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Translating East and West

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An Israeli Subversive Biblical Novel: the Italian Version of Yochi Brandes' *Melakhim Gimel*

Raffaele Esposito

As a practical contribution to the debate on translation strategies and cultural encounters, I here share some notes on my work as the translator of Yochi Brandes' novel *Melakhim Gimel*, published in 2008 (*Il Terzo Libro dei Re*), from Hebrew into Italian to discuss some translation issues and choices made in my translation. Yochi Brandes, an essayist, novelist, and playwright, was born in 1959 in Haifa to a Hassidic family Yocheved Rabinowitz; raised in Petah Tikva in the Haredi environment (i.e. the strictly religious Jewish communities commonly referred to as ultra-Orthodox), she attended religious schools and subsequently continued with academic studies, unlike most of her peers, obtaining a BA in Biblical studies and an MA in Judaic studies. She taught the Bible for many years, wrote her own column in the daily *Ma'ariv*, and appeared in TV educational programmes; at present, she lectures widely on both the Bible and literature. Brandes made her literary debut in 1996 with the short story *Maadim* and published thereafter seven novels, all of which are best-sellers in Israel; her writing draws much of its inspiration from the *mekorot*, the various Jewish sources, such as the Bible, rabbinic literature, the Kabbalah, and Hassidic lore. Yet Brandes has affirmed that, despite having written successful books, she found it hard to gain acceptance by the literary establishment, since «I am an author that writes popular literature for a broad public» and that her moving stories could be labelled by some as kitschy (Lev-Ari 2008, an interview which also provided much of the information above). Nonetheless, a central figure in Israeli literature, Professor Yigal Schwartz, offered to be the editor of her next novel, *Melakhim Gimel (The Third Book of Kings),* thus granting her an entry into a respected circle of authors. In 2010,

she published a non-fiction book, *Sheva imahot* (*Seven Mothers*), which deals with figures of women from the Bible: Lot's daughter, Tamar, Miriam the prophetess, Pharaoh's daughter, Ruth, Michal, and Esther; adopting a method already seen in *Melakhim Gimel*, Brandes turns to the Jewish sources in order to provide an alternative reading of each story and character. In January 2011, her stage play *Ki banu bakharta*, dealing with central questions about Jewish identity, premiered at Habimah National Theatre of Israel, directed by Itzik Weingarten.

Melakhim Gimel, whose translation will be discussed hereafter, is Brandes' sixth novel and currently her second last, followed by *Ha-pardes shel 'Akiva* (2012). It was also her first book to be translated, at the moment into Czech and Italian.[1] It is a biblical novel dealing with a central period for Jewish ancient history: the foundation of the Hebrew monarchy and the division into two kingdoms, Israel and Judah (ca. 10th century BCE).

The events are told from the point of view of Shlomam – the hero of the first and third part of the novel, followed from age eight into adulthood – and of a mysterious «crazy princess», who retells the story of her family in a long flashback that takes up the whole second part. Shlomam is a boy from the northern tribe of Ephraim and the beloved son of a wealthy family, whose untroubled days suddenly come to an end following a discovery: his parents keep a dangerous secret which he realizes being somehow related to an old uprising against the king and to a masked woman who has been living hidden for years, «buried alive» in a cave inhabited by leprous people. Led to Jerusalem by a series of apparently accidental events following his juvenile rebellion, Shlomam eventually meets the crazy princess and is forced to listen to a long story told by the old woman; slowly reconnecting to his true ancestry, he eventually accepts, although reluctantly, his role as the leader of a bloodless rebellion and as the next king of Israel.

In the afterword to the original edition, the author defines this book as «a subversive biblical novel» (Brandes 2008:447); indeed its strength resides in the original treatment of events and characters from the Bible, whose stories are told from an unconventional point of view, yet consistently and without con-

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[1] *Třetí kniha královská,* Prague, Garamond, 2012, translated by Tereza Černá.

tradicting the sources. Apart from being an enthralling and emotional tale, *Melakhim Gimel* challenges our common perspective which sees the house of King David as righteous and legitimate in opposition to the heretic northern kings of Israel; this attitude reflects the outlook of the southern kingdom of Judah – which survived longer, thus evolving into Judaism and giving birth to Christianity – as recorded by its official scribes in the historical books of the Bible as we know them. Brandes radically changes this perspective, recovering a marginalized point of view: David reveals himself as a greedy status seeker, a mean traitor, a usurper, and a bloody tyrant, whereas Saul is portrayed as a righteous monarch, a loving father, and an almost flawless man; the kingdom of Judah, with its wars of expansion, its centralised cult in the Temple of Jerusalem, and the unsustainable burden of taxes and forced labour imposed over the other tribes, is unmasked in its oppressive rule, whereas the rebels of Israel simply aim at restoring a kingdom inspired by peace, freedom, and brotherhood.

This point of view is based on several inconsistencies that emerge from under the surface of the multilayered canonical biblical texts; in other words, everything is already in the Bible, where nearly all the events and characters from the novel – both the protagonists and the many secondary figures – are mentioned at least once. Brandes ingeniously extrapolates a hidden parallel story and makes a 445-page novel from it, retelling ancient history in first-person narrative through the voices of the two main characters; those voices sound at times ironic, at other times enraged or tearful, in an alternation of the past and present tense, the latter used to isolate and highlight under an unwavering stare each decisive moment and sudden flash of inspiration. Conscious of a potentially unsettled response of the reader, which is confronted with an alternative narrative removed from the commonly accepted view, the author decides not to reveal the characters' identity from the beginning: the connection with biblical events and characters is only established after sympathy has been directed towards the defeated and hostility towards the rulers, thus reversing the roles; and it is only shortly before the epilogue that we learn the biblical identity of the hero.

The plot and subplots, along with many dialogues, are strongly supported by canonical texts, including post-biblical literature;

for instance, when we are told that Saul was such «a king that even his embittered opponents had to admit that there was not a single flaw in him», מלך שאפילו יריביו המרים הודו שלֹא היה בו שום דופי (Brandes 2008:430), the author is literally quoting from the *Talmud*: «Why did the kingdom of the house of Saul not last? For the reason that there was not a single flaw in him», מפני מה לֹא נמשכה מלכות בית שאול? מפני שלֹא היה בו שום דופי (Yoma 22b; actually this talmudic passage is ambiguous, since בו also translates «in it», meaning «in the house»; nevertheless it is a positive assessment of Saul's kingdom).

Besides revolutionizing the way in which the Bible is read, *Melakhim Gimel* bears serious cultural implications: it is a novel about different models of leadership and it recuperates the feminine point of view as well, focusing in particular on the role played by women in the court. Neglected female figures treated as extras in biblical narratives of manly action – such as Michal, Ritspa bat Aya, and Bathsheba – are brought to life showing the key role that women of their times could have actually played.

When approaching my translation, I was soon confronted with a first problem, apparently a trivial one, concerning the rendering and transliteration of personal names and place names. Even if the story is set in a distant past, all the names therein mentioned have the same form, apart from pronunciation, in modern Israeli Hebrew; this is a typical example of a problem which is totally devoid of any relevance in the source language (hereafter SL) yet unquestionably relevant in the target language (hereafter TL). A choice must be made; in order to keep consistency and an acceptable degree of clearness without renouncing precision, a compromise is often necessary. In my translation of *Melakhim Gimel*, I used the Italian form of the toponyms when available, that is for better known places such as Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Judah, and so forth, while keeping the Hebrew form for lesser known places, as it is often the case with Italian Bible versions.

With regard to personal names, it was normal practice in the past to italianise both the author's and characters' names in translations, a practice that has fortunately become obsolete, though it is still adopted for Greek and Latin classics as well as for Bible versions: an Italian translation of *War and Peace* that still credited the novel to *Leone Tolstoi* (in lieu of Lev Nikolaevič Tolstoj) and told, among others, about a prince *Andrea* (in lieu of Andrej)

would definitely sound outdated, though this was standard us-
age until a few decades ago. Nonetheless, Italian forms such
as *Sofocle* and *Edipo* are universally preferred to *Sophoklês* and
Oidípous, which are never used in translations; the same prac-
tice is adopted in English, whose forms Sophocles and Oedipus
only happen to be closer to the original names if compared to
the Italian ones. More interesting to us, both English and Italian
versions of the Bible use TL variants of biblical names: read-
ers, depending on their language, are accustomed for example
to Jacob or *Giacobbe,* not to *Ya'akov,* and I could not ignore this
with regard to my translation of *Melakhim Gimel.*

Biblical names in this novel are highly evocative, being im-
mediately recognisable and associable with characters and stor-
ies that the average reader heard about at least once; but those
names have such an expressive power only if presented in a form
that the reader is familiar with. Renouncing to the Italian names
of biblical patriarchs, leaders, and prophets also meant sacrifi-
cing much of the biblical flavour that a reader expects to find in
a novel titled *Il Terzo Libro dei Re,* thus serving a bad service to
the author and her creation; on the other hand, the decision not
to use Hebrew names meant producing an old-style translation
of a contemporary novel. Once again, the solution was a com-
promise, and a consistent one based on the genre and on the
roles played by characters.

Historical novels usually stage minor, private stories of fictional
characters on the background of significant historical periods in
interaction with actual historical figures; how much history can
be found in biblical events and characters lays beyond the scope
of these notes, yet the definition of a genre and the identification
of its conventions are extremely helpful to a translator's work:
Melakhim Gimel can be defined a historical novel regardless of the
controversial historicity of biblical tales. Dealing with historical
novels, it is noteworthy that although any modern translation of
War and Peace, as aforementioned, retains the original Russian
names of the characters, a different treatment is reserved to some
historical figures dealt with in the story: the names of Napoleon
and Tsar Alexander I, for instance, are mentioned in a form that
is familiar to TL readers. A similar distinction between histor-
ical and fictional characters in *Melakhim Gimel* is more complex,
since nearly all characters are mentioned at least once in the

Bible (for mere translation purposes and from the perspective of genre, "biblical" can be equated here to "historical"); therefore a different distinction was required between biblical characters who act in the novel (group A) and biblical characters who are external to the plot (group B), the latter being only mentioned by the former. Patriarchs and matriarchs, Moses and his family, leaders, heroes, and prophets from the past all belong to group B; their names and their stories are constantly recalled by the characters belonging to group A, who act and speak in the main plot. A further distinction is possible between two narrative layers: a main timeline in nonlinear narrative going from the birth of the monarchy with the anointing of Saul to the end of its unity with the split into two kingdoms (layer 1) and a collection of ancient stories dating back to the pre-monarchic period (layer 2).

Following the current practice in translating historical novels, characters in group B and layer 2 were treated in my translation as actual historical figures, adopting the TL form of their names in order to preserve the evocative power possessed by names automatically associated to the Bible: *Sansone* (Samson) immediately sounds biblical to Italian readers, whereas *Shimshon* paradoxically does not; the same power is held by other names, such as *Giosuè* (Joshua) instead of *Yehoshua*, *Giuseppe* (Joseph) instead of *Yossef*, and so forth. On the other hand, Hebrew names were retained for layer 1, where primary and secondary characters from group A interact: *Shaul, Yonatan, Mikhal, David*, and 103 other names were thus preferred to their Italian equivalents; as for the protagonist Shlomam, his name never appears in the Bible, hence no question arose from its usage.

This translator's choice also has, at least in the translator's opinion, an internal expressive coherence, in that the distance and the separation existing between the two temporal layers and groups of characters is comparable to the distance existing between the reader and layer 2 or group B: the reader is focused on the main plot (layer 1, group A), whose characters often recall a mythical past (layer 2, group B) which is shared by the reader. In other words, the reader recalls a common mythical past together with the first-person narrating characters.

The problem of names is tightly connected to transliteration issues; standard technical systems with obscure diacritics are obviously to be avoided in a text addressed to a general reader-

ship, therefore I had to choose a consistent system that could be simple for Italian readers yet as close as possible to Hebrew pronunciation (at least the modern one performed by contemporary Israeli readers and arguably the one intended by the author).

For example, the name of the town where the hero grows up is not the usual (Zereda) since the grapheme *z* is ambiguous in the Italian writing system, being used both for voiceless and voiced alveolar affricate ([ts] and [dz]); the form preferred is instead Tsereda, where the current Hebrew pronunciation of צ is represented by *ts*. Moreover, Italians tend to read the digraph *ch* appearing in foreign words as if it were English (voiceless palato-alveolar affricate [tʃ]) regardless of the original language and in spite of the fact that in Italian it only represents the voiceless velar stop [k], whereas the same digraph is popularly used in simplified transliteration from Hebrew for the letter ח, which has a completely different sound: a voiceless pharyngeal fricative [ħ], commonly performed by most speakers as a voiceless uvular fricative [χ]. I was confronted with this problem early in my work, since people unfamiliar with Hebrew constantly mispronounced the author's first name as if it were English; therefore I decided to transliterate ח with *kh*, which is also used for כ; the loss of precision is limited, in view of the fact that native Israeli Hebrew speakers commonly disregard the phonemic distinction between ח and כ, pronouncing both [χ].

