disagreements with Robert Browning, who perceived spiritualist mediums as frauds and tried to dissuade EBB from trusting them (Karlin 1993, pp. 47–67). In August 1853, EBB writes about her belief in Spiritualism to her sister Arabella:

> You are to understand that there are two kinds of spiritual writing—one by the hand of the medium, the hand being used as an unconscious machine, and the other where no visible agency is used at all– Writings in most of the oriental languages are said to have been produced in this way. The Hebrew professor in New York was addressed by means of the raps in Hebrew– He was convinced. . . (The Brownings' Correspondence 2012, vol. 19, p. 233)

Three more references which show her keen interest in Bush's Hebrew communications appear in EBB's letters, one in August 1853 and two in January and March of 1854 while she was writing *Aurora Leigh*, illustrating her deep personal belief in the divine nature of Hebrew and its ability to communicate with the spiritual world.

EBB's reputation as a Hebrew scholar remained in spite of her attempts to underplay her knowledge of Hebrew after 1844. In 1854, this poem about EBB was sent to Robert Browning by their friend Robert Bulwer Lytton:

> She hath walked in Grecian bowers:
> She hath heard Apollo sing:
> Crown'd with parsely [sic] crowns and flowers
> Seen Anacreon revelling.
> She hath traversed oer & oer
> The old mazy Hebrew lore:
> Knows what tunes the Psalmist sang
> To his harp when he was young
> The white sheepfolds all among.
> Plato is her friend: all others

> Great & wise are her soul's brothers.
> (The Brownings' Correspondence 2013, vol. 20, p. 312)

This lasting reputation as a Hebrew scholar is also exemplified in an article published in the *Cornhill Magazine* by Barnett Smith (1874), thirteen years after EBB's death. In this article, EBB's association with "celestial fire" is dependent on her "intimacy" with Hebrew:

> But though the Greek was the language which afforded her the most delight, her acquaintance was not confined to this, her knowledge of the Hebrew being also most intimate, whilst the Bible in that language was amongst her most continuous studies. Little would men suspect in meeting her for the first time that within that slight and spiritual frame burned so much of the celestial fire. (p. 473)

The way in which EBB's reputation as a Hebrew scholar is related to her ideas on translation will be discussed in the next section.

4. Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Translation

In March 1855, EBB writes to her friend Isa Blagden:

> I have put a great concentration of will upon languages . . . & have read through in Hebrew from the first line of Genesis to the last of Malachi . . . not skipping a line—also, nearly every word extant in Greek– For years I did nothing else. (The Brownings' Correspondence 2014, vol. 21, p. 114)

EBB did not merely study and translate from Greek and Hebrew, but she was also a scholar and a meticulous translator in these two languages. Her remarkable knowledge of Hebrew is manifest in the multiple exegetical annotations she made in 1832 and 1833 to the single-volume Greek Bible and the two-volume Hebrew Bible in her possession (Elia 2014, p. 9). She also owned John Pankhurst's *An Hebrew and English Lexicon* (1778) to which she attached a Hebrew Grammar with her signature, and *Biblia Hebraica sine punctis* by M. Forster, both of which contain numerous notes (Berlin-Lieberman 1934, p. 11).[6] Her insistence on knowing the original language of the work is seen in a letter to her teacher of Greek, Boyd, on 3 November 1832:

> . . .this winter, I think I may be called rather industrious. I am thinking of attempting a poetical version of the Psalms in the Spring. Every version of them is essentially unpoetical, & has I believe been made, not from the original Hebrew but from a translation: which circumstance is in itself likely enough to produce weakness and frigidity. (The Brownings' Correspondence 1985, vol. 3, p. 62)

EBB's emphasis on understanding the original Hebrew text suggests what Reynolds (2003) termed "interlingua", an approach which aims to achieve the pre-Babelic language through translation and reaching the core of the utterance (p. 99). This mode of translation is contrasted with what he calls "translationese" in which translation "registers the difficulty of carrying meanings from one language to another" (2003, p. 99). Indeed, in the preface to EBB's *Seraphim and Other Poems* (Barrett 1838), she begins by referring to her translation of Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* and its relation to Hebrew. EBB presents the claim that Aeschylus, had he been born after the birth of Jesus, would have chosen as his setting the "deeper desertness of that crowded Jerusalem where none had any pity" (*Seraphim* 1838, p. vi). She then goes on to claim that "poetry is essentially truthfulness", and that the "strong" Greek language would crumble before the holy truth of God, not to mention English:

> But if my dream be true that Aeschylus might have turned to the subject before us, in poetic instinct; and if in such a case-and here is no dream—its terror and its pathos would have shattered into weakness the strong Greek tongue, and caused the conscious chorus to tremble round the thymele,—how much more may *I* turn

> from it, in the instinct of incompetence! In a manner I have done so. I have worn no shoes upon this holy ground: I have stood there, but have not walked. (p. ix)

Where is Hebrew placed, then, in this hierarchy of languages? The sentence "I have worn no shoes upon this holy ground" takes us to the biblical story of Moses and the burning bush (*Exodus* 3:5), where Moses speaks with God in the Hebrew language (*Exodus* 3:15), and the origin of the tradition of ineffable name (Wilkinson 2015, p. 1). By comparing herself to Moses in this context, EBB foreshadows her references to the ineffable name in this collection of poems and the appearance of Moses's sister Miriam in *Aurora Leigh* as an emblem of the poet–prophet. Thus, Hebrew is placed at the meeting point between the human and the sublime, as a connecting language between the two realms discussed by Barrett, and more revered than Greek and English.

Another reference to Hebrew in this preface also places it between the infinite and the finite in order to avoid what she terms the error of seeing the divine through our human frailties:

> Are we not too apt to measure the depth of the Saviour's humiliation from the common estate of man, instead of from His own peculiar and primaeval one? To avoid which error, I have endeavoured to count some steps of the ladder at Bethel,—a very few steps, and as seen between the clouds. (p. xi)

The Hebrew name Bethel (House of God) is used in this context to allude to Jacob's ladder in Genesis (28;10–17), on which the angels ascend and descend from earth to Heaven, "with its top reaching to heaven" (*Genesis* 28:12), but instead of angels, she assigns herself as poet (Scheinberg 244). Indeed, Reynolds (2011) claims that "Barrett's sense of herself as being true to Aeschylus' 'genius' in her second version of *Prometheus Bound* meant something rather different from being faithful to him as an author" (p. 100). EBB is striving for that transcendental truth obtained at Bethel rather than for a linguistically accurate translation. As I will exemplify in the next section, in most of EBB's works, this transcendental signified often seems to be associated with Hebrew.

5. Hebrew in *Seraphim and Other Poems* (1838)

Seraphim and Other Poems (Barrett 1838) is EBB's first collection of poems to appear under her name following her publications of *An Essay on Mind with Other Poems* (1826) and *Prometheus Bound, Translated from the Greek of Aeschylus, and Miscellaneous Poems* (1833). In this collection of poems, in which EBB's poetic voice matures and is consolidated, she incorporates transliterated Hebrew words as well as words in the original Hebrew letters of the scriptures in the poem "The Measure".

The title of the collection, *The Seraphim*, accentuates the central position of Hebrew in this publication. In her preface, EBB describes them as "those mystic beings who are designated in Scripture the Seraphim" (p. x), thus making a direct connection between her own work and the Hebraic source. EBB could have been inspired by Lowth's (1816) example of prophetic poetry, which is sung in alternating choirs:

In the very same manner Isaiah describes the Seraphim chanting the praise of Jehovah:*

> "They cried alternately, Holy, holy, holy, Jehova God of Hosts!
>
> The whole earth is filled with his glory". (p. 203)

The Seraphim (שרפים) are six-winged angels hovering above God's throne in Isiah's vision, crying "holy, holy, holy" (*Isiah* 6:3), and are perceived in Judaism and Christianity as the angels closest to God. In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, they are the highest in the hierarchy of angels and speak "the tongue/of Angels" which EBB is trying to reconstruct (*Paradise Lost* 6: 297–98). The word derives from the Hebrew שרפים (saraphim), the root of which

means "burning", associated with the proximity to God. The word has entered the English language through the Old Testament and its meaning is known to educated readers, yet it retains a "foreign" sound associated with biblical language.

