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Book Review of Latin-into-Hebrew: Texts and Studies, Volume One: Studies

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This volume of eighteen studies is dedicated to the memory of a young interdisciplinary scholar, Francesca Yardenit Albertini (1974-2011), close friend of the editors. A list of her varied publications covers three pages.

Five authors present “Latin-into-Hebrew: Introducing a Neglected Chapter in European Cultural History” (9 pages), seeking “to shed new light on an under-investigated phenomenon of European medieval intellectual history: the transmission of bodies of knowledge and texts from Latin into Hebrew between the twelfth and fifteenth century” (p 9). Scholars have evidence of 190 translations into Hebrew in the 13th century: 128 in philosophy and science, 62 in medicine. Of these 12 were from Latin. In the 14th century 233 translations were made, 134 in sciences and philosophy; of these 34 were from Latin. There were 89 translations in the 15th century, of which 62 were in science and philosophy; 53 were from Latin. Most philosophical texts were translated in Italy; medical texts were translated in Italy and in Provence (p 11). Volume One offers detailed examinations of Latin-into-Hebrew knowledge transfer; Volume Two analyzes several Latin-into-Hebrew translations, thereby the team wishes to enrich the understanding of the intellectual history of Jews in Europe (p 17). These books bring together the results of conferences in Paris (December 7-9, 2009) and in Barcelona (February 17-19, 2010).

Volume 1 consists of five parts: the first three present studies on intellectual exchanges in a harmonious or neutral context; then exchanges in the conflicted religious sphere, and finally two general studies.

Part I begins with “Latin into Hebrew- Twice Over! Presenting Latin Scholastic Medicine to a Jewish Audience” by Susan Einbinder and Michael McVaugh (12 pages with an appendix of texts). Among medical experts of Montpellier in the 14th century they focus on Arnau de Vilanova’s Speculum medicine, completed in 1308. Excerpts of this long manuscript were transliterated into Hebrew (rarely done) and then translated into Hebrew. Cyril Aslanov continues to examine Arnau’s work, analyzing “the kind of Latin represented there and the way the Hebrew script was adapted to represent it: “Latin in Hebrew Letters: The Transliteration/Transcription/Translation of a Compendium of Arnaldus de Villa Nova’s Speculum medicinae (13 pages). Gad Freudenthal continues the discussion of “this remarkable two-column bilingual document” (p 59) along with three others of the same type in “Latin-into-Hebrew in the Making: Bilingual Documents in Facing Columns and their Possible Function” (8 pages).

“From Latin into Hebrew through the Romance Vernaculars: The Creation of an Interlanguage Written in Hebrew Characters” (15 pages) by Cyril Aslanov examines a collection of “more than twenty medical translations produced by an anonymous scholar in southern France ca. 1197-1199 who employed the pseudonym “Doeg the Edomite” (p 69-70) and his glosses to the text.

Danièle Iancu-Agou, “La pratique du latin chez les médecins juifs et neophytes de Provence médiévale (XIVe-XVIe siècles)” (17 pages) continues the theme of the previous essays into the 14th century. Study of medicine at the University of Montpellier was not open to Jews and in 1390 they were forbidden to acquire medical manuscripts in Latin. However, several overcame this ban, some by converting to Christianity and entering the university.

Part II has three essays with a medical connection.

In “The Father of the Latin-into-Hebrew Translations: Doeg the Edomite,” the Twelfth-Century Repentant Convert” (15 pages), Gad Freudenthal offers a preliminary report on the earliest and most prolific
translator from Latin into Hebrew. He had converted and later regretted the decision, so gave himself the name of a betrayer of David (1 Sam 22:9). He could not return to Judaism openly but worked to share contemporary medical knowledge with the Jewish readers.

