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Giovanni Battista Iona's Hebrew Translation of the Four Gospels

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ABSTRACT In this article, I examine the Hebrew translation of the four Gospels published in 1668 by Giovanni Battista Iona, a convert from Judaism employed as a professional Hebraist in several Catholic institutions in Rome. I focus, first, on Iona's aims in undertaking this work – to come closer to a presumed Hebrew original of the Gospels; to rebut Jewish polemics against Christianity; to bring about the conversion of Jews by showing that the Gospels are akin to the Hebrew Bible. Second, I analyse Iona's translation technique and shed light, namely, on the sources he used (both Latin and Hebrew), on the kind of Hebrew he employed and on some specific choices he made. In fine, I tie Iona's thinking and method of work to his particular status as a 'convert Christian Hebraist'.

With the rise of Christian Hebraism in the Early Modern Period,¹ a particular figure took shape – the convert from Judaism who has become a professional Christian Hebraist, that is, a teacher of Hebrew at academic institutions and an author of books in and on the Hebrew language, on the Hebrew Bible and on different aspects of Judaism. The convert from Judaism was an exceptional figure among the Christian Hebraists, but maybe a sort of an 'exception that proves the rule'. He was often a bit of an outsider – in regards to his biography, his training and his methods of work. At the same time, however, he was an 'ideal' – his knowledge of the subject matter and especially

* This study has been presented in a panel entitled 'Reconsidering Hebrew Scholarship in Early Modern Catholic Contexts: A Global Enterprise' organized by Jesús de Prado Plumed and Guido Bartolucci in the Annual Meeting of the Renaissance Society of America 2021. I thank the organizers as well as the respondent Andrew D. Berns.

¹ See especially Stephen G. Burnett, *Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era (1500–1660). Authors, Books, and the Transmission of Jewish Learning*, Library of the Written Word, vol. 19, The Handpress World, vol. 13 (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

of the Hebrew language was often considered to be superior to that which may be attained by his Christian-born fellows.²

The ‘convert Hebraist’ I would like to focus on is Giovanni Battista Iona. Iona was born in a Jewish Sephardic family in Safed in 1588 under the name of Yehuda Iona.³ He received rabbinic education in Tiberias. At the age of nineteen he moved to Venice, and subsequently, for almost 20 years, he moved around Europe spending a few years at a time in a number of places: Lugo di Romagna (near Ravenna), Riva del Garda (near Trento), Lviv, Amsterdam and Hamburg.⁴ In 1625, at the age of thirty-seven, he converted to Catholicism and was baptized in Warsaw.⁵ From 1632 to 1636, Iona taught Aramaic and Hebrew at the University of Pisa.⁶ Iona then spent the last thirty years of his life – from 1638 to 1668 – in Rome, where his career as a professional Hebraist reached its peak. In 1649, he was appointed Lector of Hebrew at the Collegium de Propaganda Fide (Collegium Urbanum).⁷ A year later, in 1650, he also became Scriptor Hebraicus at the Vatican Library.⁸ And from 1652 to 1664, he was also Lector of Hebrew at the Archigymnasium Romanum

² On converts from Judaism working as Hebraists, see Elisheva Carlebach, *Divided Souls. Converts from Judaism in Germany, 1500–1750* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 129–33, 200–21. See also the example of Immanuel Tremellius: Kenneth Austin, *From Judaism of Calvinism. The Life and Writings of Immanuel Tremellius (c. 1510–1580)*, (St. Andrews Studies in Reformation History; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

³ Giulio Bartolucci, *Bibliotheca Magna Rabbinica. De Scriptoribus, et Scriptis Rabbinicis, ordine Alphabetico Hebraice, et Latine digestis*, vol. 3 (Rome: Typographia Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fidei, 1683), p. 48; quoted in extenso together with quite a few other sources on Iona’s life in Jean Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc traduits en hébreu en 1688 par Giovanni Battista Iona retouchés en 1805 par Thomas Yeates* (Traductions hébraïques des évangiles rassemblées par Jean Carmignac, vol. 2; Turnhout: Brepols, 1982), p. VI. Also on Iona’s life, see Fausto Parente, *Les juifs et l’Église romaine à l’époque moderne (XV^e–XVIII^e siècle)* (trans. Mathilde Anquetil-Auletta; Paris: Honoré Champion, 2007), pp. 135–42.

⁴ Iona’s introduction to his *Disputa contro gli Ebrei*, manuscript quoted by Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc*, p. V.

⁵ Bartolucci, *Bibliotheca Magna Rabbinica*, p. 49; quoted in Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc*, pp. VII–VIII.

⁶ Angelo Fabroni, *Historiae Academiae Pisanae*, vol. 3 (Pisa: Cajetanus Mugnainius, 1795), pp. 143–4, 680.

⁷ Willi Henkel, ‘Verfügungen der Kongregation in der Judenfrage’, chap. 13 of Josef Metzler (ed.), *Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide Memoria Rerum. 350 Years in the Service of the Missions 1622–1972, Vol. I/2 1622–1700* (Rome – Freiburg – Vienna: Herder, 1972), p. 370. See also Bartolucci, *Bibliotheca Magna Rabbinica*, p. 50; quoted in Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc*, p. VIII. On the Collegium Urbanum, see Maksimilijan Jezernik, ‘Il Collegio Urbano’, chap. 3 of Josef Metzler (ed.), *Sacrae Congregationis de Propaganda Fide Memoria Rerum. 350 Years in the Service of the Missions 1622–1972, Vol. I/1 1622–1700* (Rome – Freiburg – Vienna: Herder, 1971), pp. 465–82.

⁸ Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc*, p. X, according to Jeanne Bignami-Odier, *La Bibliothèque Vaticane de Sixte IV à Pie XI. Recherches sur l’histoire des collections de manuscrits*, (Studi e Testi 272; Vatican: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1973), p. 148, footnote 20.

(Sapienza).⁹ I wish to present Iona, namely, through an analysis of his major published work – his Hebrew translation of the four Gospels published in the year of his death 1668 and entitled:¹⁰

ארבעה אבני הגיליונים מהתורה החדשה אשר נעתקו מלשון רומי ללשון עברי על ידי יוחנן הטובל יונה
Quator Evangelia Novi Testamenti ex Latino in Hebraicum sermonem versa ab Ioanne Baptista
Iona (Rome: Typis S.[acrae] C.[ongregationis de] Prop.[aganda] Fidei)¹¹

The first part of the article will be dedicated to examining Iona's writings about his translation and to presenting his ideas regarding this undertaking. In the second part, an analysis of the translated text will aim to show how Iona went about the translation work itself.¹²

Why translate the Gospels into Hebrew?

The paratexts appended to Iona's translation of the Gospels – a dedicatory letter in Latin to Pope Clement IX and a twenty-two-page introduction printed in parallel columns in Latin and Hebrew – offer much information on Iona's thinking regarding his translation project. In the beginning of this introduction, Iona tells in a nice narrative form how he made up his mind to produce this translation:

Spiritus sanctus super me delabens dedit mentem ad intelligendum, et oculos ad respiciendum Deum, eiusque Christum, qui anno Jubilei 1625. post eiusdem Christi aduentum me adduxit ad diuinum obsequium, et Sancti Joannis Baptistae die Messiae baptismate ablutus fui, et rediui ad possessionem meorum parentum mortuorum, qui crediderunt in Deum expectantes eius Christum: hac igitur die Spiritus Domini tetigit cor meum cupiditate studii collocandi in hoc Euangelio [...]. Et vehementer sitiebat anima mea hoc Euangelium linguae sanctae vocibus expressum quaerere,

⁹ Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc*, pp. X–XI, according to Giuseppe Carafa, *De Professoribus Gymnasii Romani*, vol. 2 of *De Gymnasio Romano et de eius Professoribus, ab Urbe condita usque ad haec tempora* (Rome: Antonio Fulgoni, 1751), pp. 397–8.

¹⁰ Iona also published an annotated Hebrew translation of Robert Bellarmine's catechism: לעמוד המשיחיים בקיצור: נעתק מלמוד המשיחיים בקיצור ללשון עברי מיוסגן הטובל יונה מלמד בפירסום לשון עברי ברומה: *Dottrina Christiana Breve, Tradotta dalla Italiana nella lingua Hebraea, da Giovanni Battista Iona, Lettore pubblico della detta lingua in Roma* (Rome: Stamperia della Sacra Congregazione di Propaganda, 1658). Here and below, vowel-points are brought as they appear in Iona's works, including occasional oddities. Non-published works by Iona, some of which are extant in manuscript and some of which have been lost, are listed in Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc*, pp. XII–XVI.

¹¹ On the publishing of Hebrew books by the Congregation de Propaganda Fide, see Henkel, 'Verfügungen der Kongregation in der Judenfrage', pp. 372–4.

¹² Previous studies on Iona's translation are: Pinchas E. Lapide, *Hebrew in the Church. The Foundations of Jewish-Christian Dialogue* (trans. Erroll F. Rhodes; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 67–72; Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc*, pp. V–XXV; Michael Ryzik, 'קווי לשון בתרגום הבשורות ליוחנן בטיסטה יונה', *Revue européenne des Études hébraïques* 12 (2007), pp. 59–73.

praesertim quia audiui Sanctum Matthaeum Hebraico sermone Euangelicam historiam scripsisse, donec Deus statuit ut in Urbe Lucensi nanciscerer hominem, qui inter libros, quos venditabat, habebat Codicem inscriptum Matthaei Nuntium qui apud Hebraeos in cauernis abditus fuerat, nunc autem in lucem editus est Parisiis, quae Urbs Princeps Galliae est an. 1555. Exiliui gaudio hunc librum conspicatus, cum illum legissem, dubitavi ne is, qui in Hebraicum sermonem versus fuerat, non admodum peritus esset Hebraicarum vocum, vel ne Hebraei eum librum vertissent in sermonem quodammodo balbutientem, quo Lectoribus abominabilis esset. Cum autem in hac perplexitate versarer, Deus obtulit mihi alium Codicem manuscriptum, cuius titulus, *Lapis Lydius*, Auctore quodam Hebraeo nuncupato *Scem Tob Siphrut*, a quo Euangelium Matthaei in eandem linguam Hebraicam (ut diximus balutientem) conuertitur, ac in fine cuiuslibet Capituli argumenta aduersus Euangelium recitantur quemadmodum et exemplar Parisiis editum, continent in fine 28. argumentationes, quas Hebraei afferunt contra Euangelium [...]. Praeterea in scribendo Christi nomine Hebraeo nomine affirmant hoc nomen ישו JESU non deriuari a radice ישע, quod sonat genus humanum a peccato primi hominis saluauit, ideoque dicitur יהושוע Jehosciuha, aut ישוע Jesciuha: sed Hebraei ex malignitate eundem Jesum vocant ישו Iesu, cuius nominis literae sonant secundum ipsos, *delebitur* videlicet *nomen eius, et memoria eius*. Dicunt enim literam Iod י sonare ימה Imahc, *delebitur*, literam ש Scin שמו Scemo, *nomen eius*, et literam ו Vau וזכרו VeZichro, *et memoria eius*. Quamobrem accinxi lumbos meos, ut separarem pretiosum a vili, quod [sic] si mihi forte exciderit verbum aliquod non rectum, Deus id condonet, meque liberet errore [...] ac Deus mihi aderit ne incidam in errorem, ac meo calamo moderans sermonis claritatem addet, ne hic liber aliis sacris libris sit dissimilis [...]

כשהשפיע עלי רוח הקדש ממרום ונתן לי לב לדעת ועינים לראות את יהוה ואת משיחו שבשנת היובל אלף ושש מאות וחמשה ועשרים לביאת משיחנו קרבני השם יתברך לעבודתו שביום החג של יוחנן הטובל נטבלתי בטבילה המשיח ושבתי אל אחוזת אבותי אשר בארץ המה אשר האמינו ביהוה והחילו את המשיח ומאותו היום רוח יהוה נגע בלבי וכאש בוערת בתוך קרבי לחשוק בעיון האבן גיליון [...] ובצמאה נפשי לבקש האבן גיליון בלשון הקדש ובפרט ששמעתי שהקדוש מתי כתב אותו בלשון הקודש עד שהשם יתברך אינה לידי שבעיר לוקה מצאתי בבית מוכר ספרים ספר אחת שהיה אומר בשורת מתי אשר עד היום הזה היתה גנוזה אצל היהודים ונחבתה במערותיהם ועתה באחרונה מוצאת לאור בשנת ה'נ"ך וכו' פה פאריש האם בצרפת: ובראותי אותו שמחתי כעל כל הון ובקראי בו ספקתי שמא הוא זה שמי שהעיתיקו לא היה בקי בלשון הקודש או שהיהודים עתיקהו בלשון מגומגם להתעיבו בעיני הקורא שלא לחשוב אותו ובהיותי בזאת המבוכה והנה האל קרה לי ספר אחד שמו אבן בוחן מהיהודי שמו שם טוב שפרוט שהעתיק בלשון הזה מגומגם האבן גיליון של מתי ואחר כל פרק מקשה על האבן גיליון וגם בספר שנדפס בפאריש בסוף כ"ח' קושיות שמקשים היהודים נגד אבן גיליון [...] ועוד בכתוב שם המשיח בלשון עברית כתוב ישו ולא כשמו יהושוע או ישוע משורש ישע שהושיע העולם וכל מין האנושי מחטא אדם הראשון: והיהודים לרוע לבם בלשון עברית קורין אותו י'ש'ו' לומר שראש תיבות י'מח שמו וזכרו לכן

אזרתי כגבר חלצי להוציא יקר מזולל ואולי שמחסרוני יצא דבר מעוות השם יתברך ימחול לי ויצלני משגיאת [...] ויהיה
אלהים יעזור לי שלא אחטא ויהיה עם קולמוסי ויתן לי צחות לשון שיהיה כשאר כתבי הקודש [...] ¹³

When the Holy Spirit flowed upon me from above and gave me a heart to know and eyes to see YHWH and his Messiah, so that, in the Jubilee year 1625 of the coming of our Messiah, the Name-Blessed-Be-He brought me to his worship, and, on the day of the feast of John the Baptist, I was baptized in the baptism of the Messiah and returned to the property of my ancestors in the Land [of Israel] – they who believed in YHWH and hoped for the Messiah. And from that day, the Spirit of YHWH touched my heart, and as burning fire within my viscera [it made me] desire to study the Gospel [...]. My soul thirsted to seek the Gospel in the Holy Tongue, especially since I heard that Saint Matthew had written it in the Holy Tongue, until the Name-Blessed-Be-He made me find in the city of Lucca¹⁴ in a bookseller's shop a book called *The Gospel of Matthew, which until this day was hidden with the Jews and concealed in their caves and is now recently brought to light in the year 5000 etc. here in Paris capital of France*. When I saw it, I rejoiced as if [I had found] great fortune. But as I read it, I was not sure if the man that had translated it had not been proficient in the Holy Tongue or if the Jews had translated it into stammered language in order to make it despicable to the reader, so that he would not hold it in esteem. In my bewilderment, God made me stumble upon a book entitled *Touch Stone* by a Jew named Shem-Tov Shaprut, who had translated into this stammered language the Gospel of Matthew, and after each chapter he asks harsh questions regarding the Gospel. Also, at the end of the book printed in Paris, there are twenty-eight harsh questions that the Jews ask against the Gospel [...]. Furthermore, the name of the Messiah is written there Yēšû, and not as was his name Yēhōšûa' or Yēšûa', which comes from the root yš', for he saved the world and all of mankind from the sin of the first man. And the Jews, in their evilness, call him in Hebrew Yēšû, which is the acronym [of the phrase] 'may his name and memory be erased'. Therefore, I girded up my loins like a man to bring forth [something] precious from [my] vileness. And if from my faultiness results something distorted, may the Name-Blessed-Be-He forgive me and deliver me from error [...]. And may YHWH God help me not to make any transgression, and may He be with my pen and grant me purity of language, so that [this book]¹⁵ would be like the rest of the Holy Scriptures [...].

¹³ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, 'Prooemium', pp. [1–3] (both Latin and Hebrew texts). Here and below, the English translation generally follows the Hebrew.

¹⁴ It is likely that this episode took place during the years in which Iona taught in Pisa (1632–1636), which is quite close to Lucca.

¹⁵ In the Latin text: hic liber.

Three main points may be adduced from this passage. First, one particular reason for which Iona wished to read the Gospels in Hebrew was his belief – a widespread one – that the Gospel of Matthew was originally written in Hebrew. Iona was therefore hoping to find this original version of Matthew or, at least, an approximation to it.¹⁶ Second, the Hebrew versions of the Gospel of Matthew that Iona actually found – the translation included in Shem-Tov ibn Shaprut’s fourteenth-century polemical treatise *’Eben Bōḥan (The Touch Stone)* and the translation published in Paris in 1555 by Jean du Tillet and Jean Mercier – disappointed him greatly, since he deemed that they were written in poor Hebrew, or in what he calls ‘stammered language’ (לשון מגומגם). Iona believed that the rendering of the Gospel into ‘bad’ Hebrew was a polemical technique used by the authors of these translations in order to make the Gospel ‘despicable’ to Jews. It may be noted that, although Iona surely has a point regarding the quality of the Hebrew in both of these translations, he is, in fact, mistaken concerning the identity of the translators and their intent. It has been shown by Libby Garshowitz and José Vicente Niclós that the translation incorporated in Shem Tov ibn Shaprut’s work is most probably not the work of the polemicist himself but that of a convert from Judaism.¹⁷ Regarding the translation of Matthew published in Paris, I have argued elsewhere that this is the translation produced by the Protestant Hebraist Sebastian Münster of Basel revised subsequently by a convert from Judaism.¹⁸ Third, Iona hoped that his own translation was written in such ‘pure’ Hebrew that may enable it to be perceived as being ‘like the rest of the Holy Scriptures’, that is, as being similar to the books of the Hebrew Bible.¹⁹

¹⁶ For a summary on the origins of the tradition that Matthew was originally written in Hebrew, see Christoph Ochs, ‘Matthew, Hebrew Versions of’, in *Encyclopaedia of the Bible and its Reception*, vol. 18 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020), pp. 165–7. The conception that the original Hebrew version of Matthew may be recovered through translation is common to quite a number of authors: see Eran Shuali, ‘Why Was the New Testament Translated into Hebrew? An Introduction to the History of Hebrew Translations of the New Testament’, *Open Theology* 2 (2016), pp. 515–7; Joanna Weinberg, *Azariah de’ Rossi’s Observations on the Syriac New Testament. A Critique of the Vulgate by a Sixteenth-century Jew* (Warburg Institute Studies and Texts 3; London: Warburg Institute; Turin: Nino Aragno Editore, 2005).

¹⁷ Libby Garshowitz, ‘Shem Ṭov ben Isaac Ibn Shaprut’s Gospel of Matthew’, in Barry Walfish (ed.), *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume* (Haifa: Haifa University Press, 1993), pp. 297–322; José Vicente Niclós, ‘L’Évangile en hébreu de Shem Tob Ibn Shaprut: une traduction d’origine judéo-catalane due à un converti, repalcée dans son *Sitz im Leben*’, *Revue biblique* 106 (1999), pp. 358–407.

¹⁸ Eran Shuali, ‘Les deux versions de l’Évangile de Matthieu en hébreu publiées par Sebastian Münster (1537) et par Jean du Tillet et Jean Mercier (1555): un réexamen des textes et de la question de leurs auteurs’, in Gilbert Dahan and Annie Noblesse-Rocher (eds), *Les hébraïsants chrétiens en France au XVI^e siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 2018), pp. 217–51.

¹⁹ A similar claim is found in Iona’s letter to Clement XI [p. 1]: ‘[...] necessarium, ut haec primaria eius instrumenta Arabicis, Syriacis, Graecis, atque Latinis vocibus iam expressa, etiam Hebraicis exprimerentur, cum praesertim instrumenti veteris omnes fere libri Hebraica lingua conscripti fuerint.’ – ‘[...] it is necessary that these remarkable instruments of [the Christian religion], which are already translated into Arabic, Syriac, Greek and Latin, shall also be

These three lines of thought receive some more clarification in other parts of the paratexts. Regarding the idea that the Gospel of Matthew was initially written in Hebrew, Iona sets forth a rather original theory:

Primo, Quaeremus ex qua lingua deducatur vox Euangelium, et communis opinio est eam ex Graeca deduci ad significandum *Bonum Nuntium*: verum ego miror in Hebraeorum libris a nemine hanc vocem nominari, quod *Nuntium* seu *bonum*, seu *malum* sonet, verum ab omnibus dici אבן גיליון Euen ghilion cum litera Beth, vel Vau, aut Alef, aut Haain. Praeterea cum ex traditione habeamus Historiam Euangelicam fuisse a Matthaeo Hebraice scriptam, vellem scire, quo titulo ea fuit ab ipso inscripta: quapropter fortasse etiam Sanctus Matthaeus eam nuncupavit אבן גיליון Euen ghilion, quod sonat *Petram manifestam*, quia Noua Lex intra Legem Veterem abscondebatur [...]

בתחילה אבקש על מילת האבן גיליון מאי לשון היא וראיתי שדעת כל העולם שהיא מילה מורכבת ממילה אחת בלשון יון שרוצה לומר בשורה אבל אני תמה בראותי שבכל כתבי היהודים לא מצאתי שום אחד שזוכרו בשם בשורה לא טבה ולא רעה אלא כולם קורין אותו אבן גיליון או בבית או בואו או באלף או בעין: ועוד מאחר שמקובל כפי הכל שהקדוש מתי כתב ספרו בלשון הקודש מי יתן שאדע איך קרא אותו לכן הקדוש מתי אולי גם כן כך קרא ספרו אבן גיליון שרוצה לומר אבן שנגלה בהיות שהתורה החדשה היא היתה גנוזה ונסתרת בתוך התורה הישנה [..]²⁰

First, I will inquire regarding the word 'Eben Gilyôn'²¹ – from which language does it come? I have seen that the whole world thinks that it is a word composed of a word in Greek that means 'announcement'. I am, however, hesitant, for, among all the writings of the Jews, I have not found even one that remembers it under the name 'announcement', neither a good one, nor a bad one; all call it 'Eben Gilyôn, with a Bêt or with a Wāw, with an 'Ālep or with an 'Ayin. Furthermore, since it is accepted by all that Saint Matthew wrote his book in the Holy Tongue – oh how I wish I knew what he called it – maybe Saint Matthew also called his book 'Eben Gilyôn, which means a stone that has been revealed. For the new Torah was concealed and hidden within the old Torah (...).

