A THOUSAND YEARS OF BIBLICAL TRANSLATION – INTO GREEK AND INTO SYRIAC, 3RD CENT. BCE – 7TH CENT. CE

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Abstract: In this paper I am proposing to do something that may well seem foolhardy: namely, to trace, over the course of an entire millennium, the changing attitudes to the way in which one should go about translating a text that is considered to be sacred, or otherwise authoritative. My time span runs from the third century BCE to the seventh century CE, and the main languages involved are Hebrew, Greek, and Syriac, although Latin and Armenian will also feature very briefly. I deliberately stop with the seventh century since the situation changes radically with the replacement of Greek by Arabic as the dominant cultural language of the Middle East. I hope, nevertheless, that the Late Antique background of translation practice will also be of some interest and relevance to those who are primarily interested in biblical translation of a later period.
Keywords: translation, Greek, Syriac, Scripture, Jerome.

My starting point, the third century BCE, is for a very practical reason: it is only in the Hellenistic period that we first encounter translation into Greek of any oriental religious text (cf. Brock 1972, 11-30; Rochette 1995, 151-166; Rutherford 2016, 12-16), and the one text for which we have surviving evidence is, of course, the Greek translation of the Five Books of the Hebrew Pentateuch, the Septuagint *sensu stricto.* Today, when we are familiar with a plethora of translations of the Hebrew Bible, it is easy to forget how *un*precedented this first biblical translation was, but it was no exaggeration when David Wasserstein commented that this initial translation of the Hebrew Pentateuch into Greek was "surely the most momentous literary enterprise in the annals of Western mankind" (Wasserstein 2006, ix).

Whether or not this initial translation was sponsored at the Court of Ptolemy II, as the Jewish pseudepigraph, the so-called Letter of Aristeas (2nd century BCE) would have us believe, or whether (as would seem to me more likely) the initiative stemmed from the religious and cultural needs of the Egyptian Jewish community, is not our concern here. What the Letter of Aristeas does *indirectly* indicate to us, however, is something different, for several details in its narrative of the origins of the Septuagint are clearly aimed at defending the original translation against those who wanted to 'correct' it and bring it into closer line with the Hebrew original (Brock 1992, 301-338).

Today, thanks to the discovery in the Judaean Desert of a fragmentary manuscript, dating from the first century BCE, containing a Greek translation

of the Twelve Prophets (Tov, 1990)[1] whose text had been subjected to a careful revision on the basis of the underlying Hebrew, we are able to learn much more about the work of these early 'correctors', and it has become evident that, by the second/first century BCE, Greek-speaking Jewish communities were faced with a dilemma: as the translator's Preface to the Greek translation of the Wisdom of Ben Sira indicates, there was an awareness that the Greek translations of 'the Law and the Prophets' did not always reflect the Hebrew accurately. This meant that there were two options available for diaspora Judaism – to revise, or not to revise, the original translation. The position of the author of the Letter of Aristeas, with his emphasis on the credentials of the original translators, was taken up and further developed by Philo in the first century CE. In his Life of Moses Philo claims that the translators were no less than "prophets and priests of mysteries, whose sincerity and singleness of thought has enabled them to concur with the purest of spirits, the spirit of Moses" (Philo, *Life of Moses*, II.40). Accordingly, he claims, the Septuagint should not be considered a daughter version of the Hebrew, but a 'sister', (Philo, Life of Moses, II.40) that is, of equal status with the Hebrew original – and hence, by implication, there was not any need for any correction.

As heir to first-century Palestinian and diaspora Judaism, the early Christian Church inherited both attitudes, 'to revise' and 'not to revise', but each in a different context. As far as the Septuagint itself was concerned, it was Philo's view that was taken over and developed, with various different understandings of the nature of the inspiration behind the Greek translation. The opposite position, that of the revisers, was rarely taken in connection with the Septuagint, the one major exception being Origen with his hexaplaric revision of the Septuagint, bringing it into line with the Hebrew text (and, of course, in the Latin world, Jerome). These, however, were exceptional undertakings, and for the most part Christian scholars of Late Antiquity had no interest in the original language from which the Greek Septuagint was translated.

The viewpoint of the 'revisers' was, nevertheless, adopted when it was the case of translating the *Greek* Bible – and indeed any other Greek text bearing a particular authority – into some *other* language: this, as we will shortly see, is especially well illustrated in the case of both biblical and non-biblical translations from Greek into Syriac. But before turning to Syriac, it is necessary to look briefly at the phenomenon of translation in the wider context of the Graeco-Roman world in general.

It is clear, above all from comments by Cicero (himself a translator from Greek into Latin), and later – and influentially – from Jerome's discussion, that there were two completely different approaches to translation in current use in

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[1] The significance of the fragments was first brought out by D. Barthélemy in his *Les devanciers d'Aquila* (Vetus Testamentum Suppl. 10; Leiden, 1963); cf. also Kreuzer 2021, 449-458.

the Graeco-Roman world: on the one hand, diplomatic, legal and commercial translation was the sphere of the *interpres;* (Brock 1970, 69-87; Brock 1983; Brock 2007, 935-946, 957-959) for purely practical reasons the *interpres* need to keep his translation close to the original. By contrast, the translator of a literary text aimed much more at a re-creation; Cicero thus says he himself translated *ut orator*, and not *ut interpres* (Cicero, *de optimo genere oratorum,* §14). Similarly, Horace tells the would-be translator of a Greek literary work into Latin *not* to translate it 'like a *fidus interpres*' (Horace, *Ars poetica*, line 133), that is, a slavish hack-translator, *fidus* being here used in a deprecating sense. Before too long, however, the sense of *fidus* was to be understood in quite the opposite way, and the *fidus interpres* becomes the model of the faithful translator, continuing into the Western Middle Ages (Schwarz 1944, 73-78).

The man who best explains how this dramatic reversal came about is Jerome, in his Letter 57, addressed to Pammachius (cf. Bartelink 1980). There he explains that his normal practice in translating from Greek into Latin is to render the original *sensus de sensu*, in other words, following in the footsteps of Cicero, his own much admired literary model. But Jerome goes on to make a very important exception to this practice: *absque in scripturis sanctis*, "apart from in the case of the Sacred Scriptures". There, by contrast, where "even the order of words is a *mysterium*", the appropriate procedure is to proceed *verbum e verbo.*

Jerome's words simply reflect the practice of the Jewish revisers of the Septuagint, mentioned earlier. Although Jerome's letter was certainly not known to the various Syriac scholars who were engaged at different times in revising the Syriac Gospel text, the widespread attitude which it reflects certainly was. The textual history of the Syriac Gospel text in fact follows the same course as that of the early text of the Septuagint. The earliest translation of the Greek New Testament into Syriac, namely the Old Syriac Gospels (c. 200 CE), is uneven in character, and quite free in places, due to the absence of any earlier model or precedent to follow. Sporadic 'corrections', bringing the Syriac text closer to the Greek original, are already to be found in one or other of the surviving Old Syriac Gospel manuscripts, and this process of correcting the text evidently culminated in what we know today as the Peshitta, around c. 400 CE; this particular revision was evidently so effectively propagated that it soon acquired the authoritative status which it still enjoys today in the Syriac Churches. For a couple of centuries, however, its status was open to challenge, and two further revisions were made in the Syrian Orthodox tradition.

The first of these, which unfortunately is only known from quotations, was instigated by Philoxenus, bishop of Mabbug (d. 523) (Brock 1981, 325-343); although this revision is generally known as the 'Philoxenian', the reviser was in fact Philoxenos's chorepiskopos, Polycarp, who completed his work in 507/8. In commissioning Polycarp's work, Philoxenos's motivation becomes clear

from various remarks which he makes in his Commentary on the Prologue of John (de Halleux 1977, 53):

Those who translated the Scriptures from Greek into Syriac were not concerned to preserve the precise terms used among the Greeks, nor the true sense; instead, they devised and put whatever pleased them; or they used wording they considered more in harmony with the usage of the Syriac language.

Adapting Philoxenos's criticism of the Peshitta New Testament to Jerome's terminology, Philoxenos is saying that, not only is the Peshitta's translation not *verbum de verbo*, but it is, in places, not even *sensus de sensu,* in that the rendering is dangerously misleading. Philoxenos illustrates this from the Peshitta's rendering of Hebrews 5:7: referring to the Incarnation, the Greek original there has "He who in the days of his flesh...". Philoxenos comments:

Instead of this (the translators of the Peshitta) rendered it as "When he was clothed in the flesh", and instead of translating Paul, they veered towards the position of Nestorius, who cast the body on to the Word as one does a garment on to an ordinary body, or as purple is put on an emperor.

In other words, the phraseology of the Peshitta unwittingly lent itself open to supporting the dyophysite/ two-nature Christology of the Miaphysite Philoxenos's theological opponents. I say that the Peshitta translators acted "unwittingly", since they were in fact simply using the standard early Syriac metaphor used in connection with the Incarnation (Brock 1982, 11-40).

In view of the fact that, in Philoxenos's opinion, "those of old, who undertook to translate certain passages of the Scriptures, made mistakes in many things, either intentionally, or through ignorance", it is for this reason, he says: – we have now taken the trouble to have the Holy Scriptures translated anew from Greek into Syriac – the result being the revision by Polycarp known today as the 'Philoxenian'.

It seems very likely that Philoxenos was also behind a revision of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, where the early Syriac translation had rendered the two key Greek terms *esarkōthē* (*lit.* 'was enfleshed') and *enanthrōpēse* (*lit.* 'became inhominate') by, respectively, *lbesh pagra* (*lit.* 'he put on a body', using the clothing metaphor to which Philoxenos objected, and *hwa barnasha* (*lit.* 'he became a human being'). The older terms were now replaced by two neologisms, the verbal forms *etbassar* ('he was enfleshed', based on *besra* 'flesh') and *etbarnash* ('he was inhominated', based on *barnasha*), both exact calques of the Greek verbal forms (Halleux 1978, 161-190; Gribomont 1977, 283-94).

Philoxenos was clearly not alone in wanting translations to be closer renderings of the Greek, for this can be observed from the translation practice of a number of Syriac translations which date from around the turn of the fifth/sixth century (Brock 1983, 1-14). Characteristic of this search for greater

precision in translation is the employment of these two neologisms to describe the Incarnation. In a couple of cases we also have a preface by the Syriac translator in which the reader is specifically warned that the new policy has been adopted for dealing with biblical quotations which occur within the work being translated: no longer will these quotations be adapted to the biblical version familiar to the reader (which also happens to be the usual modern practice in English); instead, the form of the Greek biblical quotation will be translated as it stands, – even though it may at times be considerably different from the Peshitta, the biblical text familiar to the reader.

This shift in practice neatly marks the transition point in the move away, in translation practice, from a reader-oriented approach to a text-oriented one, a shift occasioned, *inter alia*, by the increasing prestige in which both the source texts and the source language are now viewed. No longer is the text being brought to the reader; instead, the translator's aim is primarily to bring the reader to the text – which increasingly acts like Aristotle's unmoved mover.

Over the course of the sixth century Syriac translations of Patristic Greek texts came to adopt more and more Jerome's *verbum de verbo* approach. This can nicely be seen from a note by the translator of a work by Theodosios, Patriarch of Alexandria (d. 566) (Chabot 1907, 40; van Roey, Allen 1994, 108):

> This Discourse was translated and interpreted from Greek into Syriac word for word, without alteration in so far as possible, so as to indicate, not just the sense, but, by its very words, the words in the Greek; and for the most part not one letter has been added or subtracted, provided the requirements of the (Syriac) language have not hindered this.