EBB's choice of words for her 1838 collection of poems is closely connected to her conception of poetry as God's work, with the seraph as the poet, close to God and bringing God's ultimate truth to the sensual world through language. In "Seraphim", the dramatic lyric which opens this collection, two Hebrew-named seraphs, Ador and Zerah, witness the crucifixion and discuss it from a seraph's point of view. In Part 1, the younger seraph, Zerah, known as "Zerah the Bright One", hesitates at heaven's gate before descending to witness the crucifixion, reluctant due to his fear of earth and suffering. It is the other seraph, "Ador the Strong", who persuades him to go, assuring Zerah that he will encounter Christ there. In Part 2, when they arrive at the site of the crucifixion, Zerah initially refuses to look down, but finally, they both observe the crucifixion and marvel at the Christ's love, contemplate the implications of the event, express outrage at his suffering, and conclude their part in the poem by rejoicing as Christ completes his mission through death. In the poem, EBB constructs the "sacred" voices of these angels as well as that of Christ, and Zerah refers to Jesus as the "master-word" that initiated all other voices (p. 60). Straight (2000) writes about this poem:

In her poem, Barrett assumes the existence of "the transcendental signified", which Jacques Derrida describes as "an invariable presence", "a fixed origin" at the center of structure. Derrida describes language as a chain of signification in which every signifier refers to other signifiers, but explains that we desire a transcendental signified, which possesses meaning in itself (p. 270).

The ultimate "transcendental signified" in Jewish and Christian culture is the ineffable name, which, in its various Christian manifestations, is also called the tetragrammaton YHWA or Jehovah. The ineffable name is the powerful name of God which is supposed to contain divine forces and is not to be uttered according to the Jewish tradition (Wilkinson 2015, p. 14). According to the Mishna, the only person allowed to voice the ineffable name is the High Priest in the temple on the day of Atonement (Wilkinson 2015, p. 80). A reference to the silence associated with the ineffable name appears at the climax of the poem, when Jesus is dying on the cross, and Zerah, the weaker seraph, is dismayed by God's silence, while Ador criticizes him for his misunderstanding of the significance of the silence replacing that of the ineffable name:

> Zerah, O silence!
>
> Ador, Doth it say to thee—the NAME.
>
> Slow-learning Seraph?— (p. 48, lines 586–588)

EBB constructs this moment of silence as parallel to the ineffable name, so powerful that it must remain unuttered. This silence exhibits what Hair (2015) claims is the main conflict of the poem, namely "the problem of dealing with heavenly matters in a language derived (as Locke taught) from the senses" (p. 20). However, two pages later, the ineffable name is uttered and transliterated from the Hebrew as "Jehovah" (rather than "Lord" or "God") twice, granting the text this foreign ring, in which the "original" sacred language seems to infiltrate into the text. When Jesus's eyes close, Zerah refers to him as "Jehovah-man":

> Zerah: No more
>
> On me, Jehovah-man ---
>
> . . .
>
> Ador: His Godhead holds His human

More soft than the first cradle-watch in woman,
More pure than man's first thought in Eden air,—
(And that was man's first prayer!)
Sustains it with the strong Jehovah-being,
To bear the gaze adown,
Conceive the vast despair,
And feel the billowy griefs come up to drown,—
Nor perish, until all be finished.
(p. 52, lines 616–627)

The double appearance of the word "Jehovah", a transliteration of the Hebrew ineffable name for God, is meant to kindle the "feel" of the foreign language, that which is untranslatable, the language of seraphs. EBB thus names herself as a mediator between the transcendental signified and humanity, and the word Jehovah as a Shibboleth, through which she attempts to "step across the border of a place or the threshold of a poem", and to gain a "legitimate habitation of a language", in this case, a powerful divine language (Derrida, p. 26).

It is no wonder, then, that in the epilog to "Seraphim", the poet-narrator apologizes for "counterfeiting" this sacred language that she has put in her seraphs' mouths, a language that contains the ineffable name and the transcendental signified:

And I–ah! what am I
To counterfeit with faculty earth-darkened
Seraphic brows of light,
And seraph language never used or hearkened?
(pp. 76–77, lines 1020–1024)

