

TRANSLATING SCRIPTURE -

AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE (2)

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THE ARAMAIC TARGUMS

During the post-exilic period Hebrew gradually ceased to be spoken by the ordinary people and Aramaic took over. While Aramaic had become the official written language of the western part of the Persian Empire, Hebrew was still understood by many particularly among the intellectuals but it became increasingly necessary for the Jewish community to have translations of the Hebrew Scriptures into Aramaic. Certainly before the coming of Christ, whenever the Scriptures were read in the synagogues, interpreters were appointed to translate into Aramaic. Jewish tradition associates this custom with Ezra in Neh.8:8. These translations were always given orally in the public worship. They were never allowed to be read alongside the reading of the original text. In this way the Jews emphasised the difference between the Hebrew Scriptures and the translation. But the translations or targums were written down and we have evidence of two main versions - those revised in Babylon and those which represent Palestinian tradition.

These targums are more important in the field of the history of Jewish exegesis rather than their witness to the underlying Hebrew text. Their purpose was not merely to translate but to interpret and edify the people and in places they become almost mini-sermons.

One of the features of the Targums is the reverential attitude when

In his first article Mr Eveson suggested reasons why it is helpful to approach the subject of Bible translation from an historical standpoint, more especially the transmitting and translating of the Old Testament. He then discussed the Hebrew, Greek and Latin versions of the Old Testament text.

In this article he considers the LXX, the views of some early church fathers and finally the issue of the Septuagint versus the LXX.

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referring to God. They shied away from making God the direct subject or object and they also removed anthropomorphisms. On Gen.1:4 the Palestinian Targum (Neofiti) reads: "And it was manifest before the Lord that the light was good". Instead of saying directly "God said", the Aramaic memra ('word') is often used, e.g. Gen.1:3: "The Word of the Lord said". In this connection rabbi Judah ben Ilai's principles of translation are of interest: "He who translates a verse quite literally is a liar while he who adds anything thereto is a blasphemer". Thus he comments on the verse in Ex.24:10 that the literal translation of the Hebrew "they saw the God of Israel" is false. To put "angel" would be adding to the text. Therefore he supports the Targum reading, "they saw the glory of the God of Israel".

THE SEPTUAGINT (LXX)

We turn now to the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into the Greek language and, in passing, to comment on the Greek of the New Testament.

In most of its details the Letter of Aristeas is quite unhistorical as a witness to the history of the LXX. It is generally accepted today that the Greek version had its origin among the Jewish community which settled in Alexandria. The Pentateuch was the first part to be translated c.250 B.C. and the whole Old Testament was probably translated over a period of a hundred years. It is quite clear that there have been different translators at work and different methods of translating. Some books like the Pentateuch are fairly literal while others such as Job, Proverbs and Daniel are quite free and have become paraphrases.

What Hebrew text did the translators use? It would seem that the Hebrew text type used differed from that transmitted by the Massorettes. In fact, it appears that the different translators of the Hebrew Bible used MSS of varying editions, so that it is difficult to describe the LXX as a single work. It is really a collection of translations made by various writers who for their particular books used different editions of the Hebrew text. For instance, the Greek translation of Jeremiah lacks some 2,700 words found in our Hebrew text and the order of the text differs too so that in evaluating the worth of this Greek version it is necessary to bear these

facts in mind. In addition, as we do not have the original autographs of this version the problems of textual criticism apply to this as to the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New.

Like the Aramaic Targums, the LXX tends to avoid the anthropomorphic expressions of the Hebrew. In Ex.19:3 Moses does not ascend to God but to the "mountain" of God; and in Ex.24:10 the elders do not see the God of Israel, but "the place where the God of Israel stood".

For all the Greek-speaking Jews of Palestine and the Diaspora it was now possible to read the Old Testament in their own tongue. In addition, the Gentile Greek world were able to study the Jewish Scriptures for themselves and many of them became interested in the Jewish religion through this means. The LXX is also a very important introduction to the writing of the New Testament and to the spreading of the Christian message. It is from the LXX that many of the New Testament quotations of the Old are taken and the LXX became the Old Testament version of the Church in the early centuries. Our best witnesses to the LXX are from MSS containing both the Old and New Testament texts: codices Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, Alexandrianus and papyri texts like Chester Beatty. Fragments of the Greek Bible from Jewish circles have turned up like papyrus 458 dating from the middle of the second century B.C., and Greek texts from the Qumran community.

The Greek of the LXX is what is termed Koine ('common') or Hellenistic Greek - the general form of the Greek language used in the post-classical era. Strictly speaking the term 'koine' applies mainly to spoken Greek but it has come to be used to describe the literary Greek of the period. This literary Greek is an amalgam of the spoken Koine and the old literary language. We must go on to say, however, that the language and style of the Greek Old Testament has been coloured by the Semitic original. There is a Semitic cast to this Greek for the very reason that it follows, for the most part, fairly literally the original Hebrew. What is more, the Greek-speaking Jews familiar with the LXX developed a kind of Jewish Greek, and it is this type of Greek which we find in the New Testament.

It is often said that the Greek of the New Testament is the ordinary common language of the people in the market-places throughout the

28.

Greek-speaking world of the first century AD, the language of the soldiers, etc. But this needs qualification. English is a widely spoken and written language throughout the world today but there are differences between the spoken English of the barrack-room and public house and literary English. Again, there is a journalistic-style English, business-letter English and legal English. In the same way there are variations in Koine Greek. Too much has been made of the similarity between the Greek of the papyri found in Egypt which is akin to the unliterary spoken Koine of the day and New Testament Greek. It is true that these papyri documents have helped to a certain degree in our understanding of the New Testament language, but it is certainly not the whole story. What seems more probable is that there were different types of vernacular Koine Greek and that the Greek of the New Testament is what can only be termed Jewish Greek. Nigel Turner claims that biblical Greek as a whole "is a unique language with a unity and character of its own".¹

After showing instances of the unique character of biblical Greek Turner remarks: "I do not wish to prove too much by these examples, but the strongly Semitic character of biblical Greek and therefore its remarkable unity within itself, do seem to me to have contemporary significance at a time when many are finding their way back to the Bible as a living book and perhaps are pondering afresh the old question of a 'Holy Ghost language'. The lapse of half a century was needed to assess the discoveries of Deissman and Moulton and put them in right perspective. We now have to concede that not only is the subject matter of the Scriptures unique but so also is the language in which they came to be written or translated."²

Matthew Black maintains that the influence of the LXX has been profound on the writers of the New Testament in Hebraic concepts like 'justification', 'propitiation', etc; and has left its mark on the style and idiom of the New Testament. Bearing in mind what has been said earlier concerning the Hebrew of the Old Testament, Black's summary statement is of great interest, "this language, like the Hebrew of the Old Testament which moulded it, was a language apart from the beginning; biblical Greek is a peculiar language, the language of a peculiar people".³

Translators of the Scripture today despite all their scientific

linguistic know-how should bear in mind such points as these for they confirm the Rev Hywel R.Jones' statement that "A translation of the Scriptures should remind readers of the uniqueness of the Scriptures".⁴

OTHER GREEK VERSIONS

After the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD and the clear separation of the Jewish community from the Christian, the LXX became an acute embarrassment to the Jews. Though produced by Jews before the time of Christ and held in honour by them, the Christian attitude to it and the manner in which they used it placed the Jews in an embarrassing position. The Christians would appeal to the LXX, just as the Apostles did, to show the truth of the Christian message (cf. Justin Martyr's Dialogue with Trypho). Jewish exegetes criticised the LXX for being too free a translation or of being inaccurate as in the case of Is.7:14. As the LXX was also based on an edition of the Hebrew text which was not regarded by the rabbis as standard, eventually the Jews rejected and condemned the version which they once prized so highly. On the other hand, the Christians continued to use and highly esteem the LXX regarding it as the authoritative version in the Church.

Among the Jewish attempts to replace the LXX with a different Greek text was Aquila's version produced c.130 AD. It is a very literal translation, sometimes going to the extent of using Greek words with similar sounds to the Hebrew. It is so literal that the meaning of the text often suffers and sounds quite un-Greek. But it did command a great deal of respect among the Jews. Symmachus produced a new version in 170 AD, which managed to combine a literal translation with good Greek idiom. A little later Theodotian revised an already existing Greek version with the Hebrew text alongside him. From Origen we learn of three other Greek versions found among the Jews of that time. It would appear that the Jews of the Greek-speaking world of the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD had to contend with the same problem of a multiplicity of Greek versions as we do today. Having lost the old, well-established LXX (their 'AV'), there was nothing comparable to put in its place.

THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS

We shall examine briefly the views of three men as they relate to
30.

the Old Testament text and Bible translation work.

Origen He sought to make contact with the Jews and to discuss the Christian Faith with them. Their starting point and basis of discussion was, of course, the Old Testament. However, by this time the problem of the right text and the right Bible was a major stumbling-block. The general view in the Church was that the LXX was the true version and the differences in the Jewish version must be due to deliberate falsification of the text by the rabbis. It should also be noted that there were those in the Church, Origen among them, who accepted certain books which the Jews regarded as apocrypha - Judith, Tobit, Wisdom, etc. The LXX version used by the Church included these books although it is not at all clear that the Jews of Alexandria accepted these books as Scripture. Certainly Rabbinic Judaism did not, and the apocryphal books are not found in the Massoretic tradition.

On scholarly grounds Origen came to the conclusion that the Hebrew text accepted by the Jews of his day was the best and saw that if he was to have fruitful discussions with the Jews then that was the text he must use. In pursuit of this aim Origen produced one of his greatest works, the Hexapla, as it is called, which was a comparison of the various Greek versions with the Hebrew consonantal text. He was among the very few Christian scholars of his day who made it his business to learn Hebrew and though he did not know it very well he was able to consult Jewish scholars. With this basic knowledge he set about arranging the various texts in six parallel columns from left to right in the following order: (1) Hebrew, (2) transliteration of the Hebrew into Greek letters, (3) Aquila version, (4) Symmachus version, (5) LXX, (6) Theodotian version. For the Psalms Eusebius tells us that Origen added three other versions. It was a mammoth undertaking and is estimated to have covered 6,500 pages. In his commentary on Matthew he tells us his method of working: "With the help of God's grace I have tried to repair the disagreements in the copies of the Old Testament on the basis of the other versions. When I was uncertain of the Septuagint reading because the various copies did not tally, I settled the issue by consulting the other versions and retaining what was in agreement with them. Some passages did not appear in the Hebrew; these I marked with an obelus as I did not dare to leave them out altogether. Other passages I marked with an asterisk to show that

they were not in the Septuagint but that I had added them from the other versions in agreement with the Hebrew text. Whoever wished may accept them; anyone who is offended by this procedure may accept or reject them as he chooses".

In his preaching Origen naturally made use of his textual studies. But he did not ride roughshod over the feelings of his congregation. He read and preached from the Old Testament LXX version knowing it to be as he put it the one "familiar and current in the churches". But as occasion arose, he would point to alternative readings from the Hebrew and expound these also and Origen's attitude and method was the same over the variant readings in the New Testament.

Jerome Greek was the lingua franca of the Roman empire from Italy eastward. But in the south of Gaul and in North Africa, Latin was the dominant language and it is in these areas that we first find Latin texts of the Bible c.150 AD. Tertullian and Cyprian used such texts. The Old Latin versions of the Old Testament were translated from the LXX, and they bear witness to the LXX before its later recessions (when more Christian additions to the text were made).

The Latin-speaking Church in the 4th century found itself, then, with a wide variety of Latin versions and it seems there were those in high circles who felt the need for a uniform and reliable text for theological discussion and liturgical use. So in 382 AD pope Damasus commissioned Jerome to produce such a text. Jerome was certainly qualified for the task having learnt Hebrew from a Jewish Christian and being a scholar in Latin and Greek.

Damasus' first concern was for Jerome to produce a revision of the Old Latin Gospels. Having accomplished this Jerome then went on to revise the Psalter and perhaps other Old Testament books. In this work he became more and more dissatisfied with the LXX and eventually decided in favour of a completely fresh translation based on the Hebrew text. This is Jerome's real achievement, which he undertook during the years 390-405. As for the apocryphal books which he did not believe to be inspired, these only took him a few months to translate!