By the early seventh century the Philoxenian revision of the Syriac New Testament, made a century earlier, no longer matched up to the latest developments in the art of translating Greek into Syriac 'as far as possible' *verbum de verbo.* Accordingly, a need was evidently felt for yet a further revision, and this was supplied by the Harklean New Testament, undertaken by Thomas of Harkel (Heraclea) in a monastery outside Alexandria in the middle of the second decade of the seventh century. Whereas, in the case of the 'Philoxenian' revision, we have Philoxenos's reasons for undertaking it, but we do not have the text itself, in the case of the Harklean, we have the text, but not any information about the motivation behind it. Accordingly, the rationale behind it needs to be deduced from the character of the translation. This can perhaps best be illustrated by some examples where the practice of the Harklean is contrasted with that of the Peshitta:

> - *chaire* (e.g. Luke 1:28, at the Annunciation): the Peshitta opts for a dynamic equivalent for the angel Gabriel's greeting, *shlam leky* (lit. 'peace to you'); by contrast Thomas provides the formal equivalent, *ḥday* (lit. 'rejoice').

- The Harklean will often prefer an etymological rendering: thus, while the Peshitta employs ʿawla, 'wickedness' for Greek anomia, Thomas represents the Greek alpha privative, la namosayuta 'non-lawfulness'.
- eusebeia is rendered by the Peshitta and other early translators as deḥlat alaha (lit. 'fear of God'), whereas Thomas seeks to represent the Greek element eu- by employing a neologism which is already occasionally found in certain sixth-century translations, shappirut deḥlta (lit. 'beauty of fear').[2]
- The Harklean will retain the grammatical categories of the Greek; thus, where the Peshitta has a genitival circumlocution to represent a Greek adjective (e.g. ruḥa d-qudsha, 'Spirit of holiness' for hagion pneuma), the Harklean will represent the Greek adjective by a Syriac adjective (ruḥa qadisha).
- In general, the Harklean seeks to represent Greek tenses precisely, preserve Greek word order, and to ensure an exact correspondence with Greek particles.

These are all essentially philological, and not theological, concerns; the emphasis is on the importance of the signifiant, the 'signifier' or verbum, at the expense (as we would say) of the signifié, 'what is signified' or sensus. Evidently, from the point of view of the seventh-century revisers, the signifié lay in close connection with the signifcant, and not in any opposition to it. Thus, in contrast to Philoxenos's theological concerns, it would appear that the interests of Thomas were basically philological, revising the Peshitta New Testament in accordance with the latest developments in translation technique, where the aim was to make the translation reflect the original in as many ways as possible, and to produce what can justifiably be designated as a "mirror" translation.

These techniques had been developed primarily in the translation of authoritative Greek Patristic authors, although the underlying choice of verbum de verbo, rather than sensus de sensu, had originally been made under the influence of the practice for biblical translation, as expressed so clearly by Jerome.

The adoption of current translation techniques by Thomas for the purpose of revising the New Testament, in turn provided a model and incentive for revised translations, not only of patristic, but also of certain secular texts that were held to be authoritative. Thus, the seventh century witnessed a series of revisions of earlier translations of works by a number of Greek authors which had acquired such a status.

The earliest of these was undertaken by Paul, bishop of Edessa, while he was temporarily living in Cyprus as a refugee from the Persian occupation of Edessa. The Discourses of Gregory of Nazianzus, 'the Theologian' par excellence, had originally been translated into Syriac in the late fifth or early sixth century. Paul's revised translation, completed in 623/4, followed very much the same translation techniques as those adopted by Thomas for the

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[2] For this feature, see S.P. Brock, "Εὐδοκία – šappirut şebyana and related forms", in the Festschrift for Andreas Juckel (Piscataway NJ, forthcoming).

Harklean. In the case of the Homilies of another Cappadocian Father, Basil of Caesarea, the original translation, made in the early fifth century, was so free and paraphrastic, that it was necessary to make a completely new translation.

Revised translations were also made of select secular writings. It was not until the early sixth century that Greek medical and philosophical works were first translated into Syriac (Hugonnard-Roche 2004; 2011, 45-86). These early translations were fairly reader oriented, and so by the seventh century it was felt that, in the case of the early books of Aristotle's *Organon*, or 'Tool', these, along with Porphyry's *Eisagoge,* were in need or revision, and in several cases manuscripts of both the original translation and of the revision survive. Those who undertook the work were mostly members of the Syrian Orthodox hierarchy who had been trained at the famous Monastery of Qenneshre, on the river Euphrates. Significantly, this is also known to have been the Monastery where Thomas of Harkel had studied Greek.