This apology continues in the preface to her next publication, along with an explanatory argument which I will discuss in the next section. Another religious poem of *Seraphim and Other Poems* includes EBB's first incorporation of Hebrew letters within a poem, revealing her thorough knowledge of the language. "The Measure" is the last of four hymns which appear in the collection under the title of "A Supplication for Love". Having already published hymns in *An Essay on Mind* (1826) and *Poems* (1833), EBB's choice of the form of the hymn could be attributed to the central place it is given in Lowth's (1816) *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews* in which he describes the hymn as "the sublime employment of the Sacred Muse" (1816, p. 200). EBB writes the first three hymns in the traditional form of the hymn (quatrains rhyming abab or abcb), but in "the Measure", she creates an original form (quintains without a fixed rhyme scheme) and employs her Hebrew scholarship in order to support her choice and her theological authority (Dieleman 2007, p. 142)

The hymn contains an argument against the human complaints on the amount of earthly suffering, contrasting it with Jesus's acceptance of his suffering, and requesting God to be patient with human "foolishness" (p. 345, line 12). In the hymn, the Hebrew word שליש, which appears twice in both the poem and in the Bible, signifies a large quantity, a measure of either tears (*Psalms* 80:6) or dust (*Isiah* 40:12). EBB draws a comparison between the two appearances of the word in the Bible and between the Bible and her own poem. She includes the source as well as the translation, thus not leaving the Hebrew signifier without a signified. However, the word cannot be pronounced as a transliteration is unavailable, leaving a gap between the two languages.

'He comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure'. (שליש).
Isaiah xl.

'Thou givest them tears to drink in a measure'. (שליש). *

Psalm lxxx

In a footnote, which suggests that she had read the entire Bible in Hebrew, she seems to flaunt her knowledge of Hebrew:

*I believe that the word occurs in no other part of the Hebrew Scriptures.

(p. 344)

The word שרפים thus constitutes a Shibboleth: being able to read it in the original Hebrew is a sign of entering the realm of the poem and the hidden meanings of the Bible. EBB emphasizes her own agency by presenting herself as the writer of the hymn and the "I" of the footnote, taking upon herself the role of the mediator between the reader and the sacred text by offering a literal translation of the original. The understanding of the crux of the poem relies upon the poet's "I" and her straightforward explanation of the Hebrew words which does not allow for multiple meanings.

The incorporation of Hebrew letters is therefore not used in order to convey additional content. The literal translation seems to leave no gap in the reader's knowledge; however, the sound of the word is missing for those readers who cannot read Hebrew. Hebrew characters are used merely for their emphatic biblical appearance, a gate or a Shibboleth to sacredness, through which only those who understand Hebrew can enter. Her translation of the word grants her the poetic power to introduce the readers to the divine realm, thus rendering her as the "prophetess", or the seraph–poet.

Finally, the last poem of this collection in which Hebrew is employed as a Shibboleth is a seemingly personal, intimate lyric entitled "A Song Against Singing", dedicated to EBB's "little cousin, Elizabeth Jane H-" (p. 318). The speaker of this lyric poem is asked to sing to the baby but maintains that her suffering will produce a song that will not benefit the child and prefers to pray instead. A close reading of the poem reveals that in the penultimate stanza, EBB uses a transliterated Hebrew word, ABBA, to show that the original, "pure" babbling of the child is Hebrew, described by the speaker as "sweeter" than English. "ABBA" appears three times in the King James translation of the New Testament (*Galatians* 4:6, *Mark* 14:36, *Romans* 8:15) and means "father" in Hebrew:

So wilt thou aye be young

In lovelier childhood than thy shining brow

And pretty winning accents make thee now!

Yea! sweeter than this scarce articulate sound

(How sweet!) of "father" "mother", shall be found

The ABBA on thy tongue!

(p. 320, lines 31–36)

Through this Shibboleth, EBB seems to be hinting to the knowledgeable that Hebrew is the original language, an innate speech emanating from the "meek" child's lips, and connecting her to the "meek" angel "whose ever-lifted eyes behold/The Ever-loving face!" in the final stanza of the poem. The idea of Hebrew being the child's first language could have been inspired by the stories about the experiment by Friedrich II on children, depriving them of human communication in the hope that they would speak Hebrew and prove that it is the original language (Eco 1995, p. 15).

6. Hebrew in *Poems* (1844)

In *Poems*, EBB's 1844 collection, Hebrew is again represented as an emblem of divine poetic language, superior to Greek and other languages. EBB's preface, the long "A Drama

of Exile" in blank verse, the first three sonnets that follow it, and the final poem "Great Pan is Dead", frame the idea of poetic language for a divine goal as closely associated with the Hebrew language.