Iona contends here that the polemical terms commonly used in Judaism to denote the Gospels – אבן גיליון 'wickedness sheet' and עון גיליון 'sin sheet'²² – are not based on the Greek word 'evangelion', but on the Hebrew expression אבן גיליון, to which he attributes the meaning 'revealed stone' (or maybe: 'stone of revelation'). He suggests that Matthew may have called his Gospel

translated into Hebrew, especially since almost all books of the old instrument have been written in the Hebrew language.'

²⁰ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, 'Prooemium', pp. [4–5].

²¹ Iona's transliteration of this Hebrew term into Latin is: Euen ghilion. He seems to be pronouncing the word Gillāyôn in the construct state – Gilyôn. The expression thus sounds more like the Greek 'evangelion' than it would have with the word Gillāyôn in the absolute state.

²² These first appear in *bŠabb*. 116a.

'Eben Gilyôn as a token that the New Testament was concealed within the Old Testament before being revealed. He bases this assertion on several passages of the Hebrew Bible mentioning stones, which he quotes on the following pages of the introduction and interprets typologically as signs according to which the New Testament will complete the Old one.²³ It is interesting to note the circularity of Iona's thinking on this matter. Since he is persuaded that the Gospel is of Hebrew origin, he believes that the Hebrew terms used by Jews to denote the Gospel – און גיליון and עון גיליון – are more reliable than the Greek term. Since these Hebrew terms are, however, clearly of a polemical nature, Iona suggests that they should be corrected in order to attain what he believes to be the true Hebrew term behind the word Gospel.

Next, the hostility of Jews towards the Christian Gospel receives much attention in the paratexts. Iona notably argues that this hostility is due to the fact that the Jews serve the Devil. For this purpose, he cites in extenso two rabbinic tales in which Jews are helped by demons,²⁴ and states:

ideoque mirum non est, si Euangelium Hebraei oppugnantes, legem suam seruant, ut placeant Diabolo, non Deo, etc.

לכן אינו מן התימא אם היהודים נגדים לאבני הגיליון ושומרין תורתם לרצות לשטן לא לאל ית':²⁵

It is therefore not surprising that the Jews oppose the Gospels and keep their Law to please Satan, not God, blessed be He.

Moreover, Iona writes in the dedication to Pope Clement XI:

[...] deinde iniqua et impia Hebraeorum mens in Christum, cuius gloriae invidentes, omnia fere testimonia, quae de eo habentur, mutatis vel vocibus vel significationibus corrumpunt; est enim hoc caecae impietatis studium ea corrumpere, quae non potest refellere. Hac autem Evangeliorum versione in verum Hebraicum sermonem tantae audaciae occurrimus [...].²⁶

[...] furthermore, the unjust and impious inclination of the Hebrews against Christ, in envy of whose glory they corrupt almost all testimonies that there are about him by modifying either the words or the meanings. For this is the aim of the blind impiety – to corrupt those [testimonies]

²³ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, 'Prooemium', pp. [5–12, 18–20]; the Old Testament passages on which Iona bases this theory are: the writing of the Ten Commandments on two tablets of stone (Ex 24:12; 31:18; etc.; Deut 4:13; 5:22; etc.); Ps 62:12; Dan 2:31–35; Zech 3:9; 4:7; Gen 28:11, 18; Isa 8:14–15; 28:16.

²⁴ *bMe'il*. 17a–b; Gen. Rab. 63:8.

²⁵ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, 'Prooemium', p. [18].

²⁶ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, 'Sanctissimo Domino nostro Clementi Nono Pontifici Maximo perpetuam felicitatem', pp. [1–2].

which it cannot refute. In this version of the Gospels in genuine Hebrew language, we show much boldness [...].

According to Iona, corrupted testimonies about Christ circulated in the Jewish world. He is probably referring to the polemical passages on Jesus found in rabbinic literature²⁷ and surely to the versions of the Gospels in ‘stammered’ Hebrew that he mentions in his introduction. In these testimonies, some essential words have been corrupted, according to Iona. He mentions, as we have seen, that the term אבן גיליון has been corrupted into און גיליון or עון גיליון, and also that Jesus’s name – Yēhōšûa‘ or Yēšûa‘ – has been corrupted into Yēšû. Iona therefore seems to perceive his own ‘version of the Gospels in genuine Hebrew’ as a means to counter these corrupted testimonies and let Jews know the truth about Christ.

Finally, the missionary hope that Iona had for his translation is mentioned briefly near the end of the introduction:

Itaque amice Lector, te rogo, ut si lecturus es meum librum, ne illum contentionis, sed veritatis studio legas, tum enim Deus tibi intelligentiam tribuet ad illum percipiendum, uti videre poteris in alio libro a me scripto de Controversiis, nuncupato *Alae Columbae*, ubi soluentur omnes Hebraeorum aduersus Messiam dubitationes, atque id tibi, quod mihi, contingit [...] nam ubi Christianorum libros euolui, comperi omnia verba esse tam clara, et aperta, ita ut non fides in illis haberi, sed veritas ipsa apparere omnino in illis videatur.

לכן הואבי הקורא אחלה פניך כשתקרא בזה הספר לא לקנתר אלא להודות על האמת שאלהים יתן לכל להבינו כאשר תראה בחיבור אחר שעשיתי וקראתיו כנפי יונה וכוח ששם אתרץ כל הקושיות שעושים היהודים נגד המשיח ואם תעשה כך יקרה לך כמו שקרה לי [...] ואחר שקראתי בספרי הנוצרים מצאתי שדבריהם אמת ברור לא אמונה:²⁸

Therefore, my beloved²⁹ reader, I beseech you not to jeer when you read this book, but to admit the truth, which God will allow all to understand, as you will see in another work that I have written and that I called *Wings of a Dove: A Disputation*. There I will answer all the harsh questions that the Jews raise against the Messiah.³⁰ And if you do so, what happened to me will also happen to you [...]. After I read the books of the Christians, I found that their words are clear truth, not belief.

²⁷ See Peter Schäfer, *Jesus in the Talmud* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

²⁸ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, ‘Prooemium’, pp. [20–1].

²⁹ I think the Hebrew should be corrected into אוהבי. In the Latin text, we find here: amice.

³⁰ The manuscript of this work is now lost: Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc*, p. XIII. Paragraphs from it are, however, inserted into Iona’s translation of Robert Bellarmine’s catechism, as Iona states in his letter to the reader at the beginning of that work: *Dottrina Christiana Breve*, ‘Al Lettore’, p. [1].

Iona hopes that the reading of his translation will be convincing to some Jews and therefore bring about their conversion.³¹ It may be noted that Iona's translation is one of the earliest Hebrew translations of the New Testament in which such a missionary aim is mentioned. Only in the eighteenth and nineteenth century did the mission to the Jews become a main motivation for producing Hebrew translations of the New Testament.³²

To sum up this part, behind Iona's motivation to translate the Gospels into Hebrew lies a belief that the Gospel of Matthew was originally written in Hebrew and that a Hebrew version of the Gospels may therefore, in some way, enable one to get closer to the Jewish and Hebrew roots of Christianity. There lies also a deep concern regarding Jewish hostility towards and polemics against Christianity, which Iona hopes to parry by offering Jews a true account of the Christian Gospel. Finally, Iona entertains a hope that reading his version of the Gospels in 'pure' Hebrew will contribute to the conversion of some, namely since it will make it easier for Jews to perceive the Gospels as Scripture.

Iona's method of work

In the introduction, Iona presents clearly his method of work in translating the Gospels:

quamuis sit opus difficile verbatim ex Latino in Hebraeum traducere, ac phrasi Hebraicae haerere, tamen operam omnem praestabo, et eo fauente, cui omnia sunt possibilia, meus calamus dirigetur, et intelligentia non deerit.

אף על פי שהעתקה מלשון לאטין ללשון הקודש בהיותה מילה במילה היא דבר קשה עד מאוד לקרבה לנוסח העברי עם כל זה אטרח כל מה שאפשר ובעזרת מי שלפניו הכל אפשר יעשה שקולמוסי יכשר ושכלי לא יחסר:³³

Although in translation from Latin into the Holy Tongue, when it is done word for word, it is very hard to approach the Hebrew formulation, I will take as much pains as possible, and, with the help of Him for whom all is possible, may it be done that my pen shall succeed and my mind shall not fall short.

³¹ A missionary purpose is also attributed to Iona's work by the censor Iohannes Nicheus in his *Approbatio* from 1659 published in Iona's book: '[...] aestimo opus edi posse in publicum, idque in gloriam eiusdem Domini Iesu, et illuminationem populi Israel.' Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, 'Prooemium', p. [22].

³² See Shuali, 'Why Was the New Testament Translated into Hebrew?' pp. 517–20.

³³ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, 'Prooemium', p. [3].

From this sentence, we learn, first, that Iona translated from Latin, that is, from the Vulgate; second, that he basically tried to render the Vulgate literally – ‘verbatim’ / ‘word for word’; and third, that he strived to attain natural-sounding idiomatic formulations in Hebrew. Iona is modest enough to know that this twofold obligation of loyalty both to the source text and to the genius of the Hebrew language is not an easy one. An analysis of Iona’s translation itself may confirm this description of his method of work and add a few more details.

The Vulgate as source text

Both in the introduction, as just mentioned, and on the title page, it is noted that this translation is made from Latin.³⁴ Many details in the translation indeed confirm that the source text used by Iona was the Latin Vulgate and not a Greek text of the Gospels.

For example, in some places, one does not find the definite article in Iona’s translation where it may be expected:

John 1:1³⁵

בְּרֵאשִׁית הָיָה דְבָר וְדְבָר הָיָה אֶצְל הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֱלֹהִים הָיָה דְבָר:

In principio erat *verbum*, et *verbum* erat apud Deum, et Deus erat *verbum*.

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.³⁶

In Iona’s rendering, there is no definite article before the word *Dābār* in all of its three occurrences in this verse: ‘In the beginning was *a* word, and *a* word was next to God, and God was *a* word.’ It is easy to understand how Iona arrived at this rendering if he was working from a Latin text in which there is, of course, no definite article. It is much less likely that he would render this verse thus, had he been consulting a Greek text in which a definite article precedes the word *Logos* in all of its three occurrences here.

In the Vulgate, the Greek term ἀρχιερέυς ‘chief priest’ or more often in the plural ἀρχιερεῖς ‘chief priests’ is rendered in two different ways in its 62 occurrences in the Synoptic Gospels – *princeps*

³⁴ For the title, see p. 3.

³⁵ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, p. 305. The Latin text quoted is the one appearing in Iona’s edition; abbreviations are given in full form.

³⁶ Nestle-Aland, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012) notes no Greek witnesses in which the definite article is absent.

/ *principes sacerdotum* ‘chief/s of priests’ and *summus sacerdos* / *summi sacerdotes* ‘highest priest/s’. With few exceptions, Iona’s translation of this term follows the distribution in the Vulgate. He renders *princeps* / *principes sacerdotum* into שָׂרֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים / שָׂר ‘chief/s of the priests’, whereas he translates *summus sacerdos* into הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל ‘the high priest’ and *summi sacerdotes* into רִאשֵׁי הַכֹּהֲנִים ‘heads of the priests’.³⁷ This variation and especially the concurrence with the distribution of terms in the Vulgate would not be likely, had Iona been translating the single term that appears in the Greek text.³⁸

Moreover, Iona’s wish to stay close to the text of the Vulgate may be felt throughout his translation. Sometimes this tendency seems somewhat exaggerated,³⁹ as in the following examples:

John 10:35

וְלֹא יוּכַל לְהַפֵּר הַמִּקְרָא:⁴⁰

et non potest *solui* scriptura

and the Scripture cannot *be undone*⁴¹

In order to translate the Latin passive infinitive ‘solui’, Iona seems to be using an infinitive Hophal, which, of course, does not exist in Hebrew.

Matt 20:28

³⁷ Places where *princeps* / *principes sacerdotum* is rendered שָׂרֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים / שָׂר: Matt 2:4; 16:21; 20:18; 21:15, 23, 45; 26:3, 14, 47, 51, 57, 58, 59, 62, 63, 65; 27:1; Mark 2:26; 10:33; 11:18; Luke 3:2; 9:22; 19:47; 20:1, 19; 22:2, 4, 50, 52, 54, 66; 23:4, 10, 13. Places in which *summus sacerdos* / *summi sacerdotes* is rendered רִאשֵׁי הַכֹּהֲנִים / הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל: Mark 8:31; 14:1, 10, 43, 47, 53, 54, 55, 60, 61, 63, 66; 15:1, 3, 10, 31; Luke 24:20. Exceptions – places in which *principes sacerdotum* is rendered into רִאשֵׁי הַכֹּהֲנִים Matt 27:3, 6, 12, 20, 41, 62; 28:11 (it may be noted that all of these exceptions occur in one passage); *summi sacerdotes* rendered גְּדוּלֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים: Mark 11:27.

³⁸ In the Gospel of John, the situation is slightly more complex, which makes it less useful for the present argument. In most cases, the Greek term is rendered there by the Vulgate into *pontifex* / *pontifices*. Iona translates this term in a less systematic manner using the following expressions: הַכֹּהֵן הַגָּדוֹל / הַכֹּהֲנִים הַגְּדוֹלִים; שָׂרֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים / שָׂר.

³⁹ Michael Ryzik quotes a number of such cases in order to show the influence of Latin on the Hebrew of Italian Jews (Ryzik, 'קווי לשון בתרגום הבשורות', pp. 60–1, 64). He writes: ‘The translation of the Gospels [...] may serve as a convenient “lab” for investigating the Hebrew of that time that was influenced by Italian and Latin, since the Hebrew text appears alongside the Latin source text. Indeed, we may find in [the work of] Giovanni Battista Iona many linguistic phenomena that are also documented in original writings produced in Italy. The great advantage of this translation is that it allows to point directly to the source of the reflection.’ (pp. 59–60, my translation) It seems to me, however, that Ryzik’s methodology in this matter is inadequate to the aim of his research: the fact that Iona may translate certain expressions in an overly literal manner does not prove that he would use such calques in a context other than that of translation. Furthermore, while I am unable to judge to what extent the examples given by Ryzik demonstrate the influence of Italian on Iona’s Hebrew (pp. 61–4), I am not sure that Iona is the most pertinent case study for such an investigation: Bartolucci, Iona’s student and colleague, recalls that Iona did not speak Italian very well and used to mix it often with Spanish (Bartolucci, *Bibliotheca Magna Rabbinica*, pp. 50–1).

