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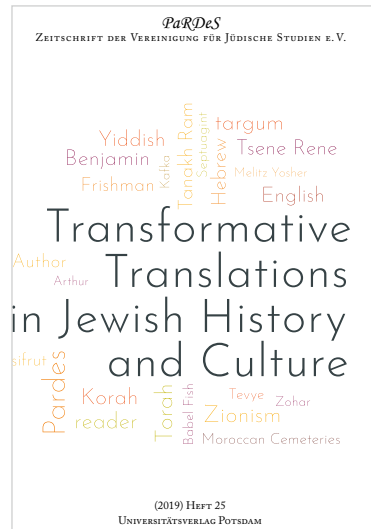
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# Benjamin, Rosenzweig, and the Babel Fish: The Transformative Impact of Translations in Jewish History and Culture

by Markus Krahl and Mirjam Thulin

## I.

Translations are everywhere, from a venerable or even sacred text to a mundane manual for a technical device, occurring between as well as within linguistic communities. As George Steiner stated, “translation is formally and pragmatically implicit in every act of communication.”<sup>1</sup>

Even a narrower concept of translation than Steiner’s points to the omnipresence and importance not just of translations, but also of the problems, potentials, and questions raised by attempts to render a text (or meaning) into a language different from its source. The recent “translational turn” and its expansion of the concept of translation adds even more questions.<sup>2</sup> These highlight the ambivalent or polyvalent nature of translations and their role within larger cultural and philosophical horizons. Translations can solve practical problems, but may also cause new ones. They may change an “original text” in problematic ways and question the idea of the “original” as they create texts that claim a degree of independence and convey new and different meanings, messages, and associations. The very existence of translations can both add to cultural richness and threaten our ability to appreciate it, as they reduce the incentives to learn foreign languages. On a functional level, they can be put into the service of universal as well as particular causes, with their actual impact often being unpredictable.

These issues take on special significance in the context of texts deemed “holy” or held sacred by communities who define themselves in relation to

<sup>1</sup> George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992; orig. publ. 1975), xii, emphasis in original.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Doris Bachmann-Medick, “The Translational Turn,” *Translation Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009): 2–16.

such texts. Translation questions can be metaphysical questions. Not coincidentally, the biblical story of the confusion of languages in Babylon, as described in the book of Genesis (11:1–9), provides the most widely used metaphor for the problems (and the cultural richness) associated with the diversity of languages. Steiner called his magisterial work on the philosophy of language and translation *After Babel*. Many other thinkers use such biblical terms and categories to explore the religious dimensions of translations, their potential to transform not just texts, but the course of history as well, and the utopian vision of the restored understanding of mankind and its eschatological redemption.

Given what is at stake, it may be as fitting as it seems irreverent to open this volume of PaRDeS by juxtaposing two extremely different translators, who have anniversaries this year and who cast very different and distinct perspectives on the utopian and religious dimensions of translations: Franz Rosenzweig and the “Babel fish.” Rosenzweig died on December 10, 1929, at the tragically young age of 42, depriving the world of ideas and texts in which he likely would have continued to engage with questions of translation. The Babel fish, a universal translator, saw the light of the, or rather, a universe in 1979, when Douglas Adams’ sci-fi novel *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* was published.

More than Rosenzweig, the Babel fish may require an introduction: It is “small, yellow and leech-like, and probably the oddest thing in the Universe.” It feeds on brain waves and, put in users’ ears, allows them to understand any form of language uttered around them, even across the divisions between different species. “The speech patterns you actually hear decode the brain-wave matrix which has been fed into your mind by the Babel fish,” the *Guide* informs us.<sup>3</sup>

As different as they are otherwise, obviously, both Rosenzweig and the Babel fish point us to the religious dimensions of translations. To begin with the latter, the *Hitchhiker’s Guide* explains that it “is such a bizarrely improbable coincidence that anything so mindboggingly useful could have evolved purely by chance that some thinkers have chosen to see it as final and clinching proof of the *non*-existence of God.”

<sup>3</sup> Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* (London: Pan Books, 2017), 34.

