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Interpretation and Meaning in the Septuagint Translation[1]

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Introduction

The interpretative character of translation consists, at least in theory, of two distinct operations. To begin with, translation implies explanation. Because languages are incompatible – words do not express the same meanings, grammar is organised differently, stylistic norms vary – translation is necessarily mediated by an understanding of the meaning of the source text. With a view to recreating the tenor of the source text, the translator must try to identify its intended meaning (or meanings) and devise an equivalent in the target text that enables only that meaning (or those meanings). Choices need to be made. Some potential meanings will be given up. New ones may unwittingly be generated. Translation is the art of the feasible. An understanding of the source text and knowledge of the receptor language allows the construction of a sort of bridge, linking two worlds. The explanatory element in translation is often viewed as a factor denaturing the text. Because a translation is at the same time a commentary, it cannot be entirely faithful to the source. This view may have it right in practice. In principle, however, the explanatory element serves to preserve meaning. It is a type of damage control. The meaning of the original is indeed affected, but as little as possible.

Explanation, however, is not the only factor affecting the meaning of the source text. Even if perfect transferral of the meaning of the source were possible, the reiteration and restatement of a text would by itself alter its meaning. As Heraclitus said, it is impossible to enter the same river twice. The key concept here is not that of linguistic incompatibility but of differing pragmatic contexts. The source

text came into being in a given culture, addressing a given audience, responding to a given need. The translation introduces the text into a different culture and addresses another audience. The translation may well arise from an altogether different need. In this respect, translation is akin to quotation.[2] Quotations reproduce earlier statements, often literally, but they usually imply a meaning that diverges somewhat from the meaning expressed originally. Similarly, by virtue of the differing communicative situation, the meaning of a translation will differ from that of the source text.

"Explanation" and "quotation" can, of course, occur in isolation. What defines the phenomenon of translation is that it combines them in an inextricable manner. A translation can never be the same, nor express the same meaning, as the source text. The problem is felt with particular sharpness in the area of Bible translation. How can one translate the word of God? If the Bible is true, will it still be true when its meaning is changed in translation? In what follows, I will try to illustrate the two sides – explanation and quotation – with reference to one particularly famous Bible translation.

Explanation in the Septuagint

With regard to the Septuagint, the question of explanation or exegesis is itself a complex one. Scholars have sometimes been tempted to "cream off" a small number of theologically significant passages, and to view the entire exegetical method of the translators in their light. That temptation should be resisted, however, for fear of finding only those passages that accord with one's preconceived notions. A comprehensive approach is called for, studying the translational process as much as possible in its entirety (Joosten 1998). In the present context, I would like to propose three basic categories.

a) Spontaneous exegesis

Much of the work of the translators has a more or less spontaneous character. It didn't take much thinking to translate וַיֵּלֶךְ אַבְרָם, "and Abram went," in Genesis 12:4, as καὶ ἐπορεύθη Ἀβράμ. This is not to say that the procedure is a mechanical one. Even the most faithful and literal renderings involve choices for the translator. Thus in the same verse, וַיֵּלֶךְ אִתּוֹ לוֹט, "and Lot went with him," is rendered καὶ ᾤχετο μετ' αὐτοῦ Λώτ, using a different verb of similar meaning. Languages are subtle instruments. The interplay of lexicon, grammar, and context leads to endless

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2   The idea that translation is a type of quotation I heard for the first time from my friend, Steve Daley. Andrew Chesterman informed me that Ernst-August Gutt has elaborated a whole theory of translation from the notion of quotation (Gutt 1991).

possibilities that cannot be codified in any simple way. The Hebrew word רֹאשׁ 'head' could in most cases be translated with Greek κεφαλή; but the 'head' of a mountain required a different word, κορυφή or ἄκρος, 'top.' Very probably, the Septuagint translators were rendering the Hebrew into their native language. Most of the choices they faced posed no problem. The selection of the required equivalent would be made intuitively and spontaneously.

Even when a word was unknown to the translators, the basic approach remains similar. In Proverbs 3:8, it is recommended to fear the Lord and turn away from evil, for, it is said:

רְפָאוּת תְּהִי לְשָׁרֶּךָ	"it will be a healing for your flesh
וְשִׁקּוּי לְעַצְמוֹתֶיךָ	and a refreshment (?) for your bones"
	(after the NRSV)

The rare word שִׁקּוּי, probably meaning 'drink' or 'moisture,' seems to have been unknown to the Greek translator who renders as follows:

τότε ἴασις ἔσται τῷ σώματί σου	"then there will be healing for your body
καὶ ἐπιμέλεια τοῖς ὀστέοις σου	and care for your bones"

The difficult word appears to be rendered here after the context. Although such instances require some reflection on the part of the translator, the path from the Hebrew to the Greek remains straightforward.