⁴⁰ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, p. 351. Example given by Ryzik, 'קווי לשון בתרגום הבשורות', p. 61.

⁴¹ Translations of biblical verses are my own unless indicated otherwise.

כְּמוֹ בְּוִדְהֵאֲדָם לֹא־בָא לְהִשָּׁרֵת אֱלֹא לְשָׁרֵת⁴²

sicut Filius hominis non venit *ministrari*, sed ministrare
as the Son of Man did not come *to be served*, but to serve

The verb נִשְׂרַת in the Niphal is extremely rare in Hebrew.⁴³

Luke 9:18

וַיִּשְׁאַלֵם לְאִמּוֹר מָה אֹמְרוֹת הַכְּפִיתוֹת הֵייתָ אֲנִי:⁴⁴

et interrogavit illos, dicens : Quem *me* dicunt *esse* turbae
and he asked them, saying: What/who do the crowds say *that I am*?

Here, Iona translates literally a Latin infinitive clause – a structure which is not idiomatic in Hebrew.⁴⁵

Last, it may be noted that, as may be expected, Iona seems to be using an edition of the Vulgate text based on the so-called Sixto-Clementine Vulgate – the ‘official’ edition of the Vulgate published by the Catholic church in 1592. In his *Mémoire sur l'établissement du texte de la Vulgate*, Henri Quentin compares a number of influential editions of the Vulgate produced during the sixteenth century⁴⁶ – two editions published by Robert Estienne, the Leuven edition, the Sixtine Vulgate and the Sixto-Clementine Vulgate – and he lists all the variants found in the first five chapters of the Gospel of Matthew; these variant readings concern 18 words in the text.⁴⁷ The Latin text appearing in Iona’s book concurs with that of the Sixto-Clementine Vulgate and with no other edition regarding these variant readings.⁴⁸ Iona’s Hebrew translation also reflects the textual choices made in the Sixto-Clementine Vulgate, as far as it is possible to determine.

⁴² Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, p. 73.

⁴³ Two occurrences of this verb may be found on the Ma’agarim database of the Academy of the Hebrew Language, both in Piyyutim – one by Yannai (6th century) and the other by Pinhas HaCohen ben Yaacov (8th century).

⁴⁴ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, p. 229. Example given by Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc*, p. XX.

⁴⁵ See also cases in which Iona translates the Latin negative order phrase *noli / nolite...* into ‘do not want to...’; Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc*, p. XX.

⁴⁶ Regarding the intense work on the text of the Vulgate during the sixteenth century, see Gilbert Dahan and Annie Noblesse-Rocher (eds), *La Vulgate au XVI^e siècle. Les travaux sur la traduction latine de la Bible* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020).

⁴⁷ Henri Quentin, *Mémoire sur l'établissement du texte de la Vulgate. I^{ère} partie : Octateuque* (Rome: Desclée et C^{ie}; Paris: J. Gabalda, 1922), p. 186.

⁴⁸ In fact, there is one difference between the Latin text found in Iona’s edition and the Sixto-Clementine Vulgate. In Matt 5:30, we find ‘abscinde’ in Iona’s text, and ‘abscide’ in the Sixto-Clementine edition of 1592. In some later editions of the Sixto-Clementine Vulgate, however, one finds ‘abscinde’, as in Iona’s text, e.g. *Biblia sacra vulgata Editionis, Sixti V. Pont. Max. jussu recognita et Clementis VIII. auctoritate edita* (Lyon: Guillaume Rouillé, 1604).

Usage of the Hebrew translation of Matthew published by Jean du Tillet and Jean Mercier (Paris, 1555)

Besides the Vulgate, there is another text that we can be fairly sure that Iona was consulting throughout his translation of the Gospel of Matthew – the Hebrew version of Matthew published in Paris in 1555 by Jean du Tillet and Jean Mercier, which Iona had bought in a bookshop in Lucca, as he recounted in the introduction. Although Iona criticized this translation harshly, his own rendering of Matthew is often quite close to it, including some non-self-evident translation choices, as the following example may show:

Matt 26:9⁴⁹

כי יוכל להמכר השמן הזה בממון רב ולהנותן לעניים: (Iona)

כי יוכל השמן הזה להמכר בממון רב ולהנותן לעניים (Du Tillet-Mercier)

For this *ointment* could have been sold for a great *fortune* and given to the poor.

potuit enim *istud* venundari *multo*, et dari pauperibus.

For *it* could have been sold *for much* and given to the poor.

The words השמן ‘the ointment’ and ממון ‘money, wealth’, which appear in both Iona’s and Du Tillet-Mercier’s version, are absent from the Latin text. The fact that both translators choose to insert here the word ממון, rather than a more common word with a similar meaning (כסף, הון, etc.), is not likely to be a coincidence.

Moreover, it is interesting to remark that some of the non-self-evident translation choices that are common to both Iona’s and Du Tillet-Mercier’s rendering of Matthew are absent from Iona’s translation of parallel phrases in the other Gospels:

Matt 3:17⁵⁰

זה הוא בני אהובי אשר בו רצתה נפשי: (Iona)

זה בני אהובי אשר בו רצתה נפשי: (Du Tillet-Mercier)

Hic est Filius meus dilectus, in quo mihi complacui.

⁴⁹ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, p. 98; Jean du Tillet and Jean Mercier, *Evangelium Matthaei ex Hebraeo fideliter redditum* (Paris: Martinus Iuuenis, 1555), p. 119.

⁵⁰ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, p. 9; Du Tillet and Mercier, *Evangelium Matthaei*, p. 10.

This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. (ESV)

Mark 1:11⁵¹

בְּנֵי אֱתָה אֱהוּבִי בְּךָ רָצִיתִי: (Iona)

Tu es filius meus dilectus, in te complacui.

Luke 3:22⁵²

אֱתָה בְּנֵי אֱהוּבִי בְּךָ רָצִיתִי: (Iona)

Tu es Filius meus dilectus, in te complacui mihi.

In the translation of Matt 3:17, both Iona and Du Tillet-Mercier insert the word נַפְשִׁי ‘my soul’, which is absent from the Latin text. This Hebrew rendering is influenced by a comparable saying found in Isa 42:1, thus creating a connection between these Old and New Testament verses. This addition is, however, not made by Iona in his rendering of the parallel sentences in Mark and Luke.

Matt 26:38⁵³

עֵצָבָה נַפְשִׁי עַד־מוֹת הַמָּתִינוּ פֹּה וְשָׁקְדוּ עִמִּי: (Iona)

עֵצִיבַת נַפְשִׁי עַד מוֹת פֹּה תִמְתִּינוּ לִי וְשָׁקְדוּ עִמִּי (Du Tillet-Mercier)

Tristis est anima mea usque ad mortem: sustinete hic, et vigilate mecum.

My soul is sad to death. Stay here and stay awake with me.

Mark 14:34⁵⁴

נִעְצָבָה נַפְשִׁי עַד־מוֹת עִמָּדוֹ פֹּה וְשָׁקְדוּ: (Iona)

Tristis est anima mea usque ad mortem: sustinete hic, et vigilate.

It is noteworthy that, in the translation of Matt 26:38, both Iona and Du Tillet-Mercier use the Mishnaic words עֵצָבָה ‘sad’ (adjective, feminine) and הִמָּתִין ‘to wait’. In Iona’s translation of the parallel sentence in Mark, he uses biblical vocabulary for rendering the same Latin words – נִעְצָבָה ‘to grieve, be sad’ (verb) and עִמָּד ‘to stand, stay put’.

⁵¹ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, p. 116.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 101; Du Tillet and Mercier, *Evangelium Matthaei*, p. 122.

⁵⁴ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, p. 174.

Other than the Du Tillet-Mercier version, I have not found evidence attesting that Iona used any other previous Hebrew translation of the Gospels, including the translation of Matthew found in Shem Tov ibn Shaprut's 'Eben Bōhan, with which Iona was familiar.⁵⁵

The Gospels translated separately

Another observation one makes when overviewing Iona's translations of the different Gospels is that they regularly do not concur with one another – Iona often chooses different vocabulary and different phrase structures to render the same Latin words and very similar phrases, which appear in the different Gospels. This gives the impression that Iona's work on the translation was somewhat spontaneous, with no substantial attempt to uniformize the translation as a whole, and also maybe that it was carried out over a rather long period of time.⁵⁶ The following example may illustrate this:

Matt 26:11

כי־ענניים תמיד יהיו עמכם ואני לא־אֶהְיֶה לְכֶם תמיד:⁵⁷

nam semper pauperes habetis vobiscum: me autem non semper habetis.

For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me.

Mark 14:7

כי בְּכֻל־עֵת יהיו לְכֶם עֲנִיִּים [...] ואני לא בְּכֻל־עֵת אֶהְיֶה עִמָּכֶם:⁵⁸

semper enim pauperes habetis vobiscum: [...] me autem non semper habetis:

John 12:8

כי עֲנִיִּים יהיו תמיד עִמָּכֶם ואני לא אֶתְמִיד עִמָּכֶם:⁵⁹

Pauperes enim semper habetis vobiscum: me autem non semper habetis.

⁵⁵ See also Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc*, p. XVII, footnote 28.

⁵⁶ To this we may add Carmignac's observation that the publication of Iona's translation of the Gospels seems to have been a very long process: different 'Approbationes' are printed in Iona's book, from 1639, 1659 and 1660 (Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, 'Prooemium', p. [22]); the book was then published only in 1668, the year Iona died. Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc*, p. XVII.

⁵⁷ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, p. 98.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 358.

While the Latin is almost identical in all three parallel verses, we can see that Iona makes a number of different choices in the translation of each Gospel. The adverb ‘semper’ is rendered into תָּמִיד ‘always’, בְּכָל־עֵת ‘at all times’, and אֶתְמִיד ‘I will persevere (always be)’. The verb ‘habetis’ – ‘you have’ is rendered either into יִהְיֶה לְכֶם / אֶהְיֶה לְכֶם ‘will be for you / you will have’ or into יִהְיֶה עִמָּכֶם / אֶהְיֶה עִמָּכֶם ‘will be with you’ – in none of these three parallel verses does Iona make the same choice regarding the rendering of the two occurrences of this verb. Moreover, there are differences in word order between the three renderings. While the differences between the divergent choices made by Iona in translating the three occurrences of this saying in Matthew, Mark and John are not highly significant, they do attest that Iona was translating each Gospel separately, without systematically consulting his past renderings and with no subsequent attempt of uniformization.

A few more examples of different choices made by Iona for rendering the same Latin words in the different Gospels may be offered. The verb ‘baptizo’ – ‘to baptize’ in the active is translated into טָבַל in Piel in Matthew, and into the more common טָבַל in Qal in Mark, Luke and John.⁶⁰ The name of the Roman coin ‘denarius’ is rendered, in different places, into דִּינָר or דִּנָּרִים,⁶¹ into מָעָה,⁶² and into אֲגוּרוֹת.⁶³ As observed by Carmignac,⁶⁴ the term ‘Spiritus Sanctus’ – ‘the Holy Spirit’ is rendered, in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, into רוּחַ הַקְּדוֹשׁ, or in a few cases into הַרוּחַ הַקְּדוֹשׁ,⁶⁵ i.e. something like a formal equivalence of the Latin expression – the noun ‘spirit’ followed by the *adjective* ‘holy’. In the Gospels of Luke and John, on the other hand, Iona renders this expression, with only a few exceptions,⁶⁶ using the very common Jewish term רוּחַ הַקְּדוֹשׁ – literally: ‘the spirit of holiness’.

Which kind of Hebrew?

⁶⁰ Piel – Matt 3:11 (this occurrence is surely influenced by Du Tillet-Mercier); 28:19 (in Du Tillet-Mercier, the verb can be either in Qal or in Piel here, since the text is without vowel-points). Qal – Mark 1:4, 5, 8; 6:14, 24; Luke 3:16; John 1:25, 26, 31, 33; 3:22, 26; 4:1, 2; 10:40.

⁶¹ Sing. – Matt 20:2, 9, 10, 13; 22:19; Mark 14:5; John 6:7. Plur. – Matt 18:28; Mark 6:37.

⁶² Mark 12:15; Luke 20:24.

⁶³ Luke 7:41; 10:35; John 12:5.

⁶⁴ Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc*, pp. XX–XXI.

⁶⁵ Matt 28:19; Mark 3:29.

⁶⁶ רוּחַ הַקְּדוֹשׁ is again found in Luke 1:15; 2:25; John 20:22.

Regarding the Hebrew used by Iona in the translation, it may first be observed that it has some clear ‘biblicizing’ features. In particular, the Wayyiqtol form is very frequently used, as in the following example:

Mark 1:41

וַיִּרְחַם עָלָיו יֵשׁוּעַ וַיִּטְדֹּף וַיַּגַּע בּוֹ וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ [...] ⁶⁷

Jesus autem misertus eius, extendit manum suam: et tetigit eum, ait illis [...]

Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him [...] (NRSV)

In this verse, as in many many more, Iona uses a sequence of verbs in Wayyiqtol to describe actions taking place in the past, as is common in the prose of the Hebrew Bible. It is interesting to remark that, in the Latin text of this verse, only two of the verbs are in the past tense, while the other two are participles. The rendering of all verbs into Wayyiqtol is, therefore, a conscious stylistic choice made by Iona.

Nevertheless, it may also be remarked that the use of biblicizing language in the translation is often not very systematic. Hence, within sequences of verbs in Wayyiqtol describing actions in the past, Iona, from time to time, includes one verb or another in Qatal in a way that is not characteristic of the language of the Hebrew Bible and does not seem to follow any particular discursive logic:

Luke 20:29–30

אִם־כֵּן הָיוּ שִׁבְעָה אֶחָיִם וַיִּקַּח הָרִאשׁוֹן אִשָּׁה וַיָּמָת בְּלֹא בָנִים: וַיִּלְקְחֶהּ הַשֵּׁנִי [...] ⁶⁸

septem ergo fratres erant: et primus accepit uxorem, et mortuus est sine filiis. et sequens accepit illam [...]

There were therefore seven brothers. And the first took a wife and died without children. And the second took her (...)

