8 A Jewish Gift to British Civilization: A New Translation of the English Bible

8.1 Earlier Jewish translations of the Hebrew Bible in England

To any English person living in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, reading the Bible as the authentic rendering of divine revelation meant always the English Authorized Version. Given the long history of the King James translation and the ubiquitous role it played in the religious, cultural, and civil life of English society for centuries, its familiar phraseology and cadences were understandably conceived as identical with the way God spoke. For the vast majority of English Jews increasingly incapable of reading the Bible in Hebrew, the English translation gradually began to function for them as well as the major entry point into the biblical narrative. It is difficult to chart the process precisely except to observe its results, confirmed by the candid observations of rabbis and educators (including Bennett himself) that Hebraic literacy, beyond a small elite, was hardly the norm by the late eighteenth century, among either Sephardic or Ashkenazic Jews. Hyman Hurwitz, writing in 1807 in his *Sefer Rishon Le-Mikra'ei Kodesh, or, Elements of the Hebrew Language*, offered as dependable an estimate as any in claiming that only a fifth of the young students graduating Jewish schools could read Hebrew with any accuracy and even fewer could read the Bible without consulting an English translation.[1]

David Levi, the dominant figure of Anglo-Jewry at the end of the eighteenth century, had long criticized the English translation for its inaccuracies, but neither he nor any of his colleagues could dislodge its usage for Christians and Jews alike. When the prominent Christian cleric Anselm Bayley, a self-proclaimed friend of the Jewish people, published a bilingual edition of the entire Old Testament in 1774, with the Hebrew text on the left side of the page and the authorized English version on the right, he intended that it be used by Jews with little or no Hebraic background, as the Hebrew title makes clear: "On one side Hebrew [*Yehudit*] and the other side English [*Britanit*] to assist the Jews who speak English to understand the Bible and its secrets from their own tongue that was in the past."[2]

1 This section relies significantly on my *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 219–228, with some shifts of emphasis; see Hyman Hurwitz, preface to *Sefer Rishon Le-Mikra'ei Kodesh, or, Elements of the Hebrew Language* (London: L. Alexander, 1807), ii.

2 See David Daiches, "The Beginnings of Anglo-Jewish Biblical Exegesis and Bible Translation," *Miscellanies* (Jewish Historical Society of England) 4 (1942): 25.

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Even the long-awaited "Jewish" version of the Torah and *Haftarot*, published in Hebrew and English by Alexander Alexander in 1785, was hardly an improvement over the Bayly edition. The five-volume set was obviously intended for synagogue use, but it too contained only the English authorized edition. The work did provide some supplementary notes, especially on the book of Genesis, but they are hardly a serious encounter with the English translation as an essentially Protestant rewriting of the Pentateuch. Even the notes, as David Daiches perceptively pointed out many years ago, display a distinctly English Protestant flavor. Such rubrics as "explanatory, historical, critical, and practical," or Alexander's use of "the argument" at the conclusion of each book, betray the formidable influence of the English Bible tradition.[3]

When Lion Soesmans offered his own rival edition of the Pentateuch for Jewish usage in 1787, he had apparently outdone his rival by securing the services of David Levi himself. The title page reads ambiguously: "Corrected and translated by David Levi." What this meant is that Soesmans again used the Authorized Version but added the more extensive scholarly notes of Levi. Even Alexander Alexander's son, Levi, eventually realized that this edition was superior to that of his father and republished it again in 1821. This later version was still unchanged from the original, despite its somewhat exaggerated claims that the "practical, critical, and grammatical" notes of Levi had been "carefully corrected and revised, with various improvements and additions distinguishing also from the six hundred and thirteen precepts [. . .] as observed by the Jews."[4] Thus, over the course of some fifty years, English Jews inevitably assumed that the Authorized Version was in fact identical to the traditional text. While Jews might have heard the original Hebrew text chanted in the synagogue, most of them understood it solely through its English Protestant translation. In this respect, their aesthetic experience with the Bible increasingly mirrored that of their Christian contemporaries in churches throughout England.[5]

David Levi surely regretted this sad twist of fate that no alternative English translation, one more faithful to the original Hebrew version, was available in his

3 Daiches, "The Beginnings of Anglo-Jewish Biblical Exegesis," 26–27, 29; Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key*, 220–221. On David Levi, see the book's index, especially passages in chap. 2.

4 Title page of *The Holy Bible, in Hebrew, Conformable to the Accurate Text of Everardo van der Hooght, V.D.M., Printed at Amsterdam, in 1705, and the Musical Accents after the Manner of Pramselo, with the English Translation on the Opposite Page; To which is added, the Notes, Explanatory, Practical, Critical, and Grammatical of the Late David Levy, Carefully Corrected and Revised,* vol. 1 (London: L. Alexander, A.M. 5582 [1821–1822]).

5 Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key*, 221–226, including the illustrations of the various books discussed.

time. He had announced his aspiration to produce "a new translation of the Bible, with a copious commentary, on a plan never before attempted; and in which the errors of the present translation will be clearly pointed out, the difficult passages explained, and the seeming contradictions reconciled,"[6] but he failed to fulfill this desire. In 1789, one of Levi's contemporaries, an otherwise unknown Sephardic Jew named Isaac Delgado, published *A New English Translation of the Pentateuch, Being a Thorough Correction of the Present Translation, Wherever It Deviates from the Genuine Sense of the Hebrew Expressions, or Where It Renders Obscure the Meaning of the Text; or, Lastly, When It Occasions a Seeming Contradiction: Proving the Validity of Such Emendations by Critical Remarks and Illustrations, Grounded on Other Instances in Scripture Where the Like Words and Phrases Occur*. Delgado, who on the title page called himself "a teacher of the Hebrew Language,"[7] accomplished considerably less than his pretentious title seems to indicate. The new English translation was in fact "a specimen of the whole": that is, a list of corrected translations in one column facing the standard English translation, along with extensive notes that justified the suggested emendations. What was unusual about Delgado's effort was neither the significance of his changes nor his erudition but the dedication "To the Honourable and Right Reverend Dr. Shute Barrington, Lord Bishop of Salisbury." The publication constituted a kind of ecumenical project since, in the words of Delgado, "we both, my Lord, worship the ONE TRUE GOD." And he continues in his preface:

> It is greatly to be lamented, that, in a Christian country, which abounds with men eminent for their abilities and learning, a correction of the present translation of the Bible, and a literal explanation of it, so much wanted, [. . .] hath been hitherto neglected; for the want of which, people, meeting with several obscure passages, which cannot be properly understood, are apt to throw it aside, and seldom view it again. What most surprises me is, that none of all the publishers of Family Bibles, that have come to my knowledge, ever undertook such a task.[8]

Delgado, accordingly, pursued his work as a service to English society in general. Since the English Bible was the common possession of Jews and Christians alike, it followed that if it was deficient, a Jew knowledgeable in the Hebrew text could

6 David Levi, *Lingua Sacra*, 3 vols. (London: W. Justins, 1785–1787), 3:epilogue, p. 7.

7 Isaac Delgado, *A New English Translation of the Pentateuch* (London: printed for the author by W. Richardson, 1789).

8 Delgado, *A New English Translation of the Pentateuch*, [iii], [iv], v. On Bishop Shute Barrington, see Sir Thomas Lawrence, "Barrington, Shute (1734–1826)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, September 23, 2004, https://www.oxforddnb.com/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-1011940?rskey=mPZSxt&result=2. Barrington is included on the list of subscribers to Bennett's commentary on Ezekiel; see chapter 6, above.

volunteer, for the common good, to improve the translation. The issue was not to preserve a Jewish version exclusively for Jewish usage, as was the case in the previous biblical editions, but to refine a text to be shared by all religions. To be sure, Delgado could not withhold his stinging barbs regarding the highly publicized project of Benjamin Kennicott. He strongly insists that he will never avail himself "of that pernicious method of supposing an error in Scripture, committed by transcribers after the compilation of the Bible by Ezra and his synod, who faithfully handed it down to us as they found it, without venturing to alter a single letter, and was since preserved by the Massorites as pure as they received it." He notes that Jews all over the world preserve the same text and "to pretend to correct the original Hebrew by the different readings found in manuscripts" is a profane act "as it would give us a spurious copy, instead of a divine narrative."[9]

Delgado's effort, apparently supported by the Bishop of Salisbury himself, was indeed a modest success. No more convincing testimony of active Jewish collaboration with Christian clergy in improving the English translation of their common Bible could be found than the remarkable ecumenical list of subscribers to this volume, including several well-known Christian clerics and Jewish leaders of both the Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities.[10] In his outreach to the well-known bishop and other Christians who supported the publication, Delgado was also breaking new ground. He was not exclusively concerned with producing a Torah translation for Jewish usage. He was committed to producing an accurate translation for Christians, though one undoubtedly to be consulted by Jews as well. But as a Hebrew expert of the Jewish faith, he was explicitly performing a service for all members of the British nation, and in so doing, he was engaged in a sacred task that transcended his own faith community. Solomon Bennett was following in his footsteps on a much grander scale.

8.2 Bennett's first announcement: critical remarks on the Authorized Version

Some forty-five years passed before another Jewish scholar advanced the idea of a new English translation, this time of the entire Old Testament rather than the Pentateuch alone. That scholar was, of course, Solomon Bennett, who in 1834 published his *Critical Remarks on the Authorised Version of the Old Testament Containing Some Examples of Its Errors, with Specimens of an Amended Translation*.

9 Delgado, *A New English Translation of the Pentateuch*, vii.
10 Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key*, 226–228.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Bennett's infatuation with Hebrew was also connected intimately to a second passion that preoccupied him virtually to the day of his death in 1838: his ardent desire to offer a corrected English translation of the entire Old Testament, a vital need for the English Christian nation, so he believed, to be carried out by a learned Jew. In fact, his *Critical Remarks* were published only a year before his essay on the Hebrew language. Not only were the two projects related – a correct version of the Bible was critical in demonstrating the continuity and perfection of the Hebrew language – but Bennett worked on both simultaneously in the last years of his life. He opens the *Critical Remarks* by addressing his Christian readers:

> During my sojourn in this kingdom, I have always endeavored to enter merely into the spirit of the vernacular language of the country; chiefly with the view of understanding its literary productions. I have read various authors of flourishing and fine language, yet at the same time void of good sense and information. I have read books replete with hypotheses and sentiments, yet void of truths, and even perplexing to the minds of readers. Different is the character of my address to the public; my labours are of a sacred nature and relate to the integrity of Scripture; and their object is to promote a pure, correct, and perfect version of the Bible, critically and etymologically demonstrated, which has never yet been attempted by anyone; and to ascertain if it meets the original or not, which has remained for near 1899 years in a state of great indecision. I am proposing a perfect version of the Hebrew Bible, but not orations of eloquence – a version of the standing truths of Scripture, so as to please Biblical Scholars, but not a display of decayed vain ornaments, so as to please idle thoughts.[11]

He later relates a specific incident that triggered his ambitious project:

> It would never have entered my mind to examine the versions of the Bible, which have stood the test for 1800 years, and which have passed the hands of thousands of divines and learned men as a correct version (to doubt their labours would be a reflection on their learning), had not one occurrence so forcibly struck my mind, that I could no longer remain indifferent to it. [. . .] In the year 1812, one Daniel Isaac Eaton published various tracts of Tom Paine, and he presented me with a copy of his writings; in which pamphlet, among his satirical allusions, I noticed that Paine greatly derided Scripture, charging it with foolish and blasphemous language.[12]

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11 Solomon Bennett, *Critical Remarks on the Authorised Version of the Old Testament: Containing Some Examples of Its Errors, with Specimens of an Amended Translation* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1834), iii.

12 Bennett, *Critical Remarks*, 3–4. On Daniel Isaac Eaton, the controversial editor of Paine's books, see his *Trial of Mr. Daniel Isaac Eaton, for Publishing the Third and Last Part of Paine's Age of Reason: Before Lord Ellenborough, Court of King's Bench, Guildhall, March 6, 1812* (London: Daniel Isaac Eaton, 1812; reprint, n.p.: Forgotten Books, 2018); Daniel Lawrence McCue Jr., "Eaton, Daniel Isaac (*bap*. 1753, *d*. 1814)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, October 4, 2007, https://

At about the same time, Bennett was sent another document, titled *Report from Select Committee on King's Printers' Patents*, ordered by the House of Commons to be printed on August 8, 1832. "From the whole of its contents," he writes, "I could not find anything to my satisfaction, in regard to my inquiry respecting the 1800 years' standing version of the Bible, for, notwithstanding the innumerable corruptions, and erroneous translations, of single words, whole phrases, and even of whole verses, like those with which the versions are filled, and which gave no sense whatever, not the least mention was made of taking the same into consideration."[13]

The problem of erroneous translation was also obvious with respect to the most recent editions of the Bible: "But what surprised me more was, I had before me the famous Bible (4 octavo volumes) entitled 'The Old Testament, English and Hebrew, with Remarks, Critical and Grammatical, on the Hebrew," by Anselm Bayley, LLD, in 1774; and notwithstanding his great promises, yet his English version is replete with all the gross errors and corruptions which we meet with in the most common editions of the Bible, without exceptions." Similarly, the editions of Adam Clarke, John Hewlett, and John Bellamy were all found wanting, filled with mistakes and corruptions that they neither noticed nor corrected. He is especially unsparing in his comments on Bellamy, whom we encountered earlier and about whom Bennett had shared his impressions: "I cannot forbear noticing an edition (published by Longman and Co., Paternoster Row, in 1818) of an imposter and plagiarist [John Bellamy], a mere pretender to the knowledge of the Hebrew language, entitled 'The Holy Bible, newly translated from the original, etc.,' whose name and abilities are hardly worth my notice."[14]

Bennett is aware that plagiarists will use his own emendations for their own purposes. "However, I must go with the stream; particularly as I was persuaded

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doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/8421; and Michael T. Davis, "'That Odious Class of Men Called Democrats': Daniel Isaac Eaton and the Romantics 1794–1795," *History* 84, no. 273 (January 1999): 74–92. Note that both the radical Eaton and the conservative Lord Ellenborough, his adversary, were on good terms with Bennett.

13 Bennett, *Critical Remarks*, 5. See "The Bible-Printing Monopoly," *Eclectic Review*, 3rd ser., 9 (June 1833): art. 4, 509–533, a review of four books on the inadequacies of standard translations, including a reprint of the committee's report, published in 1833 (available at https://books.google.com/books?id=suAEAAAAQAAJ&newbks=0&printsec=frontcover&).

14 Bennett, *Critical Remarks*, 6. On Anselm Bayley, see Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key*, 40–44, 180–83, and J. M. Rigg, revised by Emma Major, "Bayly [Baily], Anselm (1718/19–1794)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, November 10, 2022, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/1763. On Hewlett, see G. C. Boase, revised by H. C. G. Matthew, "Hewlett, John (1756/7–1844)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, November 12, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/13154.

by some literary gentlemen to do so. Accordingly, I shall present some examples out of different books composing the Bible; viz. quotations from the authorized version; as well as the corrections of the same." He thus hopes to present the reader with "a perfect idea of my labour in sacred research." He first considers the Pentateuch, admitting that the standard version is good except for some poetical sections. He notes some glaring mistakes in Joshua and 2 Samuel, as well as errors in the hagiographical and less prophetical books, notably Psalms and Proverbs; and as of 1834, he acknowledges that he "has not [yet] examined the remaining parts of the hagiographical books nor yet the latter prophetical books."[15]

There are at least three reasons for the sorry state of the English translation, according to Bennett. Jews were never consulted, given "the prevalent prejudices against the Hebrew nation, which have descended from the barbarous times of Europe down to the present day." Second, the rabbis were satisfied with the original Hebrew and had no reason to examine translations, while the Christians adhered uncritically to their Authorized Version. And third, no authority could challenge the present version, although it was authorized in a period when Hebrew was not well understood. This impediment functioned as "an iron bar before the gate not allowing anyone to enter the garden so as to clear away the weeds and poisonous herbs." Bennett openly acknowledges that some Christian translations could be trustworthy: "I have before me the Oxford Bible of 1824, in the marginal notes of which, I perceive versions which are much better than the authorized versions; even some of them are exact versions of the original Hebrew, and yet the erroneous and false translations remain in the body of the Bible, whilst these correct ones are scattered indifferently in the margin as if of little or no value at all."[16]

Despite these partial accomplishments of Christian scholars, the prevailing prejudice of ignoring the vast Hebraic skills of Jewish exegetes has led to the present condition, an unsatisfactory and inaccurate biblical translation authorized by Protestant authority. The obvious question to be asked is the following:

> Who then ought to be the best judges of the integrity of any version of the Bible, if not that people with whom the original language was vernacular; viz. from the creation until the destruction of the second temple, a period of about 4000 years, and with whom it has never ceased to be their zealous and sacred study, in all the particulars relative to the Hebrew literature at large, even in their oppressed and persecuted state, until now? Nor can any critic or historian prove, that there ever was a period of time in which the Holy Language was neglected or changed, as pretended by some shallow modern critics![17]

15 Bennett, *Critical Remarks*, 8, 21.
16 Bennett, *Critical Remarks*, 22–23.
17 Bennett, *Critical Remarks*, 22.

Bennett was nominating himself for the immense task at hand. As we have seen, there had already been several attempts by Jews to offer an English version of the Pentateuch, generally adaptations of the King James Version for Jewish usage, and in one case, that of Delgado, an "ecumenical" version; but no one had seriously attempted to revise the entire English translation of the Hebrew Bible. Bennett now offered, in the first of two small volumes, specimens of his translation along with a clear plan of action that would guide his ambitious project to its conclusion:

> The method I proceed in is this: – First, I have for my work a copy of an English Bible, viz. the Oxford Bible, an edition of 1824, and a copy of the great Hebrew Bible (printed in Basel) enriched with the Massorah Magna and Parva, and with the important commentaries of the Targums of Rabbi Solomon Iarchi, Rabbi David Kimchi, R. Levi Ben Gershom, and Aben Ezra. [. . .] I do not adhere closely to literal translation, as such is inconsistent even with living languages; and how much more so must it be the case with that Holy Language, whose system, grammar, etymology, cannot be compared with any of the modern languages. In cases like this, the Translator has only to notice, with the utmost perspicuity, the scope of the subject, and to render it with all the simplicity of the language into which he is about to translate. [. . .] Secondly, I do not trouble myself about the idiom of the standing version at large, as it is immaterial to my views whether it be of the ancient or modern idiom, so long as it preserves the sentiments of the original words, except in those instances in which the version is inconsistent with the original meaning of the Hebrew text, as demonstrated all along. [. . .] Thirdly, I have enriched it with numerous critical notes, free from hypotheses, types, and private opinions, which are common with commentators.[18]

He closes this first volume with a plea for support from Christians for his noble project. Having entered an enlightened age in Europe in a unique country with its grand repository of literature of every description and its treasury of arts and sciences, Bennett believes his dream can be realized: "In a nation like this, I hope that my labours, my sincere and upright views, will also find their zealous advocates, who will cordially patronize and support me in my proposed sacred labour."[19]

8.3 The publication of a specimen of Bennett's new translation

Two years later, in 1836, Bennett published his *Liḳuṭim me-haʿataḳah ḥadashah ʿal Torah, Neviʾim u Ketuvim = Specimen of a New Version of the Hebrew Bible Translated from the Original Text*. This time it included a list of subscribers, among

18 Bennett, *Critical Remarks*, 24–25.
19 Bennett, *Critical Remarks*, 26.

them several names familiar as supporters of earlier works as well as others: for example, the Duke of Sussex, the Lord Viscount Kingsborough, Dr. Lee, Moses Montefiore, Mrs. Housman, William Frend, Dr. Stephen Lushington (a well-known anti-slavery advocate), George Birkbeck (a famous doctor and professor of natural philosophy), James Blundell (a London obstetrician), Moses Mocatta, Myer Solomon, and Asher Solomon.[20]

In his preface, Bennett again recalls his profession as engraver, from which he was forced to retire eight years earlier (in 1828) following a partial loss of his sight, after which he devoted himself to a close examination of the Authorized Version. He now writes explicitly to potential donors to fund his ambitious project, and specifically to non-clerics: "I do not address myself to all the members of that class of the erudite whose emoluments depend on their religious pursuits, but to the well-educated, noble, wealthy, and independent class of the community, on whom the salvation and well-being of the commonwealth mainly depend, and who have no pecuniary or sinister interest in religious and literary pursuits."[21]

He relates the long history of Hebraic learning among the Jews on the Continent and the calamitous history of the Jews under Catholic rule, leading to the destruction of Jewish communities and of their precious books and libraries. Since no Jews were permitted to live in England until the mid-seventeenth century, the Bible in Hebrew was a sealed book prior to the sixteenth century. He gleaned the history of the Authorized Version from the classic history of John Lewis, A *Complete History of the Several Translations of the Holy Bible, and New Testament, into English* (1818), from which he learned that the King James Version was not a genuine translation from the original Hebrew but was partly translated from the Saxon, the Dutch, the Latin, and other European languages. He thus concludes: "Truly, the version as it stands at the present day by no means proves the authors thereof to have possessed a grammatical and etymological knowledge

20 We have encountered most of these faithful subscribers before. On Stephen Lushington, see Martin Spychal, "'A strenuous and able Reformer': Dr Stephen Lushington (1782–1873), *The Victorian Commons*, September 17, 2020, https://victoriancommons.wordpress.com/2020/09/17/a-strenuous-and-able-reformer-dr-stephen-lushington-1782-1873. On George Birkbeck, see Matthew Lee, "Birbeck, George (1776–1841)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, May 26, 2016, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/2454. On James Blundell, see [Anon.], revised by Anne Digby, "Blundell, James (1790–1878)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, April 8, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/2713.

21 Solomon Bennett, *Likutim me-haʿataḳah ḥadashah ʿal Torah, Neviʾim u Ketuvim = Specimen of a New Version of the Hebrew Bible Translated from the Original Text, and Comprising Selected Chapters [. . .] Arranged in Three Columns, viz. the Authorized Version, the Updated Version, and the Original Hebrew Text* (London: printed for the author by Richard Taylor, 1837), ii.

equal to the comprehension of the sublimity of the holy language."[22] Moreover, it has not improved up to the present day. He reiterates how he carefully examined the most popular editions – those of Bayly, Hewlett, Clarke, and Bellamy – "and although I found them to be very free in commenting, metaphorizing, and typifying Scripture, yet being shallow Hebrew scholars, they followed verbatim the authorized version with all its corruptions."[23]

As we have previously noticed, Bennett had little respect for Bellamy's scholarship, but here he is particularly outspoken in his utter contempt for the man:

> But what surprises me, and has doubtless surprised the reader, is, "The Holy Bible [. . .] by John Bellamy, 1818." This insignificant Hebraist and plagiarist, whom I assisted in many instances, greatly surprised me, in the preface of his Bible, by the use he made of my instructions, presenting them as specimens of his improved version. This inspection induced me to enter the examination of his version of the Book of Genesis, and his learned critical notes, in consideration of which, I found him to be mostly ignorant even in the lowest degree of the knowledge of the Hebrew language; the corruptions and insignificance of his version, and the critical notes relative to his taste are beyond endurance. Such has been the progressive condition of the holy language among the professors of the Church and in the classics at large. The student having taken half a dozen, or perhaps as many as a dozen lessons in that language and assisting himself with a Hebrew dictionary and a lexicon, he deems himself to be a perfect Hebrew scholar, so as even to become a critic in Hebraism!

Bennett then quotes from the beginning of Bellamy's preface on Genesis ("which in my humble opinion is the best part of his criticisms"), where he offered an extensive list of Christian authorities who believed that the Authorized Version was not consistent with the original Hebrew.[24] Bellamy's emphasis on the continuity of the Hebrew language from its inception to the present certainly mirrors Bennett's strong position.

Bennett's charges that Bellamy studied with him and then plagiarized him should also be seen in a wider context. When Bellamy's *The Holy Bible Newly Translated from the Original Hebrew with Notes Critical and Explanatory* was published in London in 1818, it was met with an avalanche of criticism from many Christian clerics, which he tried to answer in part. They challenged the notion of replacing the standard edition with a new translation and assailed the many mistakes and mistranslations he had subsequently introduced. Most interesting is a volume attacking Bellamy written in 1820 by the aforementioned Hyman Hurwitz,

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22 Bennett, *Specimen*, i–vii; quotation, vii. See also David Daiches, *The King James Version: An Account of the Development and Sources of the English Bible of 1611 with Special Reference to the Hebrew Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941).

23 Bennett, *Specimen*, viii.

24 Bennett, *Specimen*, xviii–ix.

a detailed criticism disputing the need for an entirely new translation and a defense of previous translations, Jewish and Christian. In an appendix, Hurwitz republishes his various letters against Bellamy beginning in 1814, four years before his Bible translation was published. The bulk of the book is a serious critique of the many absurd mistranslations; it even levels a charge of plagiarism regarding a much earlier book by one Walter Cross containing biblical points that Bellamy seemed to have copied. Since Bennett accused Bellamy of ignorance, mistranslation, and plagiarism, he may have known about and consulted Hurwitz's detailed book, even though he makes no reference to it. Bennett of course admits to having met with Bellamy and having shared his enthusiasm for a new translation while offering him some of his own emendations of the text. Perhaps after Bennett encouraged Bellamy to go ahead with his project, as he acknowledges, Bellamy then proceeded to "borrow" some of Bennett's arguments in favor of a new translation, an appropriation that Bennett later regretted. When Bennett saw what a miserable job Bellamy did in the end, using Bennett's insights without acknowledgment, he disassociated himself from Bellamy and his work. When Hurwitz was appointed to the University College London position eight years later, Bennett disparaged him publicly, as discussed in the previous chapter, referring to him as a mere primary school principal, but failed to acknowledge their shared criticisms of the notorious John Bellamy and Hurwitz's serious publication on this self-proclaimed biblical scholar.[25]

Before offering his three-column sample collation of the original Hebrew, the standard translation, and his own translations, along with significant comments on various verses, Bennett presents a final apology and justification of his entire endeavor. Although his work has been reviewed by several classical Hebrew

25 The number of works critical of Bellamy's Bible is startling. See, for example, Henry John Todd, *A Vindication of Our Authorized Translation and Translators of the Bible; and of Preceding English Versions Authoritatively Commended to the Notice of Those Translators; Occasioned by Certain Objections Made by Mr. John Bellamy in His Late Translation of the Book of Genesis, and by Sir J. B. Burges, in His Reasons in Favour of a New Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (London: F. C. & J. Rivington, 1819); John William Whittaker, *An Historical and Critical Enquiry into the Interpretation of the Hebrew Scripture with Remarks on Mr. Bellamy's New Translation* (Cambridge: J. Smith, 1819); Samuel Lee, *A Letter to Mr. John Bellamy on His New Translation of the Bible* (Cambridge: J. Smith, 1821); and *New Version of the First Three Chapters of Genesis; [. . .] To Which Are Annexed Strictures on Mr. Bellamy's Translation by Essenus* (London: Rowland Hunter, 1819)—"Essenus" was John Jones, a Unitarian minister. See particularly Hyman Hurwitz, *Vindiciae Hebraicae: or, A Defence of the Hebrew Scriptures as a Vehicle of Revealed Religion as Occasioned by the Recent Strictures and Innovations of J. Bellamy; and in Confutation of His Attacks on All Preceding Translations and on the Established Version in Particular* (London: F. C. and J. Rivington, 1820).

scholars, he is aware that all his emendations might not be universally accepted, and that some chapters

> will prejudice orthodox readers against it; nor will some of my critical notes meet the approbation of every modern critic, being inconsistent with some of the doctrines and opinions now entertained by philosophers. [. . .] But my earnest object is to introduce to the world a true and correct version of the Hebrew Bible, which stood the test, and was well understood for a period of near 1400 years previous to the Christian era; but has been most superficially and roughly treated for the last eighteen centuries by translators of all European nations; by some from motives of religious prejudice, by others from supineness and indifference; but more so when we consider that the Rabbies of the synagogue, from the Primate to the petty rabbi, use the original Hebrew text, the authorized version being entirely unnoticed by them. On the other hand, the Clergy of the Church, from their Primates down to the most petty curate, are well satisfied with the authorized version. As for the original Hebrew, it is generally wholly unknown to them. Accordingly, between these two negatives the truth and the integrity of the Hebrew Bible is at stake. All of which I have taken into consideration and devoted my time and labour to the sacred object of introducing to the world a new and corrected version of the Bible, with essential critical illustrations.[26]

What follows is a discussion of ten different chapters of the Hebrew Bible from Genesis to Malachi and Ecclesiastes, offering fresh translations, notes, and longer discussions of the critical issues these chapters raise for Bennett. He apologizes for the work's length: "The reader, I trust, will give me credit for sincerity in my labour; considering that I have exceeded the usual limits of a specimen, it being rather a small theological work than a mere specimen."[27] From these various excursuses, I mention a few examples.

He opens the body of the work with a discussion of Genesis 5:24–29, citing the standard translation without any alteration. He makes clear from the start that his object in highlighting a part of the chapter was not to take issue with the translation but rather to defend the integrity of the chronology of the ante- and postdiluvian periods as presented in the Hebrew Bible – dating that has perplexed modern critics, including some who have tried to amend it, especially regarding the postdiluvian period. He singles out the orientalist Thomas Yeates, whose scholarship is "not warranted by Scripture, which is an undigested performance, and contains little more than mere unsupported assertions, intended to favour the fabulous history of the antient Eastern nations." He also dismisses those scholars who offer alternate misleading readings of Scripture from either the Septuagint or the Samaritan version of the biblical text, specifically mentioning Adam Clarke's discussion and the table he had reproduced in his commentary

26 Bennett, *Specimen*, v, xii.
27 Bennett, *Specimen*, xi.

on Genesis. For Bennett, it is "unreasonable to suppose that these Samaritans should have preserved, in their idolatrous country, a correct copy of the original Pentateuch, more perfect than any copy preserved in Jerusalem under the care of the priests and levites of the Temple[.]" It is also unreasonable to assume that the Septuagint, prepared twelve hundred years after Moses, is more authentic than the original. He refers finally to his extended discussion of this very topic in his still-uncompleted biblical translation and commentary: "In the critical notes of my New Version of the Scriptures (now in Manuscript), I have demonstrated at large the delusive nature of the opinions of these assertors, as well as the unwarrantable character of the authorities upon which their hypotheses are established."[28]

For Job 38, Bennett again presents his three columns: the original, the standard version, and his own. There are small deviations from the standard version in most of the verses Bennett translates, seemingly rendering them closer to the Hebrew, although it is not always clear (at least to me) why some of these slight changes are introduced. On the other hand, the famous vision beginning with the words "Out of the Whirlwind" elicits a lengthy commentary on his part. On verse 7 he writes:

> The Rabbies are unanimously of the opinion that all the celestial hosts are *ḥayyim maskilim*, i.e. animated intellectual essences, and with passive obedience praise and fulfill the dictates of their divine Author. I know that this opinion ("the celestial bodies being animate essences,") will not be acceptable to the followers of Newton and Laplace, who are immersed in the waves of mystery concerning solar sediment worlds, even as opake inhabitable globes formed by the concussion of atomical sediments. Nevertheless, I would observe to the reader that I am far from possessing a disregard for those illustrious philosophers. I confess I do not pretend to be a professional astronomer, nor a naturalist; but considering that the authors of the sacred Scriptures did not dream of modern philosophers and theorists, so I, as translator of sacred learning, am bound to confine my version and its illustrations to the spirit of the authors of these ancient volumes, without twisting and perverting Scripture to the opinions of modern theorists.[29]

On occasion Bennett in his earlier writings had juxtaposed the theories of modern astronomers to biblical truth, but never so forcefully. Here he confesses that he is not a professional astronomer but nevertheless feels justified in challenging as-

28 Bennett, *Specimen*, 14, 15, 18; Thomas Yeates, *Remarks on the Bible Chronology: Being an Essay towards Reconciling the Same with the Histories of the Eastern Nations* (London: Richard Watts, 1830). On Yeates, see D. S. Margoliouth, revised by J. B. Katz, "Yeates, Thomas (1768–1839)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, May 24, 2007, https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/30208.
29 Bennett, *Specimen*, 19.

tronomers' mechanical understanding of the universe when it appears to contradict the clear intent of Scripture. He continues:

> All opake massy bodies, which possess even the most inert motion, we declare to be animate bodies. Why then shall we deprive the visible celestial hosts, whose substances are subtle, transparent, luminous, most essential to our habitable globe, and possess motion and order for their perpetual courses, – why shall we deny them the gift of animation? – and why should this planetary animation be more dubious than the vague and virulent hypothesis of the solar system, which teaches the doctrine of a plurality of worlds, forming themselves from the concussion of the sediments or atoms [. . .] ? The volumes of the Philosophical Transactions abound with papers on the subject of the plurality of worlds; it is therefore unnecessary for me to be prolix.[30]

To underscore his point, for those he calls the adherents of biblical truth Bennett cites a Hebrew prayer on the occasion of the new moon: "Blessed be thou our God, king of the universe, who with his word created the heavens and with the breath of his mouth all the hosts, order and time He appointed to them, not to deviate from their appointments; even [. . .] they rejoice and are glad to fulfill the dictates of their Master, who is the true worker, and his works are perfect, etc." And thus, he concludes:

> This in my humble opinion is more cogent with human understanding and feelings, than the supposition that the whole of the celestial bodies were created [. . .] by concussion and traverse the spheres on their own accord – or in other words, making the sun the chief ruler, and the omnipotential power, who directs the whole of the visible system by a power of gravitation; as such must be the drift of their doctrine of a plurality of worlds.[31]

He similarly interprets others verses in the chapter to challenge modern scientific theories; for example, he retranslates verse 38 to address the issue of gravitation. The Authorized Version reads: "When the dust groweth into hardness, and the clods cleave fast together?" And here is Bennett's translation: "Who can account for the pressure of the earth to the centre, and cement its lumps together?" And the following comment appears:

> [This is] a twofold reference to the law of gravitation, the gravitation of the earth to the centre of the system and the tendency of all matter to gravitate to the centre of the earth itself, which are inherent laws of the supreme and intelligent divine Power, but not of that law of gravitation, laid down in the delusive and unwarranted solar system of Copernicus, Laplace, Newton, and their followers; who invest the sun with the power of gravitation; and to that power of the sun's gravitation they ascribe all the planetary revolutions, and all the

30 Bennett, *Specimen*, 19.

31 He is quoting from the traditional prayer for the new moon, *birkhat ha-levanah*, based on BT *Sanhedrin* 42a.

> phenomena that appear between the lunar sphere and the earth, as well as all the physical phenomenon of the earth itself. In short, they ascribe to the sun (literally speaking) an omnipotent power of antient heathenism, and the term God, is but a byword with them.[32]

As we shall see, Bennett's assault on modern science is just a prelude to his even more intense discussion opening his translation of and commentary on the book of Genesis, still in manuscript at his death. It comes as a bit of a surprise, given that he had not gone out of his way to highlight the issue previously. In light of the image he had cut among some of his contemporaries as a critic of the rabbinate, a Jew professionally and socially attached to the Christian literary world, and generally an independent and contentious spirit regarding Jewish belief and practice, this seeming orthodoxy and biblical literalism regarding Scripture and his skepticism toward scientific icons such as Newton and Laplace seem somewhat out of character as a mature statement of his beliefs in the final years of his life. His views on science and Scripture surprisingly appear to mirror those of one of his closest Christian associates. We shall examine this matter again later in this chapter.

One final example from Bennett's specimens illustrates his passion and his expertise, here in explicating a text from Isaiah 21:1. The standard version translates the beginning of the line as "The burden of the desert of the sea. As whirlwinds in the south pass through," which Bennett replaces with "The burden of the desert, situated south of the Caspian sea." In his long note to this emendation, Bennett elaborates on the geographical location of the Caspian Sea, adding that "Babylon, Persia, and Media were all situated at the south of the Caspian Sea and extended towards the Southern Ocean. However, on the entire downfall of Babylon [. . .] Persia extended her dominion westward towards the Euphrates, even unto Egypt; it has even changed the names of those countries until the present day. Such is the geographical position of those countries to which the text refers." He then apologizes for the mistaken references to this region by the medieval Jewish commentators who wrote long before the area was visited by European explorers: "Most of them wrote in the 12th and 13th centuries, in which the geographical knowledge of that climate was mostly unknown. [. . .] But it is beyond doubt that the kings and the court of Judea, such as Isaiah himself [. . .] having had commerce at large with the Eastern kingdoms, [. . .] they infallibly must have been well acquainted with the geographical positions of their neighboring kingdoms."[33] Bennett's fascination with geographical details and his historical

32 Bennett, *Specimen*, 23–24.
33 Bennett, *Specimen*, 38–39.

awareness of the limitations of the medieval commentators are typical of his other comments throughout the text.

8.4 The working copy of the complete translation and commentary

Solomon Bennett died in 1838 at the age of seventy-one. Did he complete his revised translation and commentary before his death? And what became of the completed manuscript he had already mentioned in his 1836 publication of specimens? In his 1951 article on Bennett, Arthur Barnett mentioned that the family of Solomon had his working copy – that is, the Oxford Bible of 1824 he owned with the binding expanded to include additional pages for interleaved handwritten revisions and annotations – and they donated it to the Jews College library. With the closure of Jews College and its library, the whereabouts of this manuscript was in doubt, nor was it known whether Bennett had found time to prepare another version of his work that was cleaner and more suitable for publication. At least one thing is now clear: this manuscript exists, divided into two volumes, and I have had the welcome opportunity of reading its sixteen hundred pages (see Figures 8.1 and 8.2).[34]

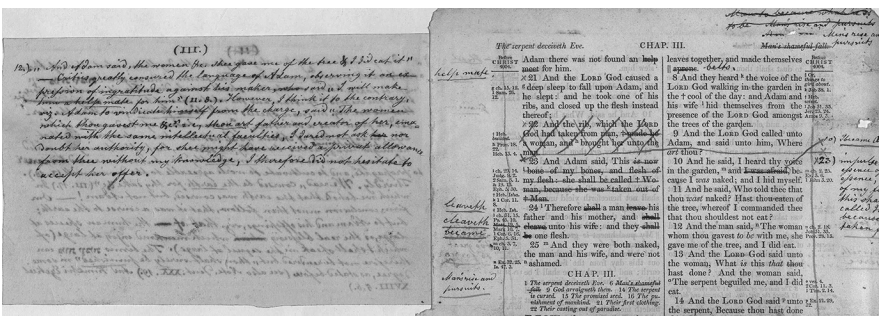

Figure 8.1: A sample page of Bennett's working copy of his revisions of the standard English Bible.

34 Bennett's Bible translation and commentary are catalogued as MS Jews College 105, vols. 1–2, which include the 1824 Oxford standard edition of the Old Testament expanded to incorporate Bennett's emendations and notes. They are now housed in the library of the London School of Jewish Studies, London. I am indebted to the librarian of that institution, Eria Zimmels, who located the manuscript for me and assisted me in acquiring a copy of the entire work.

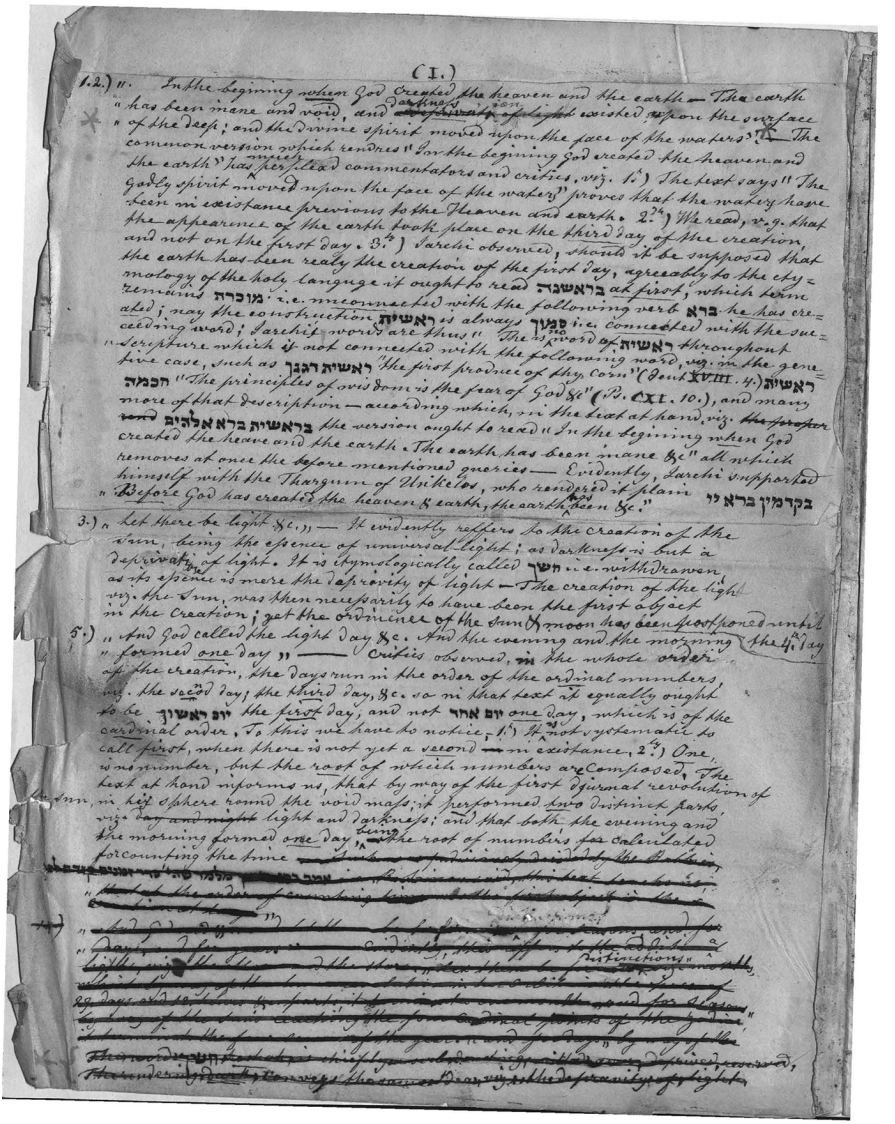

Figure 8.2: Another page of Bennett's working copy of his revisions of the standard English Bible, from his Introduction to Genesis.

Bennett includes the following note at the beginning of each volume:

> Notice: The reader of that effect, viz., the version of the Hebrew Bible, will no doubt find himself confused seeing the M.S. in so disorderly a state, viz., that many of its verses and

> notes are out of their respective places, particularly in the Hagiographical volumes and the poetical texts of scripture. To apologize for the same, I am to inform the reader that the effort at hand went through four successive perusals and a careful reexamination in such notice of what has been done in the formers, added what as well has been oversighted in the foregoing readings, which the magnitude of a work so general and so sacred as this requires. Accordingly, it was not the order I had to attend to but that of the completion perfection [*sic*] and to give due place in each page to the additions and alterations relative to each chapter and page.[35]

The notice offers a clue to resolving some of the questions posed above. This was apparently Bennett's working copy, as it includes the printed text of the Oxford Bible with Bennett's handwritten annotations on each page containing side comments and cross outs. They flow over the margins of each page and are continued on supplementary blank pages inserted by Bennett. These latter pages too are sometimes orderly and sometimes have cross outs and later additions, making for a messy mix. It might have been more efficient to recopy this entire work to prepare it for the press, and perhaps a cleaner copy exists. On the other hand, as the note indicates, Bennett addresses the reader directly, apologizing for the disorderly presentation and explaining that it was not for the lack of effort in proofreading and improving the manuscript. So, this extant copy was meant to be read, either as the penultimate version before printing or simply in its present form. As we shall see, part of Genesis was later published after Bennett's death, but his long introduction was omitted.

What seems likely is that Bennett had reached the last stages of his vast work close to the time of his death. He may not have been able anymore to correct or to improve the manuscript or to prepare it for publication, even if he had found the financial means to initiate this undertaking. Thus, he penned the apologetic note to his readers, acknowledging the sloppy nature of his completed work but also admitting that he was incapable of proceeding further. The manuscript remained in the possession of the family; it was obviously known to Francis Barham, his friend, who tried to print it, but the effort was aborted after the publication in 1841 of one volume with the original Hebrew printed alongside Bennett's translation.

A thorough examination of the manuscript is clearly beyond the scope of this chapter; but since it does constitute Bennett's final work and represents a kind of culmination of his entire scholarly career, it deserves our attention as a reflection of the author's most mature thoughts on the Bible and his self-understanding as a Jewish translator and commentator. I begin by considering a sampling of the prefaces that Bennett provided to each chapter of the Bible, which are accessible in-

35 MS Jews College 105, 1:4 (appearing upside down), 2:2.

troductions intended for the general reader and meant to highlight what he considered the essence of each unit of the text.

The most interesting and lengthy of all the prefaces is Bennett's introduction to the book of Genesis, in which he denigrates the theories of modern science: heliocentricity, the solar system, gravitation, and multiple worlds. The purpose of the peripatetic system and ancient philosophy in general as well as of modern philosophers and scientists such as Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton, as he saw it, was the derision of scriptural authority with respect to creation. We have already seen an adumbration of this position in his commentary on Job 38; here the argument is developed even more expansively.

Bennett begins his preface with a conventional treatment of the long-discussed subject of creation out of nothing [*ḥiddush*] versus the eternity of the world [*kadmut*], citing first Aristotle and then Maimonides' well-known discussion of the problem in his *Guide for the Perplexed*. One cannot assert from experience what is beyond experience, Maimonides carefully formulates. Accordingly, neither position – creation or eternity – can be proven, and it is therefore plausible to accept the former, as it possesses prophetic authority if not philosophical certainty.

Prophetic testimony, of course, is subjective, dependent on each nation's notion of revelation. Bennett thus prefers to justify the notion of creation out of nothing by appealing to an argument based on historical truth derived not just from one credible witness but from an entire nation and the recounting of its sacred history. The historical truths of sacred Scripture corroborate faith in a universal creator. The Bible's perfect chronologies and histories of patriarchs are similarly indisputable. He is therefore entitled to claim a priori that the account of creation is also historical and factual.

The truth of creation can also be ascertained a posteriori from the more recent history of European nations who immigrated to the West from the East. Even accounts by travelers to North and South America of indigenous peoples who apparently trace their ancestry to the ten lost tribes testify to scriptural truth, including that of creation. The history of modern civilized people obliges us, Bennett claims, to assume that all creation emerged from nonexistence and divine intervention.

Aristotle struggled to demonstrate eternity while simultaneously claiming that the earth was a changeable body. Aristotle's ideas gave rise to notions of modern philosophers regarding fossils, shells, minerals, and animal skeletons discovered in places to which they are not native. This later history accordingly provides a basis for establishing the earlier creation. Since Aristotle acknowledged a

gradual and imperceptible change of the earth's surface, the concept of eternity is not reasonable, and the biblical notion of creation remains intact.[36]

It is at this point that Bennett's narrative sharply turns in a polemical direction. He begins by attacking the claims of some scholars of the ancient world:

> Modern critics, the gropers after the ruins of Egypt and Asia, tell us of civilizations that preceded the one depicted in our sacred scripture. [. . .] These whims are mere undigested suppositions invented from the hieroglyphical figures of fragments of ancient Egypt, the mode of the characters being mere cyphers, dull and insignificant. Some philosophers designate an antiquity to the world from the zodiacs of Egypt, Persia, and the ruins of the East and some grope among the constellations of the celestial hosts which they consider far and beyond our computations in Scripture. How can these undigested suppositions challenge the absolute authority of the truth of scripture, written in plain and explicit language?[37]

Although he admits he is not a scientist, he still cannot countenance "the nefarious doctrines that undermine scripture which lead to abject atheism, encumbered with ellipticals, eccentrics, epicycles, diagrams, ratios, and enumerations. [. . .] Some philosophers contradict our senses by seeing the earth flattest at its poles, like that of a turnip, others like an orange, others oblong like an egg. In the future, other suggestions may suit their convenience." There is no agreement among philosophers on the measurement and dimensions of the planetary system:

> They settled in their mind to change places between the sun and earth so that the latter revolves around the former. They found it no difficult task to transmigrate all the visibly lucid stars into material and opaque bodies, namely many habitable globes like our inhabitable earth. They defy the first chapter of Genesis entirely with the doctrine of plurality of the worlds ad infinitum moving in a vacuum, infinities of space, time, and atoms. Atoms floating in a vast vacuum, like the Epicureans, they ascribe them a power of blind agency of gravitation which they attribute to the sun-attraction, repulsion, collision, and separation. By the power of gravitation worlds are created from the various floating atoms conglomerated into a solid body even setting it into motion in various directions like our globe. They frequently discover stars that left their places. New stars, old stars disappear, a creation based on gravitation, necessity, and self-formation.[38]

These modern theories are repulsive to Bennett since "their only object is to reject the position of sacred scripture, its authority with respect to creation, to annul revealed religion and the chronology laid out in scripture, and miracles. [. . .] Nothing is more significant than corroborating scriptural authority [. . .] the

36 MS Jews College 105, 1:9–16 (some of the pages are out of order).
37 MS Jews College 105, 1:16.
38 MS Jews College 105, 1:17–18.

source of universal religion and history and a code peculiarly adapted to preserve the commonweal of mankind." Bennett offers several examples of contemporary scholars who defend Scripture while challenging the overreach of philosophy and science, such as Lord Francis Bacon, Bartholomew Prescott, and Captain William Woodley. Finally, Bennett objects to the Copernican system and its followers, including several clerics among them – followers of Kepler, Laplace, Buffon, Mirabeau, Newton, and Herschel, as well as "the eminent divines" Cardinal Cusanus, Bishop Wilkins, and Bishop Horsley: "Shall we from mechanical experiments confined to a workshop obtain a knowledge of the rolling order of the spheres? Can blind agency produce that wisdom and intellect which made the universe? O, philosophical insanities! The delusion of atomical, chaotic, and infinite creations forming themselves blindly into infinite worlds. The biography of the solar system commences with heathenism and ends with atheism."[39]

This lengthy discussion seems surprisingly out of place at the beginning of Bennett's translation and commentary. Its aggressive argument against the Copernican system and modern science in general and its linkage to ancient heathen philosophies do not seem appropriate as an introduction to the first book of the Bible. That is perhaps why Francis Barham, in his printed version of Bennett's translation, omitted it altogether and substituted the first pages of Bennett's earlier work of 1834. It is also surprising, as noted above, because Bennett was never so outspoken on modern science in his other writings, apart from the passages on Job 38 discussed earlier in this chapter. Was this a later development in his thinking, a fuller expansion of a theme latent in earlier writing but presented so explicitly and so explosively only in his final work? It does challenge the profile of Bennett as a kind of radical Jew, comfortable among non-Jewish elites, and a critic of the rabbis and the Jewish community, as mentioned earlier. In this case, his views on religion and science, on faith and Scripture, are quite conservative, retrograde, even fundamentalist. It surely underscores the complexity of Bennett's intellectual profile and the difficulty of categorizing his thinking.

One possible source of this turn of thinking deserves mention. In chapter 5 I discussed Bennett's close relationship to his patron Mrs. Catherine Housman, her interest in his writings and engravings, his dedication to her in one of his books, and her remarkable production of six books about Scripture, ancient philosophy,

39 MS Jews College 105, 1:18, 23 Bennett gives special attention to two critics of modern science: Bartholomew Prescott, author of *A Defence of The Divine System of the World* (Liverpool: J. Lang, 1823), whom he calls "an acquaintance of mine," and Captain William Woodley, R.N., author of *A Treatise on the Divine System of the Universe* (London: W. A. Wright, 1834): "This gentleman was a royal navigator, accustomed to measure the longitude and latitude of his sea journeys. [. . .] The earth is always at rest, the sun moves around it." MS Jews College 105 1:19, 20.

and modern science. Was it mere coincidence that Bennett sounded so much like his talented associate? Without repeating my summaries of her work, it is obvious that the two had much in common, that their relationship was built on more than financial considerations. Bennett never cites her books, nor are the sources he uses to substantiate his position cited by her. Thus, there is no tangible evidence of her influence on his thinking. Yet the resemblance is striking and suggests that he might have read her books or conversed with her on a subject so central to her Christian and to his Jewish faith. That Bennett's reflection emerged at the very end of his life and long relationship with her is also worthy of note.

The other prefaces Bennett composed to books of the Bible are shorter, less explosive, and less revealing about his ultimate concerns. Nevertheless, several shed interesting light on his priorities in understanding the biblical text. In his preface to the book of Esther, he accepts the view of critics that it was written in Persian and later translated by the Great Synagogue because of its importance in tracing the beginning of the restoration of the Second Temple period. He relates how he inspected an ancient Bible in the library of the Duke of Sussex, written in Hebrew, Arabic, and Persian all in Hebrew characters, printed in Constantinople: "In this Bible I observed that the Book of Esther is intitled the Book of Ahasuerus; this Bible obviously bears its name from the East from ancient times. It was written, most probably, in Persian as part of the court chronicle relative to the reign of Ahasuerus. The Great Synagogue saw it essential to its history since Ahasuerus was the successor to Cyrus." The Massorites placed a Hebrew version in the Bible and changed its name, but the "Eastern Hebrews" retained its original title.[40]

Bennett writes in his preface to Job that the book is undoubtedly of early antiquity and unique in the Bible. While some critics suppose it to be factual, most, including the rabbis, consider it a poetical and critical composition that includes a sacred dialogue. The rabbis assert that Moses was the author, and their claim is not without foundation. Such metaphysical discussions of providence are not found prior to Moses, who was eminently qualified in "Arabic" [*sic*] intellectual culture and learned in all wisdom. Accordingly, Bennett concludes that Moses was the author and that this discussion served as an introduction to his code of Jewish law, constructed as a controversy between Job and his three friends over Job's afflictions, his apparent innocence, reward and punishment, fatality, and predestination. God intervenes and Job ultimately accepts his fate as mere dust and ashes, and his felicity is restored. In Bennett's estimation, the prose parts of

40 MS Jews College 105, 2:131–132. The Bible printed in Constantinople is apparently *Torat Adonai*, copied by Eliezer ben Gershom Soncino in Constantinople. The right column contains Jacob Tavusi's Judeo-Persian ("Farsi" in Hebrew) translation; now in the British Library, London, Or. 70.

the book were written in a perfect parabolic and emblematic style equal to that of Moses, mostly condensed in its use of pronouns, adverbs, tenses, and syntax. The discussants use harsh language even against each other, vigorously defending their positions. When the Lord answers Job out of the storm, the language is more emphatic and more sublime.

Bennett scrupulously consulted Targum Yonatan, Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Levi ben Gershon, and he finds them strongly differing from each other and offering hypotheses on several passages that in his humble opinion could not be attributed to the author. The object of the book is an abstract discussion regarding the omnipotent power of God and his providential influence in the universe at large. It was meant to be a composition of a general nature for all human beings and not for any sectarian group. Given that it is even more ancient than the Pentateuch, Bennett feels duty bound to bring it to the common reader in a plain and correct language. It would thus appear that Job is the Bible's quintessential book that contains neither a Jewish nor a Christian message, but a universal one.[41]

Bennett's preface to the book of Psalms focuses on the question of authorship and its historical context. He acknowledges that David wrote many psalms, but some were undoubtedly written by contemporary Levite poets on behalf of their king. Many psalms refer to the desolation of the House of Israel at the end of the First Temple period and during the Babylonian captivity, while others, such as Psalm 119, were written in Babylon by the sons of Korach. There are those who, like Ibn Ezra, insist that all were written by David through prophecy and vision, but Bennett discounts this view as lacking evidence and proceeds with the first hypothesis of multiple authorship. He insists on recognizing the talented poets of the period beyond David himself. Overall, the style of the book of Psalms "is plain and intelligible, poetic, laconic, free from hypothetical sentiments[,] [. . .] not prophetic, speaking of future things [in contrast to the Christian way of interpreting them]; they speak of one or multiple subjects, sometimes not fully comprehensible given their antiquity and our inability to understand their contexts." Bennett explains the various categories of Psalms with their Hebrew names as well as the musical terms of the Temple musicians.[42]

His preface to the book of Proverbs is straightforward. The moral proverbs are presented in the form of a thesis and antithesis; sometimes several verses connect to one subject. The language is laconic and hard to translate. Translators of the standard version rummaged through rabbinic commentaries but were not successful in translating and understanding certain Hebrew words. These sacred

41 Bennett, MS Jews College 105, 2:148–152.

42 Bennett, MS Jews College 105, 2:221–224; quotation, 222.

proverbs were preserved and passed down for generations in perfect Hebrew. To convey the best sense of their meaning, one must introduce certain ellipses and transpose certain words in accordance with the vernacular of English. He concludes, "This is my approach for the other poetical works and my approach for Proverbs."[43]

His preface to Ecclesiastes is similarly conventional. He sees the work as a multitude of judicious sentiments about the vanity of human speculation and idle thoughts, emphasizing that there is nothing positive or decisive in a person's endeavors and in objects that he seldom attains, and that the present good should not necessarily be considered an absolute good. All human affairs depend on time, place, and circumstance. The drift of the book can be summarized in one sentence comprehending two principal points – man's efforts and achievements all are vanity and no special advantage is bestowed on him, yet individually human beings are part of a whole system; though the purpose of the universal creator is hidden and not for mortal men or women to understand, their assistance may be indispensable to the whole. The conclusion of the entire work is to fear God and to do his commandments.[44]

In sharp contrast to the books already considered, Bennett is at a loss for words when introducing the Song of Songs: "I am not ashamed to own that the Book comprehending the songs of Solomon is above my comprehension to meddle with. I shall therefore not put my hand to it in either view but shall leave it to the unlimited field of hypothesis to the typical commentators to play with them to their own pleasure." However, he does attempt to remove any allusions to Christianity from its translation.[45]

Isaiah, in Bennett's preface to the prophet's book, appears as a royal poet of the kings of Judah, a visionary and talented orator. His is the first great poetic book of antiquity, lyrical but clear, plain, and energetic, although a few of the orations are obscure and open to the possibility of conjecture. His language is overburdened with figures and characters, even too "high colored." Like Psalms, the book of Isaiah had more than one author; Isaiah 40–66 was composed by several anonymous writers of the Babylonian captivity, then edited and included in the Bible by Ezra and the men of the great assembly.[46] Bennett does not disparage Isaiah, the father of poetic biblical writing, but elevates other prophets over him,

43 Bennett, MS Jews College 105, 2:379–382; quotation, 379. Israel ben Yom Tov Bennett, Solomon's son, signed 378, suggesting that he had something to do with the editing or ownership of this manuscript.

44 Bennett, MS Jews College 105, 2:432–433.

45 Bennett, MS Jews College 105, 2:452.

46 Bennett, MS Jews College 105, 2:457.

especially Jeremiah and Ezekiel. In his view Jeremiah's language is far superior to that of the other prophets, specifically in his depictions of destruction and reconstruction in the Second Temple period. Jeremiah was the author of Lamentations, according to Bennett. It is an emotional narrative whose poetry surpasses that of all the other prophets and exemplifies the ancients' powerful writing on tragedy. Ezekiel was a contemporary of Jeremiah, prophesizing in Babylonia while Jeremiah was in Jerusalem, offering both castigation and comfort for a return and rebuilding of the Temple, and exhibiting a style different from that of the other prophets, which was clearly forged in Babylonia.[47]

Beyond these compact summaries of the biblical books, Bennett of course offers his comprehensive revisions of each book with annotations explaining and justifying his emendations as well as offering various observations on subjects he deemed important. It is impossible to review meaningfully in such a short space the multiple results of his laborious effort. All I can offer here are a few more samples illustrating the style and substance of the translation and commentary.

One way to begin this brief consideration is by citing three contemporaries who read all or part of the work and commented on its significance. We have already encountered Francis Barham, who tried but failed to publish Bennett's entire translation posthumously. In the preface to his edition of Bennett's translation to Genesis, Barham wrote:

> To translate the Hebrew Bible for himself, and to satisfy the critical aspiration of his own soul, was his favorite design for many a studious year. He knew that to please himself was the best way to please the world, and he never deserted a text till he conceived that he had perfectly understood and expressed its latent power in definite terms. [. . .] He translated the Bible as if no translation had been made before, as if he alone were High Priest of the Holy of Holies, and the first to reveal its mysterious and ceremonial sanctities to the eyes of an uninitiated world.

He then adds that Bennett

> appears to have been perfectly satisfied with the larger portion of our vulgate English version, and he has left a great number of texts standing in perfect accordance to it, knowing that no alteration could be made with advantage. To the Christian English reader, this fact will appear most satisfactory, since it proves that a learned Jew, by no means prejudiced for Christianity, but rather the reverse, has, in the majority of instances, confirmed the ordinary Anglican translation as sound and unobjectionable. On other occasions, however, Mr Bennett, as might have been expected a priori, has differed widely from King James's trans-

47 Bennett, MS Jews College 105, 2:573, 673, 685.

> lators in rendering important texts. He has not unfrequently rendered a biblical phrase by words that present the most striking antagonism to the versions generally received.[48]

The second Christian to remark on Bennett's work did so in a review of his earlier specimens of 1836, published in *The Times* on October 24, 1840:

> From what we have seen, it appears that the learned labours of Solomon Bennett are calculated to throw a great deal of light on numerous texts, to assist very greatly the study of the sacred volume, and convey generally, to all readers of the Bible, a vast deal of important instruction. [. . .] From what we have examined, we can, however, testify to the very able manner in which the translation is done, to the recondite learning of the translator, and to the extraordinary industry displayed. There are many of the corrections which, though at first appearance of little moment, and merely shades of verbal alteration, will, on reflection, be entitled to praise.[49]

Here are some of the comments of the third reviewer, writing for *The Spectator* soon after the publication of Farham's edition of Genesis:

> The general character of the translator's mind seems to have been one of great primitive simplicity – English words with an old Hebrew tone of thinking. This quaintness, which is not pleasantly perceptible in his common prose, well adapted him for a translator of the Scriptures; especially since he seems never to have altered for the sake of altering, but preserved the authorized version wherever he deemed that it conveyed the meaning. As an example of the errors of the authorized version, the First Part is hardly a fair specimen; great care having been taken in the rendering of Genesis, as indeed is the case with all the books of Moses. What changes there are are chiefly verbal. For instance, the second verse in the first chapter in the authorized translation runs – "the earth was without form and void"; Bennett has it: "The earth was waste and void"; which conveys a more striking picture of desolation, but one less chaotic. Again, in the same version, the authorized version says – "The Spirit of God moved on the face of the waters": Bennett – "The Divine Spirit hovered above the face of the waters"; which is more characteristic of the winged presence under which the Spirit is generally painted.[50]

These positive evaluations of Bennett's achievement share much in common. They all comment on his industry and his commitment to this project, translating

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48 Francis Barham, "Editor's Preface," in *The Hebrew and English Holy Bible: The Hebrew Reprinted from the Text of Heidenheim*, revised by Solomon Bennett, edited by Francis Barham (London: printed for the Family of the late Solomon Bennett, 1841), 2–3.

49 "Specimen of a New Translation of the Hebrew Bible," *The Times*, October 24, 1840.

50 "Solomon Bennett's Bible," *The Spectator*, April 10, 1841, 355. Note, however, the slightly different translation of the verse in Bennett's Bible manuscript, MS Jews College 105, 1:1, for Genesis 1:1: "In the beginning when God created the heaven and the earth, the earth has been inane and void, and darkness existed upon the surface of the deep." Did Bennett change his mind after writing his manuscript, or was the change the work of Francis Barham? We shall never know.

the Bible "as if no translation had been made before." They point out how much of the authorized translation was left intact, acknowledging for the Christian reader that while the standard Bible required revision, its Hebraic scholarship still had considerable merit in the eyes of an unprejudiced observer. The second reader notes that many of Bennett's alterations are minor, "merely shades of verbal alteration," as he calls them, but still worthy of praise. The final reader, who had seen only the volume on Genesis, notes that this specimen exhibits relatively few emendations, since Bennett agreed more often than not with the standard version.[51] He does characterize Bennett's English translation as primitively simple and quaint, in contrast to the English of his previous writings, and even illustrates Bennett's improvements by quoting his translation of a memorable verse from the beginning of Genesis, probably known by heart by most Christian readers. Such a commendation is particularly significant in light of the abuse Bennett endured at the hands of reviewers of his early publications who singled out his English skills as unacceptable.

To these comments on Bennett's achievement we might add the following. Bennett's primary focus in translating and revising the standard version is grammatical and philological. He considers the Bible sacred and strives for as accurate a translation as possible, but one rendered into a readable and aesthetically pleasing English style. He is aware of the powerful weight of the traditional English text of the King James Version and recognizes the huge challenge of seeking to dislodge it from its traditional place in English culture. Nevertheless, he appreciates the urgency of the hour and of his critical task to make the translation align with the original so as to genuinely replicate the divine words. He works especially hard on retranslating biblical poetry and considers the English translation of the Hagiographa [*Ketuvim*] as in particular need of revision.

His devotion to philology is accompanied by a commitment to historical context, particularly an abhorrence of extraneous theological notions that corrode the actual meaning of the text. He cannot countenance Christian eisegesis and its historical misreadings of the text and removes all such Christian accretions silently and without fanfare. He carefully identifies the biblical actors, accounting for their lives and literary habits, as well as the political and economic conditions of the societies from which they emerge. Given his professional background, he is especially sensitive to material objects, to measurement and thick description both of objects of nature and of artificial creations of human beings such as the Temple edifice and its accoutrements. While he is incensed by the pretentious claims of modern science and philosophy to undermine biblical truths, he is nev-

51 "Solomon Bennett's Bible," 355.

ertheless aware and appreciative of the works of nature and scientific discoveries as long as they do not violate the inerrancy of the biblical narrative. Finally, though Bennett regularly consults medieval Jewish commentaries, his translation does not rely on previous modern renderings into English such as that of Adam Clarke, which indeed he scornfully rejects. As Barham had put so well: "He translated the Bible as if no translation had been made before."

My short description hardly does justice to this massive undertaking, scarcely scratching the surface of Bennett's prodigious adaptation of the Hebrew Bible into English. Before concluding this summary, I offer several rich examples of his exegesis. In his comment on Genesis 22:17, Bennett questions the notion of blessing the seed of Abraham when his descendants lived in war and strife during the first monarchy. He clarifies that the object of God's blessing was neither temporal nor worldly. The monarchy offered no benefit in its despotic or aristocratic character. Instead the reference is to the spiritual existence of Abraham's offspring, proclaiming the existence of the universal creator. All civilizations benefited from Israel, since "history has decreed that everywhere the Israelites were dispersed they carried with them their religious precepts, holy scriptures, and holy language."[52]

Commenting on Exodus 22:18, Bennett offers a reflection on witches, who have preoccupied numerous critics of the church:

> The Rev. Doc. A. Clarke in his notes claims the law proves the existence of witches, and the actual performances of supernatural things such as spells, incantations, and charms. This is the theory behind the miracles performed by Jesus himself and by the apostles. It becomes an absolute creed and a faith in the existence of demons which is held not to deny the truth of the Gospels. I have no need to expiate on the truth of the Gospels in general but can comment on the text of reason as described in the Old Testament which is contrary to the Christian understanding of miracles.

