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Why Was the New Testament Translated into Hebrew?

An Introduction to the History of Hebrew Translations of the New Testament

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Abstract: After offering a short overview of the history of Hebrew translations of the New Testament from the Middle Ages to our time, this article focuses on the purposes of the different translations as reflected in what has been written and said about them by the translators themselves and by other people involved in their dissemination. Five such purposes are identified: 1. Jewish polemics against Christianity in the Middle Ages. 2. Christian study of the Hebrew language. 3. The quest for the Hebrew “original” of the New Testament. 4. The mission to the Jews. 5. The needs of the Christian communities in the State of Israel. Concluding remarks are then made regarding the way in which Hebrew translations of the New Testament were perceived throughout the ages and regarding the role they played.

Keywords: Jewish-Christian relations; translation studies; Bible translation

The first fragment of a New Testament passage translated into Hebrew that has come down to us is probably from the end of the 9th century.¹ It is a Hebrew translation of the Lord’s Prayer written in Latin transcription.² From the 12th century onwards, continuous production of translations of New Testament passages and books into Hebrew is attested.³ In general, these translations can be divided into three groups.

The first group comprises translations of chosen passages that are incorporated in Jewish polemical writings against Christianity from the Middle Ages.⁴ We find such translated passages in the *Book of Nestor Hakkomer*⁵ as well as in Jacob ben Reuben’s *Wars of the Lord*,⁶ both probably written in the 12th century; in the *Book of Joseph the Zealous* by Joseph ben Nathan Official from the 13th century; in the anonymous *Old Book of Victory (Nizzahon Vetus)* also from the 13th century. In the polemical book *The Touchstone (Eben Bohan)* written by Shem Tov ibn Shaprut in Spain at the end of the 14th century, we find the first Hebrew translation of an entire New Testament book – the Gospel of Matthew.⁷

1 In the fourth century, Epiphanius mentioned Hebrew translations of the Gospel of John and of the Book of Acts – Epiphanius, *Panarion*, 30.3,8–9; 6,12; 12,10; Horbury, “The Hebrew Text of Matthew in Shem Tob ibn Shaprut’s *Eben Bohan*”, 738, footnote 28.

2 Carmignac, “Hebrew Translations of the Lord’s Prayer”, 21; Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church*, 7–8.

3 For the history of Hebrew translations of the New Testament, see the seminal book: Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church*. A very useful list of translations produced notably since the 16th century in the Christian world is provided in Carmignac, *The four Gospels Translated into Hebrew by William Greenfield*, VII–X.

4 An overview of this phenomenon as well as analyses of specific translations of this kind can be found in Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church*, 20–52.

5 See Lasker and Stroumsa, *The Polemic of Nestor the Priest*.

6 Rosenthal, “The Translation of the Gospel of Matthew by Jacob ben Reuben”.

7 Much has been written on this Hebrew version of the Gospel of Matthew. A critical edition of it has been published: Howard, *Hebrew Gospel of Matthew*. Important studies of this translation are: Marx, “The Polemical Manuscripts in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America”; Garshowitz, “Shem Ṭob ben Isaac Ibn Shaprut’s Gospel of Matthew”; Horbury, “The Hebrew Text of Matthew in Shem Tob ibn Shaprut’s *Eben Bohan*”; Petersen, “The *Vorlage* of Shem-Tob’s ‘Hebrew Matthew’”; Niclós, “L’Évangile en hébreu de Shem Tob Ibn Shaprut”.

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The second group includes translations made in the Christian world, either by Christian Hebraists or by converted Jews, notably starting from the 16th century.⁸ The first translation of this sort is the Hebrew version of the Gospel of Matthew, published by the influential Protestant Hebraist Sebastian Münster of Basel in 1537.⁹ Other relatively well-known translations in this group are the translation of the entire New Testament published by the Lutheran Hebraist Elias Hutter in 1599; the translation of the four Gospels published by the Jewish convert to Catholicism Giovanni Battista Iona in 1668;¹⁰ the three consecutive versions of the Hebrew translation of the New Testament published by the *London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews* in 1817, 1838 and 1864;¹¹ the translation made by the prolific and influential German scholar of the Bible and of Judaism, Franz Delitzsch, and first published in 1877;¹² and the translation published in 1885 by the Jewish convert and missionary Isaac Salkinson, who was one of the first translators of literature into Hebrew in the *Haskalah* period – “the Jewish Enlightenment”.¹³