“The argument goes something like this: ‘I refuse to prove that I exist,’ says God, ‘for proof denies faith, and without faith I am nothing.’

‘But,’ says Man, ‘the Babel fish is a dead giveaway, isn’t it? It could not have evolved by chance. It proves you exist, and so therefore, by your own arguments, you don’t. QED.’

‘Oh dear,’ says God, ‘I hadn’t thought of that,’ and promptly vanishes in a puff of logic.

‘Oh, that was easy,’ says Man, and for an encore goes on to prove that black is white and gets himself killed on the next zebra crossing.”<sup>4</sup>

It seems doubtful that Rosenzweig would have appreciated such facetious playing with questions that he took seriously. The religious dimension of his translation work is well known, from the translation of Yehuda Halevy’s (1075–1141) medieval poetry from Hebrew into German, published in 1926, to the monumental translation of the Hebrew Bible into German, which he began with Martin Buber but did not live to see completed.<sup>5</sup>

The example of this Bible translation leads to questions about the significance of translations specific to Judaism and Jewish life. Any Bible translation reminds us how the importance of texts, their transmission, and the multilingualism of Jewish life give translations an outsized importance across time and space. Translations are rooted in diaspora cultures in different ways. They can be read as cultural practices and performances by Jewish and non-Jewish translators for Jewish or non-Jewish audiences, serving different functions, restaurative and innovative being just two of many.

## II.

The Buber-Rosenzweig translation of the Bible raises many questions in this regard that inform this volume on “transformative translations in Jewish history and culture.” They range from pragmatic linguistic matters to the roles and functions of languages in Jewish religious life and in the cultural or political constitution of Jewish communities, and from traditional translations

<sup>4</sup> Adams, *Hitchhiker’s Guide*, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Franz Rosenzweig, *Jehuda Halevi: Zweiundneunzig Hymnen und Gedichte, deutsch* (Berlin: Lambert Schneider, 1926); *Die Schrift. Zu verdeutschen unternommen von Martin Buber gemeinsam mit Franz Rosenzweig* (Berlin: Lambert Schneider, 1926–31, from vol. 12: Berlin: Schocken, 1932–38; the translation process concluded in 1961, after Buber revised the previous texts once more.

to the transformations of texts in new material, cultural, social, and political environments. Translations have affected the relationship of Jewish communities and cultures vis-à-vis others, their boundaries, and the notion of an essence defining Judaism and Jewish distinctiveness over time and in the face of adversity and persecution, as well as assimilation and acculturation.

Buber and Rosenzweig hoped to re-familiarize German-speaking Jews with the Bible by de-familiarizing them with existing renderings. They tried to achieve this with a translation emulating the Hebrew original in syntax, vocabulary, sound, and orality. This project was supposed to be the key to a renewed, positive sense of Jewishness in the face of assimilation and persecution. Rosenzweig and Buber faced an audience whose knowledge of the original Hebrew was very limited, hence the need for a translation.<sup>6</sup> In this and other religious contexts, knowledge of the original language of texts is often an ideal based on the perception of losses incurred in the translation process, and/or on the notion of a religious essence woven into the fabric of a language. Rosenzweig made the ideal of Jewish knowledge of Hebrew explicit in his renderings of Yehuda Halevy's poetry.<sup>7</sup>

Focusing on the limitations inherent in any process of translation, when taken to the extreme, questions the translatability of texts into other languages. When such ideas of untranslatability are applied to sacred or other texts that are claimed as constitutive of a group's religious, national, or cultural distinctiveness, thorny questions of essentialism or constructedness are not far away. The intellectual setting of the Buber-Rosenzweig translation was a romantic Jewish nationalism in the medium of the German language. In the process, they transformed and expanded the language by foreignizing it through neologisms derived from the Hebrew. Romantic Jewish nationalism, however, can work in both directions: Translating texts from "non-Jewish" into "Jewish languages" in a narrow sense, such as Hebrew and Yiddish, was the Jewish instance of a larger pattern of linguistic national projects observed by George

<sup>6</sup> Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und ihre Verdeutschung*. Berlin, 1936. For the context, cf. Paul Mendes-Flohr, "Jewish Cultural and Spiritual Life," in *German-Jewish History in Modern Times: Renewal and Destruction* [vol. 4], ed. Avraham Barkai and Paul Mendes-Flohr; general eds. Michael Meyer and Michael Brenner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 143–148, 151–156; Michael Brenner, *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 103–111.

