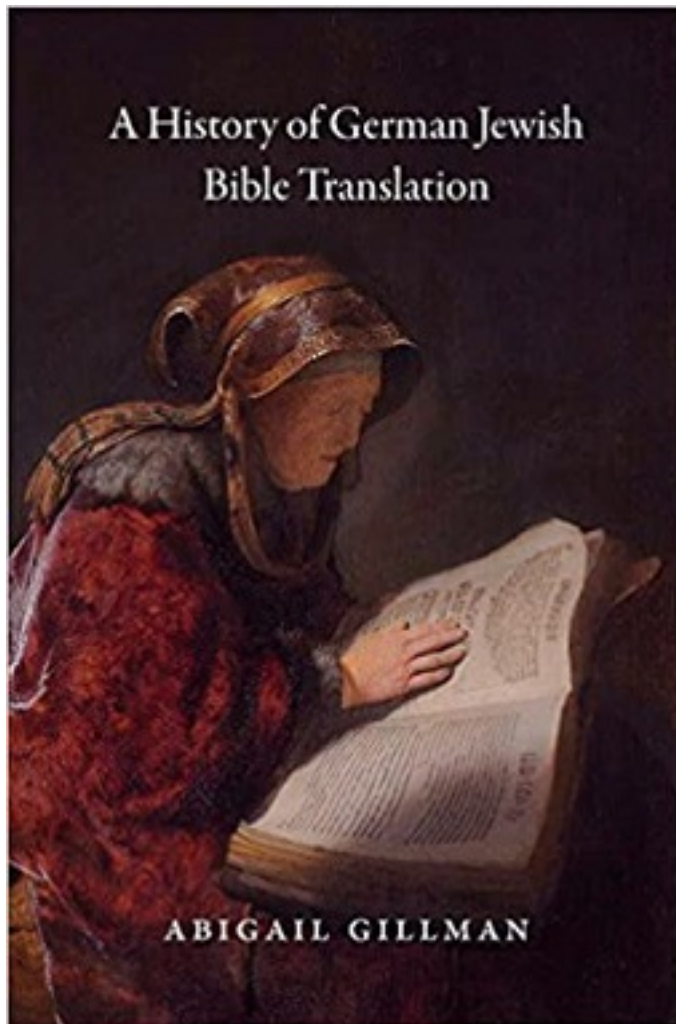


A History of German Jewish Bible Translation

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Abigail Gillman: A History of German Jewish Bible Translation. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018. xxiii + 332 pp. \$35.00 (paper)



The starting point for Abigail Gillman's impressive new book, *A History of German Jewish Bible Translation*, is the "astonishing number of Bible translations" produced by "German Jewish luminaries"—an average of one new translation every nine or so years between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries (p. xiv). Encompassing widely known editions that remain available in bookstores today along with obscure works that may be unfamiliar even to many specialists, these translations constituted a major form of religious and cultural creativity within German Jewry. Figures as diverse as the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, the scholar Leopold Zunz, the rabbinic leader Samson Raphael Hirsch, and the activist and intellectual Bertha Pappenheim (among others) all saw the translation and retranslation of the Bible as crucial to the fate of Jews and Judaism in the modern world.

Gillman explores the aims, history, and internal diversity of this tradition of Bible translation. Looking as far back as Yiddish Bibles from the 1670s and as far forward as German versions from

the 1920s and 1930s, she argues that translation served a wide array of educational, linguistic, cultural, and religious goals. She divides this tradition into four waves, linking each to a well-known phenomenon in German Jewish life: the Yiddish and German Haskalah (often described as the Jewish Enlightenment), *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (the scientific study of Judaism), religious movements such as Reform and neo-Orthodoxy, and European and Jewish modernism. In each wave, she focuses on a small number of translations “that were designed to achieve similar goals, but used diverse, sometimes even opposing, strategies to do so” (p. xvi). In charting this narrative, she not only sheds new light on these texts and the tradition of German Jewish Bible translation as a whole, but also raises important questions about modern Jewish history more broadly.

