

The following short description of the Aramaic Targums is excerpted from Bruce M. Metzger's article, "Important Early Translations of the Bible," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150 (Jan 93), pp. 35ff.

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## The Jewish Targums

Bruce M. Metzger

The Targums are interpretive renderings of the books of the Hebrew Scriptures (with the exception of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel) into Aramaic. Such versions were needed when Hebrew ceased to be the normal medium of communication among the Jews. In synagogue services the reading of the Scriptures was followed by a translation into the Aramaic vernacular of the populace. For a reading from the Pentateuch the Aramaic translation followed each verse of the Hebrew; for a reading from the Prophets three verses were followed by the Aramaic translation.

At first the oral Targum was a simple paraphrase in Aramaic, but eventually it became more elaborate and incorporated explanatory details inserted here and there into the translation of the Hebrew text. To make the rendering more authoritative as an interpretation, it was finally reduced to writing. Two officially sanctioned Targums, produced first in Palestine and later revised in Babylonia, are the Targum of Onkelos<sup>(1)</sup> on the Pentateuch and the Targum of Jonathan on the Prophets, both of which were in use in the third century of the Christian era.

During the same period the Targum tradition continued to flourish in Palestine. In addition to fragments and citations that have been collected, the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch is found, primarily, in three forms. The two that have been the most studied are the Pseudo-Jonathan Targum and the Fragmentary Targum, which contains renderings of only approximately 850 biblical verses, phrases, or words. In the mid-20th century a neglected manuscript in the Vatican library, identified as Neofiti 1, was discovered to be a nearly complete copy of the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch. Though copied in the 16th century, its text has the distinction of being the earliest form of the Palestinian Targum. It is somewhat less paraphrastic than Pseudo-Jonathan in that its explanatory additions are fewer in number and more terse in expression. The wide divergences among these Targums clearly indicate that they are "unofficial," in that their text was never fixed. There are no reliable data as to who the authors and compilers were, under what circumstances and for what specific purposes they labored, and how literary transmission was achieved.

Though the several Targums display certain common features, there are also many differences of rendering among them, ranging from literalistic to paraphrastic, incorporating a variety of kinds of explanatory comments. Sometimes an anthropomorphic expression in the Hebrew concerning God is softened or eliminated in the Targum. In speaking of the relationship of God to the world, reverence for the God of Israel led the Targumist to employ surrogates for the Deity, such as "Word" (*Memra*), "Glory" (*Yevara*, *'Iqar*), or "Presence" (*Shekinah*, Aramaic *Shekinta*). Thus in Genesis 1:16-17 Targum Neofiti reads, "The Word of the Lord created the two large luminaries ... and the Glory of the Lord set them in the firmament," and in Genesis 2:2-3 it reads, "On the seventh day the Word of the Lord completed the work which he had created ... and the Glory of the Lord blessed the seventh day."

As was mentioned earlier, besides providing an Aramaic rendering of the Scripture text, the Targumist also sometimes provided interpretive expansions. Typical of such interpolations are the following:

"And whatever Adam called in the language of the sanctuary a living creature, that was its name" (Palestinian Targum, Gen 2:19).

"Behold, I have granted them a hundred and twenty years in case they might repent, but they failed to do so" (Palestinian Targum, Gen 6:3).

"And he [Moses] reached the mount over which the glory of the Shekinah of the Lord was revealed, Horeb" (Targum Neofiti, Exod 3:1).

"Let Reuben live in this world and not die in the second death, in which death the wicked die in the world to come" (Palestinian Targum, Deut 33:6).

Despite their self-professed purpose to be a translation and/or explanatory paraphrase of Scripture, here and there the Targums also present instances of what is termed converse translation,<sup>(2)</sup> in which the Aramaic text contradicts what is said in the Hebrew. This modification is accomplished through a variety of devices, including the addition or deletion of the negative particle, or the replacement of the original biblical verb with another of opposite meaning. Neofiti on Exodus 33:3 reads, "I will not remove my presence from among you," whereas the Hebrew text reads, "I will not go up among you." Cain's cry in the Hebrew text, "Behold, you have driven me this day from the land, and from your face I shall be hidden" (Gen 4:14), is changed to read, "Behold, you have driven me this day from upon the land, but it is not possible to be hidden from you" (Targums Onkelos and Neofiti). In both these instances the Targumist was unwilling to accept the implication that God's presence and power could be circumscribed or limited. In the Targum on Genesis 4:23 Lamech boasted, "I have slain a man for wounding me, a young man on account of which my progeny would be destroyed." Here the Targumist changed a bloodthirsty song of triumph into an affirmation of divine justice.

In passing through the territory of the descendants of Esau, the Israelites were instructed in Deuteronomy 2:6, "You shall buy water from them, so that you may drink." Since this verse is followed by the observation that "these forty years the Lord your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing," the buying of food and water appeared to be inappropriate to the Targumist. So he contradicted the biblical text and the Targum reads, "You need not buy food from them for money, since manna from heaven descends for you; neither need you buy water from them, since the well of water ascends with you, up to the mountain tops and down into the valleys" (Targum Neofiti).

All translations of the Bible are necessarily interpretive to some extent, but the Targums differ in that they are interpretive as a matter of policy, and often to an extent that far exceeds the bounds of translation or even paraphrase. It is perhaps against such license that Rabbi Judah (2nd century A.D.) declared with paradoxical vehemence, "He who translates a biblical verse literally is a liar, but he who elaborates on it is a blasphemer."<sup>(3)</sup>

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1. Though the name Onkelos corresponds to Aquila, there is no reason to ascribe this Targum to the Aquila who made a literalistic Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures in the second century.

2. See Michael Klein, "Converse Translation: A Targumic Technique," *Biblica* 57 (1976), 515-37, and Etan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of the Bible* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), 33-36 and 151-66.