<sup>7</sup> Rosenzweig, *Jehuda Halevi*, 153.

Steiner.<sup>8</sup> One specific example of this pattern is analyzed in the essay by DANIELLE DRORI in her article on David Frishman's translations. Depending on the ideology behind such projects, language can be seen as the repository of a Jewish essence or as a medium that, skillfully used in translations, allows for transcending divisions that are linguistic rather than essential.

The historical roles of different languages used by Jews militates against stark dichotomies. While Hebrew has been the sacred Jewish language, medium of divine revelation and religious practice, Yiddish has been hailed as containing a Jewish essence, and Jewish religious life (unless very narrowly defined) has taken place in other Jewish vernaculars and other languages, too, often functionally differentiated from Hebrew and pragmatically relying on translations.

In the case of Jewish religious life and the experiences of individuals and communities, the significance of language and translations is negotiated in contrasting ways in order to experience, understand, and express Judaism. Romantic notions of the ineffable are one such way, different from linguistically mediated insights and interpretations of texts. This internally Jewish interplay between different approaches is one dialectic that has shaped Jewish culture over time. Translations have been crucial to it, as in the case of the *Zohar*, a central text of the Kabbalah. Its translation from Aramaic into English, reviewed in this issue by ERTAN P. FISHBANE, is an instance of this larger dialectic.

Another dialectic that permeates this issue devoted to translations takes place in the relations between Jews and others, Jewish and other cultures. Translations from "Jewish languages" into others have paved ways for greater Jewish interaction with other cultures, which in turn have shaped and enriched Jewish culture. Likewise, translations into languages such as Hebrew and Yiddish have contributed not only to the modernization of these languages, but to an expansion of their users' epistemological horizons. This insight forms the background of the research report by CAROLINE GRUENBAUM. Translation, broadly understood, is a form of cultural mediation: transformative not just for the text, but also for the "receiving" culture (and echoing back to the source).

<sup>8</sup> Steiner, *After Babel*, 341. The topic of "Jewish languages" has sparked a wealth of scholarly studies. A good entryway into this growing field is provided by The Jewish Language Research Website: <http://www.jewish-languages.org>.

In short, translations play a crucial role in the historical development of Jewish cultures and for fundamental questions facing Jews and Judaism especially in modern times. With their inherently innovative and transformative potential, translations can both stabilize and destabilize boundaries, between Jews and others, between the sacred and profane, but also between different expressions of Judaism and its cultural traditions, various social strata of Jewish communities, as well as between Israel and the diaspora. Translations are everywhere.

### III.

The cover and frontispice of this issue are associative hybrids of a Wordle, tag cloud, crossword puzzle, and Scrabble board; they illustrate some of these insights and the range of associations between translations and Jewish Studies. Traditionally understood, translations are attempts to give new form to existing content, thus like in a crossword puzzle, they have to work within the formal requirements of the target language, its vocabulary, syntax, rhythm, and sound, but also the associational space it opens up are associative hybrids. More recent understandings of translations as independent works push against the limitations implied in relations of accuracy and pay greater attention to the different trajectories of sources and translations. As words in different languages come in contact with one another their overlap can be punctual, as they run in otherwise different directions like the horizontal and vertical columns of a crossword puzzle or a Scrabble board.

Just as in that game, a translator gives great value to finding the *mot juste* out of the material she has. Ridding yourself of ten tiles by placing the word “Septuagint” on the board may be as exhilarating as finding a German equivalent for the Yiddish term *fartaytshn*, as the article by MARIA COORS on translations of Sholem Aleichem’s Tevye stories from Yiddish into German illustrates. Imagine playing Scrabble with words in different languages permitted, music from *Fiddler on the Roof* in the background, and with a Babel fish in your ear – a support many actual translators may wish for (or not, given the limitations of artificial intelligence in translating complex or even poetic texts).

