Universitätsverlag Potsdam
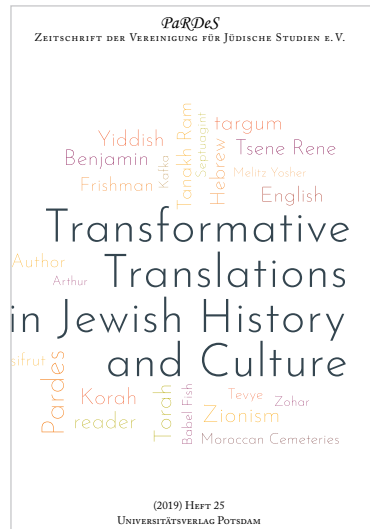
Artikel erschienen in:

PaRDeS
ZEITSCHRIFT DER VEREINIGUNG FÜR JÜDISCHE STUDIEN E. V.

Yiddish targum
Benjamin Tanakh Ram Tsene Rene
Frishman Kafka Melitz Yosher
Hebrew English

Transformative Translations in Jewish History and Culture

Authar
Arthur

sifrut Korah Tevye Zohar
Pardes reader Torah Babel Fish Zionism
Moroccan Cemeteries

(2019) HEFT 25
UNIVERSITÄTSVERLAG POTSDAM

King Arthur's Jewish Knights:
The Many Faces of Medieval Hebrew Literature

by Caroline Gruenbaum

In late medieval England, France, and northern Italy, far removed from the bustling multicultural cosmopolitan cities of the Mediterranean basin, several Hebrew authors embarked on ambitious literary projects, translating existing stories and crafting new ones to entertain and teach Jewish audiences. The most amusing incidents that move the plot along in these stories include knights who spout Hebrew phrases, magical curative plants, and mysterious portals to hell. As exciting as these texts are, they remain largely unknown, even within medieval Jewish studies scholarship. Taken in conjunction with better-known contemporaneous texts, such as rabbinic commentaries, pietistic manuals, martyrological poetry, and historical chronicles, these non-rabbinic literary works expand our understanding of medieval Hebrew literature in northern European communities.

This research project, which comprises a dissertation and a subsequent book, focuses on the under-studied corpus of non-rabbinic Hebrew literature in medieval Northern Europe, consisting of translations, folktales, and stories. These texts, while purporting to teach Jewish ethics, often borrow from non-Jewish literature to form the content of their tales. My dissertation analyzed several paradigmatic texts of this type that all emerged between the late 12th century and the late 13th century: Berechiah ha-Nakdan's *Mishle Shuʿalim* ("Fox Fables", northern France), a modified translation of Marie de France's *Ysopet*; the story collection *Sefer Ha-Ma'asim* ("Book of Tales," Champagne), which draws on a variety of existing Jewish folktales in combination with new French stories; and the anonymous *Melekh Artus* ("King Arthur," northern Italy), a translation of several King Arthur stories.[1]

---

[1]   *Mishle Shuʿalim* exists in twelve manuscripts and early printed versions, with the earliest dated to the 13th century. *Melekh Artus* only survives in a single seven-folio fragment, MS Vatican

This project defines all of these non-rabbinic texts as "literature," deserving of literary analysis to uncover the author's intent and the text's function. Israeli and European scholars including Eli Yassif, Joseph Dan, Tovi Bibring, Tamás Visi, and Rella Kushelevsky, among others, have highlighted the literary aspects of some of these texts, and this project intends to continue their work by applying their theories to a wider corpus.[2] This project presents medieval Hebrew literature as diverse, rejecting attempts to analyze all texts with the same framework. From liturgical and ceremonial to entertainment, this corpus of literature boasts a variety of functions and reflects different authorial aims. Each text must be considered not only as a product of a Jewish community but as a product of a unique author in a unique literary sphere.

My research is the first to analyze these texts together as reflective of a new–though short-lived–Hebrew narrative awakening in medieval northern Europe. I divide them into two categories: folktales and translations. The folktales emphasize traditional pious values and practices, such as observing the Sabbath or monogamy, using biblical and rabbinic texts to influence the community's behavior. They assist in our understanding of the function of literary texts as vehicles for behavioral changes. Differing from the folktales in tone, content, and style, the translations promote universal ethical and moral values, rather than piety. Their claim to a Jewish identity rests in the language they appear, as Hebrew literature was only accessible by Jews. The text uses biblical language, a mainstay of medieval Hebrew in general, but is not dependent on scripture.

