1. Introduction: Wissenschaft in the Age of Nationalism

This paper intends to briefly address, from a slightly different perspective, some of the issues that have been raised in the course of this volume: the (im-)possibility of cultural transfer from the medieval Christian to the Jewish domain, the importance of creating ecumenical spaces in order to effect that transfer, and the role which linguistic competence may have played in the process. We shall try to tackle these themes through the work and thought of Moritz Steinschneider (1816–1907), the man who single-handedly supplied the basis for all past, present and no doubt future research on medieval translations from Latin (and Arabic) into Hebrew. The “impartial Steinschneider”\(^1\) stands out among his generation as a scholar deeply committed to uncovering the hard plain facts behind the Jewish literary heritage. His bibliographical reconstructions of the medieval translation library, a corpus that had originated at the crossroads of various, sometimes incongruous, religious spheres, likewise seems to testify to an unparalleled emphasis on objective scholarship. In this paper, however, I hope to illustrate that it was precisely this focus on translation literature (a corpus that was largely ignored by his immediate colleagues) that enabled him to convey a deeply ideological message. A message in which political cosmopolitanism and free intellectual exchange were highlighted in order to counter the increasing focus, prevalent in both Jewish and non-Jewish scholarship, on narrowly defined national cultures.

This shift towards the cosmopolitan indeed seems to single out Steinschneider from among his fellow-Wissenschaftler. In later evaluations Steinschneider is generally presented, together with the movement's founding father Leopold Zunz (1794–1886), as an exemplary exponent of the nineteenth-century Wissenschaft des Judentums.2 Yet even if his bibliographical studies were deeply indebted to Zunz' jüdische Philologie, with its combination of rigorous source criticism and historicist interpretation,3 Steinschneider cannot be set aside as a mere linear epigone of Zunz. For all the Wissenschaft's fascination for Jewish literature and its historical metadata,4 Steinschneider's choice of subject matter (translations), his approach (bibliography) and ostensibly 'objective' rhetoric (thoroughly un-Zunzian indeed!) were without precedent. As such, they signal a departure—in spirit as well as in methodology—from the original cultural-nationalist orientation that had fostered, to varying degrees, the work of Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), Zacharias Fraenkel (1801–1875), and Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891).5

2 Even the Wissenschaft's most famous critic Gershom Scholem allowed for some ambivalent praise when measuring the "assimilationist" Zunz and Steinschneider against the agenda of Zionist Jewish scholarship. While staging them as "truly demonic figures" (in "Mi-toḵ hirhurim ‘al ḥokmat yisraʾel," pp. 385–403 in Devarim be-go: Pirqeı morašah u-tehiyyah [Tel Aviv, 1975], on p. 391), he nevertheless lauded both for being the only Wissenschaftler to have shown "a strictly untheological attitude" (in "The Science of Judaism—Then and Now," in The Messianic Idea in Judaism and Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality [New York: Schocken, 1971], pp. 304–313 (on p. 306). An uncomfortable predecessor, Steinschneider was both "one of the most significant scholars the Jewish people ever produced" (ibid.) and "the most central figure in the group of learned liquidators of Judaism" (in Walter Benjamin. Die Geschichte einer Freundschaft [Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1975], p. 117, quoted, in English translation, in David Biale, Gershom Scholem. Kabbalah and Counter-History [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979], p. 3).

3 Cf. Zunz' adhortation to conduct the interpretation of rabbinic literature “unter der Aegide der Kritik,” i.e., by taking into account its transmission history "vom Augenblicke der Mittheilung an bis sie gegenwärtig zu unserer Kenntnis gelangen"; in Etwas über die rabinische Litteratur (Berlin: Maurersche Buchhandlung, 1818), p. 8.


5 According to Miroslav Hroch's well-known division of nineteenth-century nationalism into three consecutive phases (in Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985]), we could classify Zunz' Wissenschaft as a Jewish (minority) equivalent of "phase A nationalism," i.e. the first stage, in which the reconstruction of a national library and folklore aimed at forging a national consciousness. While in "phase B" we witness the beginnings of actual political campaigning for the various "national ideas," it is only in "phase C" (from the 1880s onwards) that these nationalist programs were finally embraced by the majority and became political mass movements.