Only Jerome's translation of the Gospels was widely accepted during
32.

his lifetime - no doubt because it was but a revision of the familiar Old Latin and not a fresh translation. His translation of the Old Testament was severely criticised at the time and it took centuries for the version to gain general acceptance. The criticisms raised against it included: a) that it was tainted with Judaism; b) that it was a forgery; c) that it undermined the truth of the inspired Scriptures of the LXX.

It would seem that the Hebrew text he used was substantially the same as the Massoretic text we possess. As his Hebrew MSS bore witness to one tradition, he assumed that the LXX MSS in his possession had in the process of copying strayed from this original text.

On the question of technique in translating, Jerome discusses the principles and problems in the preface to his translation of Eusebius' Chronicles. He finds the translator's task almost an impossible one due to the idiomatic phrases and variations in word order from one language to another. He must wrestle with the choice between a word for word, literal rendering and a freer more elegant translation. In his letters Jerome continues to discuss the subject, pointing out that the New Testament writers themselves often used much freedom when quoting from another language. Jerome's general rule was that the translator should render sense for sense and not word for word.

Having said all this, however, he made one very notable exception - "except for the Holy Scriptures, where even word-order is a mystery". In this way he made a sharp distinction between translating the Classics and translating the Scriptures. The Latin of his new version can only be described as a special 'Biblical Latin' coloured by the Hebrew original. There was a time when Jerome would have regarded such a production as barbarous and uncouth in the same way as Tatian had felt when he first read the Greek of the LXX. Jerome's Latin version like the LXX before it was not set in a style that belonged to a past literary glory. This Latin text does have its weaknesses, varying in quality and style from passage to passage, even allowing New Testament understanding to come through in an unjustifiable way. An obvious example is Hab.3:18 where "I will joy in the God of my salvation" is rendered "I will joy in God my Jesus".

Augustine It may be of comfort and encouragement to many readers to know that this great man was no good at languages! He knew little or nothing of the original languages of the Bible but he saw the need of an authoritative Latin version, deploring the multiplicity of translations circulating in North Africa. Now while he respected Jerome as a great biblical scholar and came to use his revision of the New Testament Gospels, he was not at all happy that in his translation of the Old Testament Jerome had set aside the LXX in favour of a Hebrew text which few in the Church could understand. For Augustine, the Old Testament Latin text based on the Greek Septuagint was the authoritative one. He felt that the translators of the LXX had been given a peculiar understanding of the text. He writes: "There were other translators out of the Hebrew into the Greek, as Aquila, Symmachus, Theodotion, and that nameless interpreter whose translation is called the fifth edition. But the Church has received that of the LXX, as if there were no other, and it has been used by the Greek Christians most of whom do not know that there is any other. Our Latin translation has been made from this one also. However, Jerome, a learned presbyter, and a great linguist, has translated the same Scriptures from the Hebrew into Latin. But although the Jews affirm his learned labour to be all truth and avouch the LXX to have erred often, yet the Churches of Christ hold no one man to be preferred before the many who produced the LXX".⁵

On the pastoral side Augustine feared that this dependence on the Hebrew would lead to a division between the Greek and Latin churches, because he sensed that the Greek church would continue to use the LXX. He also took into account the feelings of the people who were used to the Latin wording based on the LXX but he was not averse to using other translations in his discourses and preaching. He sometimes appealed to different renderings of a passage without making any attempt to judge between them. G. Bonner comments: "so far as he is concerned, one form is as good as another for the purposes of preaching".⁶

THE SEPTUAGINT versus THE MASSORETIC TEXT

One of the criticisms raised against the LXX by the rabbis, as we have stated earlier, was that it was based on an inferior text. Were they right in so thinking or was it simply the result of antagonism

toward Christianity? Likewise we need to ask on what grounds has the Western Church come to accept the Massoretic text in place of the Septuagint tradition? If the text underlying the LXX was good enough for the New Testament apostles and regarded by the Early Church as a kind of Received Text why should the Church now be committed in any way to the authority of the Massoretic text when such a text was approved and transmitted within a rabbinic, anti-christian tradition?