Bennett cites various rabbinic sources to argue that witches and spirits don't exist: those who claim to be witches are mere imposters who prey on credulous individuals and even derange their minds.[53]

Bennett's comment on Leviticus 11:2 regarding the laws of *kashrut* [dietary laws] focuses on issues of health and sanitary practice: "Moses was divinely inspired like a skilled physician ordering his patients. He distinguished between animals to be eaten and not to be eaten[;] [. . .] shellfish are a combination of petrifi-

52 Bennett, MS Jews College 105, 1:63–64.
53 Bennett, MS Jews College 105, 1:158.

cation and putrefaction, for we know nothing of their nature when submarine and we do not know their effect on human blood and the body."[54]

Regarding the laws of adultery and the sanctity of marriage in Leviticus 20, Bennett declares: "Marriage is not a mere civil contract nor a mercantile engagement but a sacred divine institution for the propagation of the world [. . .] to cultivate duties from parents towards their legal and pure offspring, to promote the welfare of a commonwealth, not to propagate libertine men, looseness of character, void of principles, living instinctively like the ferocious beasts of the fields and forests. Therefore, the adulterer should justly be put to death."[55]

Could this comment be relevant to Bennett's own personal life and the public accusation that he had abandoned his first wife and family? Was this reflection on the laws of divorce in Deuteronomy 24 drawn from personal experience? He writes: "This legislation is relevant today where in Christendom it is assumed when God ordains, marriage should not be severed [Matt. 19:3–12]. [. . .] Marriages now are more commercial articles than divine unions; they depend more on the two physical brokers – the eye and the heart. The mind and judgment are hardly consulted in these engagements." He adds that bodily and character defects are often disguised before partners marry, a circumstance that makes the marriage susceptible to perpetual discord.[56]

On the sun standing still in Joshua 10:12–14, Bennett acknowledges that

> I chose the theory of the famous philosopher and theologian R. Levi ben Gershon. He could not accept the notion that the sun stopped for twelve hours nor that there was no miracle at all. All miracles were sublunary and local, performed for a small group of people, namely Israel, but the miracle of Joshua occurred in the spherical region. [. . .] He is not convinced the miracle was felt throughout Canaan or the opposition would have immediately surrendered to Israel. This would have disorganized the entire sublunary world, the Palestinian hemisphere, established by divine mandate. This miracle would make Joshua more important than Moses.

Instead, Levi ben Gershon concluded that the sun was not absent entirely but moved slowly, with eighteen hours rather than twelve of daylight, so that the result was not noticed by the world at large. This forced interpretation confirms for Bennett that the sun neither stopped its course entirely nor did it move at its usual speed.[57]

54 Bennett, MS Jews College 105, 1:191.
55 Bennett, MS Jews College 105, 1:225.
56 Bennett, MS Jews College 105, 1:223–225, 356–357.
57 Bennett, MS Jews College 105, 1:401–402.

In his reflections on 1 Kings, Bennett once again displays his utter disdain for the monarchy, including the vaunted Solomon:

> To my humble and unprejudiced opinion, Solomon's reign began with innocent bloodshed and has terminated with the introduction of idolatry into the holy city of Jerusalem, by the indulgence of the numerous illegal wives and concubines of the various idolatrous nation altogether quite contrary to the command of a king of Israel as fully laid down in the commandments [Deut. 17:14–20]. [. . .] I have no need to screen my considering that scripture justifies the cause of all these points.

He finds the honest testimony of Scripture regarding Solomon's political and private conduct more acceptable "than any of the divines that sophistically palliate all the faults of Solomon."[58]

In his comments on Isaiah 11–12, Bennett expands on the divergent emphases on messianism among Jews and Christians. Here his negative view of messianism in general is consistent with his other writings:

> The Fathers of the present European Church also established their notion of a spiritual messiah but with the rabbis it remained a doubtful dogma; some even denied his existence such as Hillel in Sanhedrin who claimed he was devoured in the time of Hezekiah. The messianic issue remained undecided, but Maimonides strenuously defended the messianic doctrine and included it in his thirteen principles. But Ḥasdai Crescas in *Or Adonai* and Joseph Albo in his *Ikkarim* both claimed it was traditional but not based in scripture. Albo even claimed that the Nazarean [Jesus] adopted the creed to disparage Jewish law for the Gospel dispensation cannot exist without that creed of the messiah. The mosaic code was meant to preserve the commonwealth of mankind at large; it stands on its own ground and its own defense. Accordingly, the messiah is out of the question; the preservation of its laws and statutes are the only guide to them who faithfully adhere to it. [. . .] I treated on that subject more than the text requires, for which I apologize.

If any orthodox persons upbraid him for deviating from traditional Jewish sources, he declares that he relies on the citation of Hillel in the Talmud, on Crescas, and on Albo.[59]

8.5 German and English Bible translations

There remains only the final sequel to the narrative of Bennett's life and literary legacy. In 1841, three years after his death, Francis Foster Barham edited and published *The Hebrew and English Holy Bible* on behalf of his family. This first vol-

58 Bennett, MS Jews College 105, 1:579–583; quotations, 579, 582.
59 Bennett, MS Jews College 105, 2:477–479; quotation, 478–79.

ume was apparently meant to be the beginning of a multivolume work including the original Hebrew with Bennett's English translation and notes. Alas, only one volume was published, which contained only his translation of Genesis 1–41:30 without his notes but with an appreciative introduction by Barham (quoted in part in chapter 4). We might surmise that Barham valued Bennett's accomplishments as a translator more than his harsh remarks on modern science as well as on other subjects.[60]

We have already noted that while Bennett had examined several contemporary English translations and commentaries of the Old Testament, he disparaged them and never consulted them for his own use. He of course based his own translation on the Authorized Version and was fully conversant with the medieval Jewish commentators. During Bennett's lifetime, German Jews produced a surprisingly large number of biblical translations, the best-known being those of Moses Mendelssohn and Leopold Zunz. It seems hard to imagine that Bennett had never encountered at least the famous Mendelssohn translation, since he knew German well, had lived in Berlin, and was aware of Jewish literary developments on the Continent. However, I have no record of his reading or consulting it or of seeing it as a kind of model for his own work. In fact, as I have already argued in chapter 1, Bennett mentioned Mendelssohn's name only once, and he (as well as his colleagues) appears to have made no impression on Bennett during his stay in Berlin, which was long after Mendelssohn's death and at a time when the German Haskalah had lost much of its élan. In 1838, the same year that Bennett died after nearly completing his work, Zunz edited and published his own popular translation, an edition Bennett could not have known. How might we understand Bennett's Bible in the context of these two monuments of German Jewish culture?

In recent years both Abigail Gillman and Michah Gottlieb have published impressive studies of the history of German biblical translation in this period, which easily enable us to compare the aspirations and results of the German works with those of Bennett. Without recounting the rich details presented by both scholars, and the variety of approaches taken by individual German Jewish translators, one might conclude that their common goal was to create a Bible accessible to and resonant with middle-class German Jews, so that they would appreciate more meaningfully the values and aesthetics of the biblical roots of their religious identity. In Gottlieb's view, the translation explosion among German Jews was primarily a Jewish reformation, diminishing the importance of Talmud study and elevat-

60 For more on Barham, see chapter 4, above.

ing the Bible in a language meant to enhance Jewish identity while furthering the integration of Jews into German society.[61]

How strikingly different were the goals of Bennett and his Bible project! Bennett initiated his revision of the Authorized Version for the betterment of Christian society, to save it from the scourge of Thomas Paine and his bitter disparagement of Scripture. His goal was to dedicate his Hebraic expertise on behalf of his adopted Protestant homeland, to salvage its religious values and its soul, and to effectuate a Christian reformation shielded from the ravages of the secular atheists and other enemies of the Anglican Church. In so doing, he hoped to bring Judaism and Christianity in its Protestant form closer to each other, on the basis of a shared sacred scriptural foundation.

There were of course similarities between the efforts of Bennett, Mendelssohn, and Zunz. All three were prioritizing the Hebrew Bible over the Talmud through their translations, and all three anticipated in one way or another that their projects would enhance Jewish culture and their own co-religionists. Bennett certainly hoped that by reforming Christianity, Judaism might be recentered within Christian civilization and the position of the Jews could be improved. Nevertheless, the difference between the German Jewish translators and this Anglo-Jewish one was profound. In England, Bennett was less afflicted by the social and political disabilities of Jewish life than were his counterparts in Germany. Indeed, he had left Berlin precisely because he desired more freedom as a Jew and as an artist and writer, and he found it. No doubt assimilated English Jewish readers would benefit from his English translation as much as Christians, but they were not his primary target audience.

While German Jewish translators felt less compulsion to follow the revered translation of Martin Luther and could work more independently in forging fresh translations of their own, the sacred tradition of the King James Bible still weighed heavily on English society and on Bennett in particular. His starting point was not a new translation but one intimately linked to the Authorized Version. He was oblivious to what was transpiring in Germany with respect to translation, and he created, or almost created, a new English Bible addressing primarily the needs of Christians – his unfinished gift to British civilization.

61 Abigail Gillman, *A History of German Jewish Bible Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), and Michah Gottlieb, *The Jewish Reformation: Bible Translation and Middle-Class German Judaism as Spiritual Enterprise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). See also Naomi Seidman, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006). Gottlieb's useful analysis would have been strengthened by a more serious engagement with the arguments of his predecessors.