

## TRANSLATING THE UNTRANSLATABLE: SEPTUAGINT RENDERINGS OF HEBREW IDIOMS

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

It is universally agreed that translating is impossible. All those who have tried their hand at it see the truth of the Italian proverb: *traddutore traditore*—“the translator is a traitor.” When one translates a piece of discourse, one changes it. On a purely linguistic level, the words and the grammar of one language are never precisely equivalent to those of another language: meaning cannot be expressed in exactly the same way in two different languages. And on a more general communicative level, the transposition of a text from one language into another cuts it off from its original situational context and puts it into an entirely new situation. Since meaning is essentially determined by pragmatic context, this cutting-off is bound to affect the text profoundly.

In everyday life, although the problems are real enough, the limitations of translation can often be accommodated. Translation is the art of the feasible. In the religious realm, however, the merely feasible is not good enough. When ancient texts are regarded as the word of God, as they are in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, betraying their meaning in translation amounts to sacrilege. Rabbi Judah states: *המתרגם פסוק כצורתו הרי זה בדאי והמוסיף הרי זה מגדף* “He who translates a verse literally is a liar, and he who adds to it is a blasphemer”.<sup>1</sup>

In light of these reflections, the Septuagint stands out as a remarkable achievement, not only for what the translators did, but even more for the very fact of doing it. From our modern point of view, the decision to translate Scripture may seem unremarkable. The Septuagint is merely the first in a very long series. To this day, the Bible has been translated into over 2000 languages. In its own historical context, however, the production and publication of a translation that would stand in for the original Hebrew and be used in its stead, in teaching and liturgy and perhaps other connections too, are truly momentous events. In later times, Rabbinic Judaism rejected this model of translation adopting instead the Targumic model characterized by the conjoint presence of source text and translation: the Targum does not replace the Hebrew but accompanies it—much as a musical counterpoint. Islam went one step further and denied the very possibility of translating the Qoran: any translations of the Qoran are regarded as *tafsir*, “commentary.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *T. Meg.* 4.41.

<sup>2</sup> See A. L. de Prémare, “Coran et langue arabe: quelques réflexions,” in “*Dieu parle la langue des hommes*”: *Études sur la transmission des textes religieux (1<sup>er</sup> millénaire)* (ed. Béatrice Bakhouché and Philippe Le Moigne; Histoire du Texte Biblique 8; Lausanne: Éditions du Zèbre, 2007), 93-100.

How can one explain the distinctive stance reflected in the Septuagint? What is the background of the decision to translate? Did the Greek translators fail to think through all the implications of their actions, rushing in like fools where angels would fear to tread? Or perhaps to them the text they were translating was not sacred Scripture but merely the traditional lore, and law, of the Jews? These possibilities can hardly be excluded—we just do not know. It is equally possible, however, and on balance much more likely, that the Septuagint translators did regard their source text as divinely inspired, and that they knew what they were doing—or at least, thought they did. Perhaps they were motivated partly by a desire to manifest their independence from Palestinian Judaism. God had spoken in Hebrew to their ancestors, but now he was speaking to them, in Alexandria, in a language they could understand. An explicit statement going somewhat in this direction is made by Philo—admittedly some three hundred years after the event—when he calls the Septuagint translators prophets inspired by God.<sup>3</sup> Or perhaps one should not stress the translators' desire to affirm their own identity: they may merely have been pragmatists, thinking that God's word would effect the purpose for which it had been sent, even in translation. Conscious of the limitations of translation, they would nevertheless have been confident that the essential message of the biblical text could be transposed into a different language.

It would be presumptuous to pretend answering these deep and difficult questions in a brief study. The Septuagint is an enigmatic literary corpus coming from a period about which almost nothing is known. Even such elementary questions as that of the provenance of the translators—were they Jerusalemites or Alexandrian Jews—remain hotly debated. To identify the essential nature of the Septuagint, the “philosophy of the translators,”<sup>4</sup> is an almost impossibly complex undertaking. Nevertheless, it would be regrettable not to set such important questions on our agenda. The way forward is to analyze single features of the Septuagint's translation technique in depth and to try and relate the results to larger issues.