In the preface, EBB touches upon the criticism of her use of "sacred" topics and the voices of God and the angels in her previous collection by referring to prohibition of "naming of holy names except in consecrated places":

There is a feeling abroad which appears to me (I say it with deference) nearer to superstition than to religion, that there should be no touching of holy vessels except by consecrated fingers, nor any naming of holy names except in consecrated places. As if life were not a continual sacrament to man, since Christ brake the daily bread of it in His hands! As if the name of God did not build a church, by the very naming of it! As if the word God were not, everywhere in His creation, and at every moment in His eternity, an appropriate word! (Barrett 1844, p. x)

EBB seems to mock this belief in the ineffable name, calling it superstition coming from "abroad", although the criticism of her use of sacred language appeared in the very British *The Examiner*, and was criticized by her friends Mary Russell Mitford and John Kenyon (Straight 2000, p. 269). She further argues against this criticism that Jesus himself, just like her poetry, is an instance of the divine within the human, comparing "sacred" poetic language to a sacrament. Indeed, EBB continues to incorporate "sacred" language and topics within this collection.

In the same preface, EBB demonstrates her knowledge of Hebrew by focusing on the word "Erev", which means evening in Hebrew, showing its semantic connection with the word "mingling" (the two words have the same root). The reason behind this explanation is the length of the evening in her version of the biblical exile from Eden in "Drama of Exile", thus claiming "her right to–with Milton–reinterpret the Bible on the basis of her Hebrew knowledge" (Scheinberg 2002, p. 73):

If it should be objected that I have lengthened my twilight too much for the East, I might hasten to answer that we know nothing of the length of mornings or evenings before the Flood, and that I cannot, for my own part, believe in an Eden without the longest of purple twilights. The evening, [erev] of Genesis signifies a "mingling", and approaches the meaning of our "twilight" analytically. Apart from which considerations, my "exiles" are surrounded, in the scene described, by supernatural appearances; and the shadows that approach them are not only of the night (Barrett 1844, p. xi).

EBB supports her construction of Eden by referring to the root of a Hebrew word, transliterated within the preface, using it as a Shibboleth, the gateway to a deeper understanding of the text and providing her with legitimacy to access a sacred realm of divine poetry and to reconstruct the biblical story.

In "A Drama of Exile", the first long poem of the collection, EBB rewrites the story of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. The poem begins with Gabriel, conversing with Lucifer, referring to the creative power of God's original language, ending the argument with a capitalized "Amen":

> This is not Heaven, even in a dream; nor earth,
> As earth was once,—first breathed among the stars,—
> Articulate glory from the mouth divine,—
> To which the myriad spheres thrilled audibly,
> Touched like a lute-string,—and the sons of God
> Said AMEN, singing it.
> (p. 5, lines 31–34)

The "mouth divine" articulates in the "original" language and is answered with "AMEN", a transliterated Hebrew word deriving from the Hebrew root of אמנ, to believe. The use of capitalization for a transliterated Hebrew word is reminiscent of "ABBA" in "A Song Against Singing".

Another reference to Hebrew appears with regard to the name Eve, whose Hebrew root is related with the word "life", once again drawing attention to the hidden meaning of Hebrew roots which must have escaped most readers who are ignorant of the language:

Eve, O Adam, Adam ! by that name of Eve—

Thine Eve, thy life—which suits me little now,

(p. 23, lines 420–421)

These hidden references to Hebrew are accompanied by biblical words that appear in the poem such as "Hosanna", "Sabbath", "Behemoth", "Jehovah", and "Mammoth" and grant the poem an atmosphere of authoritative religious language. For example, the following is uttered by the earth spirits:

Your bold speeches, our Behemoth,

With his thunderous jaw, shall wield!

Your high fancies shall our Mammoth

Breathe sublimely up the shield

(p. 80, lines 1539–1542)

Following the biblical theme and the references to Hebrew in "A Drama of Exile", there is a sequence of twenty-eight sonnets on various subjects, the first three of which set the tone for the entire collection. The first of these is "The Soul's Expression", which delineates the speaker's poetic mission and the dangers that it involves, oscillating between the "senses" and the "infinite", the "song of soul", and the "sublime" (lines 5–8). Having already compared herself to Moses in the preface, the first line of the sonnet is a reference to Moses's stammer:

With stammering lips and insufficient sound

I strive and struggle to deliver right

That music of my nature, day and night

With dreams and thought and feeling interwound,

And inly answering all the senses round

With octaves of a mystic depth and height

Which step out grandly to the infinite

From the dark edges of the sensual ground!