It would appear that within Jewish circles a standardization of the Hebrew text had taken place by the end of the 1st century or early 2nd century AD but we cannot say that the standardized text is identical with the Massoretic text we possess today. No text of the whole Hebrew Bible from that time is on our possession yet we do have a Hebrew text that has certainly been very carefully transmitted and guarded by the Massoretic scribes. They have not only given us the printed text but the whole system of guarding the text. Every letter and word of the Bible has been counted and the half-way letter and word carefully noted.

The earliest extant MSS of the entire Old Testament preserving the Massoretic text date from c.10th century AD. Fragments of the Hebrew Bible found in an old Cairo synagogue dating from 6th to 8th centuries are in the same textual tradition; so, too, are texts recently found at Murabba'at and Masada in the Judean desert, which were used by orthodox rabbis and date from the bar Kochba rising of 132-135 AD. Rabbi Aqiba who according to tradition was deeply involved in the standardization of the Hebrew text was a leader in that revolt. These latter texts would confirm that by the early part of the 2nd century AD the Hebrew text was standardized and in general agreement with our Massoretic text.

Other earlier Hebrew texts from Qumran dating back to pre-Christian times have given us a complete text of Isaiah, Habakkuk 1-2 and fragments of every other book of the Bible except Esther. The Isaiah scroll has a text which generally supports the Massoretic but it does also offer a great number of variant readings. Incidentally, the Massorettes themselves offer textual variants by their use of special points and marginal notes but they did not emend the consonantal text which they held to be inviolable.

We have mentioned earlier that it was from about the middle of the 2nd century that the difference between the Jewish Hebrew Bible and the Christian Greek Bible became a point of contention. It would appear that the 1st century Christians, as B.Childs notes, "made no claims of having a better text of Scripture as did, for example, the Samaritans" and that "they continued to use whatever texts were current among their Jewish contemporaries".⁷ Certainly, from the New Testament documents, we find considerable freedom in the use of Old Testament quotations, many of them reflecting the LXX version. All this changed as a result of the Jewish activity at the end of the 1st century.

The question remains, why did the rabbis after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD select for their use and future transmission that text type which was to be the ancestor of the Massoretic text? Sadly the question cannot be answered with certainty on our present knowledge. Scholars are however less inclined now to believe that the rabbis met in council to survey all the possibilities and arbitrarily pronounced in favour of a text which shewed no affinities with the text underlying the LXX. It is far more likely that they accepted a textual tradition which had a long history of use in worship and instruction within mainline Judaism. What is more, recent finds and scholarly research has upheld the wisdom of the rabbis. The multiplicity of Hebrew MSS at Qumran and the other places further to the south have exhibited a wide range of text-types including those which underly the LXX, the Samaritan Pentateuch and the later Massoretic version. Compared with the other text types that which lies behind the Massoretic tradition shows fewer signs of later interpretation and harmonistic additions.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

1. It has become increasingly clear that in the Providence of God the ancient rabbis have preserved a text that is superior to the texts which lie behind such versions as the LXX. This ancestor to the Massoretic text shows all the signs of being of great age and reliable. What is more, the Massoretic scribes have preserved it for hundreds of years in a most excellent form. One modern textual critic writes: "The Massoretic Text itself deserves very high respect and should be changed only with great caution."⁸

2. The LXX can be of some assistance where the Hebrew text has been

poorly transmitted but its greatest value lies in the area of Old Testament interpretation. Despite protests to the contrary, under the Providence of God it gives the correct sense in such crucial passages as Is.7:14.

3. While we should aim to obtain the best possible Hebrew text and a translation that is of the highest accuracy (for we believe in verbal inspiration), we should not get into the position where Christians divide among themselves over such issues. Let the New Testament Church be an example to us. They made good use of the best they had and used what their opponents in the Greek-speaking world were accustomed to; in a different age Origen and Jerome did the same.

4. We have been reminded over and over again that a translation of the Scriptures should always convey the uniqueness of the Biblical Writings. Even the Biblical languages are distinctive and this should be conveyed in the translation.

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