

LOST IN THE PAST FOUND IN TRANSLATION

An innovative translation of the Bible opened a new vista on the world’s most famous story. Now we’re learning how it was done

Nine years ago, after her grandfather passed away in Vienna, Dana Rubinstein sorted through his substantial library. Among the stacks of volumes, Rubinstein came upon an original 1889 Bible, translated into German by rabbi and author Ludwig Philippson. Sticking out of the pages of the well-worn volume were neatly folded tissues indicating passages that Rubinstein’s grandfather had marked for himself. As Rubinstein continued sorting, she came upon the Herxheimer translation, and then the Zunz translation. In all, Rubinstein found five different Bible translations, all bookmarked with tissues.

This was puzzling: Rubinstein’s grandfather was fluent in Hebrew and well-versed in the Hebrew Bible. Why did he own and use a Bible translation, let alone five?

When Rubinstein thought about it, though, it made sense. “He didn’t use them as translations,” she says, “at least not in the conventional sense, but as intricate commentaries, new windows into a text that was meaningful and beloved to him.”

The experience in her grandfather’s library inspired Rubinstein to reimagine the humble Bible translation — essentially the lens through which we view much of the Judeo-Christian story — in an entirely fresh way.

Rubinstein is a PhD candidate in the Department of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and an Azrieli Graduate Studies Fellow. She says translations offer readers more than just access to the Bible in their native language. When used correctly, they can help readers, even those who can read the Hebrew original, achieve a more profound understanding of the text.

Rubinstein’s research focuses on one of the most remarkable Bible translations of all time — the German translation by philosopher-titans Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig. Buber and Rosenzweig were already well established as paradigm-shifting Jewish thinkers when they teamed up in 1925 to begin translating the Bible into German. They left behind

German philosophers Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig teamed up to produce a trail-blazing translation of the Hebrew Bible. Some 5,000 pages of their correspondence, stored at the National Library of Israel, are now being studied by Dana Rubinstein, a PhD candidate in the Department of Jewish Thought at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and an Azrieli Graduate Studies Fellow.



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some 5,000 pages of letters and drafts of the project, now housed in the National Library of Israel. It’s a tantalizing collection that allows a researcher such as Rubinstein to, essentially, eavesdrop on five years of intense dialogue and debate between the two thinkers.

In many respects, Rubinstein is ideally positioned for this pursuit, though she did not arrive at it directly. Born in Tel Aviv and having grown up in Munich, Vienna and New York, she is fluent in Hebrew, German and English. She studied philosophy as an undergraduate at Yale University but then took a detour, earning a law degree and working in a Manhattan law firm. With the arrival of her first child, Rubinstein and a friend launched a brand of natural baby products. All the while, she became increasingly absorbed in the study of Jewish texts.

When Rubinstein and her family moved back to Israel, she resumed her academic career at Hebrew University. She first worked with the Buber-Rosenzweig papers while completing a master’s thesis on Bible scholar Nechama Leibowitz.

Benjamin Pollock, her PhD supervisor at Hebrew University, describes Rubinstein as a “one-of-a-kind doctoral student” with “a combination of philosophical and hermeneutical sensitivity and a profound sense of responsibility to bring to light through scholarship aspects of the German-Jewish world that have been lost.”

Aperio editor Alan Morantz spoke with Rubinstein to learn about her fascination with the Buber-Rosenzweig approach to Bible translation and the lessons that can be drawn for future translators.

Alan Morantz: Hebrew poet Chaim Nachman Bialik once described reading the Bible in translation as like kissing one’s bride through a veil. What do you find appealing about studying biblical translation?

Dana Rubinstein: I like this image, but the idea behind it is actually one that I’m trying to upend. Conventional wisdom says that because all translations are a form of interpretation, they necessarily remove us from the ideal, which is the perfect one-to-one correlation to the original text. This is especially poignant when it comes to the Bible, a text profoundly important to so many.

I started off by thinking about translation just like that. Then I discovered the Buber-Rosenzweig translation and realized there’s a way in which translation can get us closer to the original. There’s a way in which someone who can understand the language of the original uses a translation to reach deeper into the text. Once you start thinking of translation as a source of interpretation — affirmatively instead of negatively — it changes the way you interact with it.