Naama Cohen-Hanegbi’s “Transmitting Medicine Across Religions: Jean of Avignon’s Hebrew Translation of the Lilium Medicine” (29 pages) tells of another convert, Moses of Roquemaure/Jean of Avignon, who translated Lilium medicine in 1360. Bernard of Gordon (ca. 1260-1318) was a professor of medicine in Montpellier who wrote Lilium medicine between 1303-05. It was copied often and translated into French, German and Provencal, with two translations into Hebrew. About 1384 Jean wrote a medical treatise, Sevillana medicina, which modern scholars consider to be very innovative (p 122). In contrast to the translator of Arnau de Vilanova’s work, Jean neither avoided nor suppressed the Christian origins of his translation (p 145).

Medicine seemed to be a neutral field, except where incantations were considered to be an integral part of a treatment (p 161). Katelyn Mesler, “The Three Magi and Other Christian Motifs in Medieval Hebrew Medical Incantations: A Study in the Limits of Faithful Translation” (57 pages) found that “translators and scribes employed a range of strategies when faced with such passages…” (p 162). Thomas Aquinas distinguished between pious prayers and incantations that may be a pact with demons. In medicine some treatises from the 13th to mid-14th century considered that incantations were legitimate and not magic or superstition. Fragmentary translations into Hebrew do not include the incantations. Four translations that do are studied in detail. The Magi (Matthew 2:1-12), recognized as kings, presented three gifts; from the 12th century these were seen to be efficacious against epilepsy, “the falling disease.” Sometimes the Hebrew reads angels instead of kings, a correction or a scribal error? The Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:9-13), holy water and prayer with specifically Christian context were often omitted in the Hebrew version. Perhaps the translators and scribes followed the Talmudic statement: “Whatever cures is not idolatrous” (Babylonian Talmud Shabbat 67a; Hullin 77ᵇ (p 209)).

Part III The Philosophical-Scientific and Literary-Moral Contexts

Resianne Fontaine, “An Anonymous Hebrew Translation of a Latin Treatise on Meteorology” (23 pages) sketches the influence of Aristotle’s Meteorology on Arabic transmitters and on Albert the Great (ca. 1206-1280), who commented on the Meteora. This was used by the compiler of the meteorology section of the Philosophia pauperum, attributed to Albert, which was translated twice into Hebrew. The anonymous translation in one manuscript preceded that of Abraham Shalom in Spain before 1492. Like Cohen-Hanegbi or Jean of Avignon, Fontaine lists the Latin words transliterated into the Hebrew alphabet.

“Albert the Naturalist in Judah Romano’s Hebrew Translations” (28 pages) by Carsten L. Wilke, studies Judah ben Moses of Rome, a very productive translator of Latin into Hebrew in the earlier part of the 14th century. He was in the court of Robert of Anjou, King of Naples, from 1309-1343, where he translated biblical and other Hebrew texts into Latin for the king. Translating Albert’s commentaries on Aristotle and his followers was a challenge because the Hebrew language of the day did not have the specialized vocabulary and, when he created terms these would be understood only by those initiated into the Latin world of thought. “Judah Romano’s position in Jewish philosophy is thus best summarized with the insider/outsider paradox. Although he was fully immersed in the central questions of Greek and Arabic philosophy... his work remained inscribed in the concentric limits of his young Hebrew language... (p 273).

Did works of Albert’s most famous disciple (1225-1274) come into Hebrew? Tamás Visi, “Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae in Hebrew: A New Finding” (18 pages) presents the evidence: “The Book of the Diety’s Wisdom” (better than Visi’s term “Science” to render the word Scientia) the anonymous author gathers 78 excerpts from the Summa Theologiae and one from the Summa contra Gentes. The source is
not credited and the passages are not in the order of the original. Before 1350 in Italy, Judah Romano translated selected questions but Visi presents another work that focuses on Divine Unity and the “five ways” to prove the existence of God; he supplemented these with additional arguments from the *Summa contra Gentes* (p 279-80).


