

***Rewriting Scripture for the Twentieth Century:***  
**The Buber-Rosenzweig Bible Translation and the National Politics of Language**

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## Introduction

Franz Rosenzweig wrote “The Star of Redemption” (*Der Stern der Erlösung*) while serving in the German military during World War I. While risking his life for the German national cause, he contemplated the role of Hebrew as a linguistic barrier between Jews and their national “brothers.” Rosenzweig writes:

[The] last and most obvious openness of life is denied to the Jew, because he speaks a different language with God than with his brother. With his brother he therefore cannot speak at all; with him the glance informs him better than the word, and there is nothing more deeply Jewish than a final suspicion of the power of the word and a heart-felt confidence in the power of silence. The holiness of the holy language, in which alone he can only pray, does not allow his life to take root in the soil of a language of his [own.]<sup>1</sup>

With this provocative statement, Rosenzweig designates the language among brothers as the national soil, a terrain in which the Jew cannot root himself *because* of his relationship with the sacred tongue. To Rosenzweig, Hebrew was both a linguistic portal to divine revelation and a barrier between the Jew and his national territory. Rosenzweig believed that the Hebrew language enabled Jews to communicate with God, yet rendered their national language(s) mute. His above proclamation points to the national and linguistic issues that preoccupied twentieth-century German Jewish thinkers. These issues are at the heart of this thesis.

The era of the Weimar Republic between the first and second World Wars is regarded as a Jewish cultural renaissance in Germany. The liberal atmosphere of Weimar-era Germany facilitated a renewed interest in Jewish life and culminated in a vibrant amalgamation of *Deutschtum* and *Judentum*. Jewish spiritual and intellectual culture thrived, resulting in the establishment of Jewish education centers that taught Hebrew and offered classes on the Hebrew

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<sup>1</sup> Rosenzweig, Franz. *The Star of Redemption*. Frankfurt. 1921, 321.

Bible; the flourishing of the Yiddish theater; and the publication of a multitude of Jewish newspapers oriented across the political spectrum from German nationalist to Zionist. Both German and Zionist national politics heavily influenced German Jewish life at this time.<sup>2</sup>

The classical approach to German Jewish history tends to divide German Jews along these political boundaries into assimilationists (German nationalists) and dissimilationists (Zionists). Historian Scott Spector suggests a more nuanced historiographical approach to German Jewry, which includes specific, subjective experiences instead of objective categories.<sup>3</sup> His historical study of Franz Kafka's Prague represents his approach. Through an examination of the relationship between territory and language in *fin de siècle* Prague, Spector's work develops Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri's analysis of Kafka's language, in which they use the concept of "deterritorialization" to describe the capacity of minor literatures' (non-canonical literatures) to detach major languages from dominant political contexts.<sup>4</sup>

Spector elaborates on the way physical space came to be determined as "German" or "Czech" property according to the everyday language of its residents. He explains that Kafka and his contemporaries' use of German detaches the language from its geographically-bound German national territory. With their use of the extra-literary *Prager Deutsch*, the Prague writers stretch the limits of the German language.<sup>5</sup> Kafka himself noted this deterritorializing function of his literature, symbolized in his metaphor of "[stealing] the German babe from the cradle." His statement alludes to the decoupling of the German language from German land. In this

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<sup>2</sup> Brenner, Michael. *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany*. New Haven, CT Yale UP, 1996; Niewyk, Donald L. *The Jews in Weimar Germany*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1980.

<sup>3</sup> Spector, Scott. "Forget Assimilation: Introducing Subjectivity to German-Jewish History." *Jewish History* 20.3/4, 2006, 349-61.

<sup>4</sup> Spector, Scott. *Prague Territories: National Conflict and Cultural Innovation in Franz Kafka's fin de siècle*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000; Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guatarri. "What is a Minor Literature?" In *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 16-27.

<sup>5</sup> Spector, *Prague Territories*, 73-4.

detritorialization, the subversive voice of the Prague writers pries the national language from the nation.<sup>6</sup>

This thesis explores another context of linguistic deterritorialization among German-speaking Jews, in this case within German national territory. While Spector describes how the turbulent political atmosphere of *fin de siècle* Prague cultivates the inventive writing of a generation of German-speaking Prague Jews, I examine the correlation between Weimar-era Zionist and German nationalist politics and the philosophy of translation behind the language of the Buber and Rosenzweig Bible. I look to the hebraicized German of the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible to provide insight into a conflict over the relation of the Jews to the German nation and to the nascent Jewish state.

Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig met in Berlin in 1914 following the completion of Rosenzweig's dissertation on Hegel's Idealist Philosophy. Soon afterward, Rosenzweig invited Buber to join the faculty at the newly established *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus*, a center for Jewish education in Frankfurt.<sup>7</sup> In Buber's reflections on the translation, he remembers Rosenzweig's refreshed confrontation with the Bible through teaching it. Buber explains, "for the first time in his life [he] actually [stood] before the pure text in its nakedness, without its traditional garments."<sup>8</sup> The Bible's "traditional garments," in this comment, are the layers of Christian interpretation that "obscured" the naked text to Rosenzweig and other contemporary readers. It became the goal of Buber and Rosenzweig to expose this "pure" text to the German public.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 92.

<sup>7</sup> Jay, Martin. "Politics of Translation: Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin on the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible." *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook*, 21, 1976, 3-24.

<sup>8</sup> Buber, Martin, and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture And Translation*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994, 207.

When Buber was approached by the *Lambert Schneider* to create a new, “Jewish” translation of the Hebrew Bible, he requested that Rosenzweig collaborate with him on the project. The new translation was meant to supplant the German translations of the Hebrew Bible by Mendelssohn (1783), Zunz (1837), and Wohlgemuth-Bleichrode (1899), whose political or theological motives Buber and Rosenzweig rejected.<sup>9</sup> Despite Rosenzweig’s declining health due to an advanced stage of lateral sclerosis, he agreed to collaborate with Buber on the translation. In 1928, the completion of the translation was suspended due to the Nazi shutdown of the *Schocken Verlag* (which had absorbed *Lambert Schneider* since the beginning of Buber and Rosenzweig’s work on the translation). Rosenzweig died in December 1929, following the suspension of their project. Buber immigrated to Palestine in this same year and joined the faculty of the Hebrew University. In the 1950s Buber resumed working on the translation by himself, completing it in 1961 in Israel.<sup>10</sup>

Upon beginning their work on the translation, Rosenzweig agreed to the project only on the condition that he and Buber would attempt to revise Luther’s translation rather than creating an altogether new one. At the outset of his work on the translation, Rosenzweig revered Luther as the indomitable “Father” of the German language and national consciousness; he believed Luther’s Bible established a *Deutschtum*, a Germanness, inextricable from its Christian origin.<sup>11</sup> As Buber explains in his reflections on their collaboration, Rosenzweig initially viewed the Luther Bible as “the one legitimate translation.” After initially attempting revisions of the Luther Bible, it became clear to Buber and Rosenzweig that “what was at issue was not details but a

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<sup>9</sup> Jay, Martin, “Politics of Translation,” 8-9; Brenner, Michael. *The Renaissance of Jewish Culture in Weimar Germany*, 104.

<sup>10</sup> Jay, Martin, “Politics of Translation,” 8-9.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, Mara. *Rosenzweig’s Bible*. New York: Cambridge, 2009, 104-34.

system of life.”<sup>12</sup> Rosenzweig’s initial reverence of the Luther Bible developed into an ambivalent relationship with it.

Buber and Rosenzweig’s essays on their methodology reveal a shared philosophy of translation that prioritized Hebrew as a universally sacred language. Through their writing on the political dimensions of language and translation, we can look to their project as a mediation between the German national language and the holy Hebrew language, which calls into question issues of nationhood and linguistic property. In this thesis, I consider the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible through the lens of these linguistic and national territories, using it as an entrance point into the spaces between languages and nations.

Because Buber and Rosenzweig intended to present God’s unmediated communication in their Bible, their translation was published without any commentary. Instead, an essay that Rosenzweig titled *Die Schrift und Luther* (Scripture and Luther) was included with the publication of the first book of their translation.<sup>13</sup> This essay articulated an array of shortcomings that Rosenzweig detected in Luther’s methodology of translation. Its effect was a positioning of the new Buber-Rosenzweig translation as a direct replacement of Luther’s Bible, which, as Rosenzweig acknowledges, functioned as a central document of the German literary canon. In pointing to the Bible as a common founding text among Jewish and non-Jewish Germans alike, the essay targets a universal- rather than exclusively Jewish-German audience for the new translation. Furthermore, this representation of a Hebrew text as a core element of German national consciousness rejected the popular paradigm that the Jews were an “other” among Germans.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Buber, Martin, *Scripture and Translation*, 213-214.

<sup>13</sup> Rosenwald, Lawrence. “On the Reception of Buber and Rosenzweig’s Bible.” *Prooftexts* 14.2, May 1994, 147.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin, Mara. *Rosenzweig’s Bible*, 104-34.



With the hebraicized German that Buber and Rosenzweig created in their Bible translation, they attempted to segue into a universally sacred language that was unaffected by German and Jewish national categories. This language, achieved through an ultra-literal translation of the Hebrew, created a linguistic quality in their Bible that provoked a controversial response from the German Jewish audience. Notably, in Siegfried Kracauer's 1926 critique in *Frankfurter Zeitung*, he criticized the language of the translation as a German nationalist aesthetic. Additionally, he argued that the idea of seeking truth in a religious text was in vain, as the modern "entrance to the truth" lay in the profane.<sup>15</sup> Although the translation underwent both widespread praise and extensive criticism, the only critique that Buber viewed as legitimate came from Gershom Scholem in his letter to Buber on April 27, 1926.<sup>16</sup> Scholem's critique reads:

*What fills me with doubt* is the excessive *tonality* of this prose, which leaps out almost uncannily from the particular wording (this word is wrong; I mean the *niggun* [Hebrew: melody] of your translation)...If I search in the original for what your translation gives, I can succeed only by singing—i.e., "reciting"—it; the mere text without music does not yield it...<sup>17</sup>

In Scholem's critique, he identifies the *unheimlich* (uncanny) quality of its language, a characteristic that Buber and Rosenzweig produced intentionally in order to "render the foreign tone in its foreignness."<sup>18</sup> The translators conformed German rhythmically to Hebrew by echoing Hebrew's syllable pattern, Semitic root system, and specific wording.<sup>19</sup>

In reading the essays that Buber and Rosenzweig wrote in defense of their methodology and philosophy of translation, the national implications underlying their novel language are discernable. The language of the translation is a departure from the literary canons that shaped

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<sup>15</sup> Jay, Martin, "Politics of Translation," 15.

<sup>16</sup> Buber, Martin, letter to Gershom Scholem, Heppenheim May 24, 1926 in *The Letters of Martin Buber*, Random House LLC, 2013, 347.

<sup>17</sup> Scholem, Gershom, letter to Martin Buber, Jerusalem April 27, 1926 in *The Letters of Martin Buber*, Random House LLC, 2013, 343.

<sup>18</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *Writings on Art and Literature*, "The Uncanny," Stanford University Press, 1997, 193-233.

<sup>19</sup> Buber, Martin, *Scripture and Translation*, 213.

the nationally-charged atmosphere of twentieth-century German Jewry. Through its establishment of an intermediate language between German and Hebrew, this novel translation departs from literary- and geographically-bound ideologies, namely, from the nationalist paradigm that shaped European thought in the twentieth century. In this manner, the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible's Hebraic German functioned as an attempted transcendence of divisions between *Deutschtum* and *Judentum*. Buber and Rosenzweig intended for their language to transgress the confines of the written word, yet they utilized literature itself to enter the unchartable realm of the spoken word.

By reworking Luther's German Bible, Buber and Rosenzweig propose a reconsideration of a founding text of German language and national consciousness. As Mara Benjamin points out, the course of Rosenzweig's work on the translation convinced him that *Deutschtum* could be reconfigured—not to necessarily dissociate Christianity from it, but to supersede Christianity in rank through a restoration of German to its Hebraic origins through the grounding of German in a “more original” Jewish text. Benjamin explains that Rosenzweig saw no need to *negate* the Luther Bible; rather, his goal was to re-orient it as one (Christian) interpretation of the scriptures among infinite possibilities for revelation. In this manner, Rosenzweig historicized the Luther Bible; he situated it as an interpretation relevant to a particular moment of the past rather than a means for continuous, renewable interaction with God.<sup>20</sup>

The Buber-Rosenzweig Bible's implications are twofold: firstly, it asserts the centrality of the Jews within the German nation; and, secondly, it represents a rejection of the nationalization of Hebrew within the nascent Jewish state in Palestine. It is a mediation of the conflicted national status of Jews in the twentieth century via manipulation of national and sacred languages. This Bible simultaneously opened German linguistic territory to Jews and

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<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, Mara, *Rosenzweig's Bible*, New York: Cambridge. 2009, 104-34; 106.

decoupled Hebrew from nascent Jewish state by situating Hebrew as a sacred parallel to a national German. Indeed, the Bible translation imagined and enabled a future for Jews within the German language. It thereby suggested a future for the Jews as members of the German nation rather than as members of a separate Jewish national political entity. At the same time, it asserted the role of Hebrew as a holy language (though unique among holy languages in that it resided in contact with profane linguistic territory of the lay population). Essentially, Rosenzweig and Buber cast German into an unfamiliar linguistic territory, a territory that was simultaneously German *and* Jewish.

Buber and Rosenzweig constructed a linguistic escape from Hebrew and German territories in order to open a space for the Jews to participate in the German nation without politicizing Judaism itself. They aimed to create the first Bible translation that was not the foundational document of a nation, and that was not directed exclusively toward any single community or political purpose. Unlike previous translators, they would not carry the content of the text into another language, but would instead maintain the “original character” of the Bible within German.<sup>21</sup>

The question of linguistic territory is compounded by the factor of translation in the Buber and Rosenzweig Bible. As a translation, it functions intrinsically as a mediation of linguistic terrains. Mara Benjamin’s argument that the B-R Bible opens *Deutschtum* to include the Jews through a restructuring of the German language indicates a deterritorialization of German from its Lutheran heritage.<sup>22</sup> I expand upon her analysis to show how Buber and Rosenzweig’s translational philosophy and methodology functioned simultaneously as a deterritorialization of Hebrew, specifically spoken Hebrew, from its literary heritage within

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<sup>21</sup> Buber, Martin, “The How and Why of our Translation” in *Scripture and Translation*.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin, Mara, *Rosenzweig’s Bible*, 104-34.

German. In fact, the translation effected a deterritorialization of Hebrew from a two-thousand year history of scriptural, literary territory which Buber and Rosenzweig believed had obscured the original voice of God.

The first chapter of this thesis introduces the Luther Bible through the lens of Rosenzweig, who identified Luther as a central figure of German language and nation-building. Luther created a colloquial German Bible in order to transmit a specific message to his sixteenth-century German-speaking audience. The Lutheran Reformation had the effect of unifying German-speakers through a common written language (*Schriftsprache*), which in turn preserved a historically particular reading of the Bible in the German language. In recognizing that Luther's politicized language persisted into the twentieth century, Rosenzweig identified it as a barrier standing between German speakers and a dynamic, unmediated revelation from God.

The second chapter describes the specific linguistic choices that Buber and Rosenzweig made in their translation. Their word choice restored spoken Hebrew to a hegemonic orientation over the German text. It decoupled the spoken word from the text, and thereby deterritorialized Hebrew from German literature. The intent of Buber and Rosenzweig's efforts was to resituate Hebrew in a superior relationship to literary and national entities in order to restore the status of Hebrew as a vessel for dynamic and unmediated revelation from God.

The final chapter interrogates the national implications of the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible. Based on the notion that language and nation are intimately related phenomena, this chapter argues that the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible's Hebraic German aimed to open up a linguistic and national extra-territory in which Germans and Jews could reside simultaneously as subjects of God and creation. Positioning Hebrew as a prioritized, *unheimlich* original voice of German literature effected a two-fold deterritorialization: first, through the dissociation of German from

Luther's Protestant convictions, this language becomes deterritorialized from Christianity; second, by positioning Hebrew as an *unheimlich* aspect of the German national language, Hebrew was decoupled from the Zionist canon—which was under construction among Buber and Rosenzweig's contemporaries—and reoriented it as a language altogether exempt from territory.

## Luther's Bible: The Origins of a National *Schriftsprache*

The question a translator must ask himself, Rosenzweig writes, is at which points the original text is to be “moved,” and at which points the reader? His question concerns which language must be changed in translation—the source or the target language. Should the dialectical character of the original language be adapted for the reader so that she understands it within her own linguistic structure? Or should the target language be modified to accommodate the idiomatic nuances of the original? Despite the fact that Buber and Rosenzweig situated their translation specifically in opposition to the Luther Bible, all three translators took remarkably similar approaches to their projects. They all intended to preserve the integrity of the original text in ways they believed to be revolutionary. They diverged from each other only with regard to their choices of which aspect of the original’s integrity to prioritize: the words or the “sense and meaning.”

Luther’s goal was to make the language of his Bible “as German as possible,” so that its message would be “comprehensible to everyone, with an undistorted sense and meaning.”<sup>23</sup> For Luther, it was more important to convey the original message, as if it were produced spontaneously in German, than to render a word-for-word correspondence. A notorious example of this approach is Luther’s addition of the word “alone” to Romans 3:28, where it is absent from the original Latin, in order to convey a particular message in colloquial German. His version reads: “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith *alone* apart from the deeds of the law,” as opposed to the word-for-word translation of the Latin: “Therefore we conclude that a

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<sup>23</sup> Rosenzweig, Franz, *Scripture and Translation*, 48.

man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.”<sup>24</sup> Luther defends his rendering as “justified by faith *alone*,” rather than “justified by faith,” as necessary to abide by the grammatical customs of German. He explains that the word “alone” (*allein*) would be included in German speech, in order to emphasize the negation when one thing is affirmed (*bejaht*) and another negated (*verneinet*).<sup>25</sup> Though he adjusted the wording, he believed that his rendering of the text was in fact loyal to the sense of the original because it affirmed the dominance of faith over the law.

In defense of his rendering, he writes:

It is true: those four letters s-o-l-a [alone] are not in the original text and those asses’ [Papists’] heads stare at them as cows stare at a new gate. But they don’t see that those letters correspond to the sense of the text, and if you want to Germanize it clearly and forcefully they belong in the translation, for once I had decided to speak German in my translation [*Dolmetschung*] I wanted to speak real German, not Latin or Greek... You should not ask the Latin letters how to speak German, as those asses do, but the mother in the house, the children on the streets, the common man in the market place.<sup>26</sup>

As this excerpt illustrates, Luther believes that by adding the word “alone,” he manages to preserve the full meaning of the original text even more “clearly and forcefully” than would be accomplished in a word-for-word translation. He repeatedly emphasizes the authenticity of his German; he assures the reader that it is “real,” like the German of the layman in the marketplace. Adherence to an ‘authentic’ German grammatical structure, he believed, was the most effective method for conveying the sense of the Bible to the German reader.

Luther’s prioritization of the “sense and meaning” of the original was a reaction to precedent Bible translations, which he found inaccessible to German readers because of their

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<sup>24</sup> Luther Bible, Romans 3:28: “*So halten wir nun dafür, dass der Mensch gerecht wird ohne des Gesetzes Werke, **allein** durch den Glauben.*”; KJV, Romans 3:28, my italics.

<sup>25</sup> Luther, Martin. *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*, 1530 in *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen und drei andere Schriften weltlichen Inhalts. Mit Einleitungen und Anmerkungen hrsg. von Rudolf Lehmann*, Leipzig: Philipp Reclam 1888, 7-8

<sup>26</sup> Lefevere, André, *Translating Literature: The German Tradition from Luther to Rosenzweig*, 1977, 9.

unnatural, foreignized language, which he concluded was too heavily influenced by Greek and Latin.<sup>27</sup> In order to transfer the sense and meaning of the original into standard German, Luther's translation demanded that he interpret the words, as he does in the above example. To him, the addition of "alone" was necessary in order to convey the message.

Rosenzweig viewed the insertion of "alone" as representative of Luther's overall approach to translation, not only of the Latin, but also of the Hebrew. This interpretation of language was what Rosenzweig regarded as Luther's tendency to "move" the original.<sup>28</sup> Also notable in this passage is the highly politicized language. Luther's use of the term "asses" to refer to the Papists points precisely to the sort of political motives for precedent German Bible translations that motivated Buber and Rosenzweig to take upon themselves a new translation. Indeed, though Luther warranted his addition of the word "alone" on the basis that it is implied in the original and he only transferred this implied sense to a colloquial German rendering, the concept of "justification through faith *alone*" was a cornerstone of the Lutheran rejection of the Pope's authority.<sup>29</sup> Even though Buber and Rosenzweig certainly had their own political motivations for literal translation, they positioned their Bible as a refutation of Luther's political motives for translation. Luther's liberal restructuring of the sacred Hebrew words was problematic for them, not only on the grounds that it was politically motivated, but also in that it represented a silencing of the holy, pronounced word. Furthermore, it was an interpretation tainted by certain Christian beliefs and a Christian system of thought, albeit a modern one.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Luther, *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*, 7-8

<sup>28</sup> Rosenzweig, Franz, *Scripture and Translation*, 49.

<sup>29</sup> i.e., *Sola fide*

<sup>30</sup> Rosenzweig, "Scripture and Luther," in *Scripture and Translation*.



## The Silenced Word of Luther's Scriptures

Rosenzweig's essays, "Scripture and Luther" (*Die Schrift und Luther*) and "Scripture and Word" (*Die Schrift und das Wort*), expose a division that he observes between the holiness of the spoken word and Luther's written language. He believed that the written permanence of Luther's Bible constricted the immediate power of the word. To inscribe one specific message into German, as Luther did, denied the reader an intimate relationship with the creator. The reader's communication was hindered by Luther as mediator, so that the word, God's revelation, became trapped in writing. It became eternally paralyzed as Luther received it, even though what was true for sixteenth-century German speakers did not remain true indefinitely. Luther's truth became dated across passing time and changing circumstances.<sup>31</sup>

As Rosenzweig explains:

We have only to consider the letter—the most legitimate form of writing, the form always addressed to an immediate need and necessity, the form from which all other forms borrow whatever legitimacy they have—to see that this legitimation of writing can never pertain to the word of and to and before God; God is *present*, and if he acts through messengers, they are not postmen bringing yesterday's news, which perhaps in the meantime has already been overtaken by the intervening events; rather in this moment of theirs God is what acts immediately in them and speaks immediately through them.<sup>32</sup>

Rosenzweig finds the letter legitimate in that it has been written specifically to address a "need and necessity." Yet God's words can never be contained in a letter, Rosenzweig states, because God is always present. Hence Rosenzweig's qualms over Luther's interpretation of the text; to him, the Bible was meant to convey God's immediate intentions. God's voice should resound from it, calling out to creation through the reader. By interpreting these intentions and re-

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<sup>31</sup> Rosenzweig, Franz. *Scripture and Luther*, in "Scripture and Translation."

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 41-42

inscribing them in his own words, Luther acted as a “messenger” between God and the reader, who brought “yesterday’s news,” already “overtaken by the intervening events.”<sup>33</sup>

Rosenzweig argues, then, that without regard to the power of the word itself, Luther attended only to the meaning, the *sense*, that was conveyed through the words. He disregarded the presence and sound of God’s voice. In his efforts to interpret and transplant the meaning of the scriptures into German, he became a mediator between God and man. In that he understood the message a certain way and then expressed it in his own words, he took authority over the Word, hijacking the voice of God. Thus God’s voice was rendered mute; God could no longer speak through the called-out word of man. The problem for the reader, then, was that without access to the original words, he could only understand the dimension of God’s intention as Luther had understood and chosen to represent it. The reader was denied the complete *presence* of God that resides in the spoken word. Rosenzweig thus viewed the Luther Bible as a silencing of the voice of God; where God’s voice should call out through the Bible, Luther spoke in its place.

Moreover, Rosenzweig argues, Luther’s was a Christian interpretation of the text, inspired by his Protestant convictions. He writes: “Luther’s belief, then, determines at every level how the work of mediation is to proceed—that is, where to leave the word in peace and where the hearer.” In other words, in the process of translating the Bible, Luther’s decisions regarding where to preserve the nuances of the Hebrew language are influenced by his Christian reading of the text. Although Rosenzweig recognized that Luther at times “made space for Hebrew,” his concern arose because of the authority Luther took to himself to choose *at which points* to make space for Hebrew. These instances in which the Hebrew deserved “space,” where Luther deemed it more powerful in conveying the sense than colloquial, he recognized through the lens of his

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

Christian persuasion. The product of his translation was then a distinctly Christian text.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Rosenzweig believed that Luther interfered with the unity of revelation. To Buber and Rosenzweig, the Bible represented one unified revelation, to which each word was an integral component. To detach the meaning from these sacred words through interpretation, they believed, interfered with the integrity of the scriptures.<sup>35</sup> Rosenzweig thereby concluded that even as Luther claimed to eliminate the mediation of the Pope, he still transmitted a mediated revelation from God to his German audience.

#### The Luther Bible as a Founding Document of German National Society

Through its formative impact on the German language, Luther's interpretation was historically ingrained in the German nation, so that the Luther Bible became the central, classical German literature.

Even the most significant translations of the Bible that we possess...do not aim principally at maintaining the original character of the book as manifested in word choice, in syntax, and in rhythmical articulation. They aim rather at transmitting to the translators' actual community...a reliable foundational document. They accordingly carry over the 'content' of the text into another language.<sup>36</sup>

Paradoxically, Buber and Rosenzweig acknowledge that Luther's desire to express the sense of the text in colloquial German was evidence of Luther's own recognition of the power of the spoken word, except that in Luther's case it was the spoken German word that held priority. Luther was aware that the "pre-literary mode of reading" would be most effective in reaching an audience. And, in fact, the sixteenth-century German-speaking audience who received Luther's

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 48-9

<sup>35</sup> Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, 74.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

Bible was perhaps a pre-literary society, since for them the word resided primarily in speech. A German literary canon did not yet exist, and next to the literate elite, the general German-speaking population was illiterate. It was with the aid of Luther's Bible that the German-speaking audience transformed into a literate population, marking also the origin of the German national consciousness.<sup>37</sup>

The translation of Luther's theses into German sparked a revolution in German-language printing: in the twenty years following their publication, the number of books published in German tripled, and his works made up at least one-third of German-language publications sold between 1518 and 1525. These major contributions to the vernacular printing press initiated a dramatic increase in literacy rates among German speakers, which in turn perpetuated a national consciousness grounded in a common literary experience.

As Benedict Anderson illustrates in his study of the modern nation, literature catalyzes this national entity formation by creating a linguistic community, a literary collective that is bound by its common written language. Despite speaking varied dialects, members of the literary collective understand a common written language. The written language—which is accessible to a far wider audience than the mutually-unintelligible vernaculars—creates shared experiences across a literary collective that inhabits a broad geographical expanse. What the members of the collective read imposes a common history upon them. Eventually, the identity of each individual is affected by her literary collective history, until the community members' sense of self becomes engulfed in the experience of the imaginary, linguistic collective.<sup>38</sup>

Because Luther played a central role in this national identity-formation process among German speakers, his texts are deeply ingrained in the German literary tradition. What Luther

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<sup>37</sup> Anderson, Benedict R. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991, 39.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 9-46.

founded, Rosenzweig identified, was the German *Schriftsprache*, the language of scripture and literature: the common, unifying form of German.<sup>39</sup> Luther at first used the spoken word to reach his contemporary audience, but in fact the transformation toward a literary German society that Luther's Bible inspired had a paralyzing effect over the spoken word.

Rosenzweig explains that this *Schriftsprache*, in addition to creating shared experience, dominated spontaneous workings of the consciousness. The language became an instrument of the Christian state, in that it reinforced the collective experience of the people while perpetuating a Christian mode of thought. Rosenzweig viewed the *Schriftsprache* produced by Luther as the boundary of German social conscience and expression. A literate people, contained by its language, Rosenzweig believed, could not exist independent of its *Schriftsprache* and was thus trapped within its linguistic paradigm. The consequence of the Luther Bible for *Deutschtum* was that it became spiritually and linguistically indebted to Christianity. Rosenzweig believed that because a Christian text produced a Christian *Schriftsprache*, even members of a society who were not Christian became influenced by Christianity, since their primary mode of expression was through a language stamped by Christianity.<sup>40</sup> The case of Germany and the Luther Bible, whose language was born of Christian convictions, then presented a problem for the twentieth-century German Jew attempting to regain his Jewishness: his consciousness was bound within a language that diverged from his spirit. Rosenzweig attributed the notorious "bifurcation" of the German-Jewish soul, then, to a specifically linguistic source.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Rosenzweig, Franz, *Scripture and Translation*, 51.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Mendes-Flohr, Paul R. *German Jews: A Dual Identity*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1999, 1.

## **Translating an Unwritten Language: the Voice of God in German Scripture**

The point of divergence between Luther's approach to translation and Buber and Rosenzweig's lies at the (dis-)juncture between signifiers and "sense and meaning." Rosenzweig viewed Luther as an interpreter rather than a translator, a religious figure who determined from the words of the original text a specific message and then selected German words to contain it. While Luther rendered his interpreted meaning in colloquial German words and syntax, Buber and Rosenzweig strictly prioritized the original Hebrew language. They believed that the meaning that Luther sought was a dynamic, ever-changing concept, which would depend on the reader, the context, and the changing circumstances. Indeed, Buber and Rosenzweig deemed it impossible to determine a content of scripture separate from its form. Buber explains: "*Theoretically* we cannot even meet the necessary precondition of translation, namely, the discovery of the fundamental text; for what was primarily meant by a biblical word cannot be known but only inferred, and often inferred only conjecturally." In other words, Buber viewed it impossible to discover the "sense and meaning" from the text, because the text itself is only a representation of the spoken Hebrew as uttered centuries ago, and therefore cannot reveal a definite meaning. To Buber and Rosenzweig, only the spoken Hebrew words were a reliable vessel in their own right for God's communication; each Hebrew word carried infinite revelatory potential.<sup>42</sup>

While Buber and Rosenzweig regarded Hebrew as sacred, Rosenzweig's writings on the Hebrew language explain that even among languages considered holy, Hebrew held a unique status: unlike the other sacred languages of Islam and Christianity, Hebrew was not closed off to the lay population. It did not reside exclusively within holy territory: "It never degenerated into anything like the magic sacredness of church Latin or the Arabic of the Koran, which may be,

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 168; 75-6

which even *should* be, incomprehensible to the layman—all that is required of him is adherence in spirit and faith. The holy language [Hebrew] demands to be understood, word for word.”<sup>43</sup> Rosenzweig believed that Hebrew necessarily belonged also to creation. Therefore, Rosenzweig reasoned, Hebrew transcended sacred and profane territories; its holiness relied on this dual status as a language shared between God and humans. Through its dual status, it united the two parallel realms of sacredness and profanity. Galili Shahar further underscores the orientation of Hebrew as *unheimlich* in Rosenzweig’s thought: “After the destruction of the temple, Hebrew lives ‘*zu Gast*,’ as a foreigner in the lands of the peoples. The sacred language lives ‘*schweigsam*’ silent and hidden in the profane languages of the nations.”<sup>44</sup> In fact, in Rosenzweig’s view, Hebrew’s survival as mediator between God and creation depended on renewal from the mundane, spoken languages of man. Rosenzweig thus viewed Hebrew as essentially *unheimlich*: this orientation allowed it to function as a link between God and creation.

What Buber and Rosenzweig saw as the difference between their translation and Luther’s is that Luther’s text takes agency away from God by speaking for God in German words. Through their return to the Hebrew, they endeavored to liberate God’s voice from Luther’s interpretation and restore God to an authoritative position over creation. While Luther assumed the authority to interpret God’s intended meaning, Buber and Rosenzweig aimed to restore God’s authority by un-interpreting God’s words and returning them to their supposedly raw, unaltered state. Their methodology of translation, therefore, was structured in response to Luther’s; it attempted to remedy what they viewed as Luther’s vain attempt at uncovering a meaning from the original text.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Glatzer, Nahum H., *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, Schocken Books: New York, 1961, 268.

<sup>44</sup> Shahar, Galili, “The Sacred and the Unfamiliar: Gershom Scholem and the Anxieties of the New Hebrew,” *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 83: 2010, 305.

<sup>45</sup> Buber, Martin, “The How and Why of Our Translation” in *Scripture and Translation*, 205-219.

It was Buber who specifically articulated a detailed methodology of translation, with the aim of restoring lines of communication with God. His method relied on a return to spoken Hebrew through a transposition of its rhythm, Semitic features, and unity to German. According to his and Rosenzweig's conviction that Hebrew lay at the core of the German language (due to the central role of the Luther Bible in establishing the literary German standard), they believed German could be manipulated in order to retrieve the Hebrew at its core. Buber's meticulous philological research resulted in the Hebraic rhythmic character of their German translation.

To this end, the two translators attempted to reflect the aural quality of Hebrew in their German translation by conforming German so that it related to itself in the same way that Hebrew relates to its own self. They intended for their Bible to be read aloud; and, while they were not concerned with recreating the specific "sounds" of Hebrew, they attempted to recreate the *rhythm* of Hebrew by transferring its linguistic framework to German. As Buber explains: "The auditory patterns of German can never *reproduce* the auditory forms of Hebrew; but they can, in growing from an analogous impulse and in exercising an analogous effect, *correspond to* them Germanically, can *Germanize* them."<sup>46</sup> The methods that Buber and Rosenzweig employed to achieve this correspondence included several key components.

The most prominent features of their language are the division of prose into units of meaning according to breathing patterns; the neologisms used to represent Hebrew concepts that were not already available in the German vocabulary; the reflection of Hebrew's Semitic root system; and the concept of *Leitworte*, according to which each word that is encountered in the Hebrew text is rendered with a single, recurring German equivalent. Buber and Rosenzweig thought of the Bible as a complete, unified framework for revelation. The physical text was not in itself the revelation; rather, it facilitated revelation. They regarded revelation as a continuous

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<sup>46</sup> Buber, Martin, and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture And Translation*, 73-89; 75; 170.



dialogue between God and creation, which is constantly influenced by the personal and contextual factors that impact the pronouncement of every syllable. An example of the text they created to achieve the correspondence between God's voice and its textual representation is the following translation of Genesis (*Im Anfang*) 1:3:

Gott sprach: Licht werde: Licht ward.  
Gott sah das Licht: daß es gut ist.  
Gott schied zwischen dem Licht und der Finsternis.  
Gott rief dem Licht: Tag! und der Finsternis rief er: Nacht!  
Abend ward und Morgen ward: Ein Tag.<sup>47</sup>

Luther's rendering of the same passage reads:

Und Gott sprach: Es werde Licht! und es ward Licht.  
Und Gott sah, daß das Licht gut war. Da schied Gott das Licht von der Finsternis  
und nannte das Licht Tag und die Finsternis Nacht. Da ward aus Abend und Morgen der  
erste Tag.

In comparing the above passages, several features of the Buber-Rosenzweig rendering stand out: firstly, in the line "*Gott sah das Licht: daß es gut ist,*" (God saw the light, that it is good), the translation transitions from past to present tense. The Hebrew כִּי-טוֹב (*ki-tov*; that it's good) is temporally ambiguous. It attributes good to the light, without confining this quality to a specific moment. Therefore, in translating this phrase, *ki tov*, Buber and Rosenzweig were left with a choice of whether to render it as past or present tense in the German. Their use of the present tense is significant in that it mixes tenses in the same sentence; it differs thereby from Luther's rendering in the past tense, "*Gott sah, daß das Licht gut war*" (God saw, that the light was good). The Buber and Rosenzweig Bible's compression of time draws the reader's attention to God as superior to history: in the beginning, God already saw what presently "is." The difference

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<sup>47</sup> *Die Schrift, zu verdeutschen unternommen von Martin Buber gemeinsam mit Franz Rosenzweig*, 15 vols, Berlin 1926-1961; This quote comes from the version that Buber revised after their first 1926 publication.

between past and present in their writing suggests that God's presence is not restricted to a specific moment in the past, but rather, that the present moment belongs also to a never-ending process of creation.

A unique point of the Buber-Rosenzweig text is that in the line "*Gott sprach: Licht werde: Licht ward,*" (God spoke: light becomes: light became). As opposed to Luther's translation, Buber and Rosenzweig use the colons to draw direct equivalencies between God's speech and creation. This feature implies a stronger presence of God, in that creation is not a response to God's command, but rather God's command *is* at once creation. They also retain the Hebrew structure of four words, albeit reversing the order of noun and verb: *yehi or va-yehi or* (*or* meaning light). This distinct spokenness of creation is again emphasized in God's *calling* to the light and darkness: "*Gott rief dem Licht: Tag! und der Finsternis rief er: Nacht,*" rather than *naming* them, as in Luther's version, "*Gott nannte das Licht Tag und die Finsternis Nacht*" (God named the light day and the darkness night). The calling (*rufen*) indicates the voiced rather than silent naming of creation: the universe was created through God's spoken word; whereas in Luther's version creation is portrayed as a response to—rather than a function of—God's command. Luther names the light that appears, instead of creating day from it. The Hebrew verb *va-yikra* is ambiguous in this respect, meaning both "to call" and "to name."<sup>48</sup> Finally, the becoming of evening and morning are drawn as a direct equivalent to one day through a colon: "*Abend ward und Morgen ward: Ein Tag*" (Evening became and morning became: one day); whereas Luther expresses that the first day was created as a *result* of evening and morning.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> In English this issue is elegantly resolved through the verb "to call" as in Robert Alter's translation: "And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night," Alter, Robert, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Again, Buber and Rosenzweig maintain the same structure and word count of the Hebrew: *va-yehi erev va-yehi boker yom echad*.

The wording of Buber and Rosenzweig's rendering of Genesis is among the most controversial features of the translation.<sup>50</sup> The second line of *Genesis* in the B-R Bible reads: “*Die Erde aber war Irrsal und Wirrsal.*”<sup>51</sup> Unlike Luther's “*Und die Erde war wüst und leer,*” Buber and Rosenzweig's “*Irrsal und Wirrsal*” mirrors the syllable pattern of the Hebrew *tohu vavohu* and presents the reader with the extreme chaos that preceded creation. It also conforms to the grammatical structure of Hebrew by using nouns instead of adjectives to correspond to Hebrew's nouns, “*tohu*” and “*wohu.*” While “*wüst und leer*” connote emptiness and disorder, the terms “*Irrsal und Wirrsal*” imply an intensified chaos. Buber and Rosenzweig's use of nouns provides a positive, definitive statement. They imply that chaos and emptiness are agents themselves, that chaos and emptiness *exist*. That is, instead of attributing the adjectives “empty” and “chaotic” to the earth, Buber and Rosenzweig indicate that the earth *is* chaos and emptiness. This phrasing approaches the *unheimlich* through an act of self-negation. The earth, a familiar, *heimlich* territory (in fact it is the “home” [*Heimat*]) is fused to concepts of non-existence. Instead of framing the earthly home as a disorderly yet present terrain, as Luther does, Buber and Rosenzweig render the earth as equivalent to nothing, or, as the ultimate unknown. Home thereby becomes a non-territory, and the reader encounters the *heimlich* earth in an *unheimlich* form.

Another notable feature of the Buber-Rosenzweig translation is that its prose is divided into units, which are intended to be pronounced aloud in one breath. Buber and Rosenzweig created this feature in the text, which they called *colometry*, to preserve the rhythm of the Hebrew prose. This feature drew the criticism of Kracauer, who deemed it “blank verse.” Buber refutes this statement in his response to Kracauer's critique. He explains that the rhythmic units

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<sup>50</sup> It is critiqued by Kracauer, Rosenwald, Scholem, to name several.

<sup>51</sup> Buber and Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift*, 1:2.

(*cola*) lend the text “its natural division into lines of meaning as these are determined by the laws of human breathing and human speech.” Buber and Rosenzweig believed that the spoken word belongs to a synergy between God and creation, in which meaning is a physical corporeal auxiliary of the spoken word. What the speaker feels and experiences, her momentary state of being, her mood—all factor into the sound of her voice. These ephemeral, immediate circumstances that influence breath and lend each utterance a unique sense is what Rosenzweig viewed as the dynamic presence of God through speech. It is through this “calling-out” of the word that divine revelation occurs.

As Rosenzweig explains: “The word of God *cannot dispense with* the word of man—the true, spoken, sounding word of man.”<sup>52</sup> (*Das Gotteswort kann auf das Menschenwort, das wirkliche, gesprochene, lautende Menschenwort nicht verzichten*).<sup>53</sup> In other words, the spoken word of man is essential to convey the voice of God. To Rosenzweig, revelation from God exists only through its pronouncement by man. Therefore, the “message” of the scriptures is inseparable from the spoken words themselves. The content is not to be interpreted; rather it is to be experienced in hearing the text.

[The Bible] cannot attain the autonomous, aesthetic value of *Schrift* [literature; scripture] because it cannot attain the distance that is the precondition of this value. Its content, the essential part of its content, refuses displacement into the objectivity, the separatedness, the *madeness*, that characterize all that becomes literature... But the essential content is precisely what escapes the specifying and distancing power of *Schrift*; the word of God to man, the word of man to God, the word of men before God.<sup>54</sup>

This quote explains what Rosenzweig viewed as the proper use of the Bible to facilitate dialogue between God and humans. Because to Rosenzweig the Bible was fundamentally a spoken dialogue, it rejected inscription—it could not become literature. While the concept of colometry

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<sup>52</sup> Buber, Martin, and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture And Translation*, 170.

<sup>53</sup> Buber, Martin, and Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und Ihre Verdeutschung*, 79.

<sup>54</sup> Buber, Martin, and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture And Translation*, 41.

is in one regard problematic as the translators themselves have determined from the original text the breathing patterns and inscribed these in the translation, the breathing *cola* that Rosenzweig and Buber created were intended to maintain God's presence through the spokenness of the Bible.

Even as Rosenzweig explicitly situated the reading of the scriptures as an oral task, Buber and Rosenzweig took an exceptionally literal approach to translation. But, in fact, the literalness of their translation transcends literature precisely by rejecting the linguistic laws that bind German in favor of a Hebraic system of language. Buber and Rosenzweig viewed the power of Hebrew as based on a structure of language relative to itself. They viewed revelation not strictly as a function of "sound" or "meaning," but rather as a function of the way these sounds and meanings exist within a wider unified structure.

In Rosenzweig's essay, "From the Spirit of the Hebrew Language" (*Vom Geist der Hebräischen Sprache*), he writes: "It is the language in which the unity of world history in general, the course of events from beginning to end, is summoned into the world and only in this language could it be summoned."<sup>55</sup> This powerful position of Hebrew as a historically unbound language grants it freedom from any one historical epoch. Hebrew should never be tied to one cause or interpretation, as it was in Luther's specific interpretation of the Bible's language. Similarly, it is never exclusively sacred or profane. It unifies the world and God; it is the primary line of communication between God and creation. Hebrew's temporal immediacy, which we can recall from the above example of God seeing the present at the moment of creation (p. 22), is drawn from its *unheimlich* status; this feature, which evokes a dimension of the past self, is the mark of a holy language unrooted—and thus ever-present—within history. In the following

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<sup>55</sup> „Vom Geist der hebräischen Sprache“ in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, 721, my translation: "es ist die Sprache in der die Einheit der Weltgeschichte überhaupt, der Gang vom Anfang zum Ende, in die Welt gerufen ist und allein gerufen werden konnte."

quote, Rosenzweig explains Hebrew's presence throughout time, parallel to the spoken languages of man.

The holiness of the Hebrew language never signified holiness in the original sense of 'seclusion,' a meaning which has been overcome in classic Judaism. The holy language, the language of God, has always drawn strength for renewal from the spoken languages of man.<sup>56</sup>

This statement posits Hebrew as the *unheimlich* other among the spoken languages of man, which exists parallel to, is even nourished by, the profane realm of creation. By existing as both itself and its silent, hidden other, Hebrew enters Freud's "class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar."<sup>57</sup> It is an indefinable, unutterable other that accompanies all that is apparent, obvious, and visible. Because Hebrew both belongs to God and is accessible to the people, Rosenzweig views it as simultaneously sacred and profane.<sup>58</sup> Hebrew is necessarily, essentially *unheimlich*. Its *unheimlich* character enables it to provide a bridge between God and creation. Because it can be at once itself and its opposite, it is capable of mediating between God's holiness and the profane realm of creation.

The Buber and Rosenzweig translational method sought to constantly remind the reader that the translation is a layer upon the original, inspired by an original that ultimately is truer and more powerful than the apparent translated version. In doing so, the B-R Bible situates Hebrew as the more powerful "other," lying just beyond visibility within the text but pervasively present. It is Hebrew cloaked in German, which intentionally evokes the internal other beneath its disguise. Therefore, in Hebraic German, Hebrew is reinstated as the *unheimlich* dimension of German; Hebrew demands that German become akin to it, yet it does not erase the German text. Instead it lends the voiced text its own Hebraic rhythm. Through this effect, Hebrew assumes

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<sup>56</sup> Glatzer, Nahum H., *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought*, 266.

<sup>57</sup> Freud, Sigmund, "The Uncanny," 2.

what Buber and Rosenzweig believed to be its proper orientation is as an other, but a privileged other with infinite power. The *unheimlich* element of Hebrew is transferred to a form of Hebraic, or hebraicized, German: this German points to the Hebrew at its core, without actually exposing it.

## Retrieving the Sacred Language from Profane Territories

This final chapter describes how Buber and Rosenzweig's gesture towards the *unheimlich* Hebrew in their hebraicized German functions as a two-fold deterritorialization of language. Specifically, Hebrew is detached from the burgeoning Zionist canon and oriented as an oral dimension of German scripture, while German is decoupled from its Christian heritage through a reterritorialization of it as a literal auxiliary of Hebrew. That is, it is a manipulation of the national consciousness that exists through means of literature, such that the language—which has been adopted for the construction of a unified national collective—is stripped of its dominant national status in favor of an alternative use. In the case of Kafka's writing, which forms the basis for this concept of a deterritorialized language, *Prager Deutsch* is infused with “new intensity” when he opts to use the extra-literal language “in its very poverty.” At the same time, Deleuze and Guatarri explain that the deterritorialization in effect in Kafka's writing is achieved by “[opposing] a purely intensive usage of language to all symbolic or even significant or simply signifying usages of it.”<sup>59</sup> While writing in excessively literal terms, Kafka refuses to produce outwardly logical or significant “sense” through the application of this language.

While very different in quality and tone from Kafka's German, the Hebraic German of the Buber and Rosenzweig translation uses Hebrew's *unheimlich* quality to achieve its own deterritorialization of German from a Luther-dominant paradigm. In the course of the deterritorialization of German, Buber and Rosenzweig's Hebraic German attempts a simultaneous deterritorialization of Hebrew from its past literary context and its present Zionist usage. These multiple deterritorializations are accomplished through the channeling of the *unheimlich* voice of the Hebrew past through the national German. This aspect approaches a

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<sup>59</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guatarri. *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 16-9.



breakdown of the structure of German through the methods discussed above in order to transport the German reader to a historical moment that is at once the story of her own creation and foreign to her.

I begin by discussing the necessity that the translators identified to restore to Hebrew an enunciated character, which they achieve from within German and imagine as a liberation of Hebrew from its literary heritage, both its ancient heritage and the construction of its modern one. Following this discussion, I expand on Mara Benjamin's analysis to explain how Hebrew is used to repurpose German as a universal language and forecast a future for the Jews within the German national and linguistic territory.

#### Hebrew and the Jewish State

Begun in the nascence period of modern Hebrew, the Buber-Rosenzweig translation stood to oppose what some viewed as an apocalyptic desecration of Hebrew underway in Palestine. Rosenzweig believed that the prospect of Zion, threatening to conquer Hebrew under the state, proposed to banish Hebrew eternally to the mute realm of nationalism. Simultaneous to his work on the new translation, Rosenzweig was actively concerned with the nationalization of Hebrew. The Zionist project of creating a national Hebrew literature stood in direct opposition to the efforts of Rosenzweig and Buber to create a German linguistic territory that was accessible to Jews.

The qualms Rosenzweig expresses about the fate of Hebrew under Zionism revolve around the apocalyptic consequences that he believed would result from severing Hebrew from God's voice so that it could become the secularized voice of the national people. His concern for

Hebrew in Palestine was that the language meant to mediate between God and creation had been hijacked, creating a circumstance in which the power beneath the language becomes a destructive force. Hebrew's destructiveness, according to Rosenzweig, could affect the very cause to which it had been applied, the cause of uniting the Jews under the nation, of rooting them to the land. To Rosenzweig, the idea of creating a unified Jewish nation through the Hebrew language was unattainable. He believed that because Hebrew's source of power is God, a Hebrew severed from God in order to build a profane political entity would become impotent.

Rosenzweig believed that the holy language, like the holy people, is holy because it is unrooted and therefore external to the land, to creation. He regarded it as a supra-territorial language.<sup>60</sup> Hence the necessity of deterritorializing it from Zionist literature. Rosenzweig's criticism of Jacob Klatzkin's translation of Spinoza's "Ethics" from Latin into Hebrew provides a lens into his conception of the Zionist linguistic territory against which the Buber-Rosenzweig translation was created. Klatzkin believed that Spinoza, who wrote in Latin, was translating Jewish (i.e. Hebrew) concepts into Latin as he wrote.<sup>61</sup> He viewed his project of translating Spinoza into Hebrew as a restoration of Jewish thought to its rightful place in a Jewish language and to its position in Hebrew literature.<sup>62</sup> According to Klatzkin, any investigation into the meaning of Spinoza's "Ethics" (*Ethica*), which was originally published in Latin, would in fact demand an analysis of *his* Hebrew translation.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, Klatzkin viewed Spinoza's philosophy as Jewish literary property, which naturally belonged within a Hebrew canon.

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<sup>60</sup> Rosenzweig, Franz, *The Star of Redemption*, 318-21.

<sup>61</sup> Wertheim, D. J. *Salvation through Spinoza: a study of Jewish culture in Weimar Germany*. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Lloyd, Genevieve. *Spinoza: Context, sources, and the early writings*, 199.

<sup>63</sup> Wertheim, D. J. *Salvation through Spinoza*. 2011.

Voicing his opposition to this politicized use of Hebrew, Rosenzweig wrote the article “New Hebrew? A Review of a Translation into the Hebrew of Spinoza’s Ethics.”<sup>64</sup> The article was originally published in a 1926 issue of *Der Morgen: Monatsschrift der Juden in Deutschland*, just after Rosenzweig and Buber first published their German translation of *Genesis* and began to work on the translation of *Exodus*. The projects of Buber-Rosenzweig and Klatzkin stand in apparent opposition to each other. While Klatzkin’s translation was inspired by Jewish nationalism as the Zionist movement gained momentum in the early twentieth century, the project of Rosenzweig and Buber was deeply rooted in the Jewish cultural renaissance in Germany. Furthermore, while Klatzkin’s translation was inspired by a movement to establish Hebrew as the national language spoken among Jews, Rosenzweig also attempted to restore the Hebrew voice to his modern era, only in Rosenzweig’s case this Hebrew voice existed through a German text.

Rosenzweig’s article emphasizes his fears regarding the nationalization and modernization of Hebrew. He was concerned that Hebrew’s adoption as a national language inscribed a political boundary around it, which, as we have seen, he and Buber associated with a silencing of the spoken word. To be sure, Rosenzweig was not anti-nationalist. Rather, he believed in a strict division between God and the nations, according to which God’s power was held highest. In fact, he strove to make space within the German national language for Jews, though the Jews were never to be ruled by the nations or fully submit to national power. The future of Judaism was not to be politically determined, he believed.<sup>65</sup> His rejection of Klatzkin’s project was not a rejection of Zionism, per se, but rather a rejection of politicized, institutionalized Judaism. Hebrew, as Rosenzweig explains in his critique of Klatzkin, *must*

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<sup>64</sup> Glatzer, Nahum H., *Franz Rosenzweig: His Life and Thought* (Rosenzweig, Franz. „Neuhebräisch?: anlässlich der Übersetzung von Spinozas Ethik.“ *Der Morgen: Monatsschrift der Juden in Deutschland*, 1925 – 1938, 1, 105-109.

<sup>65</sup> Wertheim, D. J. *Salvation through Spinoza*, 1-33.

remain external to national, earthly territories in order for it to function as a catalyst for communication with God. If it were adopted and applied toward a national goal, it would no longer be property of God but become the property of humans. In Rosenzweig's view, Klatzkin's translation represented the threat to take Hebrew hostage under the nation.

Klatzkin, then, attempted to build a Jewish political territory from the holy language, at the same time that Rosenzweig was working to open German territory to the Jews. Thus, behind Buber and Rosenzweig's translation of the Hebrew Bible into German is a profound concern for the fate of Hebrew under Jewish nationalism. They feared the apocalyptic repercussions of Hebrew's nationalization and the implications of a nationalized Hebrew for the unity of *Judentum* and its relations with God. Informed by these concerns, their translation confronts issues of nationality—inextricable from language—through a manipulation of German and Jewish linguistic territories. Through the translation, Hebrew is oriented not as the *Schriftsprache* of a modern nation, but as the holy voice used to speak to God. It is thereby decoupled from the Zionist project through its proposed role as a supra-territorial language parallel to German.

## The Unwritten Word

In writing on his and Rosenzweig's motives for creating a new German translation of the Bible, Buber explains:

The special obligation to create a new version of the Bible, which came alive in our own time and led to our undertaking, resulted from the discovery that the passage of time had largely turned the Bible into a palimpsest. The original traits of the Bible, the original meanings and words, had been overlaid by a familiar abstraction, in origin partly theological and partly literary... This applies, moreover, not only to reading in translations but also to reading in the original; the Hebrew sounds themselves have lost their immediacy for a reader who is no longer a listener; they are suffused by a voiceless, theologically and literarily determined rhetoric, and are compelled by that rhetoric to

speaking not the spirit that attained its voice in them but a compromise among the spiritualities of two thousand years.<sup>66</sup>

What is at stake in the new Bible translation, then, is the recovery of spoken Hebrew in its immediacy. Buber viewed himself not as a mediator, but as an excavator of a lost sound from its literary tomb. He regarded his own “obligation to create a new version of the Bible” as not literary or theological, contrary to his predecessors. Although this is a problematic notion in that he and Rosenzweig ultimately also mediated the sounds through as they “heard” them from the original text, Buber suggested that their obligation was to remedy an abstraction of the truth left by two thousand years of inscribed interpretations and misinterpretations of the Bible. Buber’s reference to the “palimpsest” reveals his belief that the historical abstraction of the original Bible had affected its reading not only in translation, but also its reading in the original Hebrew. He believed that the Hebrew Bible had become repurposed, so that only traces of the original were discernable through the amalgam of two thousand years of spiritualities. He thereby concluded that even in reading the original Hebrew, the reader was no longer struck by a resounding voice from the text, but rather was met with layers of a well-known theological and literary history. Again, Hebrew becomes the *unheimlich* original behind a familiar literary overlay; yet this neglected *unheimlich* position of Hebrew conflicts with that which Buber and Rosenzweig deem as its rightful status as a prioritized original “other.” To Buber and Rosenzweig, Hebrew’s otherness functioned to ascribe it a more privileged status than the familiar self.

In writing about the same literary and theological history that Buber discusses above, Gershom Scholem points to a specific transition point in which scriptures began to take a central role in Jewish life. He dates this scripturalization of Judaism to a shift from a practiced Jewish life of the Second Temple period to a post-Second Temple “theoretical” Judaism. This

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<sup>66</sup> Buber, Martin, and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, 73.

theoretical, institutionalized Judaism was born in response to the pressures of the Hellenic world. The specter of defeat by the Romans necessitated the translation of a practice, based upon the physical temple structure, into a method which could survive in exile. In the absence of a concrete physical space, it became necessary to embody divine revelation in a doctrine that could be transmitted across generations and through changing conditions. Therefore, writes Scholem, the entirety of the Jewish theocratic community was filtered into tradition, a tradition of *Midrash* that produced layers of writtenness, *Schrifttum*.<sup>67</sup> The physical script itself, rather than God, became sacred. It became no more a portrayal of the holy word, but embodied revelation paralyzed in time.

Though Scholem draws his own mystically-inclined conclusions from this history, it illuminates the literary heritage to which Hebrew had become subject since the destruction of the Second Temple. To Rosenzweig and Buber, this heritage silenced spoken Hebrew by transferring priority to the written texts. For them, Luther's translation represented a step on this trajectory of a muted, institutional takeover of power. Since the Second Temple, Jewish life suddenly changed from a practice centered around the physical structure of the Temple to a dispersed people with no central grounding structure facilitating communication with God. The Buber-Rosenzweig translation—although clearly an act of interpretation itself—therefore also aimed to unbound Hebrew from a tradition of interpretation.

The Buber-Rosenzweig translation proposes an unbounded introversion of Jewish tradition toward a hypothetical, internal unwrittenness of the word. Paradoxically, the tool at the translators' disposal in this pursuit of entry into a primordial, supra-linguistic dimension was literature itself. Their Hebraic German was an escape route that enabled a flight from literary

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<sup>67</sup> Scholem, Gershom, "Revelation and Tradition as Religious Categories in Judaism," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism: And Other Essays on Jewish Spirituality*, Schocken, 1971.

tradition—both German and Jewish—into a universal, divine truth. In establishing these lines of communication, it made possible a future for German-speaking Jews and German speakers in general, who would now have access to a dynamic, timeless revelation. This was, at least, their aspiration, even when this project met with much criticism and rejection, particularly from their own German Jewish intellectual colleagues.

Returning to Deleuze and Guatarri's analysis of Kafka's writing, the resounding Hebrew in the German of Buber and Rosenzweig is revealed as a deterritorialization in itself. Speech, Deleuze and Guatarri argue, is a deterritorialization of the bodily organs of sound production. As a process that diverts the mouth from its primary function of consuming food to an externally focused "product" (words), sound is a deterritorialization of the mouth, the tongue, and the teeth. The standard result is a reterritorialization in sense, they explain. This is what Kafka manipulates to achieve his flight from territory, as Kafka's use of language exhibits a deterritorialization without a reterritorialization in sense. The warbling of Gregor in *Die Verwandlung* is an example. The reader accesses Gregor's consciousness and observes from inside his insect body, though to the other characters in the story he cannot be understood. He is conscious but unable to communicate; he produces only nonsense in his efforts to speak. This use of language entraps the coherent word in literature.<sup>68</sup>

Deleuze and Guatarri's claim resonates with the ideas of Buber and Rosenzweig on the way in which the Hebraic voice of God was filtered into Luther's German "sense and meaning." Accordingly, Rosenzweig identified punctuation, a prominent feature of Luther's German *Schriftsprache*, as the technical bindings that hold the German reading public in a state of literary imprisonment. He writes:

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<sup>68</sup> Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guatarri, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 19-20; Kafka, Franz, *Die Verwandlung*, Leipzig: Kurt Wolff Verlag, 1915.

The fetters that today hold all written German mute are constituted by the semantic system in which the words are embedded: punctuation... Where, therefore, these fetters must be loosed at any cost—as they must be in the German Bible, for today’s reading public, which public has in reading been read off, read wrong, and read under—we need more drastic measures. Martin Buber has found these measures. The bond of the tongue must be loosed by the eye. We must free from beneath the logical punctuation that is sometimes its ally and sometimes its foe the fundamental principle of natural, oral punctuation: the act of breathing.<sup>69</sup>

Here again, with his metaphor of entrapment of the sounding word and call for its liberation, Rosenzweig alludes to the necessity of a deterritorialization of the word from writing. Because punctuation restricts the language to a logical structure, it leaves no room for musicality and spontaneity of expression. Rosenzweig’s conception of biblical Hebrew is that it is governed by the primary function of breathing. It relies on the immediate necessity of life to inflect the word. He believed that the spontaneity and impermanence of the spoken word enable it to express an immediate truth, which cannot extend past the given moment but is fully loyal to the spirit of that precise moment. He believed that the German punctuation did not leave room for spontaneous expression.

Returning to Buber’s quote on the need for a new translation to liberate the *Hebrew* sounds, we can view Rosenzweig’s accusation of the silencing effect of German punctuation above as applicable not only to the German, but to the Hebrew as well. The “measures” that Rosenzweig mentions, which Buber has found to “[loose] the bond of the tongue by the eye,” attempted to unbind the Hebrew sounds from the literary German territory in which they were trapped. Through these methods, Buber and Rosenzweig intended to turn the reader into a listener.

Buber and Rosenzweig envisioned their translation as an escape from the *inscribed* dimension of scripture; it was meant to transcend the literalness of writing. Their era of

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<sup>69</sup> Buber, Martin, and Franz Rosenzweig, *Scripture and Translation*, 42.



*Schrifttum*, in which writing itself had achieved a status of immortalized permanence, an absolute reign over the written word, had allowed their contemporary reading public to be “read off, read wrong, and read under.” The God-like status that writing had taken on in Rosenzweig’s conception of the modern era of *Schrifttum*—which, as explained, was rooted in a post-Second Temple scriptural status of Judaism—left the translators with the task “to let Scripture be suffused once again with the breath of the word.”<sup>70</sup> Since they believed that Hebrew resided within the German as an estranged original voice of God, the extensive measures to restore the German Bible to a voiced reading had a direct impact on Hebrew. Therefore, through its decoupling from literature (writtenness, *Schrifttum*) in the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible, Hebrew was restored to its spoken state, and thereby re-empowered to function as a vessel for divine revelation.

The deterritorialization of the Hebrew voice from within its literary and national bindings, both German and Jewish, was just one dimension of the Buber-Rosenzweig project. The other was a deterritorialization of the German *Schriftsprache* from the same Lutheran “fetters” that held Hebrew mute. Because Luther’s interpretation, which fundamentally changed the German language, was based on the original Hebrew words, Buber and Rosenzweig viewed German as indebted to Hebrew. Hebrew could be raised to the surface and revealed, for it already existed underneath Luther’s interpretation in German. Buber and Rosenzweig sought to remedy the tension between the “truth” of revelation and the Lutheran bindings of the German language by constructing a German that—like its Hebrew origin—functioned as a universal and timeless catalyst for God’s revelation. They believed that in restoring German to its Hebraic roots, they could reinstate a line of communication between God and German speakers.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid 42; 44.

In order for God's voice to be heard through the scriptural word, they deemed it necessary to accommodate an otherness within the text to assert the influence of God's (Hebrew) speech over the German script. Through this restoration of German to what Buber and Rosenzweig believed to be its origins in the Hebrew language, they sought to decouple German from the Lutheran paradigm. Ultimately, they intended for a new "reformation" to take place among German-speakers. This reformation of German, achieved through Hebrew, belonged to the revolutionary category of deterritorialized literature identified by Deleuze and Guattari— with their new Bible, Rosenzweig and Buber opened the extra-literary space between voice and text, nation and literature, and holy and profane to the future of *Deutschjudentum*.

## Conclusion

Despite the powerful reactions it drew from scholarly circles, the Buber and Rosenzweig Bible did not achieve the central standing within German Jewish society that the translators anticipated for it. The 1926 publication of *Genesis* remained an esoteric text, proving difficult for me to locate in its original version even today. Regardless, the translation continues to draw the attention of scholars interested in its historical implications and Buber and Rosenzweig's theory of translation.

Among the most provocative scholarly responses of the Bible was Gershom Scholem's 1961 speech at Buber's completion of it in Israel. Scholem named the Bible a *Gastgeschenk* from the German Jews to German people, a "gift upon departure" which had become the Jews' "tombstone" in German history.<sup>71</sup> The limitations that Scholem draws around the translation disregard the universalist motives that inspired the translation in the beginning. Based on the post-*Shoah* marginalization of the German language among Jews and a new generation of Jews with a Hebrew mother tongue, Scholem discounted a future for Jews within German language realms. Although his response to the Bible might be historicized as a representation of a traumatic period, it also touches on a central literary issue considered in this thesis. I have proposed that the translation be regarded within a wider Hebrew literary and linguistic history. Furthermore, I have considered the question of whether the Buber-Rosenzweig Bible in fact belongs to a circumscribed literary canon at all. The inscription of the Bible within the German-language literary territory—indeed the *inscribed* status of Bible altogether—is what Buber and Rosenzweig attempted to revolutionize.

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<sup>71</sup> Scholem, Gershom, "At the Completion of Buber's Translation of the Bible," in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, 318.

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