1 | Introduction

Multilingualism in the Neighborhood

This book will explore not simply the practice and conception of multilingualism and translation (mainly of Scripture) in ancient Judaism as separate subjects, but the deep and dialectical relationship between them, especially in view of their broader synchronic (Greco-Roman) and diachronic (the history of Judaism and beyond) contexts. It is the exploration of this interconnection, with particular emphasis on multilingualism, to be defined shortly, that, I believe, makes this volume novel. In brief, I argue that ancient Jewish, especially rabbinic, translation, both as practiced and as thematized, has to be understood in dynamic relation to a multilingual backdrop.

This work does not seek to be comprehensive or complete, but illustrative; neither systematic nor schematic, but performative. It will present ancient texts, mainly in Hebrew and Aramaic, but also Greek, that profoundly plumb the inner dynamics and pedagogical-social implications of this fundamental and generative pairing. The pedagogical agency and identity bestowing function of multilingualism and translation will be emphasized throughout.

So as to practice what I preach, ancient sources are presented in both their original extant languages and in (mainly my) English translations. Each of the six core chapters attends to a particular text, or, more often, cluster of texts, that I have found, in my own teaching, to be particularly rewarding, but also challenging; sometimes confounding. Herein lies, I wish to demonstrate, the textual beauty and transcendence of their own language and rhetorical strategies. This is not a book of theory, of either multilingualism or

translation. However, it is deeply and broadly informed by both, in an unabashedly synchronistic and anecdotal way. In short, this is a book of six distinct "case studies" or "micro-histories" (on which, more later) that I have sought to combine so as to reveal a much broader and longer history, that is, story, both Jewish and universal. In other words, this book seeks to address, and hopefully enrich, several audiences at once as they both read me and read with me.

Translation (and its presumption of multilingualism, and vice versa) is a universal practice extending back as far as human cultural history will take us, certainly to some of our earliest known written cultures, for example, Sumerian/Akkadian bilingual clay tablets in the third millennium BCE, with alternating languages in alternating lines (the "interlinear" model). Even then, the expressed purpose of such bilingual tablets is often *pedagogical*, that is to say, deeply concerned with social and cultural (not simply linguistic) transfer and reproduction.[1] We shall see much the same emphasis on pedagogical function and practice according to rabbinic literature of the early centuries CE (later on, especially Chapter 6). Although the Jewish (and before it, ancient Israelite) practice of translation in a multilingual society and culture is not nearly as hoary as its Babylonian forebears, it is well attested from the sixth century BCE (later on, especially Chapter 4) until the present. It is, therefore, no exaggeration to say that the *unbroken* history of Jewish writing, reading, and

[1] For starters, see Jerrold S. Cooper, "Bilingual Babel: Cuneiform Texts in Two or More Languages from Ancient Mesopotamia and Beyond," *Visible Language* 27 (1993): 69–96; C. Jay Crisostomo, "Language, Translation, and Commentary in Cuneiform Scribal Practice," *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern History* 5 (2018): 41–56; C. Jay Crisostomo, *Translation as Scholarship: Language, Writing, and Bilingual Education in Ancient Babylonia*, Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Records 22 (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2019). My thanks to my colleague Eckart Frahm for his guidance. As this book was going to press I came across the following title: Marc Van De Mieroop, *Before and after Babel: Writing as Resistance in Ancient Near Eastern Empires* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), which has much of relevance to the Ancient Near Eastern background to multilingualism and interlinear bilingual texts (e.g., 29–30, 33–34, 80–81, 87–88, 132–33).

translating has a *continuous* chronological and geographic span that is un- or rarely surpassed.

While the mainly early rabbinic texts that will be our primary focus will be considered initially for their creative interplay with one another, they will be viewed as well within the context of the wider and deeper history and theorizing of translation, both within the ancient history of Judaism and well beyond it. As we shall see, the Rabbis themselves presumed a central role for multilingualism and translation not just in Revelation, but in Creation, that is, as a core element of the human (and divine) practice of dynamically making and conveying meaning, as well as the forging of social identities with respect to and in contact with other peoples and their languages.

