TRANSLATION AND THE INVENTION OF RENAISSANCE
JEWISH CULTURE: THE CASE OF JUDAH MESSER LEON
AND JUDAH ABRAVANEL

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Introduction

The history of Jewish philosophy—indeed, the history of Judaism—is a series of engagements with the biblical narrative. Because these engagements take place in distinct historical contexts, various literary and aesthetic expectations govern them. The Bible is simultaneously read and translated, imagined and invented, by each generation’s gaze. Biblical translation, whether literally into a new vernacular or conceptually into a different idiom, seeks to make the old language “old” again; or, framed from a somewhat different angle, to make the new language “old.” Since any innovation must be seen to emerge naturally from the biblical text, Bible translations reveal to us something of the struggles over assimilation, integration, and separation that constantly confronted Jews as minorities. The translative act becomes one of the primary causal factors or agents that facilitate and power the struggle for a perceived core of Jewish identity that can, paradoxically, be read into and subsequently teased out of the biblical fabric.

To explore this dialectic between old and new, tradition and innovation, this essay focuses on two important fifteenth-century figures, Judah Messer Leon (ca. 1420–ca. 1498) and his younger contemporary Judah Abravanel (ca. 1465–after 1521), also known as Leone Hebreo. These two individuals were responsible for translating the biblical narrative into Renaissance categories and vice versa. Caught between biblical tradition and the intellectual currents of fifteenth century Italy,

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1 An earlier version of this paper was given at the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at UCLA. I would like to thank those in attendance for their comments, especially Moshe Idel, Arthur M. Lesley, and Brian Copenhaver.
2 Jakob Burckhardt first coined the term “Renaissance” (Rinascimento) in his The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy (1867). It is, like any term imposed retroactively on a period, extremely problematic and potentially misleading. Accordingly, it is necessary to exercise caution when using this and cognate terms (e.g., “Humanism”).
these two individuals—in their very different ways—sought to reconcile or integrate these two worldviews through the act of translation, which enabled them both to find hidden within the biblical narrative the best that contemporaneous non-Jewish literary and aesthetic achievements had to offer. Moreover, the Bible’s divine authorship permitted them both to make the further claim that such achievements existed most pristinely and most beautifully in Judaism. This apologetical argument ultimately aided the invention of what we now call “Renaissance Jewish culture.”

Translation and the Reclamation of a Birthright

The multiplicity of languages, to use the words of Derrida, “exhibits an incompleteness, the impossibility of finishing, of totalizing, of saturating, of completing something on the order of edification, architectural construction, system and architectonics.” Because of this multiplicity, there is a need for translation: to build nexuses between cultures, between languages, between texts, between ideas, and between peoples.

Prior to Saadya Gaon (ca. 882–942), when the superiority of Judaism was discussed, it tended to be done on theological grounds. With Saadya, however, literary and aesthetic dimensions begin to feature highly in such claims. If the Torah is the font of all wisdom, according to Saadya, then its language must both anticipate and surpass those (non-Jewish) canons used to define literary elegance. The perceived

See, for example, the corrective in Christopher Celenza, The Lost Italian Renaissance: Humanists, Historians, and Latin’s Legacy (Baltimore, MD, 2004).


5 See my “Precursorship and the Forgetting of History: Franz Rosenzweig and Saadya Gaon on the Memory of Translation,” in New Directions in Jewish Philosophy, edited by Aaron W. Hughes and Elliot R. Wolfson (Bloomington, IN, 2010), 52–84, esp. 70–77.

6 This trope of the purity of the Hebrew language is articulated well in the Hebrew introduction to his Egron, where he writes, for example, that: