The Ancient Translations of the Bible for Its Modern Translators

Takamitsu Muraoka

The Bible is unique among the world literature, not only for its message and literary qualities, but also for the fact that people have been translating it very, very long time. The first such attempt we know of goes back to the third century BC, and that is of course a Greek translation of the Jewish Bible, the so-called Septuagint.[1] This was followed, within a matter of a few centuries, by a few more translations into other ancient languages of the region such as a Jewish dialect of Aramaic (Targum), another dialect of Aramaic, namely Syriac (Peshitta), and Latin (Jerome's Vulgate), all translations made directly from the original Bible.

It is often taken for granted that the Bible is translated in order to bring its message to a specific community. It is thus motivated by educational or missionary designs. Such a goal is best achieved by making the Bible available in a language easily comprehensible by the masses of the community, not its elite who might know Greek or Hebrew. According to the famous second-century BC letter of Aristeas, it was precisely this sort of concern that convinced King Ptolemy II of the desirability of having the Jewish Bible translated into a language which was used and understood by the cultured ruling class and the upper echelon of the time, namely Hellenistic Greek.[2] According to the commonly heard theory, the Septuagint was

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1) It is generally agreed that the translation project took several generations to complete, and the first part to be done into Greek was naturally the Pentateuch. The dating of various parts of the translation is still a disputed issue. Nor is it known whether or not a complete written translation of a major segment such as the Pentateuch was preceded by sporadic, tentative or private written translations of parts of the Bible, say, the Decalogue or some major poems or psalms. For a fairly recent discussion of these general issues, see M. Harl et al., *La Bible grecque des Septante: du judaïsme hellénistique au christianisme ancien*(Paris, 1988), pp. 39-79.

2) Pseudo-Letter of Aristeas §10-11. The historicity of this anecdote is looked upon by many scholars with more than a modicum of scepticism. However, Gutman made,

produced against the background of the assumed deteriorating knowledge of Hebrew in the Hellenistic diaspora or the Targum came about to meet the needs of Palestinian or Syrian Jews whose Hebrew knowledge was poor and whose daily language was Aramaic. It appears, however, that there were other motives at work. The presence among the Dead Sea documents of fragments of a Greek translation of the Jewish Bible and fragments of a complete Aramaic translation of the book of Job is highly significant to our consideration of this issue.[3] From a study of the Hebrew and Aramaic documents from the same library we can conclude with confidence that members of the Qumran community were highly competent not only in Aramaic, but also in Hebrew in its classical form as a literary language, whilst in their daily mundane discourse they may have spoken Aramaic or a form of Hebrew close to the so-called Mishnaic Hebrew.[4] Why did they need an Aramaic version of the book of Job? Is the above-average number of hapax legomena, obscure Hebrew words and phrases present in the book a sufficient motive for translating the whole book into Aramaic? Can we really assume that the Aramaic of 11QtgJob was es easily understood as their mother tongue? In this context, I also pointed out that the book of Job has never formed part of the regular Jewish synagogue liturgy, like the Pentateuch or parts of the Prophets or the Megilloth regularly recited in the synagogue service. What about fragments of the Septuagint including a fragment of a non-canonical book of the Epistle of Jeremiah (7Q2)? After all, Ein Feshcha is not Alexandria. I believe that to translate the Bible was a way of verbalising, in a written form, one's interpretation and analysis of the biblical text. Someone said: "What are translations but compressed commentaries?"[5] I

I believe, quite a plausible case for the general probability of such a notion: Y. Gutman, *The Beginnings of Jewish Hellenistic Literature,* vol. 2 [Heb.](Jerusalem, 1958), pp. 115-20.

3) For example, papLXXExod(7Q1) containing fragments of Ex 28.4-7 and 4QLXXLeva(4Q119) containing a Greek text of Lv 26.2-16, and 11QtgJob preserving portions of chapters 17-41, about 15% of the original, in an Aramaic translation. For a complete listing, see E. Tov et al., *The Texts from the Judaean Desert: Indices and an Introduction to the* Discoveries in the Judaean Desert Series [DJD XXXIX] (Oxford, 2002), esp. pp. 203-20.

4) On the nature of Qumran Hebrew, see discussions by E. Qimron, A. Hurvitz and J. Blau in particular in T. Muraoka and J.F. Elwolde(eds), *Diggers at the Well: Proceedings of a Third International Symposium on the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls and Ben Sira* (Leiden,2000), pp. 20-25, 110-14, 232-44.

am not denying that the Bible was often translated to meet liturgical or missionary needs, but not exclusively for those purposes. One read a translation of the Bible, not necessarily because one was ignorant of its original language or languages, but out of scholarly or exegetical interests. A translation is not a commentary; unlike a commentary writer a translator does not go on chatting or spilling a large quantity of ink, whether ink in a pot or in a toner cartridge. As L. Morris says, it is a compressed commentary. Such a consideration can account for, or perhaps justify, the multiplication of Bible translation in a given language, as in English or Japanese, for instance. Such a situation is not a modern phenomenon affordable and fundable only in rich countries. We have ancient precedents: the so-called Old Greek, the first Greek translation of the Jewish Bible was, at various stages of its subsequent history, felt to be in need of revision or complete overhaul: the Kaige recension, Lucianic recension, Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion, the Origenic recension of the Hexapla; Jerome's Vulgate as against Vetus Latina; Targum Onkelos as against the Palestinian Targum; the Peshitta as against the Syro-Hexapla. The question as to whether the fragments of an Aramaic or Greek translation of the Bible were local products or not is a question interesting in itself, but peripheral to the issue under discussion here. Even if they were just copied at Qumran or imported from outside, whether purchased or brought along as part of members' possessions, their presence among the Dead Sea Scrolls indicates that they were of interest to members of the community and probably read and studied by them.

This brings us to a consideration of an important question as to how modern translators of the Bible should or could look at its ancient translations and draw upon them.

Here our assumption is that Bible translators are first and foremost students of the Bible. Bible translators are different, should be different, from translators employed by a multilingual agency to translate business documents, manuals for friges, televisions or whatever or an army of translators working at the EU headquarters in Brussels translating a mountin of documents in a dozen or so national languages of the EU member states. First, they work for pay. Second, the source language is mostly their contemporary, mother tongue.

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5) L. Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* [Tyndale New Testament Commentaries] (London, 1958), p. 9.

As long as they have basic knowledge of the subject matter, they would hardly face complicated or almost impossible problems of grammar or semantics of the source language. Third, they do not have to be personally involved in the message of what they are translating. The second difference is of crucial importance. Bible translators are confronted with ancient languages or very early phases of the languages, which after more than two millennia's study still challenge us constantly with hard questions and problems at every level of the language system? Phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, and stylistics. Just as Bible translators consult, as a matter of course, modern commentaries on biblical books as well as grammars, dictionaries of the biblical languages, they ought to be encouraged to consult ancient versions as a valuable depository of the earliest bible exegesis. If we are to do justice to their Bible exegesis, we need to read and study the versions as a complete, running text, not piecemeal or atomistically. Fruits of such an atomistic analysis of the versions are presented typically in the critical apparatus of Biblia Hebraica, for instance, with lettered textcritical details referring to a word or short sequence of words in the main body of the MT. Many of those textcritical details in the apparatus referr to the versions which are assumed to go with or against the MT, or to support a proposed emendation. Presentday Bible translators who would be working from the BHS or the latest edition of Nestle's Greek New Testament are likelty to approach the ancient versions from this perspective, namely that of textual criticism, seeking to establish the oldest biblical text, or if they feel not competent enough to establish such a text themselves, to try to see how specialist textcritics of the Bible are trying to arrive at such a pristine text. Put it differently, such a textcritical perspective is interested in the ancient versions primarily as a source and a quarry of possible variant readings. This in itself is a legitimate approach. After all, the text of the Hebrew Pentateuch used by the first translators of the Septuagint was nearly 1300 years older than the Codex Leningrandensis, of which both the BHK and BHS are effectively a diplomatic edition. With the discovery among the Dead Sea Scrolls of fragments of the Hebrew Bible which appear to agree more with the Septuagint than with the MT, the value of the Septuagint for the Old Testament textcriticism has been recognised anew. However, no Hebrew text or manuscript used by Septuagint translators, their so-called Vorlage, has actually come down to us; such a Vorlage can be recovered only with

careful, meticulous analysis of the Septuagint text and its translation, retroversion, back into Hebrew. This of course is no easy task, even for scholars who might be credited with sound knowledge of Greek and Hebrew. This difficulty and uncertainty is caused by a number of factors.

1) Until the Dead Sea Scrolls came to light, the quality, and even the quantity, of textual variants of the Hebrew Bible were minimal and would not substantially alter the message of the text. Even after the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, this assessment can still be maintained with the few important exceptions such as the books of Jeremiah and Samuel. In comparison, the amount of variants and the complexity of transmission and history of the Septuagint text is staggering. There is hardly a page in any book in the critical Götingen Septuagint in which the critical apparatus does not occupy more than half of the page in comparison with the reconstructed proto-Septuagint printed on top of the page. It is not the sheer multitude of variants to be found in a considerable number of manuscripts, readings preserved in commentaries written by church fathers on Septuagint books or possible variants retrived by retroverting daughter versions. Although I have so far talked about "the Septuagint," we cannot strictly speak of "the Septuagint" in the singular and with the definite article, for we know that there have existed a variety of Greek versions of the Jewish Bible, though not in the sense of P. Kahle, who held that right from the beginning there were multiple translations in circulation. During the few centuries following the original, Proto-Septuagint it would undergo various kinds and extents of alteration or revision. Some were focused on the improvement of the Greek language used in the translation, while others were based on one form or another of the Hebrew Bible. The latter type of revision or recension should interest serious textcritics of the Hebrew Bible, for they ought to be interested in the historical evolution of the Hebrew Bible text in ancient times.

2) Different approaches to translation. If you read and compare different books of the Septuagint on the one hand and compare them with the Hebrew Bible on the other hand, you cannot fail to notice that one translator took quite a different approach to his original text than his colleague or colleagues. Take, for instance, the books of Genesis and Isaiah. They must have been translated by at least two translators. Secondly, if you would translate the Septuagint Isaiah back into Hebrew, it would be extremely hard to believe

that such a Hebrew text ever existed of the book of Isaiah. This second point could be made in regard to books such as Job or Proverbs. Or take the book of Daniel, which has come down to us in two distinct recensions known as Old Greek and Theodotionic. The Hebrew/Aramaic texts obtained by retroverting the respective Greek text would be so vastly different from each other, it would be a priori improbable that the book of Daniel ever existed in two such mutually divergent forms. Those who are interested primarily in the Septuagint as Greek documents can only be grateful for the divine providence which has preserved for us two such ancient, divergent versions of the book. But the job of the textcritic of the Hebrew Bible would become extremely demanding in such a case.

With the sole exception of the Vulgate, on whose translator, Jerome, we have some idea as to how he went about his task of translation and what his motive and policy was, we are totally in the dark as regards the other ancient versions. One does not know whether there was something like the archive of the United Bible Societies or some national Bible society in which you can find minutes of meetings of translation committees. In order to be able to make intelligent, educated and responsible use of data contained in the ancient versions, the textcritic of the Bible must have some idea of the motive behind them and the way the translators went about their task. A degree of circularity is unavoidable here. In order to eatablish the proto-Septuagint, the proto-Aquilanic version and so on, one need to sift, analyse and evaluate textual data, which are often mixed. Some readings ascribed to Aquila, for instance, are considered to be wrong ascriptions, possibly due to errors of transmission. None the less, when one knows more or less for certain that Aquila tended to translate the Hebrew particle ta with the Greek preposition suvn followed by, against the Greek grammar, an accusative, the textcritic's task is made easier in evaluating Greek manuscript evidences and reconstructing the Hebrew original of the book used by this translator. In view of his Greek text ἐν κεφαλαίῳ ἔκτισεν θεός σὺν τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ σὺν τὴν γῆν, Aquila's Hebrew Vorlage must have had the particle as in the MT. For him the principle of concordant translation, consistent translation of same Hebrew words with same Greek words, counted more than the rules of Greek grammar. He must have known that the Hebrew ta is homonyous, concealing two distinct lexemes, one of direct object marker and the other of a

preposition meaning "together with."[6]

As intimated earlier, this kind of research is bound to be accompanied by a certain measure of circularity. One is trying to establish the Vorlage of a particular version on the basis of manuscript evidences of the version and on the basis of those same manuscript evidences one needs to establish the translator's working methods, his translation techniques. In these matters, absolute certainty is hardly attainable.

An investigation into translation techniques can touch on a variety of things. Firstly, we need to establish which lexeme in the target language is used to render a given lexeme in the source language. One-o-one equivalence such as Engl. oxygen vs. Germ. Sauerstoff would be the exception rather than the norm. This can be confirmed by looking up any Greek lexeme in Hatch and Redpath's Septuagint concordance to see how often a given Greek word is used to render multiple Hebrew words or, the other way round, with how many Greek words a given Hebrew word is rendered, as can be seen from a reverse index to the concordance.[7] All the same, when we learn that the Hebrew noun ברית, which occurs in the MT 283 times, was rendered as often as 275 times with διαθήκη,[8] we have an important piece of information in our hands. The use of multiple lexemes to render a single lexeme in the source language may have to do with the fact that the latter has more than one distinct sense: so the Hebrew noun המה, if it were a single lexeme and not two separate homophonous lexemes,[9] is rendered, on the one hand, with one of a series of Greek words denoting anger, and on the other hand, with ἰός" 'poison, venom'. Yet, where either the source language or the target

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6) The prepositional ta occurs, for instance, at Ge 6.9 σὺν τῷ θεῷ περιεπτει for את האלהים התהלך Note the dative, though the dative is also used occasionally to render the object marker, e.g. Ge 1.30.

7) T. Muraoka, *Hebrew/AramaicIndex to the Septuagint Keyed to the Hatch-Redpath Concordance* (Grand Rapids, 1998). This kind of valuable information is now becoming available for other versions as well: see P.G. Borbonne and K.D. Jenner: *The Old Testament in Syriac acoording to the Peshitta Version. Part V: Concordance,* vol.1, *The Pentateuch*(Leiden, 1997); T.C. Falla: *A Key to the Peshitta Gospels,* I ('Alaph-Dalath), (Leiden, 1991), II (H?-yo) (Leiden, 2000).

8) Acoording to E.C. dos Santos, *An Expanded Hebrew Index for the Hatch-Redpath Concordance to the Septuagint*(Jerusalem, 1973).

9) See my forthcoming article: "Apports de la LXX dans notre compréhension de l'hébreu et dugrec, et de leur vocabulaire."

language, or both of them, has or have synonyms or near-synonyms, we could run into difficulties. If the number of synonyms in the source language differs from that in the target langauge, the difficulty could be further exacerbated. These issues are largely concerned with lexical semantics.

Although our ancient translators did most probably not operate with the kinds of grammatical categories as those which we are familiar with, there are none the less matters which belong to the sphere of grammar and which can be of interest not only for Hebrew grammarians, but also for Bible translator s.[10] The knowledge that the Greek translator or reviser of certain parts of the books of Samuel and Kingdoms, the so-called Kaige recension, often translates the Hebrew pronoun אנכי with ἐγώ εἰμι even in conjunction with a finite Greek verb as in 2Sm 12.7 אנכי מְשַׁחְתִּיךָ — ἐγώ εἰμι ἐρρυσάμην σε is important not only textcritically in that it establishes the identity of the reviser's Vorlage with the MT in this regard, but also for modern translators, if they should decide to follow this Hebrew text here, for such a Hebrew pronoun has a pragmatic value of prominence or emphasis.

3) Difficulties and obscurities inherent in the source language and the target language. Ancient languages are characterised by varying degrees of difficulty and obscurity. This applies even to relatively well-known, well-documented and long studied languages such as Greek and Latin. Where we are dealing with rare linguistic forms, lexemes or grammatical forms, the difficulty can be acute. The ancient versions have traditionally been seen as a source of potential illumination,[11] although one needs to bear in mind that the target languages themselves, such as Greek and Latin have their own share of difficulties and obscurities. The problem may be similar to one faced by someone attempting to fill in lacunae in a fragmentary text written in an ancient language, say an attempt to complete missing lines in the Mesha inscription in Moabite. There are anecdotes over quite distinguished Semitists who had to swallow their words or bite their tongue when more fragments of

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10) The Finnish school of Septuagint scholars with the late Soisalon-Soisanninen as its founder is well known for their research in the translation technique as applied to syntactic issues.

11) See, for instance, T. Muraoka, "The semantics of the LXX and its role in clarifying Ancient Hebrew semantics," in T. Muraoka(ed.), *Studies in Ancient Hebrew Semantics [Abr-Nahrain* Supplement 4] (Leuven, 1995), pp. 19-32, and J. Margain, "Sémantique hebraïque: l'apport des Targums," ib., pp. 11-17.

the original text concerned subsequently came to light.

Let me conclude by briefly reverting to one of the points I was trying to make early on, namely the value of studying the ancient versions as a depository of ancient Bible interpretation. Over the past two decennia or so we have been witnessing a new, growing trend in biblical studies, especially the Old Testament studies. This new trend was characterised by one of its pioneers, M. Harl of Paris, as *aval*, a French word meaning "down-stream," whereas the traditional approach to the ancient versions has been given the label *amont*, a word meaning "up-stream," a sort of *ad fontes*, back to the sources.[12) The French group of scholars has been publishing a copiously annotated French translation of books of the Septuagint, so far 12 volumes published.[13) The International Organisation for Septuagint and Cognate Studies, though with a significantly different philosophy, has launched a project called NETS, A New English Translation of the Septuagint, the first fascicule of which was published in 2000.[14) There is an incomplete Italian translation.[15) Last year there came out an annotated Japanese translation by G. Hata of the Septuagint Genesis. There is also a project of putting out a German translation of the Septuagint making steady progress. In addition, a modern English translation of the Targum is available (ed. M. McNamara: Edinburgh 1987-). There is a Spanish translation by A. Diez Macho of the Targum Neofiti (Madrid-Barcelona, 1968-76) and a French translation by R. le Déaut of the Targum Neofiti and the Pseudo-Jonathan of the Pentateuch (Paris, 1978-81). The Peshitta Institute of Leiden University is committed to

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12) See M. Harl, "Traduire la Septante en Francais: pourquoi et comment?," *LALIES* (Paris, 1984), pp. 83-93 [now in M. Harl, *La langue de Japhet. Quinze études sur la septante et le grec des chrétiens* (Paris, 1992), pp. 33-42; for an assessment of this trend, see H. Utzschneider, "Auf Augenhöhe mit dem Text. Überlegungen zum wissenschaftlichen Standort einer Übersetzung der Septuaginta ins Deutsche," in H.-J. Fabry and U. Offerhaus (eds), *Im Brennpunkt: Die Septuaginta: Studien zur Entstehung und Bedeutung der griechischen Bibel*(Stuttgart, 2001), pp. 11-50, esp. 14-19.

13) A volume containing both the Greek text and the French translation of the Pentateuch with selected notes and a series of highly instructive articles is also now in print: C. Dogniez and M. Harl, *La Bible des Septante. Le Pentateuque d'Alexandrie. Texte grec et traduction*(Paris, 2001).

14) The Psalms by A. Pietersma (Oxford, 2000).

15) *La Bibbia dei LXX. 1.Il Pentateuco a cura di Luciana Mortari. Testo greco con traduzione italiana a fronte* (Roma, 1999).

publishing an annotated English translation of the Peshitta. This new direction of studies on the ancient versions promises to play an important role and produce rich fruits in the future. My own involvement in the Septuagint lexicography fits into this scheme, for a Septuagint dictionary can be compiled only through studying the version as a running Greek text and is an essential tool for a thorough study of it.