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The Use of Biblicizing Techniques in Isaac Salkinson's Hebrew Translations: Hebrew Literature and Christian Mission

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Abstract

In this article, I examine the character and reception of the Hebrew translations of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Shakespeare's *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Tiedge's *Urania*, and the New Testament produced in the second half of the nineteenth century by Isaac Salkinson, a Jew converted to Christianity and employed as a missionary by the British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Jews. I focus on a salient feature of these translations, that is the use of biblicizing techniques. In contrast to previous studies, I tie the production of all of Salkinson's translations to his activity as a missionary.

Keywords

Biblical Hebrew, Haskalah, Jewish–Christian relations, Milton, New Testament, Shakespeare, translation studies

Isaac E. Salkinson was a Jew of Eastern European origin who converted to Christianity in London in 1849.¹ He studied for four years at the short-lived Jewish Mission College of the British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Jews on Stamford Street, London. He subsequently studied at Divinity Hall of the United Presbyterian Church in Edinburgh and was ordained minister in Glasgow in 1859. He worked as a missionary of the United

Presbyterian Synod of Scotland to the Jews in Hamburg, and, from late 1865, for the British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Jews as a missionary at Pressburg, that is, Bratislava.² From there, he was also active in the nearby city of Vienna, to which he then transferred in 1876.³

Since shortly after his conversion and until his sudden death in 1883,⁴ Salkinson published Hebrew translations of the following books: Paul's Epistle to the Romans (1855);⁵ *Philosophy of the Plan of Salvation by an American Citizen* (1858);⁶ the first book of John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1862);⁷ *Paradise Lost* (full, 1870);⁸ Shakespeare's *Othello* (1874);⁹ Christoph August Tiedge's *Urania* (1876);¹⁰ and *Romeo and Juliet* (1878).¹¹ From 1877, Salkinson was preparing a Hebrew translation of the New Testament, which was completed after his death by Christian David Ginsburg and published in 1885.¹²

During his years as a missionary in Pressburg and Vienna, Salkinson was in contact with a number of progressive Jewish intellectuals based in Vienna,¹³ namely with Rabbi Adolf Jellinek and Peretz Smolenskin, a prolific author and editor associated with the Haskalah movement. These Jewish intellectuals had a keen interest in Salkinson's translation work and also influenced it considerably.

This article will attempt to examine this unusual Jewish–Christian encounter, which was centred on a mutual interest in the Hebrew language. We will begin by surveying the views of Jewish literati on Salkinson's translations and especially on his use of the Hebrew language, and then examine the Hebrew used by Salkinson, as well as his own conceptions on the matter.

The reception of Salkinson's translations in the Jewish world

Salkinson's translations were highly acclaimed by Jewish literati in his time as well as in later periods. In their appraisals, what his admirers stress the most is Salkinson's strict adherence to and virtuoso use of biblical language. Hence, in Peretz Smolenskin's review of Salkinson's translation of *Paradise Lost*, he writes:

The translator has truly excelled in this translation, for not only is it undiscernible that the style (*meliza*) was transferred from one vessel to another, but *we may believe that we are hearing the idiom of the Prophets in his visions*. Without hesitation, we may affirm that until this day no book has ever been translated from a foreign language into Hebrew with so much taste.¹⁴

It seems that Smolenskin, as well as others (see *infra*) as we will see, admired Salkinson's use of Biblical Hebrew within the framework of the project of expanding the use of Hebrew as the national language of the Jewish people.¹⁵ Thus, in his introduction to Salkinson's translation of *Romeo and Juliet*, Smolenskin wrote:

Now I will praise the work of the honest man who spends his time and effort in order to do nothing but grace to our wretched language – made wretched by those that revile it, but even more wretched by the many who love it, who throw abominations upon it in their love for it Therefore, how shall I not recognize the works of this man who has the power to show its beauty and grace to all, who miraculously puts in the mouth of the visionary Shakespeare words like the words of the prophet Isaiah.¹⁶

According to Smolenskin, then, unlike lovers of the Hebrew language who deface it by adding to it 'impure' elements in their enthusiasm for it, Salkinson brings out the beauty of the Hebrew language by using 'words like the words of the prophet Isaiah', that is, Biblical Hebrew, which he does in a most elegant manner.