In the present paper I would like to contribute to this discussion with an analysis of some expressions illustrating the impossibility of translation with particular clarity. Translating is always difficult, but some things are harder to translate than others. Borderline cases may prove to be diagnostic. Where translators come to the end of their wits, they reveal what “makes them tick.” One might retort that hard cases make bad law and that exceptions do not prove the rule. If so, let the proof of the pudding be in the tasting!

## 2. IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS

Idiomatic expressions have often been singled out as comprising a category that is particularly difficult to translate. Idiomatic expressions can be defined with Eugene Nida as combinations of words whose semantic and

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<sup>3</sup> *On the Life of Moses* 2.37.

<sup>4</sup> See H. Orlinsky, “The Septuagint as Holy Writ and the Philosophy of the Translators,” *HUCA* 46 (1975): 89-114.

grammatical structures are radically different.<sup>5</sup> Although they are constructed on normal syntactical patterns, the meaning of the whole is not simply the sum of the meanings of the parts. In English, “to have a chip on one’s shoulder,” does not mean that something is actually situated on one’s shoulder but, according to one definition, “to have a harboured grievance or sense of inferiority and being quick to take offence.” More technically, the endocentric meaning, i.e., the meaning of the words making up the expression, differs from the exocentric or global meaning.<sup>6</sup>

The precise import of idiomatic expressions is often hard to pin down. For instance, according to the dictionaries, “to cry wolf” means “to give a false alarm”.<sup>7</sup> The contexts, however, in which one uses the former are not necessarily the same as those in which one uses the latter. Idioms are somewhat akin to metaphors in this respect: they express meaning in a roundabout way laden with connotations.<sup>8</sup> If I say, “So-and-so was previously unknown and is now prominent,” I communicate something different than when I say “So-and-so is a dark horse.” Idiomatic expressions are usually limited to one single language and culture. For all these reasons idiomatic expressions are a translator’s nightmare.

The Hebrew Bible is full of idiomatic expressions.<sup>9</sup> For some reason, most of them consist of a verb and a noun referring to a part of the body.<sup>10</sup> Many of them, such as the expression “to lift up one’s eyes,” are easily understood, though some, such as “to recognize someone’s face,” are more difficult, and a few, like “to speak to someone’s heart,” are entirely opaque.<sup>11</sup> But the difficulty for translators is not one of understanding only. Rather, the problem arises from the discrepancy between form and meaning. If one follows the words, one may miss the meaning completely; and if one aims at the meaning, one may take all the savour from the text.

In the Septuagint, one encounters different ways of dealing with this problem. To begin with, the Hebrew may be rendered literally, which is often to the detriment of the global meaning. Thus the Hebrew expression

<sup>5</sup> Eugene Nida, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 45-46.

<sup>6</sup> Much more extensively, Jean-Marc Babut, *Les expressions idiomatiques de l’hébreu biblique* (CahRB 33; Paris: Gabalda, 1995), 21-59.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., E. Cobham Brewer, *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (Philadelphia: Altemus, 1898).

<sup>8</sup> Idiomatic expressions also relate more directly to metaphors when their meaning is linked to the metaphorical meaning of one of its components. The semantic analysis of idioms, even when they are well understood, is often rather involved, however. See, e.g., Babut, *Les expressions idiomatiques*, 89-90.

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., J. C. Lübke, “Idioms in the Old Testament,” *Journal for Semitics* 11.1 (2002): 45-63.

<sup>10</sup> See Edouard Dhorme, *L’emploi métaphorique des noms de parties du corps en hébreu et en akkadien* (Paris: V. Lecoffre, 1923).

<sup>11</sup> See Babut, *Les expressions idiomatiques*, [page(s)?]