Another special case is that of idiomatic expressions. In rendering these expressions, the translator often had a basic choice between translating the individual words, and thus mystifying at least part of his audience, or translating the global, "exocentric" meaning (Babut 1995), sacrificing an adherence to the precise wording of the source text. Both approaches are found in the Septuagint. For instance, Hebrew "to fill someone's hand" meaning "to ordain someone to a religious office" is rendered literally in some passages and freely in others:

Exodus 28:43(41)

וּמִלֵּאתָ אֶת־יָדָם	"you shall ordain them" (lit. 'fill their hands')
ἐμπλήσεις αὐτῶν τὰς χεῖρας	"you shall fill their hands"

Leviticus 21:10

מִלֵּא אֶת־יָדוֹ	"(who) has been ordained (lit. '[whose] hand one has filled')"
τετελειωμένου	"having been consecrated"

It should be noted, however, that the translators of the Pentateuch most often reject this basic choice, eating their cake and having it too, so to speak. In Exodus 29:33,35; Leviticus 8:33; 16:32; Numbers 3:3 the expression "to fill someone's hand" is rendered τελειόω τὰς χεῖρας τίνος "to consecrate someone's hands"!

Even the handling of foreign idioms may be put into the category of spontaneous translation. However much reflection and ingenuity went into the Greek rendering, it still proceeds straightforwardly from the source text. There is no shorter way than one of these: to render the form, the meaning, or a combination of the two.

This most basic aspect of the translators' work by all means involves exegesis. If the goal text is in many passages a faithful and accurate rendering of the Hebrew source, that doesn't mean explanation is absent, but that it is successful.

b) Deliberate exegesis

Over and beyond the more or less spontaneous rendering of the Hebrew into Greek, there are passages where a deliberate option to clarify the text can be observed. The distinction between spontaneous and deliberate interpretation cannot be made in absolute terms. There is a gliding scale of deliberateness. What can be said is that the translators do at times diverge from their usual procedures and write in Greek what they must have known did not stand in the Hebrew. A nice example is the rendering of an admittedly somewhat mysterious phrase in

Deuteronomy 29:18(19)

לְמַעַן סְפוֹת הָרָוָה אֶת־הַצְּמֵאָה.

The Hebrew might be rendered: "so as to sweep away the drenched with the thirsty," although many other interpretations have been proposed. The Septuagint version of this phrase is striking:

ἵνα μὴ συναπολέσῃ ὁ ἁμαρτωλὸς τὸν ἀναμάρτητον
"lest the sinner destroy the guiltless with him."

This is almost certainly a case where the translation did not proceed linearly from the source text. One may submit the translator understood (or thought he understood) the literal meaning of the Hebrew. However, having apprehended that the Hebrew phrase was metaphorical, he decided to decode the metaphor in translation (Aejmelaeus 2001, 550). Perhaps the rendering here reflects an existing exegetical tradition (Joosten 2005). At any rate, it represents a case of deliberate exegesis.

The decoding of figures of speech is not very usual in the Septuagint. Metaphors and metonymies are mostly rendered literally, their interpretation being left to the reader.[3] It is only occasionally that one finds that "wool" is glossed as "clothes," or "womb" is translated as "birth pangs" etc. (Joosten 1998, 77–79). Deliberate exegesis is the most interesting aspect of the translator's activity; unfortunately, it is not very prominent in the Septuagint.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Before moving on to the third category, an additional remark may be inserted. The distinction between "spontaneous" and "deliberate" exegesis can also be applied on a different, more formal level. Several scholars have argued that the translation technique of the Septuagint is itself a type of commentary. Notably, the literal quality of the version has been interpreted to express the translators' awe for the word of God (Joosten 1998, 82–85). This view is correct, I think, though not perhaps for every part of the Septuagint to the same extent. The freewheeling translation technique one finds in the Pentateuch and Joshua strikes one as being rather spontaneous. Although the translation is literal, it is not exaggeratedly so. Its word-for-word quality may reflect an "easy technique" rather than a deliberate decision. Other parts of the Bible are translated much more literally, however. In the Book of Hosea, for instance, an interesting struggle can be observed. On the one hand, the translator deploys great efforts to make sense of the difficult Hebrew; on the other hand, he seems to "give up" in a small number of passages, where the individual Hebrew words are rendered but no meaning emerges on the sentence level. These passages evince a degree of literalness surpassing the spontaneous. They witness to a deliberate choice of the translator, who bows to the text's significance even where he could find in it no meaning.