The last essay in Part III looks at compilations of Aesop’s fables. Tovi Bibring’s “‘Would That My Words Were Inscribed’: Berechiah ha-Naqdan’s *Miślei šu’alim* and European Fable Traditions” (20 pages) studies ha-Naqdan’s collection “Fox Fables,” after a historical introduction to the Latin traditions, going back to the first century C.E. Berechiah, it seems, used the collection of 42 fables by the fifth century Roman poet Avianus; these were used in the Middle Ages as a tool for studying Latin. Then she gives two examples that indicate Marie de France’s influence on the Hebrew version. Berechiah made the fables “Jewish” by quoting from the Bible and other Hebrew sources (p 323). Thus he made the fables pertinent to his audience and gave them a new moral meaning (p 329).

Part IV Latin-into-Hebrew: The Religious Context

“Latin into Hebrew and the Medieval Jewish-Christian Debate” (14 pages) by Daniel Lasker, a seasoned scholar of medieval Jewish polemics against Christians, moves from specific examples, the Paris Disputation (1240) and those of Barcelona (1263) and Tortosa (1413-14) in Spain, to discuss motivations for Jewish intellectuals to learn Latin. Polemics was a major reason; quoting Latin or other Christian sources would buttress the authority of the author’s arguments (p 342). Inclusion of individual words in Latin might have clarified the Christian doctrine for readers who might have heard the terms from their neighbors (p 343).

Philippe Bobichon develops this area in “Citations latines de la tradition chrétienne dans la littérature hébraïque de controverse avec le christianisme (XIIe-XVe)” (39 pages), pointing out that apologetics and polemics go together as defense and criticism serve the readers in encounters with the other community. He studies 38 Jewish polemical works dating from the late 12th to the late 15th century. They contain 120 citations, 32 from the Old Testament Vulgate, 70 from the New and 18 from liturgical or theological sources. These passages are arranged in a series of charts that are helpful for detailed analysis.

Part V Latin-into-Hebrew: Final Reflections

Well versed in the influence of Greek and Arabic texts of Aristotle or medieval Jewish thinkers, Jean-Pierre Rothschild’s “Traductions refaites et traductions révisées” (29 pages) compares translations of the “Nicomachean Ethics,” “Metaphysics,” and the “Book of Causes” (a work now known not to be from Aristotle) among Latin Christian and Jewish scholars. Because of the complexity of issues relating to medieval efforts to obtain an accurate rendering of citations, Rothschild invites specialists to further collaboration in this field.

What was happening during the 19th century in this field? Irene E. Zwiep, “Nation and Translation: Steinschneider’s *Hebräische Übersetzungen* and the End of Jewish Cultural Nationalism” (24 pages) notes
that the extraordinary contribution of Moritz Steinschneider (1816-1907) regarding translation literature was “in order to counter the increasing focus, prevalent in both Jewish and non-Jewish scholarship, on narrowly defined national cultures” (p 421). Translations were neglected by most scholars because it was felt that they shed little light “on the national character of a particular literary tradition” (p 429). This wide-ranging survey ends by describing Steinschneider “as a Jewish scholar who, disenheartended with the prospect of civic equality, tried to (re-)construct an intellectual ecumene that would ultimately connect all scholars, regardless of race, creed and nationhood” (p 445).

The final essay, “Postface: Cultural Transfer between Latin and Hebrew in the Middle Ages” (7 pages) by Charles Burnett, charts the interaction of Hebrew and Latin in medieval science and philosophy. Three areas are covered: Jews as translators of Arabic learning; Jewish texts in Hebrew as a source for Latin texts; Latin texts as sources for Hebrew texts. Burnett thus places the studies in this volume into the important context for seeing the larger picture of Jewish, Muslim and Christian interactions in the medieval and renaissance periods.

This handsome volume is completed by a list of contributors (with some of their publications), and indices of modern names, ancient and medieval names, French names, ancient and medieval works, subjects and places. These tools make a valuable contribution to the researcher in a field where collaboration advances the study of a vast field.