“to put one’s life in one’s hand,” meaning “to risk one’s life,” is rendered word for word:

1 Sam 19:5 For he (Jonathan) did **put his life in his hand** (וַיִּשְׁכַּח אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹ בְּכַפּוֹ), and slew the Philistine.<sup>12</sup>

καὶ ἔθετο τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ ἐν τῇ χειρὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐπάταξεν τὸν ἀλλόφυλον

And he **put his life in his hand** and smote the allophyle.<sup>13</sup>

To what extent the idiomatic meaning of the Hebrew would be clear to a Greek reader is uncertain.<sup>14</sup>

A second approach is to render the Hebrew expression freely, keeping the global sense but sacrificing the wording. Thus the expression “to soften (?) the face of so-and-so” is translated “to appease” in the Minor Prophets:

Zech 7:2 The people of Bethel had sent Sharezer and Regemmelech and their men, **to entreat the favor** of the LORD (וַיִּשְׁלְחוּ אֲנֹכְיָא וְרַגְמֵלֵךְ וְאֲנָשֵׁי בֵּיתֶל).

καὶ ἔξαπέστειλεν εἰς Βαιθηλ Σαρασαρ καὶ Ἀρβεσεερ ὁ βασιλεὺς καὶ οἱ ἄνδρες αὐτοῦ τοῦ ἐξιλάσασθαι τὸν κύριον

And Sarasar and Arbeseer the king and his men sent to Baithel **to appease** the Lord.

This translation captures the meaning of the Hebrew well, but makes no effort to follow the wording.

A third possibility often chosen by the Greek translators is to combine a free rendering of the global meaning with a literal rendering of the form. A nice example is the way the Hebrew expression “to lift so-and-so’s face,” meaning “to show respect to so-and-so,” is rendered in a number of passages:

Gen 19:21 And he said unto him, See, **I have accepted thee** (וַיִּקַּח אֱלֹהִים אֶת־נַפְשׁוֹ) concerning this thing also, that I will not overthrow this city...

καὶ εἶπεν αὐτῷ Ἴδου ἐθαύμασά σου τὸ πρόσωπον καὶ ἐπὶ τῷ ῥήματι τούτῳ τοῦ μὴ καταστρέψαι τὴν πόλιν...

And he said to him, “Look, **I have indulged your person** also in reference to this matter, not to overthrow the city...”

The Greek verb θαυμάζω, “to honor, to show respect,” by itself corresponds rather satisfactorily to the idiomatic expression used in the Hebrew; it certainly does not render the lexical meaning of Hebrew נָשָׂא alone. The words ἐθαύμασά σε would have sufficed to give an adequate, free translation. The addition of the word “face, person” has no other motivation than to reflect the word of the same meaning in the Hebrew text.

<sup>12</sup> English translations of the Hebrew are given according to the KJV because it is often more literal than more recent translations. English translations of the Septuagint generally follow NETS.

<sup>13</sup> The Hebrew expression is found also in Judg 12:3; 1 Sam 28:21; Job 13:14 (compare Ps 119:109). In all these passages the Greek rendering is literal.

<sup>14</sup> The expression ψυχὴν παρατίθημι is used in Homer with a meaning close to that of the Hebrew expression (see LSJ, “ψυχή,” 2026).

The rendering of the idiomatic expression is a mixed one, combining adequate translation of the global, exocentric, meaning with a degree of subservience to the wording of the Hebrew.

One would expect the three techniques to depend on the degree of transparency of the Hebrew expression: idioms that could be readily understood by the Greek reader might be translated literally, while idioms that were entirely foreign to the genius of Greek might be rendered freely. This is not what happens, however. In reality, the three techniques are rather frequently applied to one and the same Hebrew idiom:

### 2.1. יָשָׁר בְּעֵינָיו literally “it was straight in his eyes” = “it pleased him”

#### A. Literal Translation

1 Sam 18:26 it pleased David well (וַיֵּשֶׁר הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי דָוִד) to be the king’s son in law

καὶ εὐθύνηθη ὁ λόγος ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς Δαυιδ ἐπιγαμβρεῦσαι τῷ βασιλεῖ

And the matter was **made straight in the eyes** of David to become the king’s son-in-law<sup>15</sup>

In this case, the expression was rendered word for word. Since in Greek, it is not idiomatic to say that something was made straight in the eyes of so and so, a reader with no Hebrew could gather the meaning of the phrase only from the context.