Although a larger, more detailed history of multilingualism and translation, both as practiced and as thematized, both Jewish and universal, is well beyond the scope of this book and its author, it will be signaled frequently, especially in the Afterword (Chapter 8). The multilingual templates founded in antiquity, especially by the ancient rabbinic sages, continue to serve what we might think of as the "people of translation," as all peoples of translation, and those who study them. This book might be thought of as an initial down payment toward a robust mutual engagement between "translation studies" and "Jewish studies," lest they become self-enclosed with respect to this subject (and others). In short, it asks, for the specific times and places on which it focuses, what is the social and cultural "work" that is both performed and contested in ancient Judaism, especially in its early rabbinic variety, but as viewed within its broader chronological and spatial contexts? What role does translation, especially of canonical scriptures, play, and how and why does it do so, in the Jewish (already inner-biblical) vocation of serving as interlocutors and mediators between competing literate and visual cultures, whether locally, regionally, or internationally? While the chapters of this book are partly designed to be read as self-contained "micro-histories," it is hoped that their shared

purpose and authorial oversight, as articulated in this Introduction, will enable them to illumine one another and their shared subject of inquiry.[2] In short, translation, as a form of both communication and interpretation, is a two-way discursive street that is at the heart of verbal meaning making, which is to say, at the core of human culture. Regarding the universality of translation, George Steiner says, "Translation is formally and pragmatically implicit in *every* act of communication, in the emission of each and every mode of meaning."[3]

In this opening chapter, I will emphasize the place of ancient scriptural translation, especially from Hebrew (Scripture) to Aramaic (*targum*), within the broader context of multilingualism and translation in the ancient Greco-Roman world, the "neighborhood" of this chapter's title.[4] I will also make occasional nods, synthetic rather than systematic, to the broader-still fields of translation studies and sociolinguistics. In the Afterword (Chapter 8), I will contextualize my mainly synchronic focus during the course of the book within a more diachronic overview of the multilingual nature of Jewish society and culture from ancient to contemporary times, and the persistent role of translation across that history and its frequent upheavals. In short, I hope to bring profoundly endearing and enduring texts to new eyes and minds, but to familiar ones as well, in the hope of mutual intellectual stimulation. I should emphasize at the outset that we will be looking less at texts of translation and more at texts *about* translation, although we will engage some examples of the former as well, especially at the ends of Chapters 3 and 6. That is because the early rabbinic texts with

[2] On my use of "micro-history," in conjunction with "new historicism," see Steven D. Fraade, *Legal Fictions: Studies of Law and Narrative in the Discursive Worlds of Ancient Jewish Sectarians and Sages*, JSJSup 147 (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 4–7.

[3] George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), xii (emphasis in original).

[4] For the wealth of recent scholarly literature dealing with translation and multilingualism in the ancient Greco-Roman world, see Chapter 3, n. 1.

which we shall engage are a particularly rich and plenteous source of reflection on and contention with both language and languages as conveyers of revelatory meaning through human as much as divine speech.

It would not be hyperbolic to say that the ancient Rabbis (like their intellectual forebears and heirs) were obsessed (no slight intended) with language(s) both for its mystical and for its destructive powers, from its tiniest units on up, and from its human to divine articulations, usually in dialogue, sometimes fraught, with one another, as in prayer. As famously stated in Proverbs (18:21): מָ֭וֶת וְחַיִּ֣ים בְּיַד־לָשׁ֑וֹן ("Death and Life are in the Power of the tongue"), and even more so "tongues."[5] This applies as much to communication between humans and one another as between humans and God, in the domain of the holy as in the domain of the secular, especially when they intrude upon one another, as they do in scriptural translation into the vernacular.

I seek to fill a lacuna in scholarship, whereby anthologies of texts and essays relating to multilingualism and translation, hot topics now in the humanities and social sciences, generally either ignore or are unaware of the rich sources of ancient Jewish, and rabbinic

[5] The bibliography of such subjects would be immense, and many such references can be found in the successive notes and chapters and in the cumulative Bibliography. Here, I'll just give a very brief and diverse sampling: Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," in Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, *Vol. 1: 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 62–75; Fergus Millar, "Ethnic Identity in the Roman Near East, AD 325–450: Language, Religion, and Culture," *Mediterranean Archaeology* 11 (1998): 159–76; Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Seth Schwartz, "Language, Power and Identity in Ancient Palestine," *Past & Present* 148 (1995): 3–47; Willem F. Smelik, *Rabbis, Language and Translation in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Steiner, *After Babel*. Smelik's book covers much the same material as do I, but less in terms of the broader cultural context and resonances with translation theory, and less essayistically. Steiner's book mimetically inspired the title of Chapter 2.

in particular, reflection on these subjects.[6] This nearsightedness is largely true as well for those interested in multilingualism and translation in Jewish societies of medieval, for example, Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic, and modern, for example, Hebrew, Ladino, and Yiddish, times.[7] If I can correct these oversights, even if only by a little, I will feel justified in having explored these long-overlooked texts and insights with a broader audience in mind and in view. While seeking to use the best critical evidence to ground my discussion, I do not pursue text-critical or philological matters for their

[6] For example, Michael Ballard, *De Cicéron à Benjamin: Traducteurs, traductions, réflexions*, Etude de la traduction (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Lille, 1992); André Lefevere, ed., *Translation/History/Culture: A Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1992); Douglas Robinson, ed., *Western Translation Theory from Herodotus to Nietzsche*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 2002); Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, eds., *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Lawrence Venuti, *The Translation Studies Reader*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2012).