For the topic of translations in Jewish history and culture, the Babel fish’s ability to translate across species divisions would be less relevant than the skills to deal with vastly different religious, political, social, and cultural



contexts that change over time. While the articles in this volume do not follow one common theory of translation, they are united in their approach of contextualizing the translations they engage with beyond the texts and practices themselves.

The topics, adumbrated on the cover, range from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries and therefore address a spectrum of different contexts and functions of translations. They involve not just Hebrew, Yiddish, Russian, German, French, and English, but also “Israeli:” a language wholly distinct from biblical Hebrew, as GITIT HOLZMAN and GHIL’AD ZUCKERMANN argue. Their assessment of the translation of the Bible into Israeli challenges conventional and politically important assertions of unbroken links between biblical Hebrew and the language spoken in the Tel Aviv Central Bus Station in 2019. The ethnographic article by CORY DRIVER goes beyond linguistic dimensions, as he analyzes the ritual translations performed by Muslim keepers of Jewish graves in Morocco.

The articles in this volume offer fresh perspectives on old texts and their old-new translations. MORRIS FAIERSTEIN’s article tells us about readers of semi-scholarly Yiddish religious literature in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by analyzing the *Melitz Yosher*, a work by Rabbi Jacob ben Isaac Rabbino of Yanova, the author of the *Tsene-rene*. (This is a good place to point out the gendered nature of translation projects, as exemplified by Bertha Pappenheim’s (1859–1936) translation of this “women’s bible” into German, published in 1930.<sup>9</sup>) The *Tsene-rene* is the starting point also for NETTA SCHRAMM’s article, which traces various presentations of the biblical Korah story into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Her concept of translation as “transvaluation” breaks with established notions of translations being in some way faithful to an “original.”

<sup>9</sup> Yaakov ben Yitzhak Ashkenazi, *Zeehnah u-Reenah Frauenbibel*, transl. by Bertha Pappenheim (Frankfurt a.M.: J. Kauffmann, 1930). Pappenheim also translated the memoirs of Glückel of Hameln (first published privately in Vienna in 1910) and parts of the “Ma’asse Book,” also known as the “women’s Talmud” (*Allerlei Geschichten. Maasse-Buch. Buch der Sagen und Legenden aus Talmud und Midrasch nebst Volkserzählungen in jüdisch-deutscher Sprache. Nach der Ausgabe des Ma’ase-Buches Amsterdam 1723 bearbeitet von Bertha Pappenheim. Mit einem Geleitwort von Ismar Elbogen* (Frankfurt a.M.: J. Kauffmann, 1929).

#### IV.

The relationship between an “original” and its translation(s) is, of course, at the core of practical as well as theoretical discussions about translations, as are questions of form and content, husk and kernel. Walter Benjamin’s (1892–1940) classic essay “The Translator’s Task” (1923), read and re-read, interpreted and quoted over almost a century, offers perspectives that seem particularly relevant to the topics addressed in this volume of PaRDeS.<sup>10</sup> At the more pragmatic level of his theory, Benjamin, who was influenced by Rosenzweig in other regards, argued for foreignizing and transforming the target language by means of a word-for-word translation that focuses on form and dethrones the information or message conveyed by the original, as well as ideals of accuracy or equivalence.<sup>11</sup> A translation shines a new light on the original as it contributes to the latter’s unfolding over time:

“[A] translation proceeds from the original. Indeed, not so much from its life as from its ‘afterlife’ or ‘survival.’ If [a] translation is indeed later than the original, it nonetheless indicates that important works [...] have reached the stage of their continuing life.”