John 12:44

וַיִּצְעַק יֵשׁוּעַ וַיֹּאמֶר [...] ⁶⁹

Jesus autem clamavit, et dixit [...]

And Jesus cried out and said [...] (ESV)

⁶⁷ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, p. 119.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 361.

Furthermore, reading through Iona's translation one notices on every page the vast use of post-biblical vocabulary and features of language. For example, the following words originating in ancient rabbinic literature (Mishnah, Talmud, etc.) may be found in the translation:⁷⁰ אֵיזָה 'which' (e.g. John 12:33), אָלָא 'but' (Matt 26:39), אֲמֵתִי 'true' (John 1:9), אֶפְשָׁר 'it is possible' (Matt 26:39), כְּדֵי שֶׁ- 'in order that' (Matt 26:41, 56), כְּלוּמֵם 'nothing' (Matt 26:61), מְעוּלָה 'excellent' (Luke 22:26), מְשִׁינָה 'different' (Mark 1:34), פְּלוּנִי 'someone' (Matt 26:18), צָרִיךְ 'need, must' (Matt 3:14; John 12:34; 13:29), הַצָּטְרִיךְ 'need' (Matt 26:35, 65), נֶצְרִיךְ 'need' (Mark 14:31), שֶׁל 'of' (Matt 26:53; Mark 14:47), שְׁעַת הַכּוֹשֵׁר 'the right time' (Luke 22:14).

As for morphological and syntactical features characteristic of Mishnaic Hebrew, one occasionally finds the masculine plural suffix ין- (e.g. מְתַקְנִין 'fixing'; Mark 1:19).⁷¹ The comparative is regularly formed using the word יוֹתֵר 'more' (e.g. Matt 26:53; Mark 7:36, 37; 14:5; Luke 22:26; John 1:50; 12:43). אוֹתוֹ, אוֹתָהּ, etc. are used as demonstrative adjectives (e.g. אֹתוֹ הַיּוֹם 'that day' [diem illum]; Matt 26:29). One finds the construction 'עָתִיד + infinitive' denoting a future action (e.g. מִי שֶׁהֵיךָ עָתִיד לְמַסְרוֹ 'he who would hand him over' [quisnam esset qui traderet eum]; John 13:11).⁷² The preposition לְ- is commonly used to introduce a definite direct object (e.g. וְיֶדֶד אֶחָד מֵהֵם לְעַבְדֵי שָׂר 'and one of them hit the servant of the chief priest and cut off his right ear' [Et percussit unus ex illis servum Principis Sacerdotum...]; Luke 22:50).⁷³

Finally, some post-Talmudic Medieval Hebrew vocabulary is also used in the translation: for example, יְכוּלָה 'power, ability' (Matt 26:64; renders the Latin word 'virtus'), יַעֲרִי 'forest (adj.)' (Matt 3:4), מְכֻנָּה 'called' (Luke 22:3),⁷⁴ מְסוּפָּק 'be doubtful' (John 13:23), הִתְמִיד 'persevere' (John 12:8).⁷⁵

Well-chosen idiomatic renderings

⁷⁰ The period from which each word originates is conveniently indicated in Avraham Even-Shoshan, *Even-Shoshan Dictionary Renewed and Updated for the 21st Century* ([Israel]: The New Dictionary, 2004). It may also be verified in the Ma'agarim database of the Academy of the Hebrew Language: <https://maagarim.hebrew-academy.org.il/>

⁷¹ More examples listed in Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc*, p. XVIII.

⁷² A parallel example is found in Matt 26:21.

⁷³ See more examples in Matt 26:37; Mark 14:33, 63; Luke 22:8; John 12:9, 10, 45.

⁷⁴ This root is used in Piel already in the Hebrew Bible. Its earliest uses in Pual are, however, in Piyut.

⁷⁵ Furthermore, Michael Ryzik identifies a number of morphological features in Iona's Hebrew that are characteristic especially of Italian sources: Ryzik, 'קווי לשון בתרגום הבשורה', pp. 64–7.

Last but not least, it is not rare to find in Iona's translation renderings of undeniable quality, that is, cases in which Iona manages to find a translation that both faithfully renders the meaning of the Latin expression or phrase and is idiomatic in Hebrew and resonates with Jewish culture. Two examples may be offered:

Luke 22:41

וְהוּא סָר מֵאֲתֵמָם כַּמִּטְחָוִי אֶבֶן⁷⁶

Et ipse avulsus est ab eis *quantum iactus est lapidis*

And he withdrew from them *about a stone's throw* (ESV)

For the translation of this verse, Iona borrows and nicely adapts an expression from Gen 21:16:⁷⁷

וַתֵּלֶךְ וַתֵּשֶׁב לָהּ מִנְּגֹד הַרְחֵק כַּמִּטְחָוִי קִשָּׁת

et abiit seditque e regione procul *quantum potest arcus iacere*

Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, *about the distance of a bowshot* (ESV)

Mark 7:2

וַיִּבְרְאוּתָם קֶצֶת מִתַּלְמִידָיו שֶׁהָיוּ אוֹכְלִים לֶחֶם בְּלֹא נְטִילַת יָדַיִם הַרְפוּם:

Et cum vidissent quosdam ex discipulis eius *communibus manibus, id est non lotis*, manducare panes, vituperauerunt.

And when they saw some of his disciples eat bread *with defiled, that is to say, with unwashed, hands*, they found fault. (KJV)

Here, Iona renders the entire phrase 'with defiled hands, that is, unwashed (hands)' into 'without handwashing'. He uses the very common technical term for ritual handwashing in Judaism, נְטִילַת יָדַיִם, which enables him to be more concise than the source text – a reader familiar with this Jewish custom does not need an explicit explanation on the connection between the defilement of hands and not washing them.⁷⁸ This Hebrew translation may seem obvious, but we must appreciate that

⁷⁶ Iona, *Quator Evangelia*, p. 290.

⁷⁷ This rendering has been noted by Lapidé, *Hebrew in the Church*, p. 70. This verse is translated in an almost identical manner in Elias Hutter, *Novum Testamentum Domini Nostri Jesu Christi. Syriace, Ebraice, Graece, Latine, Germanice, Bohemice, Italice, Hispanice, Gallice, Anglice, Danice, Polonice* (Nürnberg: 1599), p. 298. Since I cannot find other clear cases that may indicate that Iona was borrowing from Hutter (see also Carmignac, *Évangiles de Matthieu et de Marc*, p. XVII, footnote 28), I think it is most likely that both translators arrived at this elegant solution independently.

⁷⁸ Iona uses the expression נְטִילַת יָדַיִם / נְטֵל יָדַיִם also in Matt 15:2, 20.

Iona was, as far as I know, the first Hebrew translator of the New Testament who had the idea of rendering this verse and its parallels using the technical term נְטִילַת יָדַיִם.

Conclusion

An analysis of Giovanni Battista Iona's Hebrew translation of the Gospels offers a nice portrait of the figure of the convert from Judaism who has become a professional Christian Hebraist, and highlights some of the characteristics of this kind of Hebraist of the Early Modern Period. In Iona's work, we see a particular interest in the Jewish origins of Christianity, a deep concern regarding Jewish hostility towards Christianity and notably regarding Jewish polemical activity, as well as a hope for the conversion of Jews. We see excellent knowledge of Hebrew including all of its strata – biblical, Talmudic and Medieval, accompanied by a very nice Sprachgefühl – feeling for the language, but also a somewhat unsystematic approach and a certain lack of theoretical understanding of the Hebrew language.