[7] See Robert Singerman, *Jewish Translation History: A Bibliography of Bibliographies and Studies, with an Introductory Essay by Gideon Toury*, Benjamins Translation Library 44 (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2002). In Toury's excellent introduction ("Translation and Reflection on Translation: A Skeletal History for the Uninitiated") to Singerman's bibliographies, he notes this absence of works dealing with ancient Jewish translation, providing a curious excuse, by stating (xiii), "This period [of the Mishnah], which was *rich in manifestations of both translation and reflection on it*, later became one of the most researched fields, especially the translation of the Bible into Aramaic, Greek and Latin (which is why the compiler of the bibliography has decided not to include it in the list, lest all the rest be overshadowed by it)" (emphasis added). I will have more to say about this in the Afterword (Chapter 8). For a good overview of multilingualism in Second Temple Judaism, see Timothy H. Lim, "Multilingualism," in *The Eerdman's Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2010), 373–75. For a survey of the scholarly literature on multilingualism (and by extension, translation) in modern Jewish history and culture, see Afterword (Chapter 8), n. 9. For an excellent historical overview of Jewish translation, that asks, among other questions, "What's Jewish about Jewish translation?" see Naomi Seidman, "Sacred Tongue, Translated People: Translation in the Jewish Tradition," in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation and Religion*, ed. Hephzibah Israel (Oxford: Routledge, 2023), 334–47 (thanks to the author for sharing it with me prepublication).

own sakes, except to the degree that they affect textual meaning in a way that informs my discussion.

To begin with, I offer a definition of multilingualism, which, while formulated by Benjamin Harshav, a scholar and late colleague, who worked with Jewish languages of an entirely different time and place, serves well my purposes: "the knowledge of more than one language by a person or a social group and the ability to switch from one language to another in speech, in writing, or in reading."[8] Harshav further clarifies that multilingualism can be "personal, social, or inter-subjective," that is, not all members of a society need to be equally multilingual to characterize that society as being multilingual. Within such a society there can be great variability as to the degree and nature of language priority and dominance, for example, urban/rural, coastal/inland, socioeconomic elite/non-elite, professional/manual, teacher/student. It is not simply a question of which language, assuming there is only one, is used in which linguistic domain, for example, speech/writing, reading/listening, business/ritual, home/market. Rather, key to Harshav's definition for my purposes, as I will expand upon shortly, is his emphasis on "the ability to switch between one language to another." Similarly critical to my interest in this subject as per Harshav's definition is the social dimension of multilingualism, that is how it enables or dis-enables communication and interactions between and among social groups or strata, as between Jews and non-Jews (Chapter 3),

[8] Benjamin Harshav, *The Polyphony of Jewish Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 23–40 ("Multilingualism"), citing from 25. One could add, as an indicator of language knowledge, if not literacy, in a largely oral culture, the ability to decode the spoken word pronounced by others. Not all four aspects of language performance need to be present, let alone in equal measure, for a person to be considered "lingual" in a number of languages. I do not intend to enter the fraught debate concerning ancient Jewish literacy, for which see Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2001). For rabbinic texts emphasizing the important duty of a father to teach his son to *speak* Hebrew, see Steven D. Fraade, "Before and After Babel: Linguistic Exceptionalism and Pluralism in Early Rabbinic Literature," *Diné Israel* 28 (2011): 33*–35*.

and between Jews and Christians (Chapter 7). It should be stressed, as I hope to exemplify, that both multilingualism and translation occur as much *within* societies and *between* them.

How does my understanding of ancient Jewish multilingualism affect my view of translation, mainly scriptural but not only, in that broader context? It begins with a generally held, but overly simplistic, view of the practice of translation that can be represented as follows: Monolingual person A, let us say, a native speaker of the French, writes or says something in French. Monolingual person B, a native speaker of, let us say, German, does not understand what A has said or written. Monolingual person B engages bilingual person C, who speaks and writes both French and German (at least), to translate (in the sense of its Latin etymology, "*transferre/ transfero*," to carry across) the words of person A for the cognitive linguistic benefit of person B. Once done, mission accomplished!

The only one who we can presume knows French *and* German (at least) is person C. We might further presume, by extension but without warrant from the existence of such translations, that the culture of person A, like that of person B, is predominantly monolingual, even if it contains a smattering of multilingual exceptions, who are, as it were, free for hire. Those monolinguals who have access to the translation into their own language have no further need for the "original," which, for all practical intents and purposes, is of no further use to them. It is as if the untranslated original has disappeared, having been superseded by its translation, regardless of the degree to which the latter is deemed to be "accurate."

But what if the available evidence – for my purposes a combination of literary, documentary, and epigraphic – suggests that Jewish society in Palestine, and perhaps to a lesser extent in the diaspora (depending on where) was multilingual, following Harshav's definition and qualifications? To ask this question in terms of our hypothetical French–German model, why would someone conversant (functionally bilingual) in *both* French and German bother to read or consult a French–German interlinear or parallel-column

translation? Presumably so as to read or hear one version in light of the other, or, in other words, to structure a bilingual, dialogical *hermeneutic* between them. At least, this is how the Rabbis, undoubtedly bilingual in Hebrew and Aramaic, and presumably other cultural elites, would have experienced the performance of *targum*, whether in scriptural study or recitation. How this would have resonated for monolinguals is linked to the question of the overall diffusion and maintenance of Hebrew in ancient Jewish society more broadly, about which there is significant disagreement among scholars. In any case, there is no "one size fits all" in this regard. The same question can be raised with regard to bilingual inscriptions and documents, the overt intention of whose inscribers is generally not known.

At its core, translation is interpretation, regardless of whether the real or ideal target audience is within or without the linguistic society (or circle) of the text.[9] If that society is bilingual (at least), the translation ceases to be a one-way transference, but a two-way (even if just rhetorically) dialogue. In such a culture, translation does not occlude the "original" but enhances and expands it, even as it interrogates it. Its bilingual audience can challenge the performed translation.[10] To quote the great scholar of rabbinic literature, Saul Lieberman: "But the first rudiment of the interpretation of a text is the ἑρμηνεία, the literal and exact equivalent of the Hebrew תרגום, which means both translation and interpretation."[11]

[9] I elide the question of whether it is always self-evident which is the original text and which is its derivative translation, or even whether they are original and/or translation to one another at all. Perhaps there are better ways to characterize their interrelation, including those that do not prioritize between them to begin with. I will leave this chicken and egg for another meal, even though we will nibble it shortly.

[10] See for example, m. Meg. 4:9.

[11] Lieberman continues: "The elementary task of the interpreter of the Bible was to explain the *realia* and to render the rare and difficult term in a simpler Hebrew, or, sometimes, in Aramaic." Saul Lieberman, *Hellenism in Jewish Palestine*, 2nd ed. (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1962), 48 and n. 15. See Chapter 4, n. 12; Chapter 6, n. 13. Note how the amoraic Palestinian sources atomistically cite discrete

They are hermeneutical partners. Similarly, in the words of Walter Benjamin, a literal translation "reflects the great longing for linguistic complementation." Continuing, he says:

> A real translation is transparent; it does not cover the original, does not block its light, but allows the pure language, as though reinforced by its own medium, to shine upon the original all the more fully.[12]

Translation and interpretation, while being linguistically discrete, are partners in disclosure.

Compare this with a recent article on ancient Hebrew–Greek translations (e.g., the Septuagint), whose author, Dries De Crom, decries what he terms the "directional fallacy":

> In this period [late second century BCE to second century CE] it was common for translations to circulate alongside originals and to be read by those capable of reading the source as well as translation. In such a system traditional ideas of translation and replacement are not always useful or appropriate. The study briefly explores multilingualism (Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic), which may affect translations both on the level of their production by a bi- or trilingual translator and their reception in a multilingual community.…[13]

If translation in the previous largely monolingual and unidirectional model of translation as replacement can be termed "external" (i.e., exporting cultural goods from one monolingual society to another),

Greek translations of Aquila (תרגם אקילס) in the same manner in which they cite discrete units of rabbinically attributed midrash. See Jenny R. Labendz, "Aquila's Bible Translation in Late Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Perspectives," *HTR* 102 (2009): 364–70.

[12] Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's Tableaux Parisiens," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 79.

[13] Dries De Crom, "Translation and Directionality in the Hebrew–Greek Tradition," in *Complicating the History of Western Translation: The Ancient Mediterranean in Perspective*, ed. Siobhán McElduff and Enrica Sciarrino (London: Routledge, 2011), 77–87 (from "abstract," 77).