#### B. Free Translation

1 Kings 9:12 Hiram came (...) to see the cities (...) and they pleased him not (וְלֹא יֵשְׁרוּ בְּעֵינָיו)

καὶ ἐξῆλθεν Χιραμ (...) τοῦ ἰδεῖν τὰς πόλεις (...) καὶ οὐκ ἤρεσαν αὐτῷ

Hiram came (...) to see the cities (...) and they did not **please him**<sup>16</sup>

In this second example, the expression has been decoded and its global sense has been given in the translation. The target text expresses the meaning of the phrase correctly, as far as we know, but the wording of the Hebrew has been abandoned.

#### C. Mixture of Literal and Free

Judg 14:3 she pleaseth me well (וְהִיא יֵשְׁרָהּ בְּעֵינָי) <sup>17</sup>

LXX A ἤρεσεν ἐν ὀφθαλμοῖς μου

**she was pleasing in my eyes**

<sup>15</sup> NETS has: “and the matter was right in the eyes of David...”

<sup>16</sup> NETS has: “Chiram departed...”

<sup>17</sup> NETS has: “...in my sight.” In slightly different form, this type of translation is found, for the same Hebrew expression, in Jer 18:4 and 34:5.

Here, the expression has been decoded in the same way as in the second example, but an element of the wording of the Hebrew has been added. “To be straight in the eyes of so and so” is rendered “to please — in the eyes of so and so”.

The three basic approaches to idiomatic expressions are applied to many different Hebrew expressions. Contrary to what one may expect, renderings of type A are not limited to literal translation units, nor do free translation units systematically prefer renderings of type B. All three types of renderings are found in both free and literal translation units. Moreover, there is much variation even within one and the same translation unit. Note the following.

2.2. נִשְׂאוֹ לְבוֹ lit. “his heart has lifted him up” = “he was moved” (?)

A. Literal Translation

Ex 35:21 And they came, every one whose heart stirred him up  
(נִשְׂאוֹ לְבוֹ)  
καὶ ἤνεγκαν ἕκαστος ὧν ἔφερον αὐτῶν ἡ καρδία  
And they brought, every one of those whose **heart carried them**<sup>18</sup>

B. Free Translation of the Global Meaning

Ex 36:2 every one whose heart stirred him up ((נִשְׂאוֹ לְבוֹ)  
πάντας τοὺς ἐκουσίως βουλομένους  
all those who **freely desired**

C. Combination of Literal and Free

Ex 35:26 And all the women whose heart stirred them up  
(נִשְׂאוֹ לְבוֹ)  
καὶ πᾶσαι αἱ γυναῖκες, αἷς ἔδοξεν τῇ διανοίᾳ αὐτῶν  
And all the women to whose **mind it seemed good**

The words “to their mind” have no other justification than to reflect the presence of “their heart” in the source text. Indeed, αἷς ἔδοξεν, “to whom it seemed good” would have sufficed as a free rendering of the Hebrew. In this example, all three approaches are found within the same passage.

Other examples can be found of Hebrew expression rendered literally, freely and in a third way combining the former two.

2.3. אָפַן לְחָרָה literally “his nose/anger burned” = “he became angry”

A. 2 Sam 24:1 And again the anger<sup>19</sup> of the LORD was kindled  
(אָפַן לְחָרָה)  
καὶ προσέθετο ὄργη κυρίου ἐκκαῆναι  
And the **anger** of the Lord added **to blaze**

<sup>18</sup> NETS has: “And each one whose heart was inclining brought.” This is hardly a faithful translation of the Greek.

<sup>19</sup> The Hebrew word is never translated as “nose” in this connection.

