HELDA
HELSINGIN YLIOPISTO
HELSINGFORS UNIVERSITET
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI

https://helda.helsinki.fi

The Septuagint and Oral Translation

Aejmelaeus, Anneli

Society of Biblical Literature
2013

Aejmelaeus , A 2013 , The Septuagint and Oral Translation . in M K H Peters (ed.) , XIV Congress of the IOSCS, Helsinki, 2010 . vol. 59 , Septuagint and Cognate Studies , no. 59 , Society of Biblical Literature , Atlanta, GA , pp. 5-13 , Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies , Helsinki , Finland , 29/07/2010 .

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/217488

unspecified
publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

XIV CONGRESS OF THE IOSCS, HELSINKI, 2010

Edited by

Melvin K. H. Peters

Society of Biblical Literature
Atlanta

XIV CONGRESS OF THE IOSCS, HELSINKI, 2010

Copyright © 2013 by the Society of Biblical Literature

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by means of any information storage or retrieval system, except as may be expressly permitted by the 1976 Copyright Act or in writing from the publisher. Requests for permission should be addressed in writing to the Rights and Permissions Office, Society of Biblical Literature, 825 Houston Mill Road, Atlanta, GA 30329 USA.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies. Congress (14th : 2010 : Helsinki, Finland)
XIV Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies, Helsinki, 2010 / edited by Melvin K. H. Peters.
p. cm. — (Septuagint and cognate studies ; number 59)
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-1-58983-659-4 (paper binding : alk. paper) — ISBN 978-1-58983-660-0 (electronic format) — ISBN 978-1-58983-763-8 (hardcover binding : alk. paper)
1. Bible. O.T. Greek—Versions—Septuagint—Congresses. I. Peters, Melvin K. H. II. Title. III. Series: Septuagint and cognate studies series ; no. 59.
BS744.I58 2010
221.4'8—dc23 2013004361

Printed on acid-free, recycled paper conforming to
ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992 (R1997) and ISO 9706:1994
standards for paper permanence.

The Septuagint and Oral Translation

Anneli Aejmelaeus

Abstract: Speaking of oral translation has not been popular in Septuagint research lately. The history of research knows one such theory, developed about a century ago by Paul Kahle, maintaining that there was no one written translation in the beginning but several different oral translations that were written down and eventually unified in a process comparable to the development of the Targums. This theory has been refuted, once and for all, a long time ago. Everything in the textual history of the Septuagint speaks for an *Urtext*, one translation text behind all the various developments in the textual history. But what was there before this *Urtext*? Several puzzles around the Septuagint find a natural solution, if an origin in oral translation is presupposed for the Torah or at least parts of it. The only source of arguments for a theory of this kind is the translation itself.

1. Introduction to the Panel

The real story of the origins of the Septuagint is like a big puzzle for which only a few pieces are available.[1] Through centuries scholars interested in this area of study have tried to find pieces for the puzzle from the Letter of Aristeas—as we all know, a second-century B.C.E. pseudepigraph,[2] which cannot

1. On the origins of the Septuagint, see also, e.g., Sebastian Brock, "The Phenomenon of the Septuagint," *OTS* 17 (1972) 11–36, and "Bibelübersetzungen I:2 Die Übersetzungen des Alten Testaments ins Griechische," in *TRE VI* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980) 163–172; Jennifer M. Dines, *The Septuagint* (Understanding the Bible and its World, ed. Michael A. Knibb; London – New York: T & T Clark, 2004); Benjamin G. Wright III, "Translation as Scripture: The Septuagint in Aristeas and Philo," in *The Septuagint Research: Issues and Challenges in the Study of the Greek Jewish Scriptures* (ed. W. Kraus & R.G. Wooden; SCS 53; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006) 47–61.

2. *Lettre d'Aristée à Philocrate,* introd., texte critique, trad. et notes par André Pelletier (Sources chrétiennes 89; Paris: Cerf, