

Multilingualism and Translation in Ancient Judaism

In this book, Steven D. Fraade explores the practice and conception of multilingualism and translation in ancient Judaism. Interrogating the deep and dialectical relationship between them, he situates representative scriptural and other texts within their broader synchronic Greco-Roman context, as well as their diachronic context – the history of Judaism and beyond. His careful selection of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek primary sources, here fluently translated into English, best illustrate the fundamental issues and performative aspects relating to translation and multilingualism. Fraade scrutinizes and analyzes the texts to reveal the inner dynamics and the pedagogical-social implications that are uncovered when multilingualism and translation are paired. His book demonstrates the need for a more thorough and integrated treatment of these topics, and their relevance to the study of ancient Judaism, than has been heretofore recognized.

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Multilingualism and Translation in Ancient Judaism

Before and After Babel

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Yale University



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*To Raziel Dov, who in two years has revealed to us much of
the mystery of life and language.*

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Preface

The long and winding journey of this book spans my academic career, from my first days as a graduate student in Oriental (later, Near Eastern) studies at the University of Pennsylvania to my present days as Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at Yale University. Over that almost half century, I have been intrigued by the relationship between Hebrew, in all of its stages, and Aramaic, in all of its varieties, and the nature and role of translation (*targum*) between them, as between Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek, in both their textual and inscriptional manifestations.

My interests in such translations gradually deepened into an interest in the multilingual cultural contexts from which those translations grew and to which they contributed. This, in turn, was increasingly informed by a transhistorical and theoretical interest in the ways that the dynamics of cultures in contact produce and are nourished by languages (and scripts) in contact. This, we could say, is the story of Jewish history and culture overall, from around 500 BCE (Persian conquest) until the present, in both Israel and its perpetual diasporas. Although in the final chapter (Chapter 8, “Afterword”) I will return to that *longue durée*, the preceding chapters more directly engage the wealth of *ancient* Jewish reflections on multilingualism and translation, wherein, I would argue, lies the basic multilingual template for the richness of subsequent historical and cultural manifestations, hopefully to be taken up by others with other areas of expertise. Similarly, this is not a book about translation theory or sociolinguistics, to both of which I am indebted for having enriched

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my reading of the ancient sources. For my particular dependencies, see the cumulative Bibliography at the end of the book.

Even so, my aim is less to be comprehensive than to construct a series of micro-histories (on which term, see Chapter 1) based on a selection of texts that I find to be particularly evocative of the larger dynamic of multilingualism and translation. If the focus is largely on the languages, translations, and transcriptions of *sacred* (that is, scriptural) sources, that is because that is where the ancient texts focus *their* attention. As I indicate in the introductory Chapter 1 (especially nn. 18–21), there is another type of evidence, that I do not consider extensively in this book, that is, *inscriptional* (and documentary) evidence, mainly in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek in the ancient Greco-Roman world. That is because I have discussed that evidence at length in previous publications (in Hebrew and in English), to which I direct the reader, again via the Bibliography, for a better understanding of the thick multilingual cultural realia that stand behind the present textual studies.

As previously indicated, I have spent my whole scholarly life engaged with the topic(s) of this book. My dissertation (1980) and its revision as my first book contained sections on ancient Greek (koine and patristic) and Aramaic (including Syriac and Samaritan) scriptural translations as forms of both scriptural text criticism and interpretation.¹ I gave my earliest lecture related to *targum* (and midrash) upon making the transition from graduate student to faculty member in 1979, and published my first article on the subject in 1985. From then until now I gave and continue to give many scholarly lectures and published and continue to publish many articles, not to mention having taught several graduate seminars on the present subject at Yale. As always, my students continuously open my ears and my eyes. Thus, very many colleagues and students contributed critically to the evolution of my thinking, their

¹ Steven D. Fraade, *Enosh and His Generation: Pre-Israelite Hero and History in Post-Biblical Interpretation*, SBLMS 30 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984).

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being innumerable for purposes of my acknowledging and thanking them all. My appreciations that follow, therefore, are regrettably incomplete and selective.

The following scholars gave me valuable feedback on individual chapters of this book, or their antecedents as published articles (on which, see later in this preface):

Chapter 2: Harold Augenbraum, Elitzur Bar-Asher Siegal, Peter Cole, Edward Greenstein, and James Prosek.

Chapter 3: Katell Berthelot, Yair Furstenberg, and Daniel Stein Kokin.

Chapter 4: Kevin van Bladel.

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Chapter 7: Maren Niehoff, Anita Norich, and Yonatan Sagiv.

Shoni Lavie-Driver was generous to share with me his unpublished work on multilingualism at Caesarea.

Katell Berthelot kindly and generously shared with me her important article, directly relevant to Chapter 3, prior to its publication.² It augments my argument but from a somewhat different contextual angle.

Special thanks and appreciation go to three excellent scholars and generous colleagues, who carefully and astutely read the manuscript in its penultimate entirety and provided apposite suggestions and criticisms that greatly improved the final product: A. J. Berkovitz, Peter Cole, and David Stern. Peter, in particular, was ever present with support and encouragement, beyond his critical eye and pencil.

² “Rabbinic Universalism Reconsidered: The Roman Context of Some Rabbinic Traditions Pertaining to the Revelation of the Torah in Different Languages,” *JQR* 108 (2018): 393–421.

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I benefited tremendously from the detailed and penetrating comments of two Cambridge University Press anonymous readers, one of whom read the manuscript *twice*. Thank you, whoever you are.

I had the honor to attend and contribute earlier forms of some chapters to conferences dealing specifically with language and translation (and more). I thank the organizers for the opportunities and the audiences for the receptions (in quotes are the names of the conferences; in parentheses are the primary organizers):

“Translation in Jewish Culture.” University of Maryland at College Park, 1986 (David Goodblatt).

“First International Conference on the Galilean Studies in Late Antiquity.” Kibbutz Hanaton, Israel, 1989 (Lee Levine).

“Descriptive Translation Studies and LXX.” XIIth Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies. Leiden, 2004 (Albert Pietersma).

“Translatio: Translation and Cultural Appropriation in the Ancient World.” Center for the Ancient Mediterranean, Columbia University, 2006 (David Damrosch).

“Keynote.” International Organization for Targum Studies. Helsinki, 2010 (Willem Smelik).

“Hebrew between Jews and Christians.” Alfried Krupp Wissenschaftskolleg, Greifswald, Germany, July 2, 2012 (Daniel Stein Kokin).

“Multilingualism and the Transfer of Cultures in Antiquity.” Yale University, 2014 (Hindy Najman and Zev Weiss).

“Languages of the Roman Empire: Culture, Power and Cross-Fertilization.” Beit Daniel, Zichron Ya‘akov, Israel, 2016 (Katell Berthelot and Jonathan Price).

“The Bible and the Humanities.” Centre for the Study of the Bible in the Humanities, Oriel College, University of Oxford, 2018 (Hindy Najman).

“Reading the Bible in the First and Second Centuries: Christians, Jews, Pagans and Gnostics.” Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2019 (Esther Chazon).

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“Beyond Translation: Vernacular Jewish Bibles, from Antiquity to Modernity.” Center for Jewish Studies, Harvard University, 2020 (David Stern).

Other universities at which I gave single lectures relating to this subject were Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, University of California Los Angeles, University of Haifa, the University of Toronto, and Yale University.

I would also like to thank the Academy of the Hebrew Language, and its president, Professor Moshe Bar-Asher, for its support, recognition (as an honorary member) and the opportunity to both publish (in Hebrew) and lecture (in English) on this and related subjects under its auspices.

For almost two years (2018–19, terminated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic), I had the honor and pleasure of convening a Yale faculty seminar on the subject “Translation: Sacred and Profane.” It was enthusiastically supported by the then Dean of the Humanities, Amy Hungerford, as part of a humanities initiative and co-convened by my dear colleague Shawkat Toorawa, to both of whom I am deeply appreciative. Around a dozen colleagues met monthly to share with each other the place of translation, especially of sacred texts, in the very varied cultures and languages that they command. I had the precious opportunity to present there several of the texts highlighted in this book.

Three chapters (Chapters 3, 4, and 6) were previously published in preliminary forms.³

³ Chapter 3: “The Torah Inscribed/Transcribed in Seventy Languages,” in *Hebrew between Jews and Christians*, ed. Daniel Stein Kokin, Studia Judaica 77 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 21–47; Chapter 4: “Ezra the Scribe and the (Purported) Origins of Targum, in *A Sage in New Haven: Essays on the Prophets, the Writings, and the Ancient World in Honor of Robert R. Wilson* ed. Alison Acker Gruseke and Carolyn J. Sharp, ÄAT 117 (Münster: Zaphon, 2023), 343–50. Chapter 6: “‘Reading Leads to Translating’ in a Multilingual Context: The View from Early Rabbinic Texts (and Beyond),” in *Social History of the Jews in Antiquity: Studies in Dialogue with Albert Baumgarten*, ed. Michal Bar-Asher Siegal and Jonathan Ben-Dov, TSAJ 185 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 217–31.

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This book would not have found its way to print or to digitalization without the constant support and sage counsel of Beatrice Rehl, my editor at Cambridge University Press. She maintained her commitment to the project while keeping her sense of humor, thereby sustaining mine, when things were moving tiresomely slowly during the dark days of the COVID-19 pandemic. Adroitly and patiently guiding the final steps toward production at the press were Elliot Beck as editorial assistant and Nicola Maclean as content manager, and Santhamurthy Ramamoorthy as project manager. My appreciation goes to all four and to CUP more broadly. The indexes were meticulously and tirelessly prepared by Connor Boyd of the University of Edinburgh, for which I am deeply grateful (again).

Note to the reader: It is my intent that you can either read the chapters in sequence as they interplay with and reinforce one another, with the book as a whole being greater than the sum of its parts, or you can read them individually or in any order, as they are each self-contained and self-sufficient essays.

Having previously dedicated books to my parents, wife, children, and grandparents, I dedicate this book to Raziel Dov, our two-year-old grandson. Raziel in Jewish angelology is the angelic revealer of divine mysteries. *Targum*, the rabbinic translation of Scripture from Hebrew into Aramaic, is similarly said to reveal heavenly secrets to humankind, especially those of the Prophets (b. Meg. 3a). While we lack the ability to prophesy who Razi will become, he daily reveals to us life's inner mysteries, especially as he now explores the meaning(s) and uses of language, while we find ourselves needing to translate his language into ours.

Note on Abbreviations and Transliterations

Abbreviations and transliterations of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek are according to *The SBL Handbook of Style for Biblical Studies and Related Disciplines*, 2nd ed., ed. Billie Jean Collins, Bob Buller, and John F. Kutsko (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).