(p. 123, lines 1–8)

This reference to the biblical figure of Moses, the forerunner of Jesus according to Christian typology, is a central figure in EBB's writings. Moses is an emblem of the prophet and mediator, who is hard of speech, yet is destined to communicate with God and to bring forth God's word, thus symbolizing the difficulty of putting the "transcendental signified" into the finite world. By choosing these tropes, EBB is highlighting the importance of Hebrew, spoken by Moses, and her poetical movement in her first two collections from Greek to Hebrew as a metaphor for poetic language.

The next sonnet, which is the third poem of the collection, is named "The Seraph and the Poet". The sonnet contrasts the seraph, who sings before God in heaven, with the poet who sings "upon the earth grave-riven"(line 6). The Hebrew word seraph, with its alien sound, appears four times in the sonnet, as well as the word "Amen":

The seraph sings before the manifest
God-One, and in the burning of the Seven
And ends with the Hebrew word Amen:
The universe's inward voices cry
'Amen' to either song of joy and woe.
Sing, seraph,-poet,-sing on equally!
(p. 124, lines 1–6)

"On a Portrait of Wordsworth by B.R. Haydon", the third sonnet of the collection, continues with biblical references implying the importance of Hebrew. Wordsworth's image is painted by Haydon is described as follows:

Takes here his rightful place as poet-priest
By the high altar, singing prayer and prayer
To the higher Heavens.
(p. 125, lines 9–11)

EBB's adoration of Wordsworth presents him as the poet–prophet by comparing him to the figure of the High Priest, allowed to pronounce the ineffable name and obtaining a direct connection with God. This theme continues in the second volume of *Poems* (Barrett 1844), which begins with another long poem, "A Vision of Poets", in which EBB aims to express her view of the mission of the poet. This mission is overshadowed by what EBB describes in the preface as a crisis in the perception of the poet by the audience:

In the eyes of the living generation, the poet is at once a richer and poorer man than he used to be; he wears better broadcloth, but speaks no more oracles: and the evil of this social incrustation over a great idea, is eating deeper and more fatally into our literature, than either readers or writers may apprehend fully. (pp. xi–xii)

The preface reveals EBB's desire to produce "oracles" in the biblical sense in her poetry. In "A Vision of Poets", a poet who cannot sleep follows the image of a lady who judges poets' achievements; he learns a lesson of suffering by drinking from the pools of World's use, World's love, World's cruelty, and a nameless pool; and finally sacrifices himself to God. The Hebrew word יברך appears when the lady describes how the words of dead poets turn into music by God who breathes them back into the world.[7] The Hebrew word thus appears at the moment of divine "translation"–marking the communication between God and the poets, and between God and humanity:

Harken, poet, whom I led
From the dark wood: dismissing dread,
Now hear this angel in my stead.

His organ's clavier strikes along
These poets' hearts, sonorous, strong,
They gave him without count of wrong,—

A diapason whence to guide
Up to G-od's feet, from these who died,
An anthem fully glorified—

Whereat God's blessing, Ibarak (יברך)

Breathes back this music, folds it back
About the earth in vapoury rack,

And men walk in it, crying ' Lo
The world is wider, and we know
The very heavens look brighter so:
(p. 28, lines 439–453)

The foreign sounding ending "Ibarak" rhymes with "back" and "rack", continues the fixed rhyme pattern of the entire poem, and merges the Hebrew transliteration with the English text. Unlike in "The Measure" of the previous collection, in "A Vision of Poets", the translation of the Hebrew word is complemented with transliteration, thus leaving a musical echo beyond the Hebrew letters and the translated meaning and emphasizing the sound. The Hebrew word again functions as a Shibboleth, which allows those who can read Hebrew into the poem. However, EBB distinguishes between the Hebrew word attributed to God, connecting between the divine and the seraphs/poets, and the translation which she provides to the reader, the English word "blessing".