Best known of these scholarly revisers of the seventh century is Jacob of Edessa, working at the very end of the century. Exceptionally, he was involved in all three spheres of translation, biblical, patristic, and philosophical. As far as the Church Fathers and philosophy are concerned, Jacob provided revised translations of the sixth-century translation of Severus of Antioch's 125 *Cathedral Homilies*, and of Aristotle's *Categories*. His work on the biblical text, however, was of a different character: evidently his aim was to provide a fusion of both Greek and Syriac textual traditions of certain books of the Old Testament, thus falling outside the present concerns (Salvesen 2015, 239-254).

It is clear that, even in the late seventh century, many decades after the Arab conquests, Greek was still an important language of culture and administration in Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia, and at least in learned circles Greek retained its status of high prestige; accordingly, the ideal of mirror-translation remained the translator's aim. This was, of course, to change in the following centuries, and it is no surprise that, in the radically altered circumstances of the 'Translation Movement' under the Abbasid Caliphs, expert translators like Hunayn ibn Ishaq in the ninth century reverted to Jerome's ideal for non-biblical translation, *sensus de sensu* (Brock 1991, 139-163).

The seventh century thus represents the climax in the shift from free to literal translation in the Syriac sphere. Intriguingly, the same phenomenon is to be observed in the seventh-century translations from Greek into both Latin and Armenian. In the case of Latin, this can be seen in the various translations of seventh-century conciliar documents (Riedinger, 1979) while in Armenian it is witnessed by the 'Hellenophile movement' (Terian 1982, 175-186; Calzolari 2023).

Having reached, in the case of Syriac translations from Greek, my chronological limit of c.700 for the present exploration, it is time to turn back to look briefly at the changing attitudes to biblical translation in Rabbinic

Judaism. As was seen earlier, in Hellenistic Judaism two contrasting attitudes had emerged by the time when Christianity first emerged. Whereas Philo and others held that the original translation of the Pentateuch into Greek had the same status as the Hebrew original, the translators themselves having been inspired, others held that the original translation was inadequate and in need of correction, a process that culminated in the work of Aquila of Pontus in the early second century CE. Aquila's approach to translating the Hebrew biblical text into Greek was in many ways very similar to that of Thomas in his revision of the Syriac New Testament half a millennium later.

When the emperor Justinian legislated in the mid sixth century for what biblical versions the diaspora Jewish population were allowed to use in Synagogue, he specified both Aquila's version and the Septuagint. Does this imply that both were in current use in diaspora Jewish communities? Unfortunately, the passage in the Novella is open to several different interpretations (Smelik 2012, 141-163; Veltri, Salvesen, Krivoruchko 2021, 460, 504-5). In any case, it is known from medieval Jewish Greek biblical glosses that Aquila's version remained influential. Intriguingly, his principles of *verbum de verbo* translation were evidently taken a step further in a medieval Jewish translation of Jonah where even the gender of Hebrew nouns was represented: thus *ruaḥ* 'wind' is feminine in Hebrew, and so at Jonah 1:4 the Greek *anemos* (grammatically masculine) is treated as a feminine noun. Interestingly, this is a practice which the ninth-century Latin writer Agobard stated ought to be the case with a text regarded as being verbally inspired (Brock 1970, 87).

Much ink has been spilled on the relationship between Aquila and the 'Onqelos' to whom the official Jewish Aramaic translation of the Pentateuch is attributed. What is of relevance in the present context, is the fact that both the Greek Aquila and the Aramaic Onqelos are fully in the tradition of *verbum e verbo* translation. This is in contrast with the rather freer fragmentary earlier Aramaic translations from Qumran. A second important difference lies in their respective formats: whereas the Qumran Aramaic translations are free-standing, manuscripts of Onqelos (admittedly all medieval) invariably present the Aramaic translation as subordinate to the Hebrew: for each verse, before the Aramaic translation is given, the opening words of the Hebrew original are given. Interestingly, this layout is also found in a fragmentary Jewish Greek translation of Ecclesiastes from the Cairo Geniza[3] (de Lange 1996, 71-78). The visibly secondary status of the translations reflects, in the case of Aramaic, the victory of Hebrew over Aramaic that is witnessed in Rabbinic literature, with Hebrew replacing Aramaic as the primordial language (Rubin 1998, 306-333; Moss 2010, 120-137). In the case of the Greek fragment, the subordination of