The same could be argued on the other end of the scale. Some books are translated with surprising freedom. The translator of Job has drastically shortened the book, leaving out many verses of the original. Conversely, the translator of Proverbs added a number of passages that were originally composed in Greek. These procedures also reflect a deliberate choice. The least that can be said is that the text of Job and Proverbs appear to have been less sacred to their translators than Hosea or Psalms would have been to theirs.

c) Accidental exegesis

If only spontaneous and deliberate exegesis is envisaged, many passages in the Septuagint will remain unaccounted for. A third category must be recognized, which

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3   The statement is true mainly for "live" metaphors. With "dead", like "stone" meaning "weight", the decoding may be qualified as spontaneous. Of course, it is not easy to make this distinction in all cases.

may be called "accidental exegesis." At times the meaning of the Greek diverges from that of the Hebrew, not because the two languages are incompatible, nor because the translator decided to spell out the implications of the source text, but through faulty analysis of the source text. Many specialists stop short of recognizing such a category. Indeed, it may seem mean-spirited to dwell on the errors of the ancients, to whom we owe so much. On top of this, the scholar who pretends to find fault with an ancient version may encounter criticism for being presumptuous: "Who are you to decide that this is the right way to translate the Hebrew, and that is the wrong way?" Nonetheless, the phenomenon under discussion is too important to be skirted. It is very frequent. And it results in interesting readings. Indeed, some of the most celebrated passages in the Septuagint may have been created through accidental exegesis.

Mishaps may occur at every level of analysis, from the reading of the Hebrew consonants, through the vocalization and identification of grammatical forms, to the interpretation of words and constructions. Let us consider some examples. In Micah 6:9-10, the received Hebrew text reads:

וּמִי יְעָדָהּ: עוֹד   "…and who appointed it? Still…"

This is not very eloquent and the text may indeed be corrupt. What is presently of interest is the Greek equivalent of these words:

καὶ τίς κοσμήσει πόλιν   "and who will rule a city?"

As can easily be made out, the last word in Greek reflects Hebrew עיר 'city,' instead of עוד 'still,' due to a confusion of consonants similar in form (*waw* and *yod*, *daleth* and *resh*). The preceding verb reflects a different vocalization, יַעֲדֶה "he will adorn" from עדה 'to adorn,' instead of יְעָדָהּ from יעד 'to appoint.' The readings reflected in the version have no philological plausibility whatsoever. The resulting Greek is worthless when it comes to recovering the meaning intended in the Hebrew. But it does represent a very nice phrase: κοσμέω πόλιν means 'to order, to rule a city.' The Greek translation of the Twelve Minor Prophets is full of such minor rearrangements, due at least in part to the extreme difficulty of the Hebrew text. The result may be rather felicitous, as in the present case. Or it may be completely bizarre as in Hos 9:12 where God says of Israel: οὐαὶ αὐτοῖς ἐστιν, σάρξ μου ἐξ αὐτῶν "Woe is to them, my flesh proceeds from them." Some church fathers interpret this as a reference to Christ's issuing from Israel according to the flesh, but what the translator thought it meant is a mystery (Bons *et al.* 2002, 131–132).

Accidental exegesis is like spontaneous translation in that the translator produced the rendering more or less straightforwardly from his understanding of the

Hebrew. In most cases, one may submit, the translator thought he was producing a faithful rendering of the Hebrew. Accidental exegesis is like deliberate exegesis in that the resultant Greek diverges markedly from the source text. In most translation units, accidental divergences are much more prominent than deliberate ones. For a correct apprehension of the explanatory element in the Septuagint, it is of crucial importance to recognize the factor of accident. This remains true even if it is not always easy in practice to assign each divergence to its proper category.