Translations that can be categorized as belonging to a third group are those that were made after the foundation of the State of Israel in 1948, and use Modern Hebrew to different extents. Thus, in the beginning of the 1960s, a Hebrew Missal for the Catholic Mass was produced in Israel and distributed as photocopied booklets. This Missal contained many passages of the New Testament translated into Modern Hebrew by Yehoshua Blum, a Jewish convert to Catholicism, and Yohanan Elihai, a member of the monastic order of the Little Brothers of Jesus.¹⁴ Blum and Elihai later translated into Hebrew the Gospels of Matthew, Luke and John, as well as the First Epistle of Peter.¹⁵ In 1969 Robert Lisle Lindsey, pastor of the Baptist community of Jerusalem and New Testament scholar, published a translation of the Gospel of Mark. In 1974, a Hebrew translation of the entire New Testament made by Jean-Marie Bauchet and David Kinneret was published in Rome. In 1976 was published a translation of the New Testament made by an ecumenical team under the auspices of the United Bible Societies in Israel.¹⁶ Three years later, in 1979, was published הדריך: הברית החדשה – בלשון מדוברת – *The Way: The New Testament in Spoken Language*.¹⁷ And finally, in 2013 the *Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society*, which is associated with Jehovah’s Witnesses, published a new Hebrew translation of the New Testament.¹⁸

Why were these different Hebrew translations of the New Testament made? When examining what has been said regarding these translations by the translators themselves as well as by other people involved in their dissemination – editors, authors that have quoted them in their own writings – one notes that they were considered as serving several purposes. We may identify five such purposes, which played a part in the way the activity of translating the New Testament into Hebrew was conceived by the people involved in it.¹⁹

8 Several of these translations are examined in Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church*, 53–94. Much information can be found in Jean Carmignac’s introductions to the five volumes published in the series *Traductions hébraïques des Évangiles rassemblées par Jean Carmignac*.

9 Shuali, “Les deux versions de l’Évangile de Matthieu en hébreu.”

10 Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc traduits en hébreu en 1668 par Giovanni Battista Iona retouchés en 1805 par Thomas Yeates*; *Idem, Évangiles de Luc et de Jean traduits en hébreu en 1668 par Giovanni Battista Iona retouchés en 1805 par Thomas Yeates*.

11 Carmignac, *The Four Gospels Translated into Hebrew by the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews*.

12 Carmignac, *Die vier Evangelien ins Hebräische übersetzt von Franz Delitzsch*.

13 Scolnicov, “The Hebrew who Turned Christian”; “יצחק אדוארד זלקינסון”;

14 See Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church*, 133–134.

15 Regarding Blum and Elihai’s translations of John and Matt, see respectively Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church*, 153–158 and 166–173. I learned of their translation of Luke in an oral conversation with Yohanan Elihai. Elihai provided me with the manuscript of the translation of 1 Pet handwritten by Yehoshua Blum. I would like to thank Yohanan Elihai for his invaluable help.

16 See notably Tichit, *L’Évangile de Marc en hébreu*.

17 See Pritz, “Bible Translation and Publication”, 38.

18 This translation is accessible on Jehovah’s Witnesses website in Hebrew: <https://www.jw.org/he/>

19 The importance of the purpose of a translation has been emphasized by Hans Vermeer in his “*skopos* theory”. See the introductory article: Hans J. Vermeer, “Skopos and Commission in Translational Action.”

Translating for Polemics

The first substantial passages of the New Testament translated into Hebrew are found in writings of Medieval Jewish authors, where they serve a polemical and apologetic objective. These authors present to their Jewish readers passages of the New Testament as starting points, examples or proof-texts within the framework of a criticism or a ridiculing of Christianity, aiming to strengthen these readers in their adherence to Judaism. This is clearly reflected in the introduction to the chapter dedicated to critical examination of passages from the New Testament in the *Wars of the Lord* by Jacob ben Reuben.²⁰ Ben Reuben writes:

מלאני לבי להשיב תשובות נגד משובתם / ולחבר שאלות מדברי עדותם / היודע ועד יודע, כי לא להתווכח עמהם ולא לדבר עמהם, כי אם להיות עדות מסורה לזרזים / ולהעלימה מעיני ריקים ופוזזים / גם מהשער הזה ה' יודע כי לא היה בלבי להזכיר ממנו כלל והנה חברי הכריחוני והביאוני והשיאוני להזכיר ממנו קצתו. על כן הזכרתי ממנו קצת משגיאות ספרם וממעוותו, ומעשר מן המעשר לא גליתי כי יראתי. ואנא מאתכם אם מצאתי חן בעיניכם לבלתי האשימני ולבלתי הזכיר שמי על זאת לרעה כי טובה היא ליראה את שם אלהינו ולדבקה בו כל הימים.

I ventured to answer their apostasy and to compose questions from the words of their testimony.²¹ He who knows and is a witness knows that [my aim] was neither to argue with them nor to talk to them, but to constitute a testimony that will be delivered to the diligent and hidden from the worthless and the reckless. Even this chapter – God knows that I did not intend to mention it at all, but my friends forced me, led me and induced me to mention a small part of it [i.e. of this chapter]. I therefore mentioned some of the errors of their book and of its perversion. But I have not revealed even a tenth of a tenth [of the matter], for I am afraid. And I beg of you, if I have found grace in your eyes, not to blame me and not to speak badly of me for this, because it is a good thing for fearing the name of our God and for clinging to him all the time.²²

The polemical-apologetic objective of these works also explains the way in which the New Testament passages are disposed within the text: these passages are always accompanied by critical remarks of the polemist himself, which typically come after the quoted passage. The importance of this disposition of the New Testament passages as well as the general objectives for which they are used are emphasized in the introduction of Shem Tov ibn Shaprut to the 12th book of his work *The Touchstone*, which is dedicated to an examination of the Gospel of Matthew. Shem Tov says:

ראיתי להשלים חבורי זה אשר הקדמתיו אב"ן בוח"ן
להעתיק ספרי האוונג"ל יליון עם היותם שהספרים
היות אסורים לנו לקרוא בהם פן יבואו התלמידים שלא שמשו
כל צרכם וישתו מהמים ההם, עם כל זה ראיתי להעתיקם
לשתי סיבות,
ה"א להשיב מתוכם לנוצ"רים ובפרט למומרים שמדברים
בעניין אמונתם ואינם יודעים דבר אמונה ומפרשים
פסוקי תורתנו הקדושה בעניין זה הפך האמת והפך
אמונתם וכזה יגיע שבח ליהודי לאותו המתווכח עמהם כאשר
לכדם בשוחתם
ה"ב להראות לבעלי אמונתם הראה חסרון הספרים
ההם והשגיאות הנופלות בתוכם וכזה ידעו ויבינו
יתרון ומעלת אמונתנו על שאר האמונות, לפי שלא יודע
גודל מעלת הדבר כי אם בבחינת הפכו, ואני נשען בש"ית [בשם יתברך]
שלא יצא מזה רק טוב כמו שכוונתי לטובה, ואכתוב בכל פרק
ופרק ההשגות אשר יראו לי בתוכו, והנני משביע לכל מעתיק
בחי העולם לבל מעתיק ספרי האוונג"ל יליוס אם לא בכל מקום

²⁰ Chapter 11 entitled: תמו שאלותיו ואשאל לו מן האוונגלייז – “He has no more questions and [now] I will ask him questions on the Gospel”; Ben Reuben, *Wars of the Lord*, 141.

²¹ I.e., the New Testament.

²² Unless indicated otherwise, all translations into English in this article are my own.

ההשגות אשר כתבתי כפי אשר סדרתיים וכתבתיים הנה
ואתחיל בספר מאט"יאו
אשר הוא השרשי בהם²³

I decided to complete my essay which precedes – The Touchstone, by translating the books of the Gospel (האוינג"ליון), although it is forbidden for us to read them, lest insufficiently experienced students come and drink from those waters. In spite of this, I decided to translate them for two reasons:

1. In order to use them in responding to Nazarenes and especially to converts who speak of their faith without knowing what faith is and interpret the verses of our holy Torah in this matter in a manner that is contrary to the truth and contrary to their faith. And thus praise will come to the Jew who argues with them when he catches them in their [own] trap.
2. In order to show to adepts of their faith²⁴ the inferiority of these books and the errors in them, so that they will know and comprehend the superiority and greatness of our beliefs in comparison to other beliefs. For one knows the greatness of a thing only by examining what is opposite to it. And I rely on the Name-blessed-be-He that only good will come from this, according to my good intention. I will write in each and every chapter the objections that I have in its matter, and I adjure every copyist by the Life of the world not to copy the books of the Gospel without [including] everywhere the objections that I have written, as I have arranged them and written them here.

I begin with the book of Matthew (מאט"יאו), which is the chief one amongst them.

Translating for the Study of Hebrew

Since the 16th century, with the rise of interest in the Hebrew language,²⁵ a rather large number of Hebrew translations of the New Testament was produced by Christian Hebraists, among which were several renowned scholars teaching in different European universities.²⁶ Certain remarks made by the authors of these translations attest that they thought of reading and making Hebrew translations of the New Testament books as useful exercises for learning Hebrew.

Thus, in the Hebrew text of the Gospel of Matthew published in 1551 by Jean Cinqarbres, the typographer's note to the reader explains that a few short passages from the Old Testament were added after the Hebrew text of the Gospel "so that you will have new and old Scriptures joined together, which you will be able use in order to practice the Hebrew language."²⁷ Furthermore, the editor, Jean Cinqarbres, states in his introduction: "Surely, much profit will come to all the Christian Republic for the knowledge and spread of the Hebrew language and for the learning of piety ... Thus, Christian Hebraists, of whom the world is full, will become accustomed to a new instrument."²⁸

²³ I transcribed the Hebrew text from the manuscript: British Library Ms. Add. no. 26964. Images of this manuscript can be found online here: http://www.torahresource.com/DuTillet/BL_Ms.Add.no.26964.pdf [visited 15 March 2016]. The English translation is my own. This passage is analyzed in Garshowitz, "Shem Ṭob ben Isaac Ibn Shapruṭ's Gospel of Matthew", 297–299.

²⁴ Libby Garshowitz who worked on a different manuscript of Shem Tov's work (MS. Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana [Florence] Plutei 2.17), reads אמונתנו הרמה – "our exalted faith" instead of אמונתם הראה – "their faith (showing)". See Garshowitz, "Shem Ṭob ben Isaac Ibn Shapruṭ's Gospel of Matthew." 298, 310 (footnote 2), 312 (footnote 23).

²⁵ On Christian Hebraism in the 16th century, see in particular: Friedman, *The Most Ancient Testimony*; Burnett, *Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era*.

