

Yoav Meyrav. *Themistius' Paraphrase of Aristotle's Metaphysics 12*. Aristoteles Semitico-Latinus 25. Leiden: Brill, 2019. 650 pp. ISBN: 9789004400436. Cloth: €129

Yoav Meyrav. *Themistius: On Aristotle Metaphysics 12*. Ancient Commentators on Aristotle. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 200 pp. ISBN: 9781350127241. Cloth: £76.5

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Dr Yorav Meyrav has recently published two important editions of the same fundamental work: Themistius' paraphrase of the 12th book from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. The study of Themistius' paraphrase – originally written in Greek, then translated into Arabic, and eventually in Hebrew – is a textual challenge in itself and can be summarized in this almost ironic line: “this is a study of a translation of a translation of a book about a book” (*Themistius' Paraphrase*, p. 1). These two publications are quite different from each other with respect to dimensions, readership, and readability. Nevertheless, they are complementary in pedagogical and educational terms. Therefore, they will be discussed together in the present review as I examine their similarities and differences. These two related publications pursue two common goals: first, clarifying how Greek philosophy has progressively penetrated Arabic philosophy through translations and paraphrases; second, showing how Jewish philosophy has gradually departed from the original Arabic setting and gradually developed in an autonomous philosophical system.

There are, at first, a series of insurmountable philological difficulties that Dr Meyrav has clarified since the very beginning of the text: “Aristotle's Greek is extant, as is Moshe ibn Tibbon's Hebrew. Between them, Themistius' Greek is lost, and fragments of Ishāq's Arabic are scattered in different versions among different sources” (p. 1). In particular, the lack of the entire Arabic translation has complicated further the treatment of Themistius' already complex Greek paraphrase of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. Dr Meyrav has successfully recovered several portions and fragments of the Arabic translation from surviving manuscripts and quotations from other medieval Arabic authors. Before this accurate investigation, it was almost impossible to clearly determine the nature of the textual, semantic, and theological transmission of this text from one language to another – from Greek to Arabic, from Arabic to Hebrew, and eventually from Hebrew to Latin (Yet Dr Meyrav does not treat the Latin translation that he considers too detached from the previous versions to be truly part of the same textual tradition). As aptly emphasized in the introductions to both these texts, the losses of the original Greek text and its Arabic translation have long impacted the reception of Themistius' paraphrase of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. This was a quite unfortunate circumstance, especially considering that this paraphrase – rather than Aristotle's own book of *Metaphysics* – had actually been fundamental to disseminating Aristotelian philosophy into the Arabic and Jewish world.

In this respect, Dr Meyrav has had to come to terms with a convulsed, confused, and often deceptive textual transmission. Aristotelian philosophy was only “transplanted” into the Arabic milieu through a complex process of mediation that heavily impacted the conceptual integrity of the original Greek text. There were several serious linguistic, religious, and social differences when passing from a pagan Greek society to a monotheistic religious Arabic one. As a result, it was quite obvious that serious transformations of fundamental notions from Greek metaphysics – say, the one of Being in its several lexical versions – took place in this transcultural dissemination. This all heavily impacted the process of “assimilating” Greek philosophy to the theological requirements and expectations of Arabic metaphysics. In many respects, the process of transformation was no less intrusive than the one from Greek to Latin – about which Martin Heidegger had famously lamented in his “destruction of metaphysics.” The degree of transformation from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* to the Arabic translation as the latter’s reflection in the Hebrew translation of Themistius’ paraphrase will be later examined through a single, prominent example: the translation and reception of the Greek term *ousia* (“essence”).

The primary merit of *Themistius’ Paraphrase*, published in 2019, is providing the modern reader with a comprehensive set of philological tools: extracts from the Arabic translation published together with an accurate edition of the Hebrew translation. Unfortunately, Themistius’ Greek text is now lost. Besides, this paraphrase deeply departs from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* – as it is also reflected in its translations into Arabic and Hebrew. This circumstance also makes it useless – and potentially confusing – to directly compare the surviving (fragmentary) Arabic and (full) Hebrew translations with Aristotle’s original text. On the contrary, this critical edition of Themistius’ paraphrase allows for reading the Hebrew text and occasionally comparing it with the original Arabic, when possible. Dr Meyrav has also included a quite long running commentary on Themistius’ Hebrew and Arabic text that points out pertinent lexical, textual, philosophical, and philological issues. He has also included a very detailed introduction with several – Arabic, Arabic-Hebrew, and, occasionally Greek-Arabic-Hebrew – charts that discuss the major points of departure from Aristotle’s text and the conceptual evolution into this trilingual tradition. A bilingual Hebrew-Arabic glossary and a series of other philological tools finally allow for accessing the text – given the reader’s trilingual competence in Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic – from a rigorous philological point of view.