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The key to a proper distinction of spontaneous, deliberate, and accidental explanation is the study of translation technique, in the widest sense. Establishing the normal procedures in a given translation unit will help in isolating those passages where the normal procedure was not followed. The latter passages may reflect a different source text or an alteration of the Greek text in its own textual tradition; however, where such extraneous factors can be ruled out, it becomes possible to identify a deliberate attempt at interpreting the source text – unless the translation is due to a mistake.

The Septuagint as Quotation

The passage from one language to another forces a translator to explain his source text. The Septuagint has often, and justifiably, been called the earliest commentary of the Hebrew Bible. Explanation, however, is not the only operation of the translator directly affecting the meaning of the text. When a text is translated, it is brought into a new communicative framework. A translation is like a quotation, reiterating an earlier text in a new speech situation.[4]

Now, the quoting of an earlier statement may at times require a change of the wording if the meaning is to be preserved. Let us take a biblical example. Hearing that she will at long last bear a child, Sarah says to herself:

Genesis 18:12
 "After I am worn out, shall I have pleasure? And my husband too is old."

When God quotes this statement to Abraham, he changes the wording:

Genesis 18:13
        The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say,
            '*Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old*.'"

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4   For a taxonomy of forms of quotation, see Sternberg 1982.

While Sarah spoke subjectively of pleasure, God, for the sake of Abraham, substitutes the objective notion of childbearing. What is striking, too, is that God's quotation of Sarah's words omits all reference to Abraham's old age. According to the Talmud, God left this bit out for fear of starting a row between the old couple.[5]

In the Septuagint, changes of this nature remain rather inconspicuous. Geographical names are updated, אֲרָם 'Aram' is changed into Συρία 'Syria,' and so on, and some weights and measures are adapted to Hellenistic equivalents, the weight called שֶׁקֶל 'sheqel' becoming, in some instances, a Greek monetary unit, δίδραχμον etc. Many other instances are uncertain. A possible example is the following:

Genesis 24:47

וָאָשִׂם הַנֶּזֶם עַל־אַפָּהּ   "I put the ring *on her nose*."

In Greek this becomes:

περιέθηκα αὐτῇ τὰ ἐνώτια   "I put *earrings* on her."

As it seems, the image of the ring in the nose of the matriarch was too shocking for Hellenistic Jews to countenance, and earrings were substituted for cultural reasons. The same change is made also in Isa 3:21, where נִזְמֵי הָאָף 'the nose-rings,' is rendered as τὰ ἐνώτια 'the earrings,' showing that the change in Genesis is not simply due to chance.

Such interpretations, although attributed here to the "quotational" aspect of translation, are actually on the borderline of what has been termed explanation above. The only difference is that the latter difficulties are not of a linguistic or textual nature, but derive from wider cultural reasons.

When a text is restated in a new situation, it may have to be updated a little. What has been less well recognized is the reverse: when a text is quoted verbatim under changed circumstances, the meaning may change appreciably. Language works by implication. Not all that is communicated needs to be stated explicitly. Part of the meaning of any text – whether oral or written – has to be figured out from the general context. Change the context and you change the meaning.

Let us consider an example. Paul, the apostle, could not believe that the verse: "You shall not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain" (Deuteronomy 25:4) really referred to oxen. "Is God concerned for oxen?" he wondered (1Corinthians 9:9). He therefore interpreted the verse to mean that the labourer is worthy of his

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5   BT Yeb. 65b.

salary. Presumably the original law in Deuteronomy 25:4, addressing a society essentially based on agriculture, did have real oxen in mind. When this law was read in Tarsis, however, it meant something different. As a city-dweller, the idea that God should legislate for the benefit of oxen seemed absurd to Paul. The law therefore must have a figurative meaning.[6] Whether this interpretation was already that of the translators of the Pentateuch is impossible to know, but it is not unlikely if the Septuagint was indeed created in the metropolis of Alexandria.

What I am arguing presently is not that readers can create new meanings (although they do). Rather, the process of translation itself happens in a communicative situation that determines part of the meaning of the goal text. This remains true, whether or not that communicative situation can be recovered. Usually, it cannot. Indeed, it is very difficult to analyse the "quotational" aspect of interpretation with respect to ancient translations of the Bible. We know very little about the *Sitz im Leben* of the original Septuagint. Even where we have comments by early readers, like Philo or the authors of the NT, it is often hard to know whether they accurately reflect the original meaning of the Greek. In many cases, it is more likely that later comments reflect the preoccupations of those who make them – which adds a further stage to the process and takes us beyond the limits of this paper.

