Willem Surenhuys’ Latin Translation of the Mishnah: The Ideal City of Panel 10

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Willem Surenhuys’ Latin Translation of the Mishnah: The Ideal City of Panel 10
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During his time in Amsterdam, Willem Surenhuys published the first complete Latin translation of the Mishnah. The six volumes, divided according to the six Mishnaic Orders (Hebrew: *sedarim*), were published from 1698 to 1703 with extraordinarily detailed etchings that depict specific rules from this late antique text. Two pages of etchings, illustrating 16 panels, followed by a section of four pages of explanatory text express the rabbinic rulings pertaining to the observance of the Sabbath from tractate *Eruvin*. In this paper, I examine this unique edition by focusing on a particular ruling from the tractate and on the etchings illuminating it. I first provide a brief background on Surenhuys to contextualize his work and Jewish-Christian relations during the time period. I then turn to panel 10 and its corresponding explanation to explore how Surenhuys, with the advisement of Jewish scholars, and Isaac Coenraads, the artist who produced the etchings, understood the rabbinic ruling from the Mishnah. I argue that panel 10 illustrates the rabbinic law of *Eruvin* Chapter 8, Mishnah 8 in an imagined reality of an ideal rabbinic city using Renaissance artistic practices of perspective, geometry, and monumentality to convey urban space as founded on rationality and order. The space in the etching is architecturally distinct and minimally populated; it is similar to depictions of urban settings in early modern images of ideal cities. By positioning the Jewish legal system in the ideal city of the Renaissance, the etching depicts the legal systems of *Eruvin* as being the source for Jews to live in an organized, stable, rational, and serene community wherein the law of the rabbis reigns supreme. The architecture functions as a metaphor for the Jewish legal system of the rabbis to be understood as proving good government and divine harmony.

**Surenhuys and the Latin Translation of the Mishnah**

Willem Surenhuys, a Dutch Christian scholar of Hebrew, was born around 1664 in the countryside of Gröningen. After attending the University of Gröningen, Surenhuys moved to
Amsterdam to take lessons in rabbinical literature with Jewish teachers. During this time, he took on the monumental task of publishing the first complete Latin translation of the Mishnah.

In his translation from the original Hebrew, Surenhuys used a Spanish translation with commentaries of Moses Maimonides and Abraham Bartenura, which had been available since the 1660s. As Peter van Rooden notes, he mistakenly attributed the Spanish translation to Jacob Abendana. While Surenhuys worked on his own Latin translation, word circulated that a Latin translation made previously by Jacob’s brother, Isaac, would soon be published. This influenced Surenhuys to halt the progress of his own translation, but when Isaac’s translation failed to materialize, Surenhuys resumed working on his translation till its successful publication.

The Mishnah of Surenhuys was published by the Amsterdam printers Gerardus and Jacobus Borstius. The edition contains commentary in Latin, with twenty-six of the sixty-three tractates offering text of earlier translations. According to van Rooden, Surenhuys included almost all published Latin translations, thus providing an implicit overview of the development of the Christian study of rabbinical literature. By dating the majority of the translations used by Surenhuys, van Rooden is able to identify the second half of the seventeenth century as the period in which Christian Hebraism produced most of its works on rabbinical literature.

When learning the translator’s background as a Dutch Christian, one might question why he translated a Jewish text. At the end of the fifteenth century, the Renaissance and Reformation became a scene for examining the original text of Scripture and Jewish literature. Christian

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3 Ibid.
4 Van Rooden cites that Surenhuys included almost all published Latin translations. He included Fagius, L’Empereru, Guisius, Ulmann, Sheringhama, Coccejus, Wagensil, Peringer, Sebastian Schmidt, Houting, Arnolid, Otho and Lund.
5 Ibid, 259.
Hebraists, scholars of Hebrew from Christian backgrounds, took an interest in the Tanakh, or Old Testament as called by Christians, and occasionally other Jewish texts. Surenuys believed that Christians should take interest in the Mishnah because of its divinely originated commentary on Old Testament law which prefigures Christ. As a Christian, Surenuys studied the Mishnah as a fruitful approach to understanding the New Testament. To gain a true understanding of rabbinical literature, the translator stressed the necessity of learning oral teachings from Jewish scholars. When Surenuys completed his translation, he showed it to several Amsterdam Jews to confirm it was free of error. After consulting several scholars, Surenuys decided on the published form of the Latin Mishnah. The scholars he consulted, both from the Dutch Republic and elsewhere, urged him to include the commentaries of Christian scholars who had published their translations of the Mishnah. Reluctantly, Surenuys followed their advice, showing an example of the close relationship between Jewish-Christian scholars during this period. Jewish rabbis and scholars were understood as a source for scholarly Christian Hebraism.

Panel 10: Eruvin Chapter 8, Mishnah 8

Etchings are found in the first three volumes of Surenuys’ Mishnah. The Jewish scholars that advised Surenuys extended their support beyond the translation by supplying the etchings. Isaac Coenraads, rabbi of the German synagogue in Amsterdam, played a central role in the creation of the etchings, and his death was the reason why the last three volumes lack

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6 Ibid., 263.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
Two pages of etchings [Figures 1 & 2] are structured into sections. Two columns of four rows are found on each page, making a total of 16 panels. Each panel in the top right corner has the word “TAB” followed by a number. The numbering starts with number one at the top left box, then goes across the two pages, and then down to the next row starting at the left again until number sixteen. Following the etchings is a section of 4 pages of text that seemingly explain the content of the illustrations. This section is titled, “TABULAE: De tractatu de Commiptionibus Terminis Sabbathici recollectae, quorum varii causae difficiliores pro locorum & aedificiorum fitu in figuris Geometricae demonstratantur” [Figure 3]. Above the title, the top right corner is numbered as “Pag. 88” in continuance of the etchings that are also numbered as 88. The title indicates that the panels illustrate terms of the Sabbath with explanatory text in the format of a table. The paragraphs in the section are noted as particular “TAB”s corresponding to the “TAB”s on each panel.

The panels illustrate and interpret some of the legal and ritual systems pertaining to the observance of the Sabbath, such as the Sabbath Boundary (tehum shabbat) and the Merging of Courtyards (eruv hatzerot). The latter, has to do with the prohibition of carrying objects outside the private domain on the Sabbath. Such carrying would create, according to the ancient rabbis, a new entity in the public domain (or in someone else’s private domain) and would, therefore, transgress the biblical law that forbids working on the Seventh Day. Although this system is rooted in the Hebrew Bible, Charlotte E. Fonrobert notes that Eruv is one of the most peculiar ritual system in rabbinic text as it has very little basis in biblical law.13 Compared to other ritual practices that are heavily supported biblically, such as dietary laws, menstrual impurity, and sexual prohibitions, Fonrobert finds that the institution of Eruv shows the creative ritual thinking

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12 Ibid., 262.
and law making of the rabbis.\textsuperscript{14} Eruv creates an opportunity for Jews to structure a barrier between insiders and outsiders, leading to the question of whether it is made to exclude and separate or to integrate.\textsuperscript{15}

Fonrobert explains that the forming of an eruv community establishes a boundary between Jews and non-Jews in regard to residential space. The eruv community is established by a collection of food items that together form the heart of the ritual. The food is collected and deposited in a suitable location within the neighborhood.\textsuperscript{16} Fonrobert suggests that the food stands as a symbolic representation of the community itself as it unifies and integrates the neighbors. In regard to what constitutes an eruv, the Mishnah states:

\begin{quote}
With all kinds [of food] may an eruv [of the courtyard] or shituf [of the street] be performed, except with water or salt; thus according to Rabbi Eliezer. Rabbi Joshua disagrees: A whole loaf of bread is a valid eruv. Even if it is baked from one seah [of flour] but is broken, one cannot effect an eruv with it. If it is a loaf the size of an issar but is whole, one can effect an eruv with it. (mEruvin 7:10)\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Despite these discrepancies between rabbis on what constitutes an eruv, the Mishnah retains the understanding that an eruv possesses symbolic integrity. Joining an eruv community permits Jews to carry any kind of object out of and into their place on the Sabbath.

In addition to the symbolism of the shared food item, which allows all Jewish members of a certain residential area to merge their private domains on the Sabbath, this ritual system has an architectural aspect. Gil Klein explains that by requiring “minor architectural adjustment of entryways into courtyards and alleys, the rabbis instituted a Jewish space on the local level of the neighborhood.”\textsuperscript{18} Such adjustments may include enlarging an existing beam, or extending a partition by a few centimeters. In this manner, communal space could be created in the Roman

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 10.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 12.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 13.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 57.
\end{itemize}
environment of Palestine without drawing too much attention from the authorities and without the need to erect monumental walls.

This unique rabbinic space can be seen in some of the panels in Surenhuys’ Mishnah. Panel 10 [Figure 4] illustrates the rabbinic ruling regarding drawing water from a well on the Sabbath. In the table that explains the panels, the section that appears to reference Panels 9 through 12 directs the reader to Mishnah 8 in chapter 8 of Eruvin as it indicates the illustrations as “belonging to the eighth Mishnah”.

Eurvin Chapter 8, Mishnah 8 states:

A balcony which is above water – they do not draw water from it on the Sabbath, unless they made for it a partition ten handbreadths high, whether above or below. And so two balconies, one above the other – [If] they made [a partition] for the one on top and did not do so for the one on the bottom, both of them are prohibited - unless they prepare an eruv. (mEruvin 8:8)\(^{19}\)

After examining the relevant passage in rabbinic literature, it is now possible to see the intentions of the artist. The panels illustrate the rabbinic legal system through the partition of ten handbreadths to permit the use of the well on the Sabbath. A balcony above water requires a partition whether above or below, with a sole function of marking the space as a part of a resident’s private domain. The partition would make the residents of this apartment conscious of what constitutes their private domain, thus allowing them to bring an object, in this case – water from the well – into their home on the Sabbath.

In the architecture throughout the panels, specifically the related 9 through 12, details of the residential buildings change including the arches, post and lintels, windows, columns, rooftops, and doorways. The artist does not conceptualize the rulings on the same building but takes the viewer across different buildings to convey the laws. The etchings’ explicit task is to

communicate the rabbinic law that divides Jews as insiders and non-Jews as outsiders in relationship to residential space. Through ritual and the architectural addition of a partition, the building is marked symbolically and physically as a unified eruv community. However, the etchings are a product of the understandings and motives of Coenraads, Surenhuys’, and any scholars that were consulted. By using the artistic practices and values of Renaissance art, the architecture of panel 10 becomes a metaphor for good government and divine harmony.

The scene of Panel 10 displays distinct architectural styles and is minimally populated. In this regard, the space in the etching resembles that of other urban scenes from the art of the Renaissance, in which an idealized and empty city is depicted. Perspective, geometry, and monumentality serve to establish urban space in such art as founded on rationality and order. These three tools function in the production of the socially, aesthetically and philosophically ideal city of early modern humanism.

Three Ideal City paintings, each named after the collections in which they are housed, epitomize the theme of the perfect city in the art of the Renaissance. The Ideal City of Baltimore, ca. 1480-1484 [Figure 5], attributed to architect and artist Fra Carnevale, shows the structured environment of Urbino as shaped by the humanist values of Leon Battista Alberti and the duke of Urbino, Federico da Montefeltro. Five Roman buildings enclose three sides of an open square and are illuminated by the morning light. At the center is a Roman triumphal arch, suggesting resemblance to the Arch of Constantine and his military victories that brought stability to the empire. The Walters Art Museum, where the painting is located, suggests that perhaps the arch is blank in order to be filled by Federico’s imagination of his own victories. He was the greatest