Urbinati ebr. 48. *Sefer Ha-Maʿasim* appears in one manuscript, Ox. Bodl. Or 135, but some of its stories appear in later Yiddish folktale collections. Berechiah ben Natronai Ha-Nakdan, *Mishlei Shualim*, ed. A.M. Habermann (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken, 1946); Rella Kushelevsky, *Tales in Context: Sefer Ha-Maʾasim in Medieval Northern France* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2017); Curt Leviant, *King Artus: A Hebrew Arthurian Romance of 1279* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

2   Joseph Dan, *Ha-Sipur Ha-ʿIvri Bi-Yeme-Ha-Benayim : ʿIyunim Be-Toldotav (The Hebrew Story in the Middle Ages* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974, Hebrew); Kirsten Anne Fudeman, "'They Have Ears, but Do Not Hear' : Gendered Access to Hebrew and the Medieval Hebrew-French Wedding Song," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, no. 4 (2006): 542–67; Eli Yassif, *The Hebrew Folktale: History, Genre, Meaning* (Indiana University Press, 2009); Susan Einbinder, "Signs of Romance: Hebrew Prose and the Twelfth-Century Renaissance," in *Jews and Christians in Twelfth-Century Europe*, ed. Michael A. Signer and John Van Engen (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), 221–33; Tovi Bibring, "'Would That My Words Were Inscribed': Berechiah Ha-Naqdan's 'Mišlei Šu'alim' and European Fable Traditions," in *Latin-into-Hebrew*, ed. Resianne Fontaine and Gad Freudenthal (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 309–29; Kushelevsky, *Tales in Context*.

There are three main texts that form the core of the discussions: *Mishle Shuʿalim, Sefer Ha-Maʿasim,* and *Melekh Artus.* These texts, as far as we know, all emerged for the first time in medieval northern Europe. They represent varying aspects of transculturation, with unique combinations of vernacular source material with Jewish tradition and are literary in tone.

The earliest text is Berechiah ha-Nakdan's collection of over one hundred animal fables in rhymed prose*, Mishle Shuʿalim* (Fox Fables).[3] Berechiah ben Natronai ha-Nakdan (Berechiah son of Natronai, the Punctator) practiced in Normandy in the late 12th century or first quarter of the 13th century, likely in Rouen.[4] Although previous scholarship placed Berechiah in England, newer research suggests that he only traveled there, and worked in Normandy, Provence, and England.[5] This research bases its theory on the likely dedication of Berechiah's *Musar haskel* to Meshullam ben Jacob of Lunel and its composition in Provence as well.[6] His *Mishle Shuʿalim* contains some works only known in Provence but also emerges from a northern cultural background, placing Berechiah at a crossroads between interlapping literary spheres.[7]

He produced several works, including a translation-paraphrase of Adelard of Bath's *Quaestiones naturales,* a commentary on Job, and a scientific and theological-philosophical work called *Sefer Ha-Hibbur* or *Sefer Musar Haskel,* and an ethical treatise.[8] Scholars have associated a lapidary with him

[3] Berechiah ben Natronai Ha-Nakdan, *Mishlei Shualim,* ed. A. M. Habermann (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Schocken, 1946); Berechiah ben Natronai Ha-Nakdan, *Fables of a Jewish Aesop: Translated from the Fox Fables of Berechiah Ha-Nakdan,* trans. Moses Hadas (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967). Haim Schwarzbaum produced a summary of the fables and a detailed analysis of each one's origins. He emphasizes the importance of universal folktale motifs and oral retellings that informed the Hebrew author. Haim Schwarzbaum, *The Mishle Shu'alim (Fox Fables) of Rabbi Berechiah Ha-Nakdan* (Jerusalem: Institute for Jewish and Arab Folklore Research, 1979).