B. Gen 30:2 And Jacob's anger was kindled (בְּעָרְבָה אֵת רַחֵל) against Rachel

ἐθυμώθη δὲ Ιακωβ τῇ Ραχὴλ  
And Iakob **became angry** with Rachel

C. Gen 39:19 his wrath was kindled (וַעֲרֹבָה) <sup>20</sup>

καὶ ἐθυμώθη ὀργῇ  
he was **incensed with anger**

To the free rendering, the word ὀργῇ, “in anger,” has been added in order to have a formal equivalent of וַעֲרֹבָה.

2.4. וַיִּמְלֵךְ literally “fill his hands” = “ordain him (to a priestly office)”

A. Ex 28:41 and thou shalt anoint them, and consecrate them (וַיִּמְלֵךְ אֹתָם), and sanctify them, that they may minister unto me in the priest's office.

καὶ χρίσεις αὐτούς καὶ ἐμπλήσεις αὐτῶν τὰς χεῖρας καὶ ἀγιάσεις αὐτούς, ἵνα ἱερατεύωσίν μοι.

And you shall anoint them and **fill their hands** and consecrate them so that they may serve me as priests.

B. Lev 21:10 the high priest among his brethren (...) and that is consecrated (וַיִּמְלֵךְ) <sup>21</sup>

ὁ ἱερεὺς ὁ μέγας ἀπὸ τῶν ἀδελφῶν αὐτοῦ (...) καὶ τετελειωμένου <sup>21</sup>

the priest who is great among his brothers (...) and when **he has been validated**

C. Ex 29:35 seven days shalt thou consecrate them (וַיִּמְלֵךְ) <sup>22</sup>

ἑπτὰ ἡμέρας τελειώσεις αὐτῶν τὰς χεῖρας  
For seven days **you shall validate their hands** <sup>22</sup>

Several other idioms could be quoted for which the three basic approaches are attested. For many other expressions, only two or even one of the possibilities—literal, free, or a combination of the two—is found.

### 3. OBSERVATIONS REGARDING IDIOMATIC RENDERINGS

A few comments may be formulated in regard to each type of rendering.

Literal renderings (type A) almost always result in unusual turns of phrase in the target text. To different degrees they may have been hard to understand for Greek readers. This does not mean that such renderings presuppose readers who had access to the Hebrew source text. While literal renderings may lack clarity, they make up for this by making the target text more “Hebraic.” Literal renderings of Hebrew idioms are an index of

<sup>20</sup> Similarly Isa 5:25.

<sup>21</sup> The function of the genitive is problematic in this verse, but the meaning is nevertheless clear.

<sup>22</sup> Similarly Ex 29:33; Lev 8:33; 16:32; Num 3:3.

foreignness. A large part of the intended readership may not have been averse to this.<sup>23</sup> At the same time, Hebraisms of the type created in this way would have been at least partly comprehensible from the context, even to those who did not know Hebrew.

Free renderings (type B) show that most Septuagint translators are prepared occasionally to diverge from word-for-word rendering for the sake of clarity. Usually, free renderings lead to a simplification of the grammar and to a more prosaic target text. “Idiom substitution” is extremely rare.<sup>24</sup> Type B renderings of idiomatic expressions demonstrate that, on the whole, the Greek translators’ grasp of the source language was excellent. Of course, the meaning of one or another Hebrew expression may indeed have been forgotten by the Hellenistic period.<sup>25</sup> But on the whole, the translators understood the idiomatic expressions well enough: literal renderings are not to be attributed to a lack of understanding.

Type A and type B renderings correspond to a basic option in favour of either the form or the meaning of the source text. In rendering idiomatic expressions, the translator faced a dilemma: he could either translate the individual words, and thereby mystify at least part of his audience, or he could translate the global meaning, sacrificing an adherence to the precise wording of the source text. This brings us to renderings of type C. Very often, the Septuagint translators reject the basic choice between form and meaning.