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 65.
military commander of their day and his success secured the stability, expansion, prosperity, and fame of the duchy. 23 An amphitheater is to the left of the triumphal arch, however, rather than the crumbling porticos of the first century Colosseum, the porticos are whole, perhaps representing the importance of providing places of entertainment for the populace. Hansen and Spicer note that the octagonal baptistery to the right of the triumphal arch would have been celebrated as an ancient temple adapted to Christian use and designed by Florentine architects as a reference to Roman architecture. The Colosseum and baptistery seem to establish the monumentality of an ordered city and its imperial status. Alongside the ancient buildings flanking the triumphal arch are neo-classical residential buildings dignified with classical architecture. 24 The virtues communicated through the architecture are complemented with “Roman” allegorical sculpture on top of columns in the foreground that represent personifications of virtues of good conduct or rule following ancient philosophy: Justice with her scales, Moderation with her pitcher of water to mix her basin of wine, Fortitude with a column, and Liberality with a cornucopia to communicate princely magnificence. 25 The spaciousness of the square with its stairs and statues highlight the potentiality of supreme perfection, devoid of the messiness of daily life and mundane activities. Adding to the expression of good rule, the fountain’s ability to provide the populace with good water was a sign of magnanimity. 26 Hence, architecture is used here to communicate the prosperity that is gained from living under a virtuous ruler who tends to the welfare of his people.

Coenraads uses the attributions of Renaissance urban landscapes in his portrayal of rabbinic rulings. The viewer of the panel is met with an ideal and rational city where Jewish law

23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 66.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
reigns. The urban landscape of panel 10 is almost devoid of human life, following the characteristics of an *Ideal City*. Like the renaissance painting, the architecture in panel 10 utilizes linear perspective. Alberti’s treatise *On Painting* explains the principles behind *The Ideal City*, including the tactic of linear perspective.\(^{27}\) His work lays out a mathematically derived system that accomplishes the challenge of projecting three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional surface.\(^{28}\) Hansen and Spicer explain that, “*The Ideal City* celebrates the values embodied in a well-ordered society ruled by a virtuous prince”.\(^{29}\) The *Ideal City of Berlin* and *The Ideal City of Urbino* [Figures 6 & 7] are additional fifteenth-century Italian renaissance paintings that are too designed through perspectival composition to paint a beautiful harmonious city where good rule organizes the urban center. Though different, the ideal cities are similar as Alberti’s ideology influenced their design. They seek to create a conclusive vision of the idealized city. Alberti and figures of his stature allied the cosmological geometry established by Plato with divine harmony.\(^{30}\) Aesthetic perfection was a function of the mathematical perfection since essential beauty was found in ideal measurements.\(^{31}\) “The cosmos were understood as being rationally arranged as physical representation of order and right,” Ruth Eaton states.\(^{32}\) By conforming to the same artistic practices, the ideal city of panel 10 achieves the harmony of the cosmos. By using the pictorial practices of the Renaissance, Surenhuys and Coenraads are placing the architecture of Mishnaic rulings in the imagined reality of an ideal rabbinic city. In such a city, the legal systems of *Eruvin* allow Jews to live in an organized, stable, rational, and serene community wherein the law of the rabbis reigns supreme. This is no longer the complex and

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\(^{27}\) Ibid., 62.  
\(^{28}\) Ibid., 65.  
\(^{29}\) Ibid., 62.  
\(^{31}\) Ibid.  
\(^{32}\) Ibid.
socially diverse reality of the Roman city from the time of the Mishnah, but rather the reality where only Mishnaic law determines the shape of the architecture.

**Loyola Marymount University’s Edition of The Etchings of Eruvin**

Before concluding, I would like to add a note about the copy of Surenhuys’ translation in LMU’s Special Collections. Each volume is organized according to the six Mishnaic Orders (Hebrew: *sedarim*). The first Order of the Mishnah is called *Zeraim*, meaning “Seeds”. The order is concerned with agricultural laws, especially in the setting of the Land of Israel. The two pages of etchings and its explanatory text in the Mishnah are found in volume 1 of Surenhuys’ Latin Mishnah held by Loyola Marymount University (LMU). When examining the panels, it becomes obvious that the etchings and the text they illuminate do not fit the content of the first Seder. The illustrations with the explanations on the Sabbath better fit the second volume, which *Seder Mo’ed*. The meaning of *Mo’ed* in Hebrew is “Holiday.” The Order consists of twelve tractates regarding laws of the various festivals of the Jewish year. Two tractates concerning *Shabbat*, the Hebrew word for “Sabbath”, are at the beginning of the Order: tractate *Shabbat*, followed by tractate *Eruvin*. The explanatory text of the etchings clearly connect to tractate *Eruvin*.

When comparing LMU’s edition of the translation, which is kept in the library’s special collection, with a digital scan available on Google Books, I found that the etchings in the digital copy were located after the section called “De Commiitionibus Termini Sabbatici.” This location was different in LMU’s edition, where the etchings are within “Tractatus de Re Dubia.” The reason for this discrepancy was that the etchings and texts on the Sabbath that pertain to the

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34 Ibid., 79.
35 Ibid.
panels I examine are in volume 2 of the digital copy, but in volume 1 of LMU’s edition. To further confirm the error, I referred to a second digital copy, from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid which was available also on Google Books. This second digital copy matched the organization of the former. It appears, therefore, this material from Seder Mo’ed was misplaced and attached to Seder Zeraim. The placement of the etchings and table of text are peculiar once the error has been revealed. Unlike the traditional manner in which the other pages are bound in the volume, this section seems externally attached [figure 8]. The reason and circumstances of this misplacement are unclear and would require further investigation.

**Conclusion**

In the ancient context of the Mishnah, through ritual and the architectural addition of a partition, the buildings symbolically and physically establish a unified *eruv* community. For the ancient rabbis, this symbolic ritual community was necessary precisely because the reality of the Roman city was far from ideal and the Jewish community was far from being unified. In early modern times, however, the pictorial representation of the Mishnaic text in Coenraads’ etchings finally made this urban situation a reality. By positioning the Jewish legal system in the ideal city of the Renaissance – with its implications of good government and divine harmony – the art in Surenhuys’ translation goes beyond the simple task of illustrating the text. It paints a picture in which the rabbis’ rituals of unifying the community in complex social conditions have already achieved their goals.

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36 Google Books provides several digital copies of Surenhuys’ Mishnah.
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oralium systema, cum clarissimorum rabbinorum Maimonidis & Bartenorae commentariis integris; quibus accedunt variorum auctorum notae ac versiones in eos quos ediderunt codices / Latinitate donavit ac notis illustravit Guilielmus Surenhusius.


Accessed through Google Books.

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Figures

Figure 1: Willem Surenhuys, “Amsterdam Latin translation of the Mishnah,” 88, left side etchings, Loyola Marymount University’s volume one, c. 1698 – 1703. Phone scanned image.

Figure 2: Willem Surenhuys, “Amsterdam translation of the Mishnah,” 88, right side etchings, Loyola Marymount University’s volume one, c. 1698 – 1703. Phone scanned image.
Figure 3: Willem Surenhus, “Amsterdam Latin translation of the Mishnah,” 88, back page of etchings and TABULAE: De tractatu de Commisionibus Terminis Sabbatizici recollectae, quorum vari et difficilior e pro locorum & adificiorum fit in figuris Geometricae demonstrantur, c. 1698 – 1703. Loyola Marymount University’s volume one. Phone scanned image.
Figure 4: Willem Surenhus, “Amsterdam Latin translation of the Mishnah,” 88, left side etchings, panel/TAB 10, c. 1698 – 1703. Loyola Marymount University’s volume one. Phone scanned image.
Figure 5: *The Ideal City*, Fra Carneval (attributed) c. 1480-84. Oil on panel, 80.3 x 220 cm. The Walters Art Museum.

Figure 7: The *Ideal City of Berlin*, Francesco di Giorgio Martini (attributed), c. 1490. Oil on poplar, 131 x 233 cm. Gemäldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

Figure 7: The *Ideal City of Urbino*, Luciano Laurana (attributed), c. 1470. Oil on panel, 67.7 x 239.4 cm. Galleria Nazionale delle Marche.
**Figure 8:** Willem Surenhus, “Amsterdam Latin translation of the Mishnah,” 88, etching attachments within the volume, c. 1698 – 1703. Loyola Marymount University’s volume one, photograph.