Despite all its numerous merits, this edition seems to reach us from a time capsule – coming to us from a distant time when exceptional competence in languages was obvious, if not expected. Therefore, this first publication provides no translation into a modern language except for the passages that are discussed in the extensive introduction. Apparently, a modern translation of the text is not required for this kind of critical edition. As a result, this already hypertrophic edition offers no English translation either of the main text of Themistius’ paraphrase, or of the several quotations disseminated in the text, or even of the single Greek, Arabic, and Hebrew words that constantly punctuate almost every page

of this impressive work. (Yet there are occasionally some cases where a few passages, expressions, and words are actually translated but this seems to be a sort of slip of the pen rather than expressing some true sympathy for a modern reader).

The author's and editor's wishful thinking is that this text is already accessible as it is. In truth, the result of this gigantic philological work (for the considerable bulk of almost 700 pages!) probably is much more than an ordinary academic reader from philosophy, Arabic studies, and Jewish studies could actually digest. It is clear that Dr Meyrav shares with the series editor the optimistic, perhaps, too optimistic, view that there are actually plenty of readers out there who can effortlessly access a trilingual edition of an already extremely difficult text — the ancient paraphrase of one of the fundamental texts of Greek philosophy. The result is overwhelming if not somehow intimidating. The difficult content of Aristotle's 12th book of *Metaphysics* would already be enough to discourage whoever is not equally trained in Greek, philosophy, and metaphysics. In addition to this, the extraordinary difficult textual circumstances — Themistius' departure from Aristotle's original text, the missing Greek paraphrase, the missing Arabic translation, and only a surviving Hebrew translation as a third textual witness of this intellectual wandering between cultures — make reading this text almost comically, if not even ridiculously, difficult. In addition to already impressive competence in Greek, philosophy, and metaphysics, an equal competence in Arabic and Hebrew is also required. Admittedly, the lack of an English translation (except for some passages discussed in the introduction) bring all these difficulties to the extreme.

It is then unsurprising that just a few months after publishing this impressive and yet somehow self-indulging critical edition, Dr Meyrav also published, in 2020, an English translation of this text: *Themistius: On Aristotle Metaphysics*. This second text only includes an agile translation of the surviving Hebrew translation of the lost Arabic translation of Themistius' paraphrase. This is not a surprising decision. On the contrary, it is apparent that this second edition has actually been conceived and arranged for the sake of a modern reader. This agile, accurate English translation undoubtedly comes as a secret, unspeakable relief to whomever was already at odds with the first, bulky edition. In general, this second edition is considerably much shorter than its predecessor and results in an acceptable, reassuring length (around 200 pages). The minimalist yet poignant introduction enables the reader to appreciate the burden of work required in these dire philological circumstances but spares them the philological discussion on stemmata and variants that was unforgivably given to the reader in the first publication. On the contrary, this introduction is also kind enough to educate the reader about the great value of a lost jewel from the ancient Greek past. It is almost obvious to say that Themistius' paraphrase was fundamental in shaping the reception of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* in Arabic and, by extension, Hebrew philosophy. Similarly to its philological twin, this edition too includes a running commentary that is considerably more agile than its predecessor, and a tripartite glossary — “English-Hebrew-Arabic Glossary,” “Hebrew-Arabic-English Index,” and “Arabic-Hebrew-English Index” — that is clearly an expansion on its previous version and allows for browsing Themistius' complex vocabulary from any direction one wishes — either for discovering how modern

philological terms were expressed in both Arabic and English or how a specific Arabic term was translated into Hebrew or how a specific Hebrew term had translated the corresponding Arabic term.

Given this general description of both publications, it is now possible to offer an example of what the experience of reading might be when approaching this extremely complex text. Simply put, the question is: how well do these twin texts serve the purpose of reading Themistius' paraphrase of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*?

My experience was positive but sometimes a little frustrated by the impractical necessity of skipping from one publication to another, the distribution of important remarks in many places, the overwhelming overabundance of philological details, and sometimes the surprising lack of observations on fundamental semantic shifts. I will try to make myself clear with an important example: the opening lines from Themistius' paraphrase. The text begins with a quite long paraphrase from a brief statement from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* that reads in Greek as *perì tes ousias he theoria; ton gar ousion ai archai kai ta aitia zetountari* (*Metaph.* 1069a18-19). This famous line was translated by David Ross in 1924 as follows: "substance is the subject of our inquiry; for the principles and the causes we are seeking are those of substances." This translation is a reference work, and therefore is also used by Dr Meyrav when discussing Aristotelian philosophy. Yet it is clear that Ross' rendering of *ousia* (literally: "being") with "substance" after the traditional Latin translation of *substantia* (literally: "what underlies") is seriously outdated and hardly reflects the latest development of metaphysical thinking, in the most part influenced by Martin Heidegger and, for instance, by his claim that *ousia* rather points to the "ontic" aspect of Being rather than to its "substance," under the influence of the Latin translation of *ousia* with *substantia*.

