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A New Translation of an Early Modern Gem

The diary of David Reuben is a significant, unique, and fascinating historical source for the study of the early modern period. The diary (as Alan Verskin calls it) relates, in the first person, the story of a Jew who presented himself as an ambassador from the land of three of the Ten Lost Tribes: after passing through exotic lands and embarking on adventures in territories it is highly doubtful any European would have visited at the time, he finally arrived in Italy at the beginning of 1524. There he succeeded in meeting the pope and was subsequently welcomed with honor at the court of the king of Portugal, a country in which Jewish life had not existed openly since 1497. While there, he awakened the religious consciousness of Diogo Pires, who later adopted the name Shlomo Molcho and a few years later would initiate a messianic stirring of great interest. Years afterward, Reuben joined Molcho at a meeting with Emperor Charles V, at which both were arrested. As a consequence, Reuben was taken as a prisoner to Spain, where he was eventually executed. A Jew impersonating the ambassador of the lost tribes of Israel is in itself an almost unimaginable phenomenon. The fact that this impersonator was involved in all these events is doubly amazing. Indeed, at times Reuben's diary reads like a script for a Hollywood movie rather than a historical source.

However, beyond its fantastical and exceptional aspects, Reuben's diary is a rare source from the early modern period. This is the story of a person who traversed different geographical regions—the Arabian Peninsula, Africa, the Land of Israel, and Europe—and moved between different religions, namely, Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. He also moved between identities, pretending, at times, to be a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad, a diplomatic emissary, and a cabalist. Broad parts of the diary also describe a journey within Europe from the perspective of a non-European who in all likelihood had no counter-
part in this period. As a historical source, the diary contains information that can contribute to discussions of diverse topics, including the education and place of women in Italian Jewish society; the relationship between the papal and Portuguese courts and bourgeois Jews, or new Christians; the disparities between East and West and between Islam and Christianity; and the image (or perhaps the reality) of Africa and the Islamic world in the eyes of a traveler such as Reubeni. All these make the diary a fascinating, important, and multihued work that should be available to those unable to read Hebrew, the language in which it was written.

Parts of the diary were translated into German at the end of the nineteenth century, and in the 1990s the diary was translated into Italian and French.[1] An English translation of the diary first appeared in Elkan Nathan Adler’s compendium *Jewish Travelers*, published in 1930, as part of The Broadway Travellers series. However, this translation is defective in a number of respects. Indeed, Adler based his translation on the Hebrew edition of the diary published by Judah David Eisenstein in his book *Compendium of Jewish Travels*, which itself is not without inaccuracies and omissions.[2] Likewise, Eisenstein’s edition is partial and fragmentary, and, moreover, he did not note which sections of the text he chose to omit and why. Therefore, the reader receives the impression that the text is a full translation when in fact it is only partial. A full, up-to-date, and accurate English edition was, thus, a desideratum, making Verskin’s translation an important development for researchers of the early modern period as well as general readers interested in broadening their knowledge.

In my survey below, I discuss three main points: the translation itself, the introduction, and the title of the book. Producing a modern English translation of a unique, unparalleled sixteenth-century Hebrew text is a complex challenge. The translator of such a text has two options: to follow the source as closely as possible in terms of grammatical structure and idiomatic phrasing or, alternatively, to focus on the content and meaning of the text, even at the expense of a certain distance from its unique linguistic and syntactical structure. Verskin clearly chose the second option, and I am convinced that this was a wise choice. Indeed, the diary is written in an original style that does not reference other contemporaneous styles or works, making it unnecessary to adopt the linguistic and grammatical structures of other sources. Likewise, the readership for which the book is intended is mainly interested in its content. Those wishing to focus explicitly on the linguistic and stylistic levels of the text will usually not need a translation but will work with the original Hebrew source.

Yet this decision expands the interpretational and at times subjective dimension of the translation, which requires great care on the part of the translator and awareness on the part of the reader. Thus, for example, at the very opening of the diary Verskin translates the words בַּעַל הַסְּפִיבּוֹל הַסְּפִיב (in which Reubeni sailed from the Arabian Peninsula to Suakin) as “captain,” certainly not a word-for-word translation but without doubt easing the flow of the text (p. 31). Later, when Reubeni related that he asked Abraham de Castro to help him which Adler translated as “for … the) בַּעַל הַסְּפִיב (love of the elders,” whose identity is unclear), Verskin translates this as “for the love of … our ancestors,” explaining the writer’s meaning (p. 44). He also translates the word כִּינְכֵינְר as “cittern,” a more appropriate choice than the word-for-word “violin,” in terms of identifying the instrument under discussion. Another example of a successful translation that is not word for word is the obscure phrase בַּעַל הַסְּפִיבּוֹל הַסְּפִיב as “You will travel … even against your will,” and there are many more examples (p. 145).

Yet sometimes it is possible to disagree with Verskin’s translation. Thus, for example, Reubeni described the journeys of the king of Ethiopia, re-
lating that, which simply means that the journeys were similar, while Verskin translates this as “the rule is first in, last out” (p. 32). Furthermore, Reubeni depicted an old Arab named Osman who helped him at one of the stops on his way to Egypt. In Verskin’s translation the old man becomes a “sheikh” (pp. 40–41). Although the word “sheikh” literally means an old man, its generally accepted usage refers to a tribal or local leader, and thus in this case the translation leads the reader astray. There are of course further examples, but in a general accounting they do not detract from the quality of the translation. However, they do require the reader, certainly a reader seeking to use this translation for scholarly purposes, to be aware of the interpretational element of translation.

Verskin chose to base his translation on the standard edition of the text published and annotated by Ze’ev Eshkoli in 1940. This choice is not justified considering that a legible and clear facsimile of the (lost since 1867) manuscript (on which Eshkoli based his edition) is readily available. The differences between the facsimile and Eshkoli’s text are negligible, yet a translation of this kind should be based on the source itself. Likewise, the fact that the references to the diary throughout the introduction are to Eshkoli’s Hebrew edition and not the new translation, something that could easily have been remedied while editing the text, seems unjustified.

At the same time, I would like to praise two points relating to the pagination and editing of the text that should serve as a model for others to follow. The first is the decision to note the page numbers in Eshkoli’s edition, the standard edition of the diary, in the margins of the pages. This makes it easy for readers who want to examine references from other scholarly sources to Eshkoli’s edition to find the relevant place in the new translation. Second is the decision to mark quotations from the Bible within the body of the text in italics. This allows the reader to discern easily that there are only a few biblical quotations in the text, which is instructive regarding Reubeni’s limited religious education.[3]

Verskin chose to preface the text with only a short introduction, a major part of which is devoted to a concise survey of the events described in the text. This differs to the long and comprehensive introduction that Eshkoli penned to his edition. Eshkoli’s edition was printed again in 1993, more than fifty years after the first print, without any changes, apart from the addition of two short articles concerning sources that were not available to Eshkoli. Indeed, Eshkoli’s introduction, as well as the broad scholarly literature concerning various aspects of Reubeni’s story that has appeared in recent decades in English and other languages, makes a comprehensive and detailed introduction to the translation unnecessary. Yet it would have been worthwhile referencing this literature in an orderly fashion and including a detailed bibliography featuring at least the scholarly literature directly pertaining to Reubeni and his diary, something that is unfortunately lacking.

The text under discussion here is the real diary of a fictional persona of a historical figure, describing a partially real and partially fictional journey. Thus, the work is multilayered, reflecting different, sometimes even contradictory, aims and trends and making it impossible to read it as a unified and coherent text. Rather, the work must be read as an edited and tendentious text, something the reader must keep in mind. Therefore, the introduction should have included a discussion of the genre of the text: is this a diary, a memoir, travel writing, an autobiography? Likewise, it should have discussed the time and place in which the text was composed.

In the absence of such a discussion, Verskin tends to accept Reubeni’s words at face value, even where there is room for doubt. A prominent example is Reubeni’s claim that he remained in Portugal for a year and a half, which Verskin ac-
cepts. Yet, as the official Portuguese documents published by Eliyahu Lipiner illustrate, he was exiled from Portugal a mere eight months after his arrival. Another example is the disparity between Reubeni’s description of his meeting with the pope (and his aims to make peace between the kings of Spain and France) and the details given by Daniel de Piza, who served as translator at that same meeting (at which Reubeni asked the pope for a letter of recommendation for the king of Portugal). Likewise, in the depiction of Reubeni’s illness in Rome, which led his hosts to fear for his life, it is also possible to discern the defective editing that reveals the change in Reubeni’s perception of himself. Even if Verskin did not want to embark on a methodical discussion of the different layers of the text in the short introduction to the translation, it would have been worthwhile at least mentioning this complexity and emphasizing that it is impossible to relate to the text simply as a personal diary depicting the author’s experiences.

The last topic that I wish to discuss briefly is the title of the work: *Diary of a Black Jewish Messiah.* I will not address here the question of whether Reubeni saw himself as a messiah, or when and why he chose to present himself as a messiah, which is connected to the discussion of the predisposition of the diary and the time of its composition. However, I will touch on Verskin’s decision to describe him as a black Jewish messiah. Making such a statement in 2023 certainly has meanings beyond merely determining the color of Hareuveni’s skin. So too Ramusio, the famed Venetian geographer (who in reality never left Europe), noted that the structure of Reubeni’s body was “very dry and thin, and similar to the Indians of Prester John” (meaning the Ethiopians), without noting the color of his skin. Based on these few mentions it is difficult to determine that his contemporaries attributed particular importance to the color of Reubeni’s skin. Likewise, to make such a claim it is necessary to discuss the attitude to those with black skin in the 1520s and 1530s in Europe in general and Italy in particular. Interestingly, throughout the diary Reubeni himself depicted various people that he met as black-skinned and certain countries as “black countries” (p. 94). Considering all these facts, it seems that presenting Reubeni as a black Jewish messiah does not reflect how his contemporaries perceived him.

Verskin’s translation is an impressive achievement and constitutes an important contribution to the scholarly bookshelf concerning the early modern period. Verskin provides a good translation, readable and clear, and the fact that we can at times argue about the exact translation of a certain term does not detract from its value. Likewise, the concise introduction does not overly burden the reader and presents enough information to enjoy an informed reading of the full source. This is a book that will help students and scholars...
engaged in the study of a wide range of fields: travel literature, geography, autobiography, daily life, messianism, and more. Another merit of the text is that it is accessible not only to scholars and students but also to the educated reader, who in recent years has been almost entirely neglected by scholars. Indeed, Verskin makes one of the most fascinating Hebrew sources of the early modern period available to all.

Notes

[1]. A German translation of the first part of the diary (until he sets sail for Portugal) was published in the late nineteenth century: Eduard Biberfeld, Der Reisebericht des David Rëubénì: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des XVI Jahrhundrets (Berlin: H. Itzkowsi, 1892). Prior to this, Graetz published several chapters of the diary (part 9, section 4). For the translation in French, see Haim Harboun, Les voyageurs juifs du XVIe siècle (Aix-en-Provence: Editions Massoreth,1989-94); and for the translation in Italian, see Lea Sestieri, David Reubeni, Un ebreo d’Arabia in missione segreta nell’Europa del ‘500 (Genova: Marrieti, 1991).


[3]. Eshkoli already noted this phenomenon. See Aharaon Ze’ev Eshkoli, Sipur David Hareuveni (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1993), 203n4.

[4]. Eliayhu Lipiner, “‘Iyunim beparshat David Hareuveni veShlomo Molkho,” in Eshkoli, Sipur David Hareuveni, 1.

[5]. Eshkoli, Sipur David Hareuveni, 151n4. All translations by author, unless otherwise noted.

[6]. Ibid., 155n4.

[7]. Ibid., 184n4.

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