AM: When Buber and Rosenzweig started their project in the 1930s, there were already over a dozen German translations of the Hebrew Bible. Why were they willing to undertake the Herculean task of producing one more?

DR: They thought the orality and resonance of the words had been lost. This was one of their major motivations for retranslating the Bible. They wanted to shake readers out of their numb familiarity with the text. During their time, the Luther Bible — the Protestant translation — was ubiquitous. And then, starting with [Jewish philosopher Moses] Mendelssohn, there was a series of Jewish translations too but, in many respects, they repeated each other. Buber and Rosenzweig felt that for people to really have an encounter with the Bible, they needed something jarring that made them pause, reflect and engage with the text.

So they drew on the full gamut of the German language to find words that would both be loyal to the original but also reignite the relationship between the reader and the text, and through the text, with God. They thought this was necessary at the time, when there was a loss of touchpoints between Jews living in Germany and their tradition.

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AM: What are some of the techniques they used to restore the power of the Masoretic text?

DR: A whole bunch. For example, they used a technique called colometry to structure the verses. They didn’t feel they had to abide by the traditional verse breaks. Instead, they divided the sentences into breathing units and sound units of meaning — wherever the human breath would run out when the text was read aloud or wherever a human breath would emphasize a certain word. If you look at their finished translation, how it’s outlined on a page, it looks like poetry. That was a new technique that other Bible translators hadn’t used.

Buber and Rosenzweig also worked with alliterations or word plays. *Tohu vavohu*, to give you a well-known example, at the very beginning of the creation story; most translators don’t keep that tension between the two words. But Buber and Rosenzweig wanted to replicate the upside-down confusion and rhythmic unity of the text, so they translated it as *Irrsal und Wirrsal* in German.

But probably their most innovative and impactful translation technique is tracing what Buber called the *Leitwort*. They noticed that the same word would often appear multiple times within one or across different passages of the Bible. They realized that these repetitions were meant as clues for the reader to help emphasize a certain meaning or tie together seemingly disparate narratives. Their translation was unique in preserving and highlighting these word repetitions in the target language.

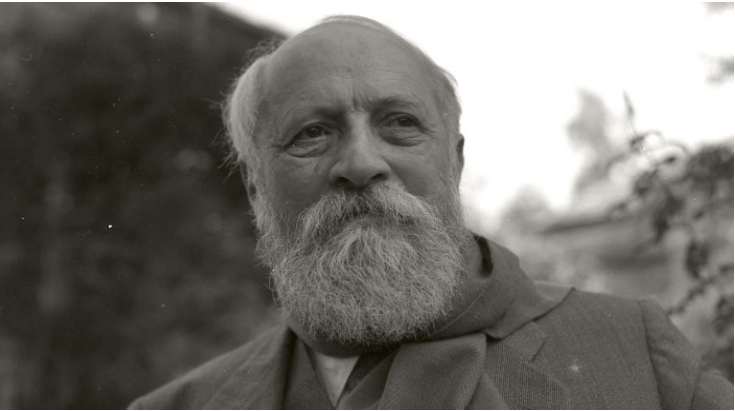
AM: You’ve suggested that a Bible translation can act almost as a commentary on the text. In the case of Buber-Rosenzweig, how did this work?

DR: I can give you an example from something I’m working on right now, the story of Adam and Eve.

The serpent speaks to Eve and says, Is it true that God forbade you to eat from all the trees in this garden? And Eve says, No, that’s not true. God only forbade eating from or touching one particular tree. Now Eve had expanded on the prohibition because God’s prohibition was only about eating, not touching.

According to a famous Midrash (ancient commentary on the Torah), the snake then pushes Eve onto the tree. When Eve touches the tree

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By the time they began working on their Bible translation in 1925, Rosenzweig (left), born in Germany, and Buber (right), a native Austrian, were widely respected philosophers and authors of provocative works. Rosenzweig would die of ALS before the translation was completed.

and realizes that nothing has happened, the snake says to her, Just as nothing happened when you touched the tree, so nothing will happen when you eat from it. All this is subtext that the Midrash fills in.