Since Smolenskin and other members of the Haskalah movement viewed Salkinson's translations as assets to the Jewish national project of expanding the use of Hebrew, several of them went to great lengths in order to justify the use, for this purpose, of the works of a convert and a Christian missionary. Two strategies may be noted in their thinking on this troubling fact. First, some Jewish literati argued in favour of intellectual impartiality in regard to Salkinson's work – that is, they claimed that his translations should be judged on their own merits without regards to their author's convictions or deeds. Hence, the maskilic critic Alexander Halevi Langebank wrote to Salkinson regarding his translation of *Paradise Lost*:

For now, it may be enough for you to know that the style of the language is, in general, good, and that I consider you to be a skilled writer who has marvellous power and might in the Holy Tongue. You may also know, Sir, that in matters of literature I judge uprightly only according to the work that lays before me and according to the principles established in this matter. I am not influenced by anything else that is not connected with the subject matter.¹⁷

Another strategy for dealing with the gap between Salkinson's well-regarded literary works and his Christian identity was identifying within him a 'Jewishness' that was separate from his

‘Christianness’. For example, the writer Moshe Kamionsky recalled that he had said the following to Salkinson:

Excuse me, Sir, if I tell you my thoughts frankly. There are two powers in your soul – an attracting power and a repelling one. As a Hebrew writer and poet, you attract all the lovers of the Hebrew language, but when you preach to the sons of your people in order to bring them into the new religion – you are then like smoke in the eyes of those who love and respect you.¹⁸

It may be noted that a similar approach to Salkinson and his works may be found in the writings of Jewish scholars until quite recently.¹⁹

Now that we have seen that what the Jewish literati appreciated most in Salkinson’s translations was his successful use of Biblical Hebrew, we will turn to Salkinson himself.

The use of biblicizing techniques in Salkinson’s translations

Except for his second Hebrew translation, that of *Philosophy of the Plan of Salvation*, all of Salkinson’s translations reflect his intention to translate into biblical language, although he does occasionally waive this rule or simply slip. This intention is indicated in the paratexts of some of his first translations. For example, the last line of the title page of Salkinson’s translation of *Paradise Lost* reads: ‘Translated into Judean [Yehudit] in clear language with the stylus of the Holy Scriptures’.²⁰ Not only does this phrase refer explicitly to the Holy Scriptures, but it also calls the language used in the translation ‘Yehudit’, which is a name for the Hebrew language that appears in the Bible and is uncommon in post-biblical Hebrew.

Furthermore, in the translations themselves, Salkinson employed various techniques in order to give the texts a biblical tint. First, for some widespread notions, Salkinson sometimes uses distinctly biblical words, such as the pronouns אֲנֹכִי – ‘I’,²¹ and נִהְיֶנוּ – ‘we’,²² or the numeral עֶשְׂרֵי עֶשְׂרֵה – ‘eleven’.²³

Second, Salkinson sometimes uses grammatical forms that are characteristic of Biblical Hebrew, such as the *wayyiqtol*, *weqatal*, cohortative and jussive verbal forms, the infinitive absolute, the paragogic *nun* and the pronominal suffix -מוּ.

Third, the biblicizing technique most frequently used by Salkinson in the translations is the incorporation of entire phrases from the Hebrew Bible that are cited literally or with minor adaptations to their new context (*shibbuz*). Examples of this may be found on almost every page in all of his translations; the following ones are taken from the Shakespeare translations.²⁴

From time to time, Salkinson manages to find a biblical phrase that renders a phrase of his source text in a surprisingly accurate manner. For instance, he translates Othello’s affirmation, ‘Rude am I in my speech’,²⁵ into לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנֹכִי – ‘I am not a man of words’.²⁶ This Hebrew phrase is taken literally from Exodus 4:10, where it is used by Moses in order to say that he is not a talented speaker, which is also what Othello is saying here.

