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The Song of Songs in Late Eighteenth-Century Germany: Theology and Desire

1 Introduction

This article will examine the cultural backdrop for the wide preoccupation with the Song of Songs in late eighteenth-century Germany, a period marked by the dawn of German Romanticism in philosophy, theology, and literature.[1] A rising interest in the Hebrew Bible fueled myriad translations of the Song by major late eighteenth-century German intellectuals, including the young Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832), Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), and Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786). In postulating that these thinkers worked in proximity to each other, I will consider the Song's translations as a mirror of the period's polemics concerning biblical exegesis. This pertains especially to the period's debates on the Old Testament's aesthetic qualities. As recent scholarship has shown, considering the Bible as an aesthetic object during this period epitomized its reconceptualization as a cultural artifact of panhuman pertinence.[2] Using the example of the Song, the article will explore how discussions of the Hebrew Bible's aesthetic merits mobilized a new conception of humans and of humanity.

The article will contextualize the period's shifts in the conception of biblical exegesis by focusing on Herder's occupation with the Hebrew Bible. By juxtaposing Herder's preoccupation with the Song to Goethe's and Mendelssohn's respective translations of the text, I will situate the admiration of Hebrew aesthetics in the larger, polemical context of late eighteenth-century Germany. I shall then ask what specific elements of the Song were brought to the fore, or mobilized, in early

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[1] My approach to early Romanticism is informed by analyses of late eighteenth-century philosophy as reactionary to earlier eighteenth-century thought. As Frederick Beiser (*Romantic Imperative*, 4) writes, "the early romantics continued with, and indeed radicalized, the legacy of the Enlightenment." The reception of the Song of Songs will be explored as grounded in a transformative philosophical strand that straddled theology and aesthetics.

[2] As Jonathan Sheehan (*Enlightenment Bible*, 148–181) has shown, late eighteenth-century Germany featured a transformative approach that enabled the appropriation of the Bible for diverse agendas: aesthetic, pedagogic, and theological, among others. The proliferation of biblical translations, Sheehan argues, mobilized this transformation. Sheehan finds that the reception of theologian Robert Lowth's presentation of the Hebrew Bible as an aesthetic artifact was instrumental for this trend. Lowth allowed translators much liberty in exempting them from adhering to the text's original features, such as strict meter.

German Romanticism. I will propose that the text's overt representation of human sexuality served to invest an egalitarian readership in a theological model that centers on the human experience.

A proponent of German Romanticism, Herder built on biblical exegesis to advance a radical rewriting of Enlightenment ideals. This rewriting entailed enhancing the presentation of theological exegesis as a transformative process focused on the reader.[3] In this regard, the emphasis on human reason was exchanged for the early Romantics' exploration of human features that were deemed equally important. The early Romantics redefined the human apparatus through a nonhierarchical positioning of reason and desire. Herder represents a far-reaching furthering of this trend onto a focus on human desires, instincts, and emotions. Concurrently, early Romantic philosophy, and Herder as its representative, reconceived the history of civilization in drawing a nonhierarchical relationship between different peoples, cultures, and historical eras. In this way, the admiration of ancient Greece, which permeated German classicism, gave way to the embracing of other peoples—including the ancient Hebrews.[4] Against the admiration of order and perfection, qualities associated with Greek cultural artifacts, salient contemporary thinkers praised aesthetic creations that consisted of unmediated expression of the impressions of the senses and of human desires.

By and large, the preoccupation with the Song of Songs mobilized the period's readings of the Bible through an aesthetic prism as a perspective that might revitalize theology. The crossing of theology into secular realms made the Song an epicenter of experimentation. The Song's explicit representation of human eroticism, which makes it exceptional in the biblical canon, played into the hands of authors who wished to celebrate human desire as central to theology. These hermeneuts explored the extent to which corporal imagery can be used as a spiritual token and investigated thereby the new societal functions of exegesis: functions that diverged from institutional theology.

2 Herder's Legacy

The German Romantics intervened in the enduring fascination with ancient nations as pillars of Germanic culture. In his *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* (*Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der*

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3 A view advanced in such works as Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (*Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, 1793).
4 See Ilany, *In Search of the Hebrew People*; idem, "Between Ziona and Teutona."

Menschheit, 1774), Herder questioned what he termed the longstanding "idolatry" that the Greeks and Romans enjoyed in Europe.[5] Against this tendency, Herder portrayed civilization as a continuing chain that straddles diverse national cultures. Each link in the chain has a constitutive role for civilization. Thus, throughout his oeuvre, Herder referred to "the Orientals" (*die Morgenländer*) to denote national cultures whose contributions to civilization had been unjustly ignored. Among the Oriental peoples, Herder noted the importance of the ancient Hebrews, a people whose cultural activity gifted civilization the Old Testament.

The so-called discovery of the ancient Hebrews' contributions to civilization was entangled with a search for a new model of national identification.[6] A wave of poetic interest in biblical Hebrew poetry featured new literary texts that took on biblical themes by such popular poets as Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724–1803) and Salomon Gessner (1730–1788). The German Romantics operated in a new political climate: they opted to establish the unique nature of their people. They turned, correspondingly, to cultures that had previously been considered inferior. The ancient Hebrews made for a suitable national model. The cultural artifact identified with their nation, the Old Testament, was approachable as a part of the biblical canon. And at the same time that the Old Testament was widely read, it could also be treated as a lost cultural treasure: as a text whose comprehension had been impacted by the damaging influences of time and ill transmission.

Herder's thought vocalized this trend. Herder contended that the expression of passions is an authentic, untamed reminder of the natural, basic use of language that preceded the harmful influence of civilization. Several of his writings express critique of the Enlightenment presumption that society is improved through ongoing cultural activity.

Herder's salient, prize-winning essay *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (*Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, 1772) represents this position. The *Treatise* advocates against the notion that Enlightenment society has perfected morality, education, and aesthetic expression. Enlightenment society sought to tame basic human impulses and desires. This resulted, in Herder's mind, in unnatural and restrained uses of language. His discussion of Hebrew takes the language as an exemplary primordial means of expression.

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5 See Herder, "This Too a Philosophy of History," 341.

6 Ofri Ilany stresses the nationalist tendencies permeating the embrace of Hebrew by German thinkers who wished to distance themselves from Enlightenment values: "while rationalist philosophy and theology ridiculed the particular character of the Hebrew tradition, writers critical of the Enlightenment saw this very particularity as an inspiration, hoping indeed to save beleaguered Christianity through the national element of Hebrew poetry" (*In Search of the Hebrew People*, 146).

> Take the so-called divine first language, Hebrew, from which the greatest part of the world has inherited its letters: that it was in its beginning so livingly sounding, so unwritable, that it could only be written very incompletely, this is shown clearly by the whole structure of its grammar, by its so common confusions of similar letters, and of course most of all by the complete absence of its vowels. Whence comes the idiosyncrasy that its letters are only consonants, and that precisely those elements of words on which everything depends, the vowels, were originally not written at all? This way of writing, writing the inessential and omitting the essential, is so opposed to the course of sound reason that it would have to be unintelligible to grammarians, if grammarians were in the habit of understanding. With us the vowels are the first and most lively thing and the door hinges of language; with the Hebrews they are not written. Why? Because they could not be written. Their pronunciation was so lively and finely organized, their breath was so spiritual and ethereal, that it evaporated and could not be captured in letters.[7]

The inability to comprehend Biblical Hebrew's original rapport with readers is exemplary of the degeneration of the human senses. Westerners' ears are incapable of capturing differences in sound, pronunciation, and accentuation. Herder presented the ancient Hebrew nation as a powerful representative of this vital use of language. In citing Biblical Hebrew's so-called wild nature, Herder presented Hebrew poetry as an aesthetic model that bore significance for contemporary poetics in such early essays as his *On Recent German Literature* (*Über die neuere deutsche Literatur*, 1767).

Herder's praise of the ancient Hebrew nation supported not only his views on aesthetics but also his historiographical innovations. Herder advocated the idea that cultures—and, correspondingly, cultural artifacts—cannot be valued hierarchically. In his mind, cultures manifested values that corresponded with their specific time of conception. He unpacked this theory of cultural relativism in *This Too a Philosophy of History*. Modern individuals cannot postulate that they are morally or culturally superior to individuals of previous historical eras. Likewise, Westerners' attempts to declare themselves culturally advanced with their ostensibly moral and poetic innovations fall through. Herder postulated that to understand a foreign nation, one needs to attend to its cultural and historical norms. Critics have associated this idea with Herder's dictum from *This Too a Philosophy of History*: "feel yourself into everything."[8]

Praise of the Old Testament as an important cultural artifact necessitated, in Herder's time, further apologia. Like other advocates of the merits of biblical poetry, Herder had to address the association of the Old Testament with a religious group that had long been accused of its moral and cultural inferiority: the Jews. On

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7 Herder, "Treatise on the Origin of Language," 71.
8 Herder, "This Too a Philosophy of History," 292.

the point of the Bible's transmission, Herder established that Jews' ongoing use of Hebrew in liturgical contexts corrupted the pure origins of Hebrew.[9]

Thus, *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (*Vom Geist der hebräischen Poesie*, 1783), Herder's most elaborated work on Biblical Hebrew's aesthetic merits, poses a distinction between the ancient Hebrews and Jews of later periods.[10] The discussion of Hebrew poetry takes the form of a Platonic dialogue between an audacious if curious student and an insightful teacher whose approach to Hebrew provokes the student's prejudices. The teacher seeks to refute the notion that Biblical Hebrew is inferior to ancient Greek and Latin.

On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry presents Biblical Hebrew as a language of unique aesthetic merits. To achieve this, Herder wittingly addressed qualities of Hebrew that have given the language a dubious reputation. One such infamous quality is the partial lack of vowels that makes it impossible to know how the ancient language should be read.[11] Another ostensible fault is Hebrew's limited range of vocabulary.

On both points, Herder inverted the accusations against the language. He claimed that these features illustrate Hebrew's unique aesthetic merits rather than the language's ostensible weakness. In reference to the infamous lack of vowels in the language, Herder presented the inability to know how Biblical Hebrew should be read as a testimony to the language's exceptional nature. This showed, in Herder's mind, the seminal role of vowels in Hebrew. As we have already seen, Herder contended that the ancient speakers of the language were not able to register their speech in writing: their pronunciation was too lofty to do so. This depiction of Hebrew pronunciation animates an aesthetic preference. To Herder, poetry is meant to be heard. Hebrew poetry sets a model for oral transmission of poetic creation, as shown by the ostensible difficulty of capturing a language in writing.[12] Similarly, Biblical Hebrew's relatively small vocabulary highlights the dominance of verbs in the language. In Hebrew, nouns are often derived from verbs, as the teacher in Herder's dialogue points out. This quality makes the language, in Herder's eyes, foster constant movement. It follows that the language features a dynamic

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9 See Herder, *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, 1:32.

10 Herder, *On the Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*.

11 A prevalent testimony to the discomfort that this quality of Hebrew provoked in Herder's time can be found in Goethe's biography. Goethe describes his endeavor to study Hebrew as an attempt that failed during the encounter with punctuation. The marking of vowels alerts readers to the mediated nature of their encounter with Hebrew. See Goethe, *Truth and Poetry*, 1:112.

12 As Tanvi Solanki ("Cultural Hierarchies and Vital Tones," 552) writes, Herder believed that "ancient cultures had strong communities due to the close affective bonds created by their musical, richly tonal languages, and their ritualized oral performances of epic poetry." As she shows (ibid., 554), Herder strove to improve his own readers by reminding them of poetry's oral origins, which are present, in his mind, in various cultural canons of foreign peoples.

flow that makes it especially suitable for the composition of powerful poetry. Herder's preoccupation with the Song of Songs demonstrates his ongoing attempt to conceptualize the aesthetic presence of Biblical Hebrew as a catalyst of a new theology, one that celebrates the human senses as integral to spiritual experiences and as central to biblical exegesis.

3 Translations of the Song of Songs in Early Romanticism: Herder and Goethe

In late eighteenth-century Germany, the Song attracted wide attention among individuals who represented diverging positions on the Enlightenment. The act of translating the Song was part and parcel of larger discussions on theology during that time. Herder was a great opponent of understanding the Bible allegorically. He advocated the reading of Scripture as a human text that was meant to address people in their language. Because of its overt engagement with corporal desire, the Song was an ideal example of this perspective. In declaring the Song exemplary of supreme poetry, Herder turned to specific elements of the text—aspects that supported his views on aesthetics, historiography, and intercultural interaction. These aspects pertained to the Song's poetic devices, particularly those that concerned hearing; to the Song's unfolding of eroticism; and to its corresponding exceptionality in the biblical canon.

Herder translated the Song twice (the manuscripts date to 1776 and 1778). The latter translation was included in the volume *Lieder der Liebe*, which purported to present the Orientals' cultural assets.[13]

Herder's translation of the Song manifests his praise of Hebrew's natural flow. In translating Song 2:8–9, Herder accentuated the sense of an enveloping plot. This is achieved through the allocation of action to separate lines:

> Stimme meines Lieben!
> Siehe, er kommt!
> Springt über die Berge,
> Hüpft über die Hügel.
> Wie ein Reh ist mein Lieber,
> wie ein flüchtiger Hirsch.

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[13] Herder's translations of the Song into German are reproduced in Baildam, *Paradisal Love*, 306–321, with awareness of Herder's scansion. Henceforth I will provide English translations of excerpts from Herder, Goethe, and Mendelssohn's respective translations of the Song.

> My beloved's voice!
> Look, he is coming!
> Jumps through the mountains,
> leaps through the hills.
> Like a deer is my beloved,
> Like a fleeting stag.[14]

The listeners are invited, in Herder's mind, to observe the Song's emerging images and stimulating narrative. The translation grounds his claim regarding the language's integral merits in vivid imagery and narratological veracity. Herder was attentive to the Hebrew syntax as well as to the rich choice of vocabulary. Moreover, the translation emulates the Hebrew sentence structure by instilling in the German the absence of the pronoun from the beloved's actions.

Herder's approach to the Song puts into practice his views on aesthetics and his notion of the Orientals as proponents of supreme aesthetic creation. Herder's translation demonstrates his view that readers should engage empathetically with the Bible by attending to the cultural climate of its authorship. Herder presumed that an interpreter's approach to a text builds on their understanding of the historical and societal norms of an era different from their own; similarly, the empathetic engagement with a text may reveal further truisms about history.

Herder's engagement with the background of the composition of the Hebrew Bible contrasted with Goethe's prism on the text. Though he expressed some interest in Jewish culture and Biblical Hebrew, Goethe commanded neither. Goethe instead approached the Song to substantiate a dissimilar aesthetic theory, one that promoted subjective perception of the text. He observed the text as a cultural artifact that encapsulates an aesthetic achievement through its poetic form. Goethe's translation demonstrates his statement that "many good translators" opt "to transmit transmissions further,"[15] for example, by reiterating the beauty of the transmitted text from their own perspective. His approach embodied a second strand of the early Romantic celebration of poetic representation of desire, one that was attuned to texts as eliciting interpreters' inventiveness.

Goethe considered the Song a most supreme instance of love poetry, and his exploration of the Song strove to experiment with textual representations of love.[16] The beauty of the Song was also available to the general reader in Goethe's mind. A main means of this accessibility was the existence of a prior translation that Goethe took as unsurpassed: the Luther translation (1545). Whereas Herder sought to offer

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14 Baildam, *Paradisal Love*, 309.

15 Goethe, *Briefe und Aufsätze*, 155 (my translation).

16 See Sauter, "Writing (in) Love," especially 191. See also Bohnenkamp, "Goethe und das Hohe Lied."

an alternative to the Luther translation, Goethe opted to further what he saw as its merits.[17] Goethe's prose translation attempted to refine Luther's achievement, demonstrating Goethe's view that a particular cultural artifact sparks a coherent lineage of adaptations that capture its essence.

As his translation of Song 2:16–17 shows, Goethe's interpretation of the Song was far reaching:

> Mein Freund ist mein, ich sein, der unter Lilien weidet. Biss der Tag athmet, die Schatten fliehen, wende dich, sey gleich, mein Freund, einer Hinde, einem Rehbock, auf den Bergen Bether.[18]

> My friend is mine, I am his, who grazes among the lilies. Until the day breathes, the shadows flee, turn around, be like, my friend, a female deer, a roe deer, on the mountains of Bether.

The image of the male lover is constituted through a surprising reference to a female animal. Likewise, the "breathing" of the day is an original rendering of the Hebrew verb (פּוּחַ), in a phrase that can be readily interpreted as referring to the dawn. These choices, as well as the original distribution of the Song into new sections, mark Goethe's departure from the notion that translation should be loyal to the original and his attempt to present an innovative rendering of the Song.[19]

For both Herder and Goethe, the Song is of interest due to its centering on human desire. For Herder, this thematic epicenter elicits an inquiry into humanity's origins because these lie, in his opinion, in the veracity of expressive language. The interpreter (in this case, the translator) enters the shoes of the people who produced the original text. Goethe, in contrast, conceived the Song as an invitation for an exploration of individualistic poetic expression. In this venture, the biblical text is taken to encapsulate a poetic achievement. This achievement wears diverging forms in its different translations, maintaining, nonetheless, its unique poetic beauty. Standing at the center of the Song's imagery, desire prolongs this chain by provoking interpreters to take part in the text's creative rendering.

4 Mendelssohn's Theological Adaptation

The period's experimentations with biblical exegesis were met with mixed reactions among traditional readers of the Hebrew Bible. A germane representative of that reaction was Moses Mendelssohn: an observant Jew who was a leading propo-

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17 See Baildam, *Paradisal Love*, 215–219.
18 The manuscript is from 1775; the text is published in Baildam, *Paradisal Love*, 328–332, here 329.
19 On Goethe's positioning of a translated text as a replacement of the original, see Bernofsky, *Foreign Words*, 191.

nent of Jewish emancipation. Mendelssohn's translation of the Song was emblematic of his larger efforts to translate select biblical texts into German. Those efforts express his mediation of the sudden enthusiasm about Hebrew's aesthetic merits and the Jewish circulation of Hebrew liturgy.

In a review of Herder's *Fragments on Recent German Literature*, Mendelssohn critiqued Herder's praises of Biblical Hebrew. Though Mendelssohn acknowledged Herder's celebration of the language as manifesting unrestrained linguistic expression, his diverging view of Biblical Hebrew poetry built on a starkly different approach to what good poetry entails. Countering Herder's intentions, Mendelssohn asked, "What do we want from poetry?" ("Was wollen wir mit der Poesie?").[20] According to Mendelssohn, poetry should aspire to represent the teleological progress of humankind. This stance on the societal and educational roles of aesthetic works objects to the attempt to trace a model of unrestrained poetic expression in the Hebrew Bible and to celebrate Hebrew poetics with this finding.

Two philosophical threads underpinned Mendelssohn's position. First, on a political level, Mendelssohn adhered to the notion of *Bildung* as instructive for both individuals and the nation. In this vein, his essay *On the Question: What Does 'To Enlighten' Mean?* (*Über die Frage: Was heißt aufklären?*, 1784) established that the longstanding improvement of a nation derives from cultural work that shows the nation's refinement to be embedded in its genuine and steady voice.[21]

Mendelssohn's ongoing philosophical work encapsulated a second, interrelated vector of resistance to Herder's idealized depiction of Hebrew. Mendelssohn's contributions to aesthetic theory granted him honorable standing in the German republic of letters. These early works postulated that striving for perfection is the ideal that should guide engagement with artwork. His essay *On Sentiments* (*Über die Empfindungen*, 1755)[22] thus established that attraction to beauty is integral to human nature. In his mind, the inclination toward perfection guides the human senses. It follows that an artwork's gradual unfolding conveys the feeling of perfection: the harmonious coexistence of all of its parts. Importantly, Mendelssohn viewed the relationship between art and nature as mimetic. Aesthetic artifacts are not a part of nature but are representative of nature. By witnessing mimesis, observers of art take advantage of artwork's supreme potential for refining human character. Herder's praise of ostensibly primordial poetics therefore met both political and metaphysical objections in Mendelssohn's thought.

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20 Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3:307 (my translation).

21 See Mendelssohn, "On the Question," 314: "Culture in an external sense is called 'refinement.' Hail to the nation whose refinement is the effect of culture and enlightenment, whose external splendour and elegance is based upon an internal, solid genuineness."

22 In Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1:41–123.

Mendelssohn's Jewishness added a third dimension to his opposition to portrayals of Hebrew poetry as a universal asset rediscovered by contemporary readers. As we have seen, Herder distinguished Biblical Hebrew from Hebrew's later usages; the aesthetic assets embodied in the language pertained, in his mind, to the ancient Hebrew nation. Mendelssohn's religious devotion ruled out this distinction. Against it, Mendelssohn conceived Judaism as an ongoing, living tradition. He appealed to traditional Jewish circulation of Hebrew to establish that Jewish scholarship was aware of the language's merits. Thus, in a review of Lowth's celebrated account of the aesthetics of Hebrew poetry, Mendelssohn cited the work of Don Isaac Abrabanel as drawing on similar tenets.[23]

At the same time, Mendelssohn's examinations of Hebrew poetry, and particularly his act of translating the Song, marked his distinctive position as a Jew in the German-speaking republic of letters. His knowledge of Hebrew made him an apt candidate to take part in discussions on the Hebrew Bible, discussions that, as we have seen, fueled the period's philosophical examinations into human nature and the origins of civilization.

Mendelssohn showed awareness of the entanglement of those examinations with the aestheticization of the Hebrew Bible. He also attempted to intervene into this reciprocity. In the essay *On Lyric Poetry* (*Von der Lyrischen Poesie*, written in 1778 and published posthumously in 1810), Mendelssohn approached Hebrew poetry as representative of principles that defined, in his mind, the rapport of poetry with readers. The essay cites the ultimate ability of lyric poetry to come close to nature.[24] Mendelssohn established that the medial relation of poetry to reality is at the core of poetic creation. He postulated that an objective (or rational) representation of world phenomena should be the guiding thread in poetic creations.[25] Tellingly, Mendelssohn ended the essay with examples from Psalms, in his translation.[26] Using quotations from Pss 123, 126, 129, and 133, Mendelssohn wished to establish that the poet's subjective perception of reality is transmitted by digression or fragmentation. The biblical excerpts ultimately led him to conclude that poetry balances the state of confusion—which characterizes the subjective, affective conception of reality—with an overall objective understanding of world

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23 See Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 4:24.

24 See Mendelssohn, "Von der Lyrischen Poesie," 304.

25 For an analysis of this position and contextualization of the essay in contemporary aesthetic theory, see Scherpe, "Analogon Actionis und lyrisches System."

26 Weinberg ("Moses Mendelssohns Übersetzungen und Kommentare," 104) establishes that Mendelssohn's translation of Psalms for this essay marks an early instance of his emerging endeavor to translate select biblical texts into German.

phenomena. Mendelssohn's translation of the Song was a similar act of intervening into his period's proliferating discussions of biblical poetry in aesthetic theory.

5 Song of Songs: Mendelssohn's Faithful Endorsement

Mendelssohn's translation of the Song was printed in 1783, as part of a volume that continued his ongoing project of translating biblical books and commenting on them. The core of this project was a translation of the Five Books of Moses into German in Hebrew letters.

Mendelssohn's position as a translator was antithetical to that of the young Goethe. Mendelssohn's translation of the Song can be described as straightforward, and the translated text demonstrates his comprehensive knowledge of Hebrew. Mendelssohn built on this knowledge to register the language of the original text faithfully. He chose vocabulary that accorded with the literal understanding of the Hebrew words and transcribed proper names such as Kedar, Schelomo, Scharon, or Libanon methodically into German. Similarly, his translation imitates the Hebrew text's sentence structure. While Herder and Goethe chose original divisions of the Song, Mendelssohn followed the traditional division into eight chapters.

> Er küsse mich
> Küsse seines Mundes;
> Deine Liebe ist köstlicher als Wein
> Wie lieblich duften Deine Salben!
>
> He kisses me
> His mouth's kisses;
> Your love is finer than wine
> How nicely smell your oils![27]

Mendelssohn's conservative interpretation of vocabulary, reiteration of Hebrew sentence structure, and transcription of Hebrew proper names demonstrate his religiosity. A foremost proponent of Jewish emancipation, Mendelssohn often served as a mediator between the Prussian authorities and the Jewish community. This role permeated his engagement with his period's treatment of the Hebrew Bible as a cultural artifact stripped of traditional liturgical associations. His translation of the Song corresponds with his agenda to make the Hebrew Bible accessible

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27 The German translation is in Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 15.1:239–252.

for Jewish individuals—Jewish youth in particular. His approach as a translator performs this loyalty to the Jewish sources.

These choices echo Mendelssohn's apologia on his translation of the Hebrew Bible. His decision to translate select biblical texts into German, which culminated in the translation of the Five Books of Moses into German in Hebrew letters, raised questions and objections in the Jewish community. As we have seen, in his exchange with Christian intellectuals, Mendelssohn stressed the tenets of traditional Jewish scholarship, which echo, according to his presentation, his contemporaries' attention, via the prism of aesthetic theory, to the unique traits of the Hebrew language. Likewise, in his correspondence with the Jewish community, Mendelssohn presented the ongoing traditional Jewish transmission of the Hebrew Bible as straddling translation (and other creative editorial strategies).

A main instance of this apologia is Mendelssohn's essay *Light for the Path* (אור לנתיבה, 1783),[28] the introduction to his biblical translation and interpretive commentary. The essay cites different means that Jewish interpreters have taken to avoid errors, on the one hand, and to make the Bible approachable to a large population of readers, on the other hand. To achieve the first goal, Jewish sages compared manuscripts while deciphering the meaning of words that might have been affected by scribal errors. The essay provides an overview of the history of translations of the Hebrew Bible into various languages, presenting biblical translation as a tradition that manifests Jewish sages' careful attempts to make the Jewish sources approachable to the Jewish population amidst changes in vernaculars that were comprehensible to Jews. Mendelssohn explained his own scholarly and ideological impetus and explicated his own commitment to *peshat* over *drash*, the literal meaning of the text over unapparent meanings. This is a guiding principle of Mendelssohn's commentary, just as much as it shapes his translation of the Song. Amidst exchange with Jewish leaders, which reflected the risk that his translations would be banned by prominent rabbis, Mendelssohn hinted that his engagement with the Hebrew text was far less risky to the Jewish community than other translations into German, which had been guided by and large by Christian interpretation.

Mendelssohn's translation of the Song into German exemplifies his mediation between Jewish transmission history and the cultural climate of his time. As the Song's rich corporal imagery was giving rise to myriad interpretations, Mendelssohn's adherence to the Bible's *peshat* embraced the Song as a text that has long-term, accepted standing in the Jewish canon. Ironically, it was exactly in the process of affirming the text's *literal* meanings that Mendelssohn reiterated, against his

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28 Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 9.1:1–96, supplies the work's German translation.

Romantic contemporaries, the *allegorical* framing of the Song that insists that its imagery concerns the relationship of the human and the divine.

6 The Sensual Hebrews

What has the Song undergone through its adaptation by Herder and his immediate interlocutors? What aspects of the text—for example, tropes and literary devices—emerge as evocative of Romantic interest? The erotic nature of the Song has modulated much of the history of its reception, forcing its commentators to take a stance on whether it should be read allegorically. The Jewish tradition featured prohibitions on the recitation of the Song. Rabbi Akiva was famously said to forbid the singing of the Song in a celebratory fashion.

The reception of the Song by the early Romantics, and specifically by Herder, objected to an allegorical reading. Herder praised the Song exactly because of its overt eroticism. For Herder, the Song, with its vivid expression of sensual love, was a paragon of the Bible's humanness. The Song illustrated, in Herder's mind, the ancient Hebrews' untamed nature, expressed in their sensibilities and, more generally, in the merits of oral poetry.

Herder established that Hebrew poets addressed their audience skillfully. They excelled in appealing to their listeners' senses, as shown in their use of poetic devices that target hearing, such as alliteration, rhythm, and repetition. Such devices advertised the poets' verse to an audience that was characterized, according to Herder, by its enhanced sensibilities. Thus, Herder portrayed Hebrew poetry as supreme on two levels. First, it targeted a people whose sensibilities, and particularly their hearing, were uniquely sharp. Second, this nation featured a group of poets who had mastered the capacity to target an audience's senses through oral poetry.

As shown with the example of Herder's comments on Hebrew poetry, the celebration of spirituality as a means of enhancing human physicality attempted to rely on the Song's style. This reliance endorsed free, dynamic, and unmediated poetic expression and objected to the classist aesthetic models that praised order and perfection. In this way, the occupation of the German Romantics with the Song highlighted its dialogic and fragmented form. Both elements fueled an effort central to Romantic aesthetics and its philosophical backdrop. While the Romantics recognized that fractures and divisions are integral to social life, they ultimately sought to transgress them and strove for unity and wholeness.[29]

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29 See Beiser, *Romantic Imperative*, 3.

7 The Translatability of Scriptures

What is it about the Song that made it, in the course of history, into such a popular text in translation? The proliferating interest in the Song in late eighteenth-century Germany provides an exemplary case study for this question.

A recurrent public gesture, the translation of the Song mobilized the period's discussions on translation. In the late Enlightenment period, the German intellectual scene celebrated the ability of theological approaches to mobilize reading practices. One such approach attempted to trace the cultural and historical background that gave rise to the composition of the text. Herder was a main representative of this approach, an instance of his overall promotion of cultural relativism in historiography. In his analysis of Herder's translation of the Song, Ulrich Gaier references the notion of *Mentalübersetzung* ("mental translation") that Herder formulated in his reflections on the difficulty (or inability) of rendering Shakespearean writings into German.[30] Gaier locates this notion in Herder's view of the plurality of meanings of equivalent terms in the target language. The awareness of this plurality accompanies the translator's work.[31] With regard to the Song, Gaier finds that Herder's own translation employed this principle by way of referencing, through editorial means such as commentary, other possible translations.[32] Herder was committed to documenting the ostensible national spirit that reverberates in the original text, while registering, concurrently, the translator's attempt to penetrate that national spirit from within his cultural stance.

An alternative approach holds that a translation should capture a certain essence to be found in an original text without trying to register the text's historical context, lexical meanings, or specific literary devices. Correspondingly, Goethe's notion of translation permits translators to employ vocabulary and literary devices that are far from the original but that engage meritoriously the creativity and agency of the translator.

Mendelssohn's translation of the Song represents a third approach. His meticulous attempt to remain as close as possible to the origin limits the translator's interpretive prism. This confinement derives from the presumptions that tradition has disseminated the text faithfully and that the translator's vocation lies in facilitating that dissemination further by overcoming linguistic hurdles that emerge in certain historical moments. Mendelssohn's translation pedagogically intones the voice of

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30 See Gaier, "Lieder der Liebe," 328.
31 See Gaier, "Lieder der Liebe," 328.
32 See Gaier, "Lieder der Liebe," 329.

Jewish tradition. In so doing, his translation attempts to bring its audience to study the language of the original, rather than renounce it.

8 Desire and the Divine

Early German Romanticism gave rise to a new conception of the relationship of humans to the divine. Herder and his immediate interlocutors advanced a conception of religion as ingrained in the specific needs of human beings. It follows that the Bible should be perceived not as the word of God but rather as a text written to humans by humans. This endeavor raises additional questions with regard to the social roles of theological practices in general and of biblical exegesis in particular. Conceiving the Bible as tuned for human sensibility presents exegesis as a dynamic experience of exposing that sensibility. Readers are expected to trace the ways in which the text addresses the specific sensibilities of the audience for whom it was written. It follows that readers identify their own innermost traits as humans in the Bible.

The Song makes for an exemplary text for those exegetical principles. Its explicit engagement with human corporality makes the Song emblematic of the representation of human needs in a theological text. Building on this representation, the German Romantics used the Song to turn theology on its head. In their minds, the explicit occupation with human sensuality made the Song spiritually sublime, rather than questionable.

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