The text of the Bible then says that Eve saw that the tree was good for eating, *v'nechmad haetz l'haskeel*. *L'haskeel* is usually translated as “gaining knowledge” or “becoming enlightened.”

After quite some back and forth, Buber and Rosenzweig translated *l'haskeel* as “*begreifen*” or, in English, “to grasp.” You see, in one word, they were able to lock both the Midrash meaning and the plain or *pshat* meaning of the verse and to bring out the deep connection between physical and intellectual grasping.

It turns out that *l'haskeel* is also a *Leitwort* and comes up in different stories in the Bible in totally different contexts. By translating every instance of *l'haskeel* with some version of *greifen*/grasping, Buber and Rosenzweig connect these different stories in the readers’ minds and open up entirely new pathways of meaning.

If you read other Bible translations or even the original, you wouldn’t get at all the meaning underlying the word *l'haskeel* here. Through meeting the original with another language, they reveal a whole different layer of the text.

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AM: What is it like for you to read these private notes between two legendary thinkers?

DR: First of all, both Buber and Rosenzweig are heroes of mine. It’s just so moving to see the actual work product of these people who you admire. A lot of the comments are very human. They tell each other about their wives or kids. Rosenzweig was very ill at the time (from ALS), so there are updates about his health. There’s something both incredibly powerful and deeply personal about reviewing these writings.

At times, it’s also frustrating. Buber had impeccable handwriting, and he would write the first drafts and send them to Rosenzweig. Rosenzweig was able to read but not speak, so he dictated his thoughts by moving his eyes. Rosenzweig’s notes are transcribed mainly in Sütterlin, which is an outdated German handwritten script that is hard for me to read. And they’re not always correlated to Buber’s notes.

I worked on this closely with my advisor to understand their special way of communicating with each other. But it took the

better part of a year to figure out their system and references — what it meant when they used a squiggly line or other shorthand. There’s been a lot of detective and decoding work in understanding their correspondence.

AM: Given the communication challenges they faced, it makes their unfettered exchanges all the more remarkable. The creative tension between Buber and Rosenzweig must have been a design feature of their translation process.

DR: It goes back to their philosophy. They were both dialogical thinkers — they thought human understanding came through dialogue. This is *really* a dialogical translation. These are two people very deliberately creating something together that neither of them individually could have created. Seeing that unfold is . . . incredible. And fresh.

In a piece reflecting on their collaboration, Buber describes it like Jacob wrestling with the angel, as if every word was a struggle in order to arrive at the right choice. You can trace that in the papers. It was a meeting at every juncture because the text was so important to them.

AM: Where is your work on the Buber-Rosenzweig papers taking you?

DR: What I’m trying to do now is to build a hermeneutic of how to use this translation and maybe eventually others as a form of interpretation. What are the rules of the game? What are the parameters in order for this to be rigorous? How much of the background or the thought process of translators do we need to legitimately use the translation as an interpretation?