Much more often, Salkinson uses biblical phrases in order to render phrases of the source text with which they have certain aspects in common but from which they also differ more or less significantly. For example, when Desdemona’s father accuses Othello of having bewitched his daughter with ‘some dram’²⁷ – that is, a small quantity of potion²⁸ – Salkinson translates the expression into מֵיִם מְאָרְרִים – ‘water that brings a curse’.²⁹ This Hebrew expression is taken from the description of the ordeal of a woman suspected of adultery in Numbers 5:11–31. However, in the biblical text, this ‘water that brings a curse’, which is drunk by the woman, is supposed to

determine if she has committed adultery or not; it certainly is not a potion than makes her fall in love.

Finally, sometimes Salkinson introduces into the translated text phrases from the Hebrew Bible that do not render any phrase of the source text. For example, into Iago's assertion that Desdemona will be united with a horse, Salkinson adds the phrase וְהָיוּ לְבָשָׂר אֶחָד – 'and they shall become one flesh'³⁰ – which comes from a well-known verse on the union between man and woman in Genesis 2:24.

Salkinson's reasons for using biblical language

In evaluating Salkinson's reasons for biblicizing in his translations, we must distinguish between the translations he produced as missionary materials at the beginning and at the end of his career – his translations of the Epistle to the Romans, *Paradise Lost*³¹ and the New Testament – and his translations of non-missionary works published between 1874 and 1878 – Shakespeare's two plays and Tiedge's *Urania*. Two reasons for using biblical language in the first group of translations may be deduced from Salkinson's writings.

First, Salkinson believed that Biblical Hebrew was the appropriate kind of Hebrew for books of a 'scriptural' nature, such as the New Testament and *Paradise Lost* that he claimed was 'based from start to finish on the Holy Books'.³² Hence, in criticizing a previous Hebrew translation of the New Testament, Salkinson wrote: 'It abounds unduly with Aramaean forms, vulgar expressions, and Rabbinical idioms; all of which appear to the lover of genuine Hebrew incompatible with the character of inspired Scripture'.³³

Second, Salkinson thought Jews had a special appreciation for Biblical Hebrew and might therefore be induced to read Christian books written in this kind of language. He thus wrote in a letter to Franz Delitzsch:

We must remember that our New Testament is intended chiefly for our unconverted brethren. Therefore it may be of some service to have it in a style which the Jews have not yet forgotten to appreciate, that is, the Biblical Hebrew.³⁴

As for Salkinson's translations of Shakespeare's plays and Tiedge's *Urania*, his motivations for biblicizing in them stem chiefly from the fact that Salkinson produced these translations at the request of his Jewish acquaintances in Vienna, whose special appreciation for biblical language he knew. Hence, it was Smolenskin who had requested that Salkinson translate *Othello* and *Romeo and Juliet*, as Smolenskin himself stated in his introductions to both translations:

And how my heart rejoices, when I remember that it was I who stirred the translator's spirit to undertake this task. (Introduction to *Ithiel*)³⁵

I have already told you that you are the only man who can bring this precious object into the treasure house of our language, and I have already asked and begged you to do so.

(Introduction to *Ram and Jael*)³⁶

Furthermore, in a letter to Jellinek, which serves as an introduction to the translation of *Urania*, Salkinson wrote: 'You read the book *Urania* in your youth, and you found its words to be good

and right. You did not mind that the author was of a different covenant, and when I came to see you, you did not tell me: “What is there between you and me? Go to the prophets of the new covenant.” You received me kindly and also told me that I would do good to the House of Israel, if I translated this book for them’.³⁷

Salkinson’s hope that the style of the translations would please his Jewish acquaintances is reflected in his letter to Jellinek: ‘If you find in it [in the book] anything good, if you agree that its aim is the fear of heaven, and *if its style (meliza) also pleases you*, then please treat it with respect before the elders of your people, and write upon it that it is legitimate’.³⁸

