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Between the Bridge and the Barricade: Jewish Translation in Early Modern Europe

Iris Idelson-Shein

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Between the Bridge and the Barricade is the work of a cultural historian whose work led her to search through "the Jewish library" that underlay Jewish translation. Her study focuses mainly on the Spanish, Italian, and middle European strands of translation. Adopting current trends in translation studies, she re-interprets Jewish translation in early modern Europe from 1450 to 1800. Her story is an account of cultural dialogue in which "Translation ... served as a way of bringing Jews and Christians together, but also of setting them apart" (p. 160).

The volume begins with two one-page technical sections. "Notes on Translation" informs readers that all translations are the author's own, unless noted otherwise. Biblical texts quoted in English are normally from the King James Version (KJV). Other translations are referenced as the translators themselves referred to their own work (p. ix). A list of six abbreviations is given. First among them is JEWTACT, the Jewish Translation and Cultural Transfer in Early Modern Europe Database (p. xi). The main text of the work, comprising four chapters of research and findings, is sandwiched between an informative "Introduction" and an incisive "Conclusion".

Five supplementary units provide supporting material. A three-page appendix describes the JEWTACT database, which constitutes the rich corpus on which Idelson-Shein carried out her study. (https://aranne5.bgu.ac.il/jtact/index.php).

Endnotes are given for all text sections of the work, ranging from brief one-line citations to fifteen-or-so line paragraphs of comment or proposed additional reading.

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A bibliography consists of six pages of primary sources and twenty-two pages of secondary sources. The author's notes provide evidence of familiarity with a significant amount of pertinent background information.

A four and a quarter-page index provides location by page reference to key terms, personalities, locations, foreign language terms, and general topics. "Bible translation" is cited as a general entry, with several sub-entries; "Martin Luther" is a personage entry with several page citations.

Book Introduction

The translation history within which our author locates her work extends over more than two millennia, that is, from the translation of the Septuagint up to the present day. Her own work is located *in medias res*, so to speak, in early modern Europe.

Quoting the historian Louis Kelly, "Western Europe owes its civilization to translators," the author articulates the theme of her work, namely, Europe owes its existence to translation. Narrowing her field, she specifies that her focus is on European Jewish translation that occurred in the historical period between 1450 and 1800. Her research seeks out the non-Jewish source—"the terra incognita"—of the intensely creative Jewish translators of the time (p. 4). Inspired by recent translation studies scholars, e.g., Naomi Seidman, Anthony Pym, Maria Tymoczko, Lawrence Venuti, and others, she presses the concept of ghettoization into a two-way centuries-long dialogue between Christians and Jews that reaches into "the Judaization of non-Jewish culture" (p. 9).

The author concludes her introductory statement with a summary of the structure of the book. Four main chapters "aim to offer a holistic view of Jewish translation in early modern Europe, focusing on translation from European to Jewish languages," attempting "to answer the fundamental questions surrounding the phenomenon of Jewish translation" as she understands them (p. 13). Four separate paragraphs summarize the content of each chapter.

1 From metaphors to mechanisms: Facts and figures of Jewish translation in early modern Europe

Playing upon the alliteration of "metaphors" and "mechanisms", Idelson-Shein presents the vast diversity that existed across the scope of Jewish translation from medieval times into the early modern period. The translations are from Hebrew into other languages, but also from other languages into Hebrew and the developing languages of Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Italian, and others. She divides people mainly into three groups—Spanish, Italian, Ashkenazi—with Hebrew script distinguishing Jewish translations from other language translations.

She discusses what was translated over the three centuries being reviewed, asking questions of identity of translators and intended audiences. She points out the difficulty of identifying "community" across the spectrum of history and geography. She observes that cultural exchange takes place over time between Jewish and Christian communities but affirms that the mechanisms of exchange are not well known.

Special attention is drawn to the absence of Jewish women translators. The author is unable to identify a single Jewish woman translator, a situation that occurs in striking contrast to other European language groups. She does give examples of women reading translations, and of having an interest in children's literature in Hebrew. She posits several possible reasons for the widespread absence of women in the Hebrew literary expression during this period of dramatic European cultural development, but none is convincing (pp. 55–58).

Seven illustrations in the form of graphs, line and circle drawings, and columns depict the variety and complexity of the author's research material. Figure 1 presents the number of Jewish translations by Italian Jews from 1200 to 1800; figure 2 is translations by Ashkenazi Jews over the same period of time; figure 4 gives the percentages of translated texts into Hebrew, Yiddish, and Judeo-Italian from 1500 to 1800; figure 5 gives the percentages of European source languages—German, Latin, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, English, other, and unknown—for translation into Jewish languages from 1500 to 1800, etc.

2 Ploughing a field to which you have no claim: The question of motivation

Iris Idelson-Shein, as researcher-writer, delves into the quandary of translation motivation with a quotation from the Jewish translator poet David Hofshi Franco Mendes, "Tell me poet, what have you done? … Ploughing a field to which you have no claim" (p. 59). The poet's threefold reference is an allusion to the Hebrew text of Isaiah 2:6, "they please themselves in the children of strangers" (p. 81). Samson's dramatic response to the Philistines, "If ye had not plowed with my heifer, ye had not found out my riddle" (Judges 14:18 KJV), and the promise of the Israelites returning to Jerusalem from exile, "And that we would not give our daughters unto the people of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons" (Nehemiah 10:30 KJV), all position translation and its dangers within the highest values of Israelite life.

The study of motivation may be reduced to a simple question, "Why translate?" Drawing from the work of Hans J. Vermeer and Katharina Reis and other translation scholars, the historian turned linguist seeks to identify the wider effects of translation that may be beneficial or nefarious, like children of strangers (pp. 59–60). For the Jewish communities of the early modern Europe

diaspora, the effect could bring about fortification of religious belief and practice, it could be recovering lost Jewish knowledge, or it could have a role of gatekeeping, building bridges or creating barricades in the context of specific social and political situations.

The author's discussion of motivation concludes by citing Herbert Schleiermacher's contention that "either translators leave the writer in peace as much as possible and move the reader toward the writer, or they leave the reader in peace and move the writer toward the reader" (p. 88). She sees the Jewish translators holding to both sides of the equation in an ambivalent manner.

3 Translation as Judaization: The norms of Jewish translation

Translation as Judaization may be seen as an overarching statement about the role or the effect of translation in the Jewish setting defined or set apart in the author's study. However, the chapter heading is modified by a subheading leading the reader to a particular aspect of the subject, namely, the norms by which it is practiced or to which it is held. In so doing, she again takes recourse to translation studies in the work of linguist Gideon Toury, as "the translation of general values or norms shared by a community" (p. 89). Untranslatability, a topic of interest to many translators, is duly recognized (pp. 36, 113).

The author envelops the immense creativity and re-creation that she has located in Jewish translation within the concept of "ethics". Acknowledging the source of the translated text, or not, may be considered an ethical choice. The source may be concealed casually or deliberately in various ways. Illustration 8 (p. 91) gives the percentages of non-Jewish texts not identified in Jewish translations from 1500 to 1775; illustration 9 (p. 139) gives the percentages of acknowledgment of translations in Ashkenazi from 1650 to 1830. The result of the absence of source text information gave the impression that a text was Jewish, especially when written in Hebrew script (p. 157).

4 Between the trickle and the tide: Maskilic translations around the turn of the eighteenth century

The author creates a comparative metaphor, "between the trickle and the tide", from Ezekiel's vision of a temple. The prophet describes the "waters" that flow out from under the threshold of the new temple. Repeatedly measuring a thousand cubits, the water reaches up to the ankles, then to the loins; afterward it is a river "that could not be passed over" (Ezekiel 47:3–5 KJV). The flowing water would bring healing and life to the people of Israel and their land (47:9–12).

The translation historian is not alluding to a life and death event, but to a significant change in the German-Jewish literary scene at the end of the

eighteenth century, that is, the rise of modern Jewish literature from a trickle to a tide, and the widely held belief that it owed this rise to German scholarship in Berlin in the late nineteenth century (p. 127). Given the extensive record of Jewish translation that begins in the sixteenth century, the author postulates "a mammoth Haskalah" that begins long before the European Enlightenment and ends long after it (p. 131).

Idelson-Shein draws us into the translation shift to extensive domestication with the example of texts like the Yiddish version of *Robinson Crusoe* that had been translated into German by Joachim Heinrich Campe published in 1779. In the new rendering in 1820, attributed to Yoslef Vitlin, a Christian Crusoe becomes a Jewish merchant, and his slave, named Shabes, is given an African appearance (p. 140). Travel tales, with fantastic destinations, impossibly difficult journeys, like the biblical Exodus, with success not always guaranteed, may reflect the translators' own conflict and loss, wanting to return home (p. 152).

Conclusion—Of bridges and barricades

Idelson-Shein credits the origin of her study of bridges and barricades to the fortuitous activity of Serendipity (p. 250). The metaphor of the bridge signals movement, passage from one space to another. In translation, it expresses the act and signification of crossing over, carrying a message across, or changing something from one form to another without changing the transported object. A barricade is more likely associated with the restriction of movement, of the denial of freedom. Forceful blockage and enclosures are not commonly associated with translation, though translations can create barriers (p. 156).

The author's story is two-fold, firstly, a new review of Jewish translators, their craft, and their creations over a three hundred fifty-year period in early modern Europe. Secondly, it is a re-evaluation and assertion of the collaboration between Jews and Christians over the centuries in post-Medieval Europe up to pre-modern times.

Reviewer final comments

For the present reader, as a translator-reviewer, the title of the work, together with its cover design, project a powerful image regarding the message of the work. The author's juxtaposition of bridge and barricade in the book title, with the definite article in English, and the harshness of the consonants in standard English pronunciation, may transport a potential reader's mind to more ominous political realities than are intended by the author-historian.

The format of the 252-page volume, the clarity of type-size and font style, especially given the different languages represented in the work, together with

a total absence of typographical and other editorial peccadilloes, a reasonable price for a quality volume, as well as the author's gentle tone and convincing argument, all make for a most welcome addition to translation scholarship.

Postscript—Jewish Bible translation studies 2018–2020

Two works appeared barely a half decade before *Between the Bridge and the Barricade* that I would present as constituting significant precedents to Idelson-Shein's work in modern Jewish Bible translation studies.

A History of German Jewish Bible Translation by Abigail Gillman, Professor of Hebrew, German, and comparative literature at Boston University, 2018, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press (reviewed by Christoph Rösel in *The Bible Translator*, April 2024, 75(1): 109–111, https://doi.org/10.1177/20516770241233943).

Jewish Bible Translations: Personalities, Passions, Politics, Progress by Leonard Greenspoon, Professor of theology and classical and Near Eastern studies at Creighton University, 2020, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, and Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press (reviewed by Philip A. Noss in *International Bulletin of Mission Research,* 2023, 47(1): 121–128, https://doi.org/10.1177/23969393221114168).