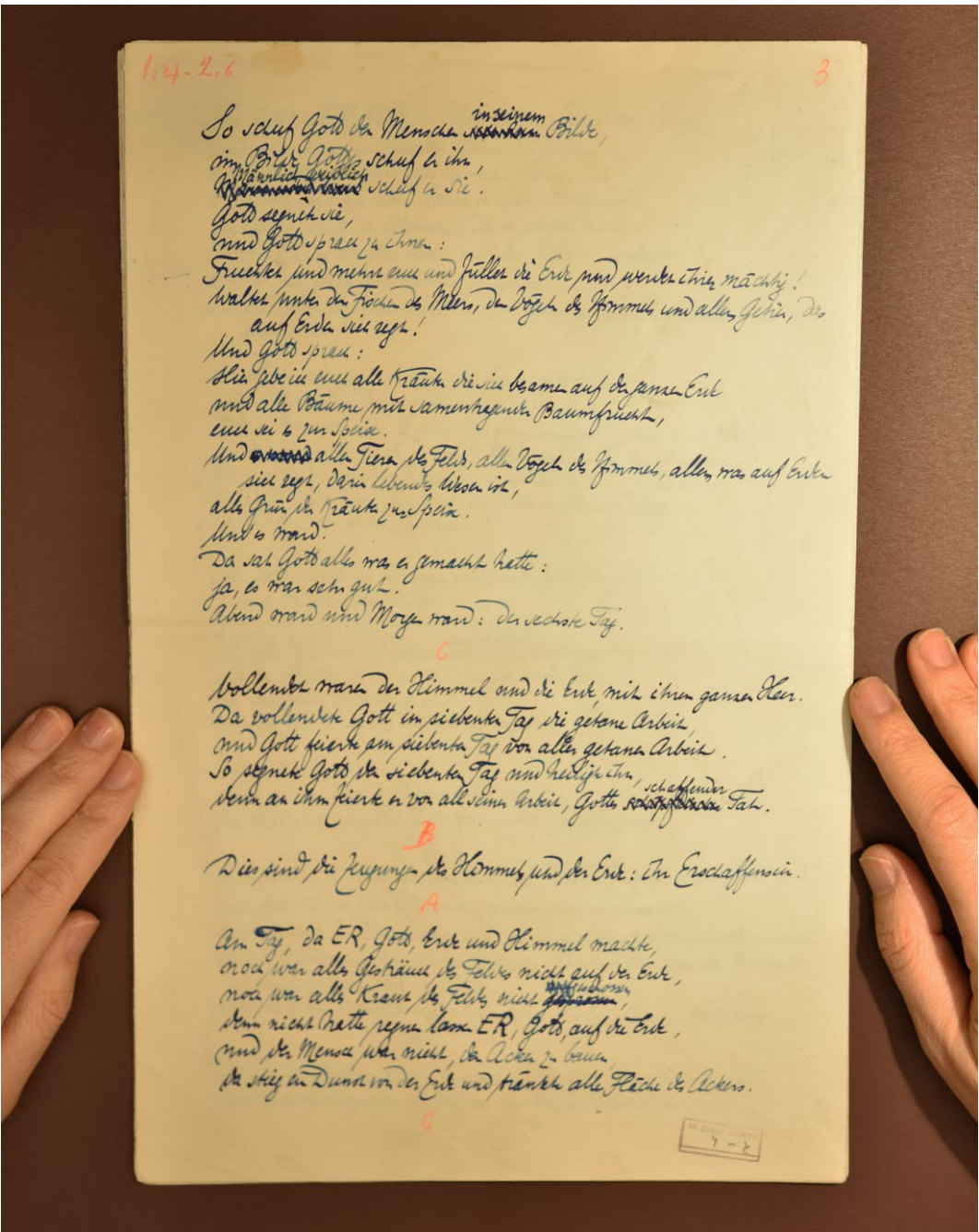
AM: The backstory of this translation is quite poignant. Rosenzweig, who had ALS, didn’t live to see it through. And the translation was a kind of labour of love on behalf of the German Jewish community, on the eve of the Holocaust. It must be hard to separate their achievement from that sadness.

DR: When Buber finally finished the translation in the 1960s, there was a book launch in Israel, and [German-born philosopher] Gershom Scholem got up and essentially said, You wanted this to be the crowning achievement of German Jewish literary work and instead it’s the tombstone. He ungraciously spelled out what a lot of people were thinking: Who is this translation for?

I think the work we’re doing now, and the way the Buber-Rosenzweig translation is being used in Germany by Christian scholars and as a commentary, proves that wrong.

It was a tragic story, but Buber gave Rosenzweig a reason to hang on for a few more years (Rosenzweig died in the middle of translating the 10th book of the Bible). When they started the project, he didn’t know how much longer he had to live. This was a major motivator for this brilliant mind to keep going. It was an incredible gift that he was able to use his last few years to think so profoundly about the Bible.

Ultimately together they also left us this gift that allows us to bring the legacy and the fruits of German-Jewish thought into our current day. ▲●■



Fluent in German, Rubinstein is studying the trove of correspondence to understand how Buber and Rosenzweig added their interpretation to the Bible translation. Once you start thinking of a translation as a source of interpretation, Rubinstein says, it changes the way you interact with it.