In renderings of type C, elements of the form are combined with elements reflecting the meaning. To a twenty-first century specialist of translation, the negative aspects of these renderings leap to the eye: they cannot be qualified as faithful calques of the Hebrew wording, nor as intelligent transpositions of the semantics. Nor can they be called doublets,<sup>26</sup> for in the target language they constitute a single grammatical unit. They are true hybrids, monstrosities, that would be allowed in no modern Bible translation.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> See Jan Joosten, “Language as symptom. Linguistic clues to the social background of the Seventy,” *Textus* 23 (2007): 69-80.

<sup>24</sup> Examples cited by John Lee illustrate formulaic language more than idiomatic expressions of the type discussed in the present paper: e.g., Gen 43:27 **וַיִּשָּׂא לְיָדָם לְשָׁלוֹם** - ἠρώτησεν δὲ αὐτούς πῶς ἔχετε. See John Lee, *A Lexical Study of the Septuagint Version of the Pentateuch* (SBLSCS 14; Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), 25.

<sup>25</sup> A good example is the expression **דבר על לב** “to speak on the heart,” the meaning of which seems to have been no longer known to late biblical authors. See Babut, *Les expressions idiomatiques*, 87-89.

<sup>26</sup> Perhaps renderings of type C functioned virtually as doublets to knowledgeable readers.

<sup>27</sup> Lübke, “Idioms,” [page(s)?] draws attention to the NIV translation of Ezek 20:5, where the idiomatic expression [Should the Hebrew expression be given?] is rendered: “I swore with uplifted hand,” combining, somewhat in the manner of C type renderings in the Septuagint, the global meaning (“I swore”) with a nod to the wording (“with uplifted hand”). Lübke attributes such renderings to “uncertainty as

Within the Septuagint, however, such renderings are far from rare. They clearly do not result from occasional blunders. They reflect a conscious policy, shared by a large group of Greek translators who otherwise show much diversity in their approach. Type C renderings are found not only in the Pentateuch but all through the Greek Bible:

1 Sam 4:20 וְלֹא־שָׂתָהּ לְבָהּ “she did not set her heart” = “she did not understand”

καὶ οὐκ ἐνόησεν ἡ καρδία αὐτῆς “her heart did not understand”<sup>28</sup>

Jer 7:31 וְלֹא עָלְתָה עַל־לִבִּי “it did not go up to my heart” = “I did not intend it”

καὶ οὐ διενοήθη ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ μου “I did not intend it in my heart”

Zec 8:22 וְלִחַלּוֹת אֶת־פְּנֵי יְהוָה “to soften the LORD’s face” = “to propitiate the LORD”

καὶ τοῦ ἐξιλάσκεισθαι τὸ πρόσωπον κυρίου “to propitiate the face of the LORD”<sup>29</sup>

Renderings of this type are created by translators whose technique is very literal, as in Judges B:

Judg 3:24 הוּא סִטְיָד הוּא סִטְיָד הוּא סִטְיָד “he is covering his feet” = “he is relieving himself”

LXX B ἀποκενοῖ τοὺς πόδας αὐτοῦ<sup>30</sup> “he is emptying his feet”<sup>31</sup>

And by translators whose approach is very free, as in Isaiah or Proverbs:

Prov 28:21 הַכֹּרֵר־פְּנִים לֹא־טוֹב

ὁς οὐκ αἰσχύνεται πρόσωπα δικαίων οὐκ ἀγαθός

He who does not feel shame for the *person* (the face) of the righteous is not good.<sup>32</sup>

To the translators, the positive aspect of these hybrid renderings may have been that they allowed them to overcome, to a certain extent, the impossibility of translating idiomatic expressions. When they create a type C reading, the translators are eating their cookie and having it too, so to speak.

to the idiomatic quality of the Hebrew.” Even in the NIV, such translations are exceptional, while in the Septuagint they are frequent.

<sup>28</sup> NETS has: “her heart did not give heed.”

<sup>29</sup> NETS has: “to appease the face of the Lord.”

<sup>30</sup> The expression is translated freely in the A text and, in a different way, in 1 Sam 24:4.