²⁶ Sebastian Münster was a professor at the University of Basel. Jean Cinqarbres and Jean Mercier, who published Hebrew editions of the Gospel of Matthew respectively in 1551 and 1555, were both professors of Hebrew at the Collège Royal in Paris (see Shuali, "Les deux versions de l'Évangile de Matthieu en hébreu"). Heinrich Friedrich Wilhelm Gesenius, who was a professor at Halle and a particularly influential Hebraist, was a member of the team that prepared the 1838 revision of the translation of the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews (Carmignac, *The Four Gospels Translated into Hebrew by the London Society for Promoting Christianity amongst the Jews*, XVII). Franz Delitsch was a professor at Rostock, Erlangen and Leipzig (Curtiss, *Franz Delitzsch*, 11–15).

²⁷ "... tum ut scripturas nouas et ueteres habeas in unum congestas, quibus te in Hebraica lingua exercere possis." (Cinqarbres, *Torat HaMashiah*, Typograpus lectori, n.p.)

²⁸ "quippe cum inde magna emanatura sit utilitas toti Reipub. Christianae tum ad Hebraicae linguae cognitionem et propagationem, tum ad pietatem descendam ... Inde etiam assuescent Christiani Hebraismis, quibus scaturit unum novum instrumentum." (Cinqarbres, *Torat HaMashiah*, Introduction, [ii].)

Another example may be found in the volume containing the Hungarian Calvinist György Thúri's Hebrew translation of the Epistles to the Galatians and the Ephesians, published in Wittenberg in 1598.²⁹ On the first page of this volume, Thúri presents a poem written by the Lutheran Hebraist Conrad Neander, who himself published in 1586 a Hebrew epistolary, i.e., a collection of New Testament passages cited notably from different Epistles, translated into Hebrew and destined apparently for liturgical reading.³⁰ The poem reads as follows:

רָאָה קִרְא אֲשֶׁר עֲבַד אֲדָמָה
 לְבוֹנֵה מִלְּשׁוֹן יוֹן עֲתִיקָה :
 אָמַת כָּל מִלְּשׁוֹן עֲבָר לְקַחָהּ
 לְמַד מִשֶּׁם לְחִבֵּר כֵּן וְאֵתָהּ :³¹

Behold a reader who is a peasant.
 He has translated incense from the Greek language.
 He has taken the truth about everything from the Hebrew language.
 Learn from it [how] you too [can] compose in this manner.

In this poem, Neander urges the Hebraist readers to use the work of György “the peasant”³² Thúri in order to learn how to compose similar works of their own. This remark is interesting since an examination of Thúri's Hebrew translation of the Epistles to the Galatians and the Ephesians shows that it is clearly inspired by the Hebrew translation of passages from these two Epistles that are found in Neander's epistolary.³³ It seems that Thúri had followed Neander's advice before it was formulated in his poem.

Translating in Order to Find the Hebrew Original

In the writings of the different people involved in the production and dissemination of Hebrew translations of the New Testament, we find rather often sayings reflecting the conception according to which the New Testament writings are based on a Hebrew “original”, as well as expressions of the desire to reconstruct this “original” through translation. However, we should note that this “original” is conceived of in different ways. Some think of a text written in Hebrew, the Greek translation of which constitutes certain books of the New Testament as we know them; others think of oral traditions that were used in the making of the New Testament writings; and some seem to have a more abstract conception of the Hebrew “spirit” or “essence” of the New Testament. Several examples of sayings of the translators reflecting these three conceptions may be offered.

The desire to present a Hebrew translation of a New Testament book as close to the presumed original Hebrew text of this book appears first in regard to the Gospel of Matthew. This is not surprising considering the ancient tradition according to which this Gospel was written by the evangelist in Hebrew.³⁴ This desire is manifest in the first three editions of Hebrew versions of the Gospel of Matthew published in the Christian world. Thus, in his edition of the Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew published in 1537, Sebastian Münster says very little about the origin of the Hebrew text he is publishing, in spite of the considerable length of the introductory parts which he includes in his book (49 pages). In fact, regarding the origin of the Hebrew text, Münster only says one thing: “We are publishing ... the Gospel of the divine Matthew in his native language, that is, the Hebrew language, not as I found it torn among the multitude of the Hebrews, but restored by me

²⁹ Thúri, *Epistolæ Pauli Apostoli ad Galatas et Ephesios*. For a general study of this translation, see Shuali, “György Thúri's Hebrew Translation”.

³⁰ Neander, *Epistolæ Anniversariæ*.

³¹ The poem is entitled: “Tetrastichon in duas Paulinas Epistolas à D. Georgio Thurio in Hebræam linguam translatas.” Thúri, *Epistolæ Pauli Apostoli ad Galatas et Ephesios*, [i].

³² This is a pun on György Thúri's first name, which derives from the Greek word γεωργός – “peasant”. Neander renders this name using the Old Testament expression עֲבַד אֲדָמָה – “worker of the ground”; see notably Gen 4:2, but also Gen 2:5; 3:23; 4:12; Prov 12:11; 28:19. I owe this observation to David Benka, whom I thank dearly for it.