"The Dead Pan", which the last poem of the collection, is a reply to Schiller's 1788 poem "Gods of Greece", which mourns the disappearance of the Pagan Gods of Greek mythology. In April 1843, EBB writes to her friend Mary Russell Mitford about the composition of the poem:

> "I take the contrary side of the question; & think the false Gods well gone, & stand up for that best Beauty which is in Truth. I do not follow Schiller's poem, mind . . .I only take the opposite view to his view, & look at it with my own eyes—and for a basement to my poem I refer to that mystic story of Plutarch's which relates that, at the time of the Crucifixion, a wail was heard by voyagers over the Ægæan, crying 'Pan is dead, Pan is dead'!" (The Brownings' Correspondence 1989, vol. 7, p. 70)

Instead, EBB emphasizes God's Word, associated with Hebrew, as a metaphor for elevated poetic language that aligns with her religious beliefs:

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Truth is fair: should we forgo it?
Can we sigh right for a wrong?
God himself is the best Poet,
And the Real is his song.
Sing his truth out fair and full,
And secure his beautiful!
Let Pan be dead.
(p. 274, lines 246–252)

7. Conclusions

EBB's use of Hebrew in her collections of poems published in 1838 and 1844 was sparked by her notion of the poet as a mediator between the human and the divine, with Hebrew serving as a Shibboleth, a powerful trope, with which she constructs a gateway between the sensual and the divine worlds in an attempt to address what she sees as the disastrous position of the poet of her generation that "speaks no more oracles"(Barrett 1844, p. xi). EBB uses Hebrew in order to deliver divine language to her

readers, as part as what she sees as her mission as a poet–prophet. The incorporation of Hebrew into "The Measure" of 1838 and "A Vision of Poets" of 1844 demonstrates this approach, which reflects the status of Hebrew as being imbued with symbolical capital. However, the Hebrew language is also the language of the Jewish minority, and EBB deserts its use after 1844 as a result of her anxiety about her reputation as a "Hebraic monster", and the association with contemporary Jewish people (Scheinberg 2002, p. 62). When she realizes that this Shibboleth is not only a gateway to "divine" language but may also distance her from her readers, she abandons the use of Hebrew in her public writing.

This paper can be seen in the wider context of the religious crises of the nineteenth century due to the influential work of the Higher Critics who undermined the status of the Scriptures (Hair 2015, p. 82). The anxiety revolving around the authority of the Scriptures is transferred to the literary realm and influences EBB's choice to use Hebrew in 1838 and 1844 so as to assign religious authority to her poems. It would be interesting to further explore the ambivalence towards poetic references to Hebrew in light of this dwindling of biblical authority in the Victorian era.

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Notes

1 Although Elizabeth Barrett Moulton-Barrett became Elizabeth Barrett Browning only after her marriage to Robert Browning in 1846, most scholarly works refer to her using these initials. This is also the way in which she signed her letters.

2 See (Mermin 1989, p. 220; Scheinberg 2002, p. 67; Lewis 1998, p. 2; Dieleman 2012, p. 25; Dyck 2020, p. 67; and Hair 2015, p. 280).

3 In *Judges* 12:6, the Gileadites use the two pronunciations of the Hebrew word Shibboleth (meaning an ear of wheat or corn) to find out whether those trying to pass the River Jordan were Ephraimites and should be allowed to enter or be killed outright.

4 EBB's tumultuous relationship with her father, who disowned her after her marriage to Robert Browning, was explored by many scholars (see Karlin 1985, pp. 20–35).

5 George Bush was a professor of Hebrew at New York University who published *A Grammar of the Hebrew Language* in 1835 and became a follower of Swedenborg's mystical theories in the 1840s (Goldman 2004, pp. 305–6).

6 The full titles of these volumes are *Biblia Hebraica Sine Punctis* Acc. Nat. Forster, Oxon (1750) and *Vetus Testamentum secundum Septuaginta Seniorum interpretationem juxta exemplar vaticanum summa cura denuo recusum; adjiciuntur editionis Brabianae variae lectiones*. Londini: Sumptibus Samuelis Bagster, 15, Paternoster Row, MDCCCXXVIII (Elia 2014, p. 9).

7 Scheinberg (2002) suggests that "it is specifically a 'lady' with prophetic powers who repeats God's Hebrew word, thus making the visionary representative of all religious verse a Hebrew-speaking woman", resisting the religious authority of men (p. 74).

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