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[3] The Greek translation is written in Hebrew script.

the translation reflects something of the later Rabbinic negative attitude to the Septuagint (*Massekhet Sefer Torah*, I, 8-9, in Wasserstein 2006, 69-70):

> The day that the Seventy Elders wrote the Torah in Greek for king Ptolemy was as bad for Israel as the day when they made the Golden Calf. For the Torah could not properly be translated.

As the prestige of Hebrew as the sacred language of Scripture increased over time, this 'language of the Sanctuary' (as it was termed) attracted more and more text-oriented translations, eventually ending up with the position that no translation at all could have any authority – a position taken over with reference to the Qur'an in Muslim tradition. Earlier, and in very different contexts, similar claims of the untranslatability of sacred texts had been made by the Neoplatonist Iamblichus, and by the author of Treatise XVI of the Hermetic Corpus (Iamblichus, *On Mysteries* 7.5 in Brock 1970, 76).

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At this point, it is worth looking back briefly on the dramatic changes that took place in approaches to translation over the course of the millennium, between the third century BCE and the seventh century CE.

The lack of any precedent in the Greek world for a translation of an extensive oriental religious text such as the Hebrew Pentateuch meant that the initial translators had to experiment, all the more so since the Hebrew Pentateuch, being part narrative and part legal in content, cut across what was to become the standard practice in the Graeco-Roman world, namely the literal approach of the *interpres* for legal and diplomatic texts, as opposed to the very free approach (that of Cicero's *orator*) for literary texts. As a result, the original Septuagint translation was uneven in character, and once this was realised, there were two basic choices to be made: either to consider the original translators to have been inspired, or to revise the translation and bring it into a closer relationship with the source language.

Hellenistic Judaism provides evidence for both approaches, and not surprisingly both were inherited by Judaism's offshoot, Christianity. Subsequently, however, Rabbinic Judaism dropped the first approach and carried the second approach to its logical conclusion, that the Hebrew original was so sacred that no translation could have any authority on its own – the attitude taken over in Islam.

By contrast, Christianity, which soon lost contact with the Hebrew source language of the Old Testament, followed Philo in holding the Septuagint in its own right to be inspired (and any differences from the Hebrew to be due to subsequent Jewish tampering with the Hebrew text). The second approach, that of the revisers, however, was taken over, not only for subsequent biblical

translation, this time *from* Greek, but also extended, especially in the Syriac sphere, to all non-biblical translations of texts which were considered to be authoritative, whether religious or secular. Horace's *fidus interpres* has been transformed into 'the faithful translator' who does not interpose himself or his own interpretation between the original and the reader. It is now the interpretative translator who is blameworthy, since, consciously or not, he may (in Philoxenos's words) 'veer towards' a heretical interpretation of the biblical text.

The attitudes to translation of the ancient biblical translators and revisers, both Jewish and Christian, at which we have been looking, are diametrically opposed to almost all modern approaches to biblical translation, where the prime concern is communication, although there are some notable exceptions, such as the German translation of F. Rosenzweig (Buber, Rosenzweig, 1930) and the French of A. Chouraqui (1985).

In the history of Western Christianity, the transition from the approach to biblical translation, so neatly set out by Jerome, to that in practice today, only took place in the period of the Renaissance and Reformation[4], long after the cut-off date for the present paper. By contrast, in the Arabic-speaking East, the Translation Movement sponsored by the Abbasid Caliphs required a return to Jerome's *sensus de sensu* practice very much earlier.

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[4] W. Schwarz, *Principles and Problems of Biblical Translation* (Cambridge, 1955) remains a helpful discussion.

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