However, after securing the reading of Aristotle's original Greek text, one can open up Themistius' paraphrase and read it both in Arabic and Hebrew in Dr Meyrav's edition (*Themistius' Paraphrase*, pp 152-153) and then move to his notable running commentary on the corresponding passage (pp. 326-330). In his first work, as anticipated, Dr Meyrav does not offer any English translation of the text but actually discusses the opening lines in the Introduction. There one can find a "working translation" in a chart comparing – only in English – these formidable opening lines in the original Greek and surviving Hebrew translation. The English translation of Themistius' opening lines runs as follows: "Aristotle said: 'existent' is said in many ways. But since we set out to inquire into the principles of the existents, we only set out to inquire into the principles of substance, because substance is of the highest degree among all of the existents herein" (*Themistius' Paraphrase*, p. 136, table 55). In his second work, Dr Meyrav has aptly reworked this first translation and provided a more convincing one: "Aristotle said: 'existent' is said in many ways. But we, when we set out to enquire into the principles of the existing thing, we only set out to enquire into the principles of substance, because substance is the most fitting existent in this respect" (*Themistius On Aristotle*, p. 25). What can be learned from these – already extremely difficult – opening lines and Dr Meyrav's running commentary?

Dr Meyrav is extremely careful in providing the reader with a clear examination of the Aristotelian notion of “substance” and in its reception in Themistius’ paraphrase. His running commentary is quite generous on the topic (*Themistius’ Paraphrase*, pp. 326-329). In both publications, the running commentary to these opening lines is particularly interested in observing some changes when passing from the Arabic to the Hebrew text. The mass of philological information with which Dr Meyrav generously provides the reader has probably diverted the attention from other equally important philosophical notions that are sometimes a little neglected. For instance, it is puzzling to note that Dr Meyrav has never discussed – or failed to put this discussion in a clear, prominent position in his introduction and running commentary – the decisive semantic differences between formidable notions like the Greek *ousia* (from the verb “to be”), on the one hand, and the Arabic *mawjūd* the Hebrew *nimtza* (from the verb “to find”), on the other hand. While it is clear that the Hebrew notion was reproducing the Arabic form, it should not be neglected that the notion of Being was heavily discussed by al-Farabi and then by Avicenna, especially when they both argued whether the original Greek notion should be expressed either as *wujūd*, *mawjūd* or *huwiyya*. It is not necessary to recall Henry Corbin for appreciating the extraordinary transformation of the notion of Being in this trans-cultural context. It might be sufficient to say that Western scholarship has often argued that *wujūd* (and its derivatives) properly defines a “finding” rather than a “being” or “existence.”

Unfortunately, things are complicated further as Themistius’ paraphrase expands on the relatively short passage from Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* and mobilizes the notion of “substance” (*jawhar* and *‘etzem*), that is, “the most fitting existent” (*mawjūd* and *nimtza*). As it is clear from the previous quotations from his two works, Dr Meyrav has taken great care to reflect these semantic changes in his English translation but has never found it necessary to discuss them openly, perhaps by delivering part of his remarkable philological and philosophical acumen also to some basic explanation of the problematic notion of Being in a “Semitic” context. True, it has to be appreciated how Dr Meyrav reflects in his lexical choices Themistius’ remarkable care to distinguish between “existence” and “substance” on both a lexical and theoretical level. Nevertheless, an open discussion of important semantic shifts would have personally interested me much more than many specific philological and codicological minutiae that especially abound in Dr Meyrav’s first publication. Hopefully, he might consider delivering another excellent piece of scholarship on this topic in the near future.

These remarks do not intend in any way to depreciate the author of these two impressive works but rather force us to ask whether it was actually necessary to publish two texts – which are both mutually exclusive and complementary. There are important things that can only be found in one of the two texts, while a full comprehension of Themistius’ paraphrase still requires the use of both. Moreover, there are details that only the first philological edition generously provides, while scholarly maturity is only to be found in the second text. This should be clear: here is not simply a question of helping a less skillful reader who requires an English translation to orient himself in the intricacies of a philological nightmare.

Yes, an English translation perhaps helps in browsing a trilingual mess – between a lost Greek original, its lost Arabic translation, and the surviving Hebrew translation as a third, indirect witness of what has irremediably been lost. Nevertheless, there is a more subtle question. Someone is almost exhausted while trying to emerge from these textual and philological difficulties. In the end, the philological difficulties that are made present to the reader almost deprive him from the opportunity to read Themistius' text for what it actually is – the paraphrase of one of the most fundamental texts of Western metaphysics. Besides, why would anybody embark on reading this text if not for its invaluable content? There is nobody who would contest the assumption that Aristotle's *Metaphysics* has provided both West and East “rigorously thinking” about the question of Being and God. This circumstance alone already justifies the incredible effort to produce – and read – a modern edition of this text. Yet this should not excuse the redundant editorial choice to have the same text published twice in a few months while unnecessarily dispersing Dr Meyrav's fundamental scholarship into two separate publications that are equally valuable and necessary. This is a paradox that has haunted me while reading and enjoying both of these two books that can only be saluted as two of the most notable recent publications in Jewish Studies.