3. Tosephta, Megillah 4:41, ed. M. S. Zuckerman (Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrman, 1937), 228.

## Theories of the Translation Process

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If, according to the traditional rendering of Proverbs 13:15, "The way of the transgressor is hard," the way of the translator is scarcely less hard. Not only does the work of translation demand the utmost in concentrated effort, but the result will seldom please everyone, least of all the conscientious translator. Since not all the nuances in a text can be conveyed into another language, the translator must choose which ones are to be rendered and which are not. For this reason the cynic speaks of translation as "the art of making the right sacrifice," and the Italians have put the matter succinctly in a proverb, "The translator is a traitor" (*traduttore, traditore*). In short, except on a purely practical level, translation is never entirely successful. There is always what Ortega y Gasset called the misery and the splendor of the translation process.<sup>[1]</sup>

The work of translating the Bible presents special difficulties. Since the Scriptures are a source of both information and inspiration, Bible translations must be accurate as well as felicitous. They must be suitable for rapid scanning as well as for detailed study, and suitable for ceremonial reading aloud to large and small audiences. Ideally, they should be intelligible and even inviting to readers of all ages, of all degrees of education, and of almost all levels of intelligence. Such an ideal is, of course, virtually impossible to attain.

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The problem is compounded by the diversity of theories of the translation process. Should the translation be literalistic or free and paraphrastic? At what level of English style should it be pitched? Is it right to introduce into the rendering cultural explanations, and if so, how frequently? In the printed format of the Bible, should pronouns that refer to Deity be capitalized? Is it advisable to print the words of Christ in red ink? All these are legitimate questions that need to be considered by Bible translators.

Perhaps it is well to note the graceful phrasing of metaphors for the translation process that the King James translators addressed to the reader near the beginning of the preface to their version (a preface that unfortunately is seldom included in modern printings of that version):

Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most Holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water, even as Jacob rolled

away the stone from the mouth of the well, by which means the flocks of Laban were watered.[2]

Basically there are two competing theories of translation. In one the predominant purpose is to express as exactly as possible the full force and meaning of every word and turn of phrase in the original, and in the other the predominant purpose is to produce a result that does not read like a translation at all, but that moves in its new dress with the same ease as in its native rendering. Of course in the hands of good translators neither of these two approaches can ever be entirely ignored. The question is merely which should come first, and which second, in the translator's mind; and when the two are in conflict and it is therefore necessary to choose between them, the question is which side is to be sacrificed. This article discusses examples of various kinds of translations of the Scriptures down through the ages.

## Translations in the Ancient World

### Aquila

Early in the Christian era, a Jewish scholar named Aquila was dissatisfied with the Septuagint translation and undertook to produce a Greek rendering of the Hebrew Scriptures that would represent each Hebrew word with a corresponding Greek word. The result of following this procedure was the production of a

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rendering that was so slavishly literal that it was often unintelligible to a reader who did not know Hebrew as well as Greek. For example in Genesis 1:1 the Hebrew text prefixes the word **לְ** to "heaven" and to "earth" in order to indicate that these words are the object of the verb "create." Aquila, however, understood **לְ** to be the Hebrew preposition, spelled the same way, and therefore rendered the

text **ἐποίησεν ὁ θεὸς οὐρανὸν καὶ γῆν**, a rendering that is totally un-Greek.

### Symmachus

Toward the end of the second Christian century another Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures was prepared. This was by Symmachus, an Ebionite Christian of Jewish background. His theory and method were the opposite of that of Aquila, for his aim was to make an elegant Greek rendering. To judge from the scattered fragments that remain of his translation, Symmachus tended to be paraphrastic in representing the Hebrew original. He preferred idiomatic Greek constructions in contrast to other versions in which the Hebrew constructions are preserved. Thus he usually converted into a Greek participle the first of two finite verbs connected with a copula. He made copious use of a wide range of Greek particles to bring out subtle distinctions of relationship that the Hebrew cannot adequately express. In more than one passage Symmachus had a tendency to soften anthropomorphic expressions of the Hebrew text.

## Jerome

Jerome's approach is puzzling. On the one hand in his letter to Sunnia and Fretela, Jerome declared that the work of a good translator consists in rendering idiomatic expressions of one language into the modes of expression native to the other.<sup>[3]</sup> In another letter, addressed to Pammachius, he discussed the best method of translating literary works in general, and stated, "From my youth up I have always aimed at rendering sense not words.... A literal translation from one language to another obscures the sense."<sup>[4]</sup> At the same time, however, Jerome made an exception when it came to the Bible. He added a qualification, "In translating from the Greek I render sense for sense and not word for word—except in the case of the Holy Scriptures, where even the order of the words is a mystery."<sup>[5]</sup>

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Here Jerome clearly advocated two different methods of translation, depending on whether the original is a secular or a sacred text. In the Bible every word is sacred. In his letter to Paulinus, Jerome wrote, "The Apocalypse of John has as many mysteries as words,"<sup>[6]</sup> and these mysteries must be preserved in the translation. Since the order of words transcends human understanding, a change in the order of words not only destroys this mystery, but it also endangers the profundity of the sacred text.

All this seems to be clear enough until one looks at Jerome's work in preparing the Latin text of the Vulgate. His declaration of policy in translating Scripture seems to be inconsistent with his general practice. It is perplexing that although Jerome advocated the word-for-word method of Bible translation, he was not always consistent in following it. Perhaps the best solution to this anomaly is to suggest that in making the Vulgate translation Jerome had in fact renounced a great part of the ornamentation of style and paraphrase he was accustomed to employ when dealing with secular works, but nevertheless allowed himself a certain amount of freedom and variety of renderings in the Vulgate.