After an introduction that surveys Jewish Bible translations from antiquity through the sixteenth century, Gillman turns in chapter 1 to what she identifies as the first wave of modern works: “Jewish Enlightenment Bibles in Yiddish and German.” Her focus is on projects that are often set in opposition to one another: Yiddish translations by two German rabbis, Jekuthiel ben Isaac Blitz and Joseph ben Alexander Witzzenhausen, appearing in 1678-79 on the one hand, and the landmark German translation of (and Hebrew commentary on) the Pentateuch published by Moses Mendelssohn in the early 1780s on the other. As different as these texts may appear, Gillman argues, they all helped launch a translation revolution. Earlier Yiddish Bibles were largely aimed at women and less-educated men (or at least presented themselves as being directed toward such audiences), and did not seek to offer what many twenty-first-century readers might expect to find in a translation—namely, a one-to-one rendering of a source text into standard syntax in a new language. Some functioned like glossaries or concordances, providing long lists of Yiddish equivalents of specific biblical words, and thereby enabling the construction of hyperliteral, yet syntactically and stylistically awkward, translations of biblical phrases; others presented narrative paraphrases or expansions of the Bible, artfully weaving together biblical verses with material and insights drawn from traditional Jewish sources. By contrast, Blitz, Witzzenhausen, and Mendelssohn sought to provide a “clear, correct, and beautiful” rendering of the Hebrew Bible into Yiddish or German (p. 15), aiming to produce aesthetically sophisticated volumes that would offer access to the Bible’s *pshat* or plain sense while also addressing a more elite male audience.

Chapter 2 explores a second wave of translations published between 1831 and 1841 by the influential scholar Leopold Zunz and three of his lesser-known contemporaries: Joseph Johlson, Gotthold Salomon, and Salomon Herxheimer. Motivated by dissatisfaction with Mendelssohn’s edition, these figures sought to provide a more literal rendering of the Bible, often by producing a more Hebraic German text—a German translation that would mimic elements of Hebrew style, sound, and syntax. Such a version, they hoped, would serve the needs of an increasingly acculturated German Jewish public, while also reflecting broader developments in Christian Bible scholarship and *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Chapter 3 turns to a third wave, focusing on translations published by the Reform and neo-Orthodox rabbinic leaders Ludwig Philippson and Samson Raphael Hirsch between 1839 and 1878. Despite their deep-seated religious disagreements, Philippson and Hirsch shared a common vision. Through tools such as extensive commentaries, these rabbis sought to present the Bible as a unified work capable of providing access to a comprehensive Jewish religious system and worldview.

Chapter 4 takes up a fourth and final wave, juxtaposing the widely discussed German translation published by Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig in 1925-27 with Bertha Pappenheim’s lesser-known 1930 German translation of the first part of the *Tsene-Rene*, often described as the “medieval Yiddish women’s Bible”—the most famous of the premodern narrative paraphrases and expansions of the Bible cited above. Although the Buber-Rosenzweig and Pappenheim editions differed from one another in significant ways, their authors shared a commitment to breaking with earlier German Jewish translators. Shaped by modernism’s ethos of creative experimentation and emphasis on infusing inherited forms with new meanings, these three figures rejected the goal of producing yet another “clear, correct, and beautiful” edition of the Bible, focusing instead on transforming Jews’ relationship with the biblical text. Their common goal was to enable individuals

to once again encounter the Bible and its voice in ways that had become impossible for most modern readers.

This journey through four waves of translations, Gillman argues, has far-reaching implications. On one level, it opens up new perspectives on specific translations and their authors. Take her discussion of Buber, Rosenzweig, and Pappenheim. The Buber-Rosenzweig Bible is often touted as an innovative, even radical project because of how it broke with earlier translations—for example, because it employed a Hebraic-sounding German style, or because it described God with intimate, personal (capitalized) pronouns such as “HE” and “HIM,” rather than more abstract, philosophical terms such as Mendelssohn’s famous “the Eternal One.” By contrast, Pappenheim’s *Tsene-Rene* might be seen as a more conservative work that simply returned to a premodern text. For Gillman, however, once we compare these works with one another and situate them against the backdrop of the broader tradition that she studies, “the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible seems less radical, less different in execution, than prior Bibles,” whereas “Pappenheim’s translations, which most write off as backward looking, acquire a progressive dimension” (p. 199). The Hebraic style that seems to mark Buber and Rosenzweig as so innovative was already present in the second wave of translations. Moreover, according to Pappenheim herself, the Buber-Rosenzweig descriptions of God as “HE” and “HIM” reified God’s maleness in a way that was just as alienating, and just as overly intellectualized, as the language used by earlier translations. Pappenheim’s translation of the *Tsene-Rene*, on the other hand, functioned as an attempt to address the religious needs of marginalized readers, especially women, overlooked by male intellectuals. Indeed, far from simply returning to an idealized past, Pappenheim’s edition “offers a snapshot of premodern traditional Jewish life in all its conflicts and irreconcilable beliefs” (p. 248), providing access to the experiences of earlier Jewish women while serving as a reminder of their marginalization and exclusion.