Finally, it must be noted that although Salkinson did not perceive his translations of Shakespeare’s plays and *Urania* as missionary materials, he seemed to have considered their production as a part of his missionary work, for he wrote: ‘My Missionary work consists in personal intercourse with my brethren, in corresponding with them, and *especially in writing treatises in Hebrew on their behalf*’.³⁹ This seemingly odd conception may be clarified by the fact that Salkinson viewed his relations with the maskilic Jews as an important part of his missionary work, a view that is reflected several times in his communication with the British Society for the Propagation of the Gospel among the Jews. Hence, in January 1876, the secretary of the Society wrote after a trip to Vienna: ‘Rev. J.E. Salkinson, who has already paid missionary visits to Vienna, and *received a welcome into some of the most influential circles*, will take up his position permanently there early in the year’.⁴⁰ And a few months later, Salkinson reported to the Society from Vienna:

I also come into frequent contact with some of their leading spirits – men who are renowned for their writing, both in Hebrew and German, and who have taken upon

themselves to be judges of Christian doctrine. When they treat *Jewish* subjects it is generally with great acuteness and originality, but *Christian* topics are differently handled. Sometimes they ask me to help them, to which I respond as far as I can; for though this is not the direct preaching of the Gospel, I hope thus to influence the minds of these men to a better understanding of it; so that their writings may ultimately serve our cause, and pave the way to the truth.⁴¹

In conclusion, we shall attempt to put the different elements of Isaac Salkinson's story in chronological order. After his conversion, Salkinson began translating into Hebrew Christian books, which he destined for use in the mission to the Jews. In two of these translations – those of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans and of Milton's *Paradise Lost* – Salkinson developed a particularly biblicizing style, since he believed that these two books were closely connected with the Hebrew Bible and since he hoped that this kind of Hebrew would make the books appealing to Jewish readers. The Jewish members of the Haskalah movement greatly appreciated Salkinson's biblicizing style, and thus personal contact was established between Salkinson and a few of them in Vienna. Salkinson viewed this contact as an important aspect of his work as a missionary among the Jews, and nurtured it, *inter alia*, by agreeing to produce translations of works his Jewish acquaintances especially wished to see translated into Hebrew – two of Shakespeare's plays and Tiedge's *Urania*. As a final remark, it may be noted that this unusual Jewish-Christian encounter was made possible by the similarity of views held by Christian circles and by the Jewish national movement regarding the special status of Biblical Hebrew and of Israel's biblical past.⁴²

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Notes

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1. John Dunlop, *Memories of Gospel Triumphs among the Jews during the Victorian Era* (London: S.W. Partridge; John Snow, 1894), 373–375; Samuel Leib Zitron, מאחורי הפרגוד: מומרים, מתכחשים [Behind the Curtain: Converts, Traitors, Deniers], Part 2 (Vilnius: Zvi Matz, 1925), 37.
 2. ‘Designation of a Jewish Missionary’, *The Jewish Herald* (1 November 1865), 172–173.
 3. *The Jewish Herald* (1 April 1876), 57.
 4. Dunlop, *Memories*, 386.
 5. *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans, Translated into Hebrew from the Original Greek*, by Isaac Salkinson (Edinburgh: Robert Young, 1855).
 6. *Philosophy of the Plan of Salvation by an American Citizen* (Altona, 1858) סוד הישועה.
 7. [There Is No Paradise: Proverb and Parable; Divided into Twelve Books] (Altona: Gebrüder Bonn, [1862]). פרדס אין: משל ומליצה. נחלק לשנים עשר ספרים.
 8. [So He Drove Out the Man], *Milton’s Paradise Lost in Hebrew Blank Verse*. ויגרש את האדם.
 9. [Ithiel the Cushite of Venice], *Othello the Moor of Venice by Shakspeare Translated into Hebrew* (Vienna: Spitzer & Holzwarth Jun., 1874). איתיאל הכושי מוינעצ'א.
 10. *Ben Koheleth nach Chr. Aug. Tidge’s Urania* (Vienna: Georg Brög, 1876).
 11. [Ram and Jael], *Shakspeare’s Romeo & Juliet Translated into Hebrew by J.E.S.* (Vienna: Georg Brög, 1878). רם ויעל.