The influence of the pragmatic situation on the meaning of the text operates not only on single verses, but on larger units as well. The Greek Pentateuch was created during a period when other accounts of Jewish origins were already circulating in the Greek world. Hecateus of Abdera, a Hellenistic historian of around 300 BCE, makes the story of the Jewish people begin in Egypt. When a pestilence arose in their country, the Egyptians attributed their troubles to a divine agency; they decided, therefore, to expulse all foreigners, driving the greater number into what came to be called Judea; the colony was headed by a man called Moses, who founded Jerusalem, divided the people in 12 tribes and established many peculiar laws and customs. So far Hecateus. A few decades later, Manetho, an Egyptian priest writing in Greek, takes up the idea that the ancestors of the Jews were expulsed from Egypt. Instead of aliens, however, he speaks of Egyptian lepers and polluted persons. Manetho's version became very popular, turning into a staple argument of anti-Semitic polemics.

Although it cannot be proven that the Alexandrian Jews who produced the Greek Pentateuch knew Hecateus' or Manetho's works, it is hard to imagine that they hadn't been confronted by accounts similar to theirs. The competing narratives must have been much debated in Jewish circles. The Greek Pentateuch may have been an important statement in an ongoing polemic between Egyptian Jews

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6   The interpretation finds parallels in Philo, and the underlying hermeneutics has been systematized by Origen: when the literal meaning is impossible, a spiritual meaning must be sought (Siegert 1996, 184; Harl 1983, 90–92).

and their pagan neighbours. One imagines the Jews would have appreciated the patriarchal narratives in particular. The origins of their people lay not in Egypt, but in Mesopotamia. Moreover, in all dealings they had with Egypt, their ancestors were eventually victorious. This polemic would not have been the only, or even the main reason for translating the Torah. But it would contribute to an extra layer of meaning – or at least, significance – of the Greek text. At least, so it would appear.

In recent cosmological theory, it is held that the universe is made of three ingredients: normal matter, dark matter, and dark energy.[7] While the first is well known to all of us, and the second is familiar at least from science fiction movies, the third remains completely mysterious. Now, one might expect that dark energy, which no one has ever observed, let alone explained, would be rare. But this is not the case: scientists estimate there should be far more dark energy in the universe than normal and dark matter added together. This theory provides an analogy to our discussion of interpretation in the Septuagint. Only part of this can be retraced. Spontaneous, deliberate, and accidental exegesis all have to do with the way the translators apprehended the meaning of their source text on the linguistic and contextual levels. Retracing these elements is difficult, but it can be done, at least to a certain extent. The greater part, however, of the interpretation applied by the translators could only be determined if we knew the exact cultural and political conditions of the version's creation. This side will probably always remain somewhat elusive.

Conclusion

General linguistics has developed the distinction between locutionary and illocutionary speech acts. Texts and segments of communication have a locutionary meaning, making up a proposition. But they also have an illocutionary meaning, corresponding to the way the proposition is put to use in human communication: the proposition serves to inform, to promise, to command, to express a feeling, and so on. While the locutionary meaning flows from the words and the forms used, the illocutionary meaning is essentially determined by the speech situation. Thus, one and the same locutionary act may express entirely different illocutionary meanings according to the pragmatic context it is given. "Can you mow the lawn?" could mean: "Please do mow the lawn," when said by a mother to her teenage son; or it could mean: "Are you able to mow the lawn now that you have a bionic arm?" in a conversation between disabled ex-servicemen (Closs Traugott 1980, 236).

The distinction of speech acts is coextensive with the distinction between the explanatory and the "quotational" quality of translation argued for above. Somewhat simplistically one could say that translation interacts with both the locutionary and

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7   See, e.g., the article on dark matter in Wikipedia (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dark_matter).

the illocutionary level of the source text. The propositional meaning needs to be rephrased in a different language. But the pragmatic meaning, too, will be affected. Setting the text in a new cultural situation changes its communicative function.

To translate is indeed to interpret. The process of explanation inherent in any translation created many changes in the Septuagint. Because the translators weren't up to the philological challenge involved in their task, the changes produced at this level were in fact greater than they needed to be. Publishing this interpreted text among Hellenized Jews in Alexandria introduced further semantic shifts. Words do not express the same meaning if they are said or read in completely different situations. Unfortunately, we know too little about the Jewish community in Alexandria in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE to retrace more than a bare outline of this aspect of interpretation in the Septuagint.

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