³³ I have shown this in Shuali, “György Thúri's Hebrew Translation”.

³⁴ Ancient testimonies to this tradition are collected in Klijn, *Jewish-Christian Gospel Tradition*.

and brought into one body.”³⁵ It seems that Münster speaks so vaguely about the origin of the text he offers to his readers while mentioning that Hebrew was the native language of its author in order to make this text appear mysterious and make readers believe that it is at least in some way connected to the presumed Hebrew original written by the Evangelist. The elliptic and vague way in which Münster speaks is even more revealing considering that this Hebrew version of the Gospel of Matthew is most probably a translation of the Latin text of the Vulgate done by Münster himself.³⁶

In the re-edition of Münster’s Hebrew text of the Gospel of Matthew published by Jean Cinqarbres in 1551, the question of this text’s relation to the original Hebrew text of the Gospel is discussed in a much more explicit manner. Cinqarbres fills almost all of his ten page introduction with a flowery account of the testimonies of the Fathers of the Church concerning the Hebrew original of the Gospel of Matthew. Since he believes that the Hebrew original of the Gospel is located in India,³⁷ and since he is rather embarrassed by the fact that Münster, whose text he is reproducing, does not speak of the text’s ancient origin, Cinqarbres states only: “I dare not affirm anything in this concern, except that, in my judgement, I believe the work to be quite ancient.”³⁸

In the edition of a Hebrew version of the Gospel of Matthew published by Jean du Tillet and Jean Mercier in Paris in 1555, the belief in the existence of a Hebrew original of the Gospel is also expressed. This seems to be the reason that a particularly appealing title was given to the volume:

³⁹ ... בשורת מתי עד היום הזה כמוסה עם היהודים ונחבאה במערותם ועתה באחרונה מתוך חדריהם ומחושך מוצאת לאור ...

The Gospel of Matthew: hidden until this day with the Jews and concealed in their caves, and now recently brought from their rooms and from darkness to light ...

It is also in order to stress the originality of this Hebrew text of the Gospel of Matthew that in the introduction to this edition Jean du Tillet says: “according to the testimony and statement of learned men from both sides of the Alps, ... it is composed in purity of language whose fragrance is not felt in any writings subsequent to the desolation of this people.”⁴⁰ In reality, the Hebrew text of the Gospel published by Jean du Tillet and Jean Mercier is a revised version of Sebastian Münster’s translation of the Gospel, which was probably made by a Jewish convert to Christianity.⁴¹

However, the Gospel of Matthew is not the only one that some believed to be a translation of a Hebrew text, which they aspired to reconstruct through “back-translation.” This kind of approach is expressed, for example, in relation to the Gospel of Mark in the following passage written by Jean Carmignac:

I tried, for my own personal use, to see what Mark would yield when translated back into the Hebrew of Qumran. I had imagined that this translation would be difficult because of considerable differences between Semitic thought and Greek thought, but I was absolutely dumbfounded to discover that this translation was, on the contrary, extremely easy. Around the middle of April 1963, after only one day of work, I was convinced that the Greek text of Mark could not have been redacted directly in Greek and that it was in reality only the Greek translation of an original Hebrew. The enormous difficulties which I had envisioned for myself had all been resolved by the Hebrew-Greek translator, who had transposed word for word and who had even preserved in Greek the order of the words preferred by Hebrew grammar.⁴²

³⁵ “Divi Matthaeei evangelium ... in nativa sua, hoc est, hebraica lingua, non qualiter apud Hebraeorum vulgus lacerum inveni, sed a me reintegratum et in unum corpus redactum emittimus ...” (Münster, *Torat HaMashiah*, Dedication to the King of England, [iii].)

³⁶ I have shown this in Shuali, “Les deux versions de l’Évangile de Matthieu en hébreu.”

³⁷ According to a tradition that goes back to Eusebius, the Apostle Bartholomew brought to India the Gospel of Matthew in Hebrew; Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, V, x.

³⁸ “... nihil ausim de eo aliud affirmare, quod opus esse putem meo iudicio satis antiquum.” (Cinqarbres, *Torat HaMashiah*, introduction, p. [iii–iv].)

³⁹ Du Tillet and Mercier, *Besorat Matay*, title page.

⁴⁰ “... quod equidem ut non ausim affirmare de eo quod sua ille lingua divinitus conscripsit, expressum, ita ex eruditorum hominum et Cisalpinorum et Transalpinorum testimonio atque praedicatione, possum asserere a Rabbinica dictione plurimum abesse, eaque conscriptum orationis puritate, quam nulla post desolatam hanc gentem scripta redoleant.” (Du Tillet and Mercier, *Besorat Matay*, introduction [i–ii].)

⁴¹ Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church*, 58–64; Shuali, “Les deux versions de l’Évangile de Matthieu en hébreu.”

⁴² Carmignac, *The Birth of the Synoptics*, 1.