A second problem arose because *Melakhim Gimel* contains several quotations from the Jewish sources but it is also replete with allusions. Biblical quotations are typographically recognisable in the original version being typed in pointed (i.e. vocalized) Hebrew; accordingly, the translation resorts to italics in order to retain a comparable form of highlighting. As for allusions, they represent a much bigger problem to be coped with from the point of view of the readership's competence: SL readers, in this case, are presumably more likely than TL readers to catch hints at biblical characters and stories. The average Italian reader is often not familiar with the story of Jephthah the Gileadite and the sacrifice of his daughter (an episode told in Judges 11), or with figures such as Deborah (Judges 4-5); the story of Joseph being sold by his brothers (Genesis 37) is known in its main outlines to many, but few are familiar with the Jewish tradition which speaks about his legendary beauty.

At first, as a temporary solution, I used footnotes to add explanations and references; later, since they were practically on every single page, I discussed the problem with the author and we agreed to avoid footnotes as she had done in the original version. One may object that such a choice is detrimental to understanding, yet a text may have different layers of understanding depending on the reader's competence and expectations. Allusion is a game played between the author and the reader, the latter deriving a sense of gratification from grasping hints at shared knowledge; to explain everything means to destroy this game by assuming a didactic tone.

A last series of problems concerns the linguistic choices about lexicon, register, and style. Translations of the Bible have had a significant impact on European languages through loanwords, idioms, and peculiar turns of phrase, often as a result of literal renderings from Hebrew or Greek; the enormous prestige attained by the 1611 King James Version lies at the origins of biblical English, a register characterized in part by the abundance of hebraisms (Esposito 2013, 2014). Modern versions of the Bible tend to be based on functional rather than formal equivalence, offering «the closest natural equivalent» in the TL (Nida and Taber 1969:12); for the purposes of my translation, it was nonetheless preferable to maintain some formal equivalences in order to preserve a biblical flavour while avoiding anachronisms.

In a moment of high tension in the first part of the novel, a soldier admonishes an apparently leprous woman as follows: מצורע שיוצא מהמערה, דמו בראשו (51; literally: «a leprous man that goes out of the cave, his blood on his head»). The idiom *his blood on his head* is a legal formula to attribute (or relieve from) juridical responsibility for the death of a person; its usage is recorded not only in biblical Hebrew (cf. Joshua 2:19) but also elsewhere in the Ancient Neat East, even in Old-Assyrian tablets (Rabinowitz 1959:209). Since its meaning is far from being transparent to a modern Western reader, I added a reference to death while keeping a literal translation: *il lebbroso che lascia la grotta viene punito con la morte, e il suo sangue ricadrà sul suo capo* («a leprous man that leaves the cave is punished by death, and his blood shall fall on his own head»).

Sexual intercourse is referred to with euphemisms actually used in biblical Hebrew: in משעה שידע אישה (55; «from the mo-

ment that he will know a woman») *to know* bears an idiomatic meaning widely attested in the Bible, whence the phrase *to know in the biblical sense*; thus I rendered it literally. On the same page we find a reference to homosexuality in משכב זכר («laying with a male»), which I translated *sodomia* («sodomy»), since a more politically correct term would have been definitely anachronistic. On the other hand, a literal rendering was the preferred choice for a reference to masturbation: כשאני פולט את זרעי (p. 39; «when I discharge my semen»).

In conclusion, special attention had to be paid to social language use: dealing with a culture that is so distant yet familiar to the reader, it would have been incongruous to translate forms of address, greetings, and interjections with TL equivalents. It is more convenient instead to ask oneself what the reader expects not for general purposes but depending on subject and register; consequently my translation of *Melakhim Gimel* uses some expressions that may sound obsolete or unnatural in modern Italian, but which were specifically chosen according to a biblical setting. The importance of lexicon is underlined by a statement in the first pages of the novel:

> [S]tories are more effective weapons than swords. Swords can kill only those who face them, while stories determine who shall live and who shall die also in the generations to come (21).

It is the responsibility of the translator to make good use of those weapons.

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