<sup>31</sup> NETS has: “he is draining his feet,” with a note explaining that “feet” may refer here to the “lowest part.” In light of the general approach of the Greek translators to idioms, this explanation would seem to be far-fetched and unnecessary.

<sup>32</sup> NETS has: “...before the person...”. See also Isa 3:9.

## 3. CONCLUSIONS

Idiomatic expressions make up only a small part of the Septuagint's source text. Moreover, only part of the evidence could be presented in this paper. Nevertheless, our tiny sample would appear to be significant in several ways.

To begin with, the fact that different techniques were applied to idiomatic expressions is suggestive. Faced with expressions that proved particularly recalcitrant to translation, the Seventy did not follow a single approach but tried out different possibilities. Within one and the same translation unit, indeed within one and the same short passage, a Hebrew expression may be translated now literally, now freely, and now in a special mode combining the free rendering with the literal one. To my mind, this versatility flows mainly from inexperience. The translators of the Pentateuch did not come to their task with ready-made recipes. Although they were rather proficient in Hebrew, and had at least some knowledge of traditional exegesis, they had not been trained as translators—let alone as translators of Scripture. They learnt their trade “on the job,” dealing with particular problems as they arose in their successive rendering of the Hebrew text. Recurrent problems were not solved by following one consistent course but by applying a mix of strategies, now privileging the form, now the perceived content of the source text.

The way the translators dealt with idiomatic expressions also reveals something of their deeper motives. The translators brought great creativity to their project. Their objective, however, was not to create something new and unprecedented, but to preserve the old. To all appearances, the ultimate goal of the translators was to give to their readers as much as possible of what they found in the source text. Although the translational process sometimes demands that one should abandon either the wording of the source text or its global meaning, the Seventy were not at ease with this alternative. More often than not, they refused this basic dilemma and tried to compose in Greek an expression that paid tribute to both the wording and the sense. Although some of their renderings are open to criticism, because they follow neither the form nor the meaning of the source, they reflect much intelligence and a general preparedness to try out new formulas.

The facts brought to light in our analysis indicate that the Septuagint was meant by its creators to *represent* the Hebrew source text. The version was designed in such a way as to suggest to its audience that this is not simply a Greek text, nor even simply a Greek translation, but a sort of replica of the Hebrew scriptures in a different language. In the passage from the Life of Moses already referred to above, Philo writes:<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> See note 3. [When you quote the English translation of an author like Philo, *The SBL Handbook of Style* says that the translator needs to be acknowledged (p. 57). When quoting this passage of Philo I have used the Loeb edition (which I note that you have not used), and the note for that edition would read: *Moses* 2.37 (Colson, LCL).]

(...) in every case, exactly corresponding Greek words were employed to translate literally the appropriate Chaldaic words, being adapted with exceeding propriety to the matters which were to be explained; for just as I suppose the things which are proved in geometry and logic do not admit any variety of explanation, but the proposition which was set forth from the beginning remains unaltered, in like manner I conceive did these men find words precisely and literally corresponding to the things, which words were alone, or in the greatest possible degree, destined to explain with clearness and force the matters which it was desired to reveal. And there is a very evident proof of this; for if Chaldaeans were to learn the Greek language, and if Greeks were to learn Chaldaean, and if each were to meet with those scriptures in both languages, namely, the Chaldaic and the translated version, they would admire and reverence them both as sisters, or rather as one and the same both in their facts and in their language.

Although he was no translation specialist and may have known no Hebrew (or Chaldaic as he calls it), it appears that Philo has here captured something of the essence of the translation approach encapsulated in the Septuagint. The translators made every effort to transmit not only the content but also the form of the source text to their Greek readers. With more than two thousand years of hindsight, and with much better tools, modern-day scholars may estimate that the Seventy failed occasionally to attain their ideal. The target text is not always perfectly true to the meaning of the source, nor—though this is more excusable—to its form. One should recognize, however, that even if the execution of their project may leave something to be desired, the project itself was admirable.