While believing, like Carmignac, that translating the Gospels into Hebrew may allow reconstructing their original Hebrew texts, Robert Lisle Lindsey thought that such a translation may also sometimes allow finding the words uttered by the historical figures portrayed in the Gospels. Thus, in the introduction to his Hebrew translation of the Gospel of Mark published in 1969, Lindsey says: “the more literal the translation the more certain it often is that the ancient Hebrew text has, as it were, reappeared. In this kind of translation the tantalizing possibility is constantly held out that we may often recover the exact words of Jesus himself, or at least that of the Hebrew undertext.”⁴³

Differently from Carmignac and Lindsey, Franz Delitzsch did not believe that the authors of the different New Testament books had originally written them in Hebrew. However, he was of the opinion that Hebrew was the language in which these authors spoke and thought, and that through translation one could attain their words and thoughts.⁴⁴ In the introduction to his translation of the Epistle to the Romans published in 1870, he says:

A translation of the New Testament into Hebrew is not merely a widening of the linguistic horizon. It achieves much more than this, since, unlike translations into other languages, it does not presuppose only an understanding of the New Testament text, but it also furthers its understanding by rethinking it in the same language that governed the thinking and the thought-expression of the holy writers even though they wrote in Greek.⁴⁵

Another example of Delitzsch’s approach will be offered below.

Translating in Order to Convert

A certain number of Hebrew translations of the New Testament have been produced for an explicit missionary purpose. Their authors express the hope that reading the New Testament in Hebrew will attract Jews to Christianity. Thus, in 1882, three years before his translation of the New Testament was published, Isaac Salkinson writes the following in a letter:

My Hebrew Version of the New Testament is now ready for publication. Hebrew translation seemes [sic] to be the only talent given to me, and it I have consecrated to the Lord. It is my alabaster box of precious ointment which I pour out in honour of my Saviour, that the fragrance of His name may fill the whole house of Israel.⁴⁶

A particularly detailed argumentation regarding the usefulness of a Hebrew translation of the New Testament for the mission to the Jews is presented by Thomas Yeates in 1799, in his “Proposal for Printing by subscription a Translation of St. Matthew’s Gospel and the Epistle to the Hebrews in the Hebrew Language for the Use of the Jews.”⁴⁷ He writes:

⁴³ Lindsey, *A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark*, 77.

⁴⁴ For a recent survey of the question of Hebrew and Aramaic as spoken languages at the time of Jesus, see Fassberg, “Which Semitic Language”.

⁴⁵ “Eine Uebersetzung des Neuen Testaments ins Hebräische ist nun zwar keine solche Erweiterung des sprachwissenschaftlichen Gesichtskreises, aber sie leistet ungleich mehr als das, weil sie nicht blos, wie die Uebersetzung in andere Sprachen, gründliches Verständniß des neutestamentlichen Textes voraussetzt, sondern selber das Verständniß desselben fördert, indem sie ihn in die Sprache zurückdenkt, welche das Denken und den Gedankenausdruck der heiligen Schriftsteller trotz dem daß sie griechisch schrieben beherrschte.” (Delitzsch, *Paulus des Apostels Brief an die Römer*, 9–10.) I thank Fränz Biver-Pettinger for helping me to understand this passage.

⁴⁶ Issac Eduard Salkinson, A Letter to John Dunlop entitled: “Vienna, April, 1882,” in Dunlop, *Memories of Gospel Triumphs*, 382.

⁴⁷ Besides the Hebrew translations of the Gospel of Matthew and the Epistle to the Hebrews mentioned in this text, Yeates also translated into Hebrew the Gospels of Mark, Luke and John, the Book of Acts and a first part of the Epistle to the Romans. His translations were not published in his lifetime. The manuscript containing Yeates’ translations of the synoptic Gospels was published in Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc traduits en hébreu en 1668 par Giovanni Battista Iona retouchés en 1805 par Thomas Yeates*; Carmignac, *Évangiles de Luc et de Jean traduits en hébreu en 1668 par Giovanni Battista Iona retouchés en 1805 par Thomas Yeates*. On Yeates’ life and work, see Carmignac’s introduction to the first of the two aforementioned volumes, p. XXVII–XLI.