[4] Albert C. Friend, "The Tale of the Captive Bird and the Traveler: Nequam, Berechiah, and Chaucer's Squire's Tale," *Medievalia et Humanistica* 1 (1970): 57–65, here 64.

[5] Tamás Visi, "Berechiah Ben Naṭronai Ha-Naqdan's *Dodi ve-Neḵdi* and the Transfer of Scientific Knowledge from Latin to Hebrew in the Twelfth Century," *Aleph* 14, no. 2 (July 2014): 9–73, here 14.

[6] Visi, 16–20.

[7] Golb, *The Jews in Medieval Normandy*, 339–342.

[8] Some editions and translations of these texts exist. Berechiah ben Natronai Ha-Nakdan, *Dodi Ve-Nechdi,* ed. and trans. Hermann Gollancz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920); Berechiah ben Natronai Ha-Nakdan, *The Ethical Treatises of Berachya Son of Rabbi Natronai Ha-Nakdan, Being the Compendium and the Masref,* ed. and trans. Hermann Gollancz (London: D. Nutt, 1902); Berechiah ben Natronai Ha-Nakdan, *A Commentary on the Book of Job: From a*

as well.[9] But his *magnum opus* may be the *Mishle Shu'alim.* In rabbinic language, "fox fables" refer not only to fables featuring foxes but simply animal fables in general. Broadly speaking, these fables follow the Aesopic tradition of animals whose disputes and comportment mirror those of humans. Each of Berechiah's fables ends with a short summary (epimythium) that bridges the gap between the animal world and the human world, often completed by a biblical, philosophizing or Talmudic citation.

The 13ᵗʰ-century folktale collection *Sefer Ha-Maʿasim* (Book of Tales) contains several folktales of interest.[10] The collection appears in the manuscript Oxford, Bodl. Or. 135 alongside collections of rabbinic legends, medieval stories, and medieval philosophical works. The manuscript dates to the middle of the 13ᵗʰ century in Champagne. In *Sefer Ha-Maʿasim,* two stories deserve special attention in the context of this dissertation: "The Poor Bachelor and his Rich Maiden Cousin" and "The Gate to Hell." Other stories will be described as they are introduced. Out of all the stories in the folktale collection, these two are among the most "secular," as they engage least with rabbinic or biblical material. They appear for the first time in this manuscript.

The third story discussed as part of this genre is *Melekh Artus* (King Arthur). It is a Hebrew translation of Arthurian stories with a completion date of 1279. *Melekh Artus* text appears at the end of Vatican Urbinati 48, a manuscript that contains calendrical treatises and a commentary on a Talmudic tractate. Only seven folios and written in two different hands from the rest of the manuscript, the *Melekh Artus* text (fol.75r-77r) breaks off mid-folio, mid-sentence. The text was first edited by A. Berliner in 1885 and translated by Moses Gaster in 1909.[11] Not until 1979 was a modernized, more accurate edition and translation available in English.[12] A handful of articles and references have pointed to the uniqueness of the *Melekh Artus* text, with many referring to

Hebrew Manuscript in the University Library, Cambridge, trans. S. A. Hirsch (London: Williams & Norgate, 1905).

[9] Gad Freudenthal and Jean-Marc Mandosio, "Old French into Hebrew in Twelfth-Century Tsarfat: Medieval Hebrew Versions of Marbode's Lapidary," *Aleph* 14, no. 1 (January 2014): 11–187.

[10] Kushelevsky, *Tales in Context.*

[11] Moses Gaster, "The History of the Destruction of the Round Table as Told in Hebrew in the Year 1279," *Folk Lore* xx (1909): 272–94.

[12] Leviant, *King Artus.*

it as a romance, or as a translation from the Christian world placed inside a Jewish context.[13]

The first story translated by the scribe begins with Arthur's conception through Merlin's machinations.[14] Merlin disguises King Uter Pendragon so that he can lie with the unsuspecting Izerna, married to the Duke of Titormel. The story then describes a separate episode featuring Lancelot de Lac and King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table. After the Quest for the Holy Grail, many of Arthur's knights have died. Arthur arranges a tournament for all the young knights to prove themselves worthy of joining the Round Table. One of these knights is Lancelot, who is embroiled in a love affair with Arthur's queen Guinevere. Lancelot disguises himself as an independent knight for the tournament. In the middle of his courageous efforts on the field, the manuscript cuts off.

While early scholars associated *Melekh Artus* with Italian versions of the King Arthur stories, I propose that the Hebrew author, even if he lived in northern Italy, was drawing exclusively on Old French versions.[15] A new reading of the transliterated vernacular words reveals that they reflect a French or Franco-Italian spelling evocative of the Francophone culture of northern Italy. The scribe translates from two sections from the popular five-part medieval collection the Lancelot-Grail cycle: the *prose Merlin* for his first part and the *mort Artu* for the second.[16] At times, he engages in close literal translation and at times rewrites the episodes. The medieval Jewish communities of France

---

[13]   M. Schüler, "Die hebräische Version der Sage von Arthur und Lanzelot aus den Jahre 1279," *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* cxxii (1909): 51–63; Howard Needler, "Refiguring the Middle Ages: Reflections on Hebrew Romances," *New Literary History* 8, no. 2 (1977): 238–42; Paul R. Rovang, "Hebraizing Arthurian Romance: The Originality of Melech Artus," *Arthuriana* 19, no. 2 (2009): 3–9; Tamar S. Drukker, "A Thirteenth-Century Arthurian Tale in Hebrew: A Unique Literary Exchange," *Medieval Encounters* 15, no. 1 (March 2009): 114–29.

[14]   I use the terms "scribe," "author," and "translator" interchangeably in this paper, as we have no other versions of this story in Hebrew. Without any evidence to the contrary, we can treat *Melekh Artus* as a unique literary production by a single author.

[15]   Moritz Steinschneider, *Die hebraeischen Übersetzungen des Mittelalters und die Juden als Dolmetscher. Ein Beitrag zur Literaturgeschichte des Mittelalters, meist nach handschriftlichen Quellen* (Berlin, Kommissionsverlag des Bibliographischen bureaus, 1893), 968; Schüler, "Die hebräische Version," 51–63; Gaster, "The Destruction of the Round Table," 274–76.

[16]   The Lancelot-Grail cycle, also known as the Vulgate Cycle, contains five major sections drawn from sources ranging between 1210 and the mid-1230s. These sections include: 1) *The History of the Grail*; 2) *Merlin*; 3) *Lancelot*; 4) *The Quest for the Holy Grail*; and 5) *The Death of Arthur*. For an overview of the Lancelot cycle and *Prose Merlin* French tradition, see the Introduction in John Conlee, ed., *Prose Merlin* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1998).

spoke Old French as their vernacular and used Hebrew exclusively for writing and liturgical use. Jewish studies scholarship has been reluctant to acknowledge the extent to which medieval Jews read the vernacular, but texts like *Melekh Artus* and its translation of sections of the Lancelot-Grail cycle suggest the scribe was using a textual source.

Translations are exceedingly unusual among medieval northern European Hebrew texts, with only two or three extant. Created in a diglossic society, with Jews speaking French but writing and reading in Hebrew, the translations from Old French to Hebrew reveal a complex relationship between language and text. In *Melekh Artus,* the author puts Hebrew in the mouths of knights and refers to biblical passages to prove a satirical or moralistic example. Otherwise, however, he refrains from "Judaizing" the material. A similar phenomenon appears in Berechiah ha-Nakdan's *Mishle Shuʿalim,* a reworking of French Aesopic tales, in which his animal fables lack any practical applications to Jewish values or religious practice.

This project puts those translations into the foreground to concretize our understanding of language and literary practices among French-speaking, Hebrew-writing Jews of medieval Northern Europe. While Jewish Studies scholarship has traditionally ascribed medieval Jewish knowledge of French stories to oral retellings, this project proves direct engagement with Old French texts. In several cases, I have shown probable transmission patterns of Old French texts to the Hebrew versions.

My research also reveals a hidden arena for Hebrew *belles-lettres* in medieval northern Europe. The only belletristic literature produced by medieval Jewish communities in northern Europe, England, Germany, or northern Italy appears in translation from non-Jewish sources, or via authors whose Judaism is challenged. We see this in the possibly Jewish identity of 13th-century poets Susskind of Trimberg (Germany), Challot le Juif (northern France) and Mathieu le Juif (Arras), the 12th-century autobiographer Herman the Jew (Cologne) and the 12th-century composer Obadiah the Proselyte (born in Italy and active in the Middle East). Some of these authors converted to Judaism, while others converted to Christianity; in all cases, their status as questionably, formerly, or newly Jewish allows them to access belletristic traditions outside the scope of traditional Hebrew literature. Through their conversion, the new Christians learned how to read Latin and write in languages other than the Hebrew alphabet – the above-named authors wrote in Latin, German, and

French in the Latin alphabet, a linguistic feat not otherwise attempted by Jewish authors. Though the literature suggests a halfhearted welcome from the Christian community, the proselytes ostensibly had access to an entirely new literary sphere from which to draw for their own creative endeavors.

I plan to continue this research in a wider medieval framework through an analysis of comparative material between medieval Jewish literary borrowing and medieval Christian literary borrowing, emphasizing the ways in which both communities drew from cultures unlike their own. Much medieval Christian literature, such as Marie de France's *Ysopet* from which Berechiah ha-Nakdan translated, itself borrows and translates from Latinate texts. While some themes become Christological in medieval French versions, some of the pagan elements remain. This tension is confronted in works such as 12th- and 13th-century Ovidian commentaries and the contemporaneous mythologized stories of the Trojan War rewritten devoid of pagan piety.[17] A comparison between the Judaization of medieval Hebrew texts and the Christological processes in contemporaneous Christian texts would allow my book to do a more far-reaching analysis of medieval literary borrowing. My dissertation as a whole, and my book project even more so, reminds us that medieval communities did not live disparately but interacted, at least on a literary level, with texts from outside their religious or cultural sphere.

By highlighting the form and function of the medieval narratives, I address the texts as unique pieces of literature rather than as dependent on traditional rabbinic or biblical literature. In doing so, I analyze the texts in light of literary scholarship on medieval literature more generally, drawing on theories of secular-sacred distinctions, as in Barbara Newman's *The Medieval Crossover,* of exegesis in literature as expressed by Rita Copeland, and literary theories of cultural borrowing.[18]

---

[17]   James G. Clark, Frank T. Coulson, and Kathryn L. McKinley, eds., *Ovid in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Ronald E. Pepin, ed., *The Vatican Mythographers* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

[18]   Barbara Newman, *Medieval Crossover: Reading the Secular Against the Sacred* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013); Angel Rama, *Writing across Cultures: Narrative Transculturation in Latin America*, trans. David L Frye, 2nd ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Rita Copeland, *Rhetoric, Hermeneutics, and Translation in the Middle Ages: Academic Traditions and Vernacular Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Itamar Even-Zohar, "The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem," *Poetics Today* 11, no. 1 (1990): 45–51.

While even non-medievalists are familiar with the names of the most pop-
ular narratives and authors in medieval Europe (*Beowulf, Chanson de Roland,*
Dante, Boccaccio, Chaucer), medieval Hebrew texts do not permeate into
greater medieval studies scholarship. At its core, this is probably a linguistic
issue: general medievalists lack the requisite Hebrew skills to study medieval
Hebrew literature and, as a result, Hebrew texts do not feature in medievalist
scholarship to any meaningful extent. Through this research project, I hope
to introduce medievalists to the rich corpus of medieval Hebrew folktales and
stories. But this literature has not garnered the scholarly attention it deserves
within Jewish studies scholarship either. I intend to bring more of these didac-
tic texts to a wider scholarly audience through careful examination of their
place within the wider Jewish and non-Jewish cultural milieus.

Many literary themes that appear in the Hebrew texts will look familiar to
a medievalist, including romance, courtly love, moralizing exempla, and pi-
caresque episodes. This dissertation introduces medievalists to this rich trove
of stories and anticipates a new emphasis on global literature in the field of
Medieval studies. Drawing on comparative literature techniques, scholars can
utilize the recent translations of Hebrew works (including *Sefer ha-Maʿasim*[19])
into modern English to complement their own non-Hebrew textual studies.

[19]   Kushelevsky, *Tales in Context.*