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12. Dunlop, *Memories*, 375, 384.
13. For vivid descriptions of Salkinson's relations with Smolenskin, see Israel Cohen, 'יצחק אדוארד זלקינסון: חייו ומפעלו הספרותי' [Isaac Edward Salkinson: His Life and Literary Work] (Tel Aviv: Mesillah, 1942), 24–32.
14. Published in *HaShahar*, quoted in Cohen, *Salkinson*, 34; the emphasis is mine.
15. See Lily Kahn, 'Maskilic Hebrew', in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*, ed. Geoffrey Khan et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 2:581–585.
16. *Ram and Jael*, V.
17. Alexander Halevi Langebank, 'אגרות בקורת', בית אוצר הספרות [Literary Treasurehouse, 'Critical Writings'], *Magazin für hebräische Literatur und Wissenschaft, Poesie und Belletristik*, I. Jahrgang (Jaroslau: Zupnik, Knoller et Hammerschmidt, 1887), 30–37, here 33.
18. Cohen, *Salkinson*, 27.
19. Ibid., 41, 95; Aminadav Dikman, 'אחרית דבר: יצחק אדוארד זלקינסון – לדיוקנו של קלסיקון עברי בתרגום' [Afterword: Isaac Edward Salkinson – A Portrait of a Classic Hebrew Author in Translation], in *Ithiel the Cushite of Venice* (Beer Sheva: Raav, 2015), 235.
20. *So He Drove Out the Man*, title page.
21. *Ram and Jael*, 3, 4, 28, 37, 43, 105, 143, 147, 163, 165.
22. *Ithiel*, 7; *Ram and Jael*, 32, 88.
23. *Ram and Jael*, 22, 23.
24. For Shakespeare's plays, see Lily Kahn, *The First Hebrew Shakespeare Translations. Isaac Edward Salkinson's Ithiel the Cushite of Venice and Ram and Jael* (London: UCL Press, 2017), 18–19; Hanna Scolnicov, 'The Hebrew Who Turned Christian: The First Translator of Shakespeare into the Holy Tongue', *Shakespeare Survey* 54 (2001), 182–189, here 187–189. For

the New Testament, see S.R. Driver, 'Two Hebrew New Testaments', *The Expositor*, 3rd series, vol. III (1886), 260–275, here 267–271; and Dunlop, *Memories*, 384–385.

25. *Othello* 1.3.

26. *Ithiel*, 22.

27. *Othello* 1.3.

28. Sujata Iyengar, *Shakespeare's Medical Language: A Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), *s.v.*

29. *Ithiel*, 23.

30. *Ibid.*, 7.

31. On the missionary purpose of the translation of *Paradise Lost*, see Dunlop, *Memories*, 374.

32. *Ithiel*, XXXIV.

33. *Romans*, i–ii.

34. Franz Delitzsch, 'In Self-Defence: Critical Observations on My Hebrew New Testament', *The Expositor*, 3rd series, vol. IX, (1889), 135–141, here 138.

35. *Ithiel*, XXXI.

36. *Ram and Jael*, V.

37. *Ben Koheleth*, V.

38. *Ibid.*, VI; the emphasis is mine.

39. Dunlop, *Memories*, 373; the emphasis is mine.

40. 'Notes of a Visit to Mission Stations in Europe', *The Jewish Herald* (1 January 1876), 6; the emphasis is mine.

41. *The Jewish Herald* (1 November 1876), 171. In an article published in 1873, Salkinson explained the importance of 'making friends of the Jews' for the missionary project, even if this

does not result in conversions: ‘To the Editor of the Jewish Herald’, *The Jewish Herald* (1 July 1873), 136. It should be noted that some of Salkinson’s statements suggest that he did not think the Society would approve of his translations of non-missionary works; see Kahn, *The First Hebrew Shakespeare Translations*, 8–9.

42. Regarding the rise of interest in Biblical Hebrew in the Christian world during the nineteenth century, see Holger Gzella, ‘Expansion of the Linguistic Context of the Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: Hebrew among the Languages of the Ancient Near East’, chapter 6 of *Hebrew Bible / Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation. Volume III – From Modernism to Post-Modernism (The Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries)*, ed. Magne Sæbø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 134–167.