Such works of art gain in relevance as reception, interpretation, and translation liberate their full potential:

“The history of great works of art records their descent from their sources, their shaping in the age of the artist, and the periods of their basically eternal continuing life in later generations. Where it appears, the latter is called fame. Translations that are more than transmissions of a message are produced when a work, in its continuing life, has reached the age of fame. Hence they do not so much serve the work’s fame (as bad translators customarily claim) as they owe their existence to it. In them the original’s life achieves its constantly renewed, latest and most comprehensive development.”<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Translator’s Task,” transl. by Steven Rendall, in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2012; orig. published 1923), 75–83.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Stéphane Moses, “Walter Benjamin und Franz Rosenzweig,” *Deutsche Vierteljahresschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 56, no. 4 (December 1982): 622–640; Caspar Battegay, “The Infinite Citation. Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig,” *Barmidbar: Journal for Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 2 (2012): 52–74.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin, “Translator’s Task,” 76–77.

Translations, then, are transformative, and not only of their source and of the language of the translation. Could Benjamin's theory be read as an optimistic description of the successful, living transmission of texts, ideas, and values in the Jewish tradition, beginning with the Bible and its various translations, but also including many other texts (and practices) that, collectively and organically, bring about "the constantly renewed [and ever more] comprehensive development" of this tradition?

For Benjamin, the messianic Marxist, translations have an eschatological vanishing point. Translations express "the most intimate relationships among languages" which "are not alien to one another, but *a priori*, and irrespective of all historical connections, related to each other in what they want to say."<sup>13</sup> Translations point to a "pure language" and liberate it by rewriting the works that imprison it. In this process, the situation *after Babel* is ultimately overcome in a utopia of linguistic harmony.

Once again, religious imagery and religious texts, first and foremost the Bible, play a key role in this vision of the salvific and transformative potential of translations as they usher the development of languages toward their destination:

"[If] languages grow in this way until they reach the messianic end of their history, then it is translation that is ignited by the eternal continuing life of the works and the endless revival of languages in order to constantly test this sacred growth of languages, to determine how distant what is hidden within them is from revelation, how present it might become in the knowledge of this distance."<sup>14</sup>

Religion has a role in the progress toward the ultimate dissolution of the foreignness of languages to each other, which cannot be brought about by human translators; but, indirectly, "the growth of religion ripens the seed hidden in languages into a higher language." It is in Holy Scripture, where text and truth are so immediately related as to obviate mediation through "sense," meaning, or message, that the translation already inherent in the original can be produced in the same immediate proximity to the original: "For to some degree all great writings, but above all Holy Scripture, contain their virtual

<sup>13</sup> Benjamin, "Translator's Task," 77.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, "Translator's Task," 78.

translation between the lines. The interlinear version of the Holy Scripture is the prototype or ideal of all translation.<sup>15</sup>

Later theorists, philosophers, and practitioners of language may disagree, strongly and fundamentally, with this assessment. But it marks what has been seen to be at stake in the seemingly mundane labor of looking for the felicitous phrase, the right tone, and best equivalent in a new language for something written in a different language and time. With Rosenzweig and Benjamin as presiding angels, a Babel fish in the ear (and tongue in cheek), the texts in this issue of PaRDeS are offered to be read in this spirit.

## V.

If and when Benjamin's vision becomes reality, translations will be a matter of the past. In the meantime, as translations are everywhere, their transformative role in Jewish history and culture makes them all the more relevant and interesting. That may be true even more so in the field of Jewish Studies, which PaRDeS strives to serve, in the daily practices of teaching and researching. This practical dimension of our topic is reflected in the survey of scholars who responded to the question of which text in the field of Jewish Studies should urgently be (re-)translated, into which language, and why.

The responses illustrate not only the breadth of topics that Jewish studies aim to cover, from a 10<sup>th</sup>-century source on Karaite practice and belief to the 17<sup>th</sup>-century *converso* Uriel da Costa, to an early study of Holocaust survivors written in English. They point to inaccessible works that call for translations from Hebrew, Russian, Arabic, Polish, and German. The suggestions presented here alone show how many works in various languages wait to be (re-)translated into various other languages.

Translations may be everywhere already, but there is still work to do. Lest anyone despair of the magnitude, the over-quoted yet timeless wisdom of *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers, Mishnah section *Seder Nezikin*, 2:21) puts the task into perspective: "You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it."

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin, "Translator's Task," 83.