The design and utility of such a work would be to promote the Knowledge of the Gospel amongst the Jews, and open a way for their Conversion to Christianity. The Hebrew is the only Language proper for this design; it is the only medium whereby to communicate Christian Knowledge amongst them, and the New Testament translated into this language, that is to say, the language of the Old Testament; the same would be open to the Jews of all nations, for all who read the latter, could read the former. The Translation of the New Testament, executed in the pure language and style of the Old Testament, would be possessed of such superior advantages to all other Translations in other languages, that I cannot forbear to mention a few of them on this occasion. 1. The Hebrew Bible is universally read by the Jews; and all their prime books are written in the same language, with little difference as to style and manner, which for distinction sake, is called the Rabbinical Hebrew; therefore such a Translation would be executed in what may be termed the universal language of that people. 2. The majesty and energy of the Hebrew language, the sententious and sublime forms of speech, the accuracy and purity of its diction, would combine in the most powerful and persuasive manner to excite the learned Jews to a perusal of the New Test. whose sublime periods would thereby recieve [sic] all the graces of the Mosaical and Prophetical Scriptures. 3. Many Names of Persons, Places, and Things would here be expressed by the very originals themselves, extant in the writings of the Old Testament, and with which the Jews are everywhere acquainted. 4. I will not scruple to assert that there are extant in the Gospels, periods, and sentences, which by translation into Hebrew would assume additional grace and beauty, and a harmony equal to the most admired periods in the Old Testament: Nor can any Translation do justice to the Original that does not regard the harmony of a sentence as well as the sense. 5. The Jews would open a Hebrew New Testament merely from curiosity, out of regard to their own language where a Translation in any other language would disgust them. 6. In a Hebrew Translation we hear as it were Our Saviour and the Apostles speaking in the language of Moses and the Prophets, and we read the Book of Prophecy and the Book of Fulfilment in the same language. How long shall it be 'ere (?) these advantages are realized! hasten the time, O God, for the sake of the remnant of Thy People!⁴⁸

Translating for the Needs of the Christian Communities in the State of Israel

The Hebrew translations of the New Testament produced since the creation of the modern State of Israel attest to a new purpose, i.e., to meet the needs of the local non-Arab-speaking Christian communities, in which the liturgy and the interpersonal communication between members, who are usually of different origins, often takes place in Modern Hebrew, the language of the land.⁴⁹ This was particularly evident in the first translation project in which Modern Hebrew was used for rendering the New Testament in the 1960s: the translation of New Testament passages for the Hebrew Missal of the Catholic Church.⁵⁰

Yohanan Elihai, who was one of the chief collaborators on this Missal as well as on the translation of the entire New Testament published by the United Bible Societies in 1976, has said the following things to me regarding these two projects in an interview conducted at his home in Jerusalem:

Since I was a child I thought: “Why pray in Latin? We should pray in Hebrew.” And we received [the authorization]. You know that now, in the entire world, people pray in vernacular languages, since the [Second Vatican] Ecumenical Council. But ten years earlier, we received the authorization to pray in Hebrew from Pope Pius XII [...]. When I arrived here,⁵¹ I began, with the help of a local person [Yehoshua Blum], to translate the Mass into Hebrew. [...] And for every Sunday, we would translate the readings, this or that passage. So, little by little we made parts of the New Testament for ourselves, for a small group of people praying in Hebrew. But all of a sudden, I heard that the Protestants wanted to publish the entire New Testament in Hebrew in a new translation, etc. And they asked if we were ready... And I said: “Wait a second; I didn’t come here to participate in something like this. Later on, they will distribute it. This is not my intention. But if we don’t participate, maybe they will make mistakes and we will regret it: Why didn’t we tell them?” Because I know Greek since I

⁴⁸ Quoted in Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc traduits en hébreu en 1668 par Giovanni Battista Iona retouchés en 1805 par Thomas Yeates*, XXXVI.

⁴⁹ Neuhaus, “*Qehilla*”; Neuhaus, “Contemporary Jewish Israeli Views”.

⁵⁰ Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church*, 115–132.

⁵¹ Yohanan Elihai is originally French. He arrived in Israel in 1956, around the age of 30.

was a child. I was lucky enough to learn Greek when I was eleven. At that time, Greek and Latin were obligatory. So I read the original [text of the New Testament] quite easily. So I said: “All right; so be it.”⁵²

We should particularly note Elihai’s concern that the translation might be distributed for missionary purposes.

In the introduction to his translation of the Gospel of Mark published in 1969 by the Baptist House in Jerusalem, Robert Lisle Lindsey also emphasizes the need for a Hebrew translation of the New Testament within the Christian communities in Israel. He says: “Some years ago I came to the conclusion that a new Hebrew translation of the New Testament was badly needed, especially by the young Hebrew-speaking Christian congregations in the State of Israel.”⁵³

Intertwining Motivations

A remark is in order regarding the five motivations for undertaking Hebrew translations of the New Testament: several of these motivations are often intertwined in the thinking of the translators and their co-workers within their general vision of the activity of translating the New Testament into Hebrew. This could already be felt in some of the passages quoted above. A few sentences written by Frantz Delitzsch in 1883 regarding his own translation may illustrate this particularly well.

I am far from presuming that I have realized the ideal. A true and satisfactory version of the N. T. is a thing of the future, and only will be produced, when the new Thora of the Gospel has been received into its heart of hearts by the regenerated remnant of Israel.⁵⁴

Our Lord and his apostles thought and spoke for the most part in Hebrew. And the New Testament, as the new Thora, the complete half of God’s revelation, must be translated into Hebrew; if we intend to make it a reading book for the Jews of all countries and a constituent part of the worship of the future Israel, who shall be saved after the entering in of the fullness of the Gentiles.⁵⁵

But it shall come to pass in the last days, that they shall acknowledge Him whom they have so long despised. Israel will then become confessor and interpreter and apostle of the New Testament, and the new Thora, which is gone forth out of Zion, will then be gloriously transfigured into the holy tongue. Jacob shall then take root, Israel shall blossom and bud and fill the face of the world with fruit. For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be but life from the dead! – O house of Jacob, come ye and let us walk in the light of the Lord and his Christ! Their light is one, light of the only One, the heavenly source of life, as Christ has said: This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.⁵⁶

Delitzsch’s vision may be summarized as follows: most of the words of Jesus and the Apostles reported in the New Testament were uttered in Hebrew.⁵⁷ Even when the Apostles wrote in Greek, they were thinking in Hebrew. A Hebrew version of the New Testament may assist in convincing the Jews to convert to Christianity.

52 Interview with Yohanan Elihai at his home in Jerusalem, on 16 July 2013:

מהילדות אני חשבתי למה להתפלל בלטינית. אנתנו צריכים להתפלל בעברית. וקיבלנו... אתה יודע שעכשיו בכל העולם מתפללים בשפת המקום, מאז המועצה האקומנית, אבל עשר שנים לפני זה קיבלנו רשות להתפלל בעברית מהאפיפיור פיוס ה-12 [...] מה שאני עשיתי כשהגעתי לפה, זה התחלתי עם עזרה של משהו מקומי לתרגם בעצמי את המיסה לעברית. [...] ולכל יום ראשון היינו מתרגמים את המקראות. קטע כזה וקטע כזה. זאת אומרת שלאט לאט עשינו חלקים מהברית החדשה לעצמנו, לקבוצה קטנה של מתפללים בעברית. אבל פתאום אני שומע שהפרוטסטנטים רוצים להוציא את הברית החדשה כולה בעברית בתרגום חדש וכולי. והם שאלו אם אנחנו מוכנים... ואני אמרתי: רגע, אני לא באתי לכאן להשתתף בדבר כזה. אחר כך יפוצו את זה; זה לא הכוונה שלי. אבל אם לא משתתפים, אולי הם יעשו שגיאות ונצטער: למה לא אמרנו להם? כי אני יודע יוונית מהילדות. היה לי המזל שלמדתי יוונית בגיל 11. באותה תקופה יוונית ולטינית זה היה חובה. ככה שאני די בקלות קורא את המקור. ואז אמרתי: טוב, מילא, שיהיה.

53 Lindsey, *A Hebrew Translation of the Gospel of Mark*, 9; see also, p. 78.

54 Delitzsch, *The Hebrew New Testament of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, 29–30.

55 Ibid., 31. The expression at the end of this sentence comes from Rom 11:25.

56 Ibid., 33–34.

57 Delitzsch thought that, in Palestine at the time of Jesus and the Apostles, Hebrew was “the language of the higher form of speech”, whereas Aramaic “was the language of daily life, the vulgar language”. The influence of the former on the New Testament writings was, according to him, far greater than that of the latter. He writes: “The Shemitic woof of the New Testament Hellenism is Hebrew, not Aramaic.” The previous quotations are taken from a passage in which Delitzsch discusses and dismisses the idea of translating the New Testament into Aramaic: Delitzsch, *The Hebrew New Testament of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, 30–32.

In spite of all the efforts of the philologist, a man-made translation of the New Testament into Hebrew cannot be flawless. In an eschatological future, the entire Jewish people will become Christian and accept the New Testament. The true Hebrew form of the New Testament will then appear by divine intervention. In Delitzsch's words we can see how three motivations for translating the New Testament into Hebrew intertwine: his love for Hebrew philology, his belief in the Hebrew background and "essence" of the New Testament, and his hope and effort for the conversion of the Jews.

Conclusion

This presentation of the different reasons given for translating the New Testament into Hebrew shows that these translations were always considered by their authors as instruments used within Jewish-Christian relations. They were assigned a role in the concrete interaction between the two religions – in Jewish polemics and in Christian mission. They were the fruit of Christians' openness toward Judaism – of their interest in the Hebrew language or of the wish of Christians living in the State of Israel to feel integrated in the surrounding society. They were used by Christians in order to emphasize their religion's strong connections with Judaism. An overview of the reasons given for translating the New Testament into Hebrew illustrates the complexity of the relations between Christianity and Judaism, a complexity which is due, in particular, to the conjunction of great proximity and long opposition between the two religions.

At the end of this presentation, it may be stated that a new kind of motivation for translating the New Testament into Hebrew may be identified at the basis of an ongoing translation project that is being conducted today under the auspices of Tel-Aviv University Press and in which the author of this article is involved.⁵⁸ The preparation of this new scholarly and literary translation of the New Testament into Modern Hebrew by a mixed group of Jewish-Israeli and Christian scholars is motivated mainly by the wish to introduce modern-day Israeli readership to the New Testament as a *chef d'œuvre* of world literature and a central text of world religion and culture. This translation is being undertaken within the context of the current interest in and openness toward Christianity in Israeli society.⁵⁹

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⁵⁸ The team includes a general editor – Aviad Kleinberg, a scientific editor – Christophe Rico and a translator – myself.

⁵⁹ I would like to thank Luise von Flotow, Ari Shuali and Open Theology's reviewers for their remarks on a previous version of this article.

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