CHAPTER SEVEN

TRANSMITTING MEDICINE ACROSS RELIGIONS:
JEAN OF AVIGNON’S HEBREW TRANSLATION OF
THE LILIUM MEDICINE

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For my sake shooting stars came to be, lit my gloomy face with lightning, carrying away the black blood from my arteries, thereupon my mind’s blind eyes were opened and I saw a lily among the forgotten myrtles, like a lily among the thorns. This is the book named Lilium medicine known as la-Gordorina, which was composed by the wise Master Bernard of Gordon; that is to say, the Flower of Medicine.

These words of introduction conclude the description of a vision experienced, as we are told, by the translator of the Lilium medicine, Jean of Avignon.¹ For him, the lightning he describes was, perhaps, the light of knowledge or science. It revived Jean and put an end to his melancholy, encouraging him to undertake the translation of the book from Latin into Hebrew. For modern scholars, however, this translation sheds light on the intricate process of the translation of scientific works, not only from one language to another, but also across religions. The method of translation used by the author to transmit terms and ideas, which are laden with religious meanings and connotations within the context of medical thinking,

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² For the introductory poem, see the appendix. All translations from Hebrew into English in the article are mine.
exemplifies both the difficulties inherent in the transmission of scientific knowledge across cultures and the solutions proposed to resolve such problems.

The challenge of transmitting knowledge across religions is found with particular complexity in this translation by Jean of Avignon, himself a convert from Judaism to Christianity. Jean's biography is embedded in the translated work, primarily in his preface, but also to some extent in translation choices he made throughout the work. Furthermore, as will be discussed below, although at least part of the translation may have been executed before his baptism, it is clear that the text circulated and perhaps was made public only after Jean's conversion. The translation thus suggests that Jean was still in touch with Jewish readers after his conversion. This leads us to consider Jean of Avignon as a man of a hybrid identity, a person who lived on the border between and within Judaism and Christianity, and to examine his position as translator and author through this lens.

The Translator

The details of the biography of Jean of Avignon (born Moses ben Samuel de Roquemaure) remains relatively unknown, as only minimal and scattered information exists about his life. He was probably born in Roquemaure, a small town near Avignon, around 1320, but there is no record of his birth and early years.² What is known of his life comes from his writings: a Hebrew polemical poem he wrote sometime before 1358, denouncing the teachings and messianic claims of Shemariah ben Elijah Ikriti (Shemaryahu of Negroponti);³ his translation of Lilium medicine (dated 1360), which includes an autobiographical preface from which I quoted above; and an original medical treatise, written circa 1384, entitled Sevillana medicina, which modern scholars consider to be the most innovative medical work written in the Iberian peninsula during the period.⁴

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⁴ This work received great acclaim only after it was edited and printed by Nicolás Monardes in 1545. Although it is unclear whether Jean originally wrote in Latin or Castilian, the work survived only in Castilian. On Sevillana medicina, see José Mondéjar’s introduction in