Gillman also recasts the history of German Jewish Bible translation as a whole. Narratives often begin with Mendelssohn and conclude with Rosenzweig and Buber, painting a picture of a tradition that moved steadily away from Yiddish Bibles aimed at women and less-educated men toward German texts directed at a more elite, male readership. However, by placing the Blitz and Witzgenhausen Yiddish Bibles alongside Mendelssohn at the beginning of this history, and by situating Pappenheim’s *Tsene-Rene* alongside Buber and Rosenzweig at its conclusion, Gillman suggests a different, richer narrative. On her telling, just as this tradition began with both Yiddish and German Bibles, it concluded with the reemergence of a Yiddish legacy focused on female readers alongside German texts associated with a more elite, male audience. “In the 1920s and 1930s,” Gillman writes, “the two traditions—German and Yiddish, male and female—emerge side by side” (p. 250).

This is an excellent, carefully researched book. Gillman offers detailed, compelling readings of the translations she studies, while also moving seamlessly between the diverse Jewish and non-Jewish contexts that shaped those works. For example, she shows how translators responded both to dynamics within German Jewish life and to developments in German culture as a whole, ranging from shifts in biblical scholarship to changes in religious observance to the rise of new forms of print media. Similarly, she persuasively describes the tradition of German Jewish translation as “a merger of rabbinic and romantic sensibilities” (p. xix), situating this tradition both within a longer history of Jewish engagement with the Bible, and amid intellectual and aesthetic currents central to European modernity. Particularly noteworthy is Gillman’s thorough documentation and analysis of the myriad ways in which Jewish translators creatively appropriated Christian models, including her word-by-word, line-by-line comparisons of Jewish Bibles with Christian translations. (Indeed, if I have one minor quibble with Gillman’s erudite study, it is that she sometime emphasizes these covert instances of appropriation at the expense of cases of implicit resistance and polemic. She uncovers Mendelssohn’s use of Christian models along with his divergence on some stylistic and linguistic points, but she devotes relatively little attention to his charged critiques of Christian approaches to the Bible and its translation—especially regarding

issues such as the nature of rabbinic exegesis, the integrity of the Masoretic text, and the significance of the Bible's musical recitation. Similarly, she emphasizes Philippson's and Hirsch's concern with illuminating Judaism's religious system and their insistence that this system possesses world-historical significance, but she says less about how such arguments might have challenged non-Jewish attacks on Judaism, flipping the script on supersessionist frameworks that relegated Judaism's relevance to a distant past. But these are relatively minor points that should not overshadow Gillman's original and perceptive treatment of Jewish borrowings from Christian sources.)

I would suggest, in fact, that the significance of Gillman's study extends well beyond the translations she studies—and even beyond the issues that she herself explicitly explores. Her book raises questions about periodization and Jewish history. While some recent scholarship tends to locate the Haskalah primarily in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Gillman's emphasis on a wave of Jewish Enlightenment Bibles extending back to the 1670s redirects our attention to that earlier period. To what extent do developments in the seventeenth century already constitute a chapter in the history of the Haskalah, and what do such developments tell us about that movement more broadly? She also highlights the influence of German Jewish translations in eastern Europe, America, and Israel, raising questions about Jewish engagement with the Bible in diverse historical and geographic contexts. In what ways are Jewish encounters with the Bible still shaped by the decisions and concerns of German Jewish intellectuals, and in what ways have translators across the globe not only appropriated, but also broken with, the legacy of such figures? Finally, Gillman's book has implications for the study of Jewish modernity more broadly. While some of the figures she explores are well known, others, such as Johlson, remain relatively obscure; similarly, although Pappenheim's life and writings have generated a steady stream of scholarship, her rendering of the *Tsene-Rene* has largely been neglected. By attending to such sources, then, Gillman implicitly raises questions about how we study modern Jewish thought and intellectual history. Whose voices remain excluded from those fields? What types of sources and genres should we explore to recover the work of female intellectuals such as Pappenheim? And how would our understanding of modern Jewish thought change if such voices, sources, genres, and intellectuals were to play a more central role in contemporary scholarship?

One of the many strengths of *A History of German Jewish Bible Translation* is that it makes such questions unavoidable. Gillman's study is essential reading for anyone interested in German Jewry, in Jewish engagement with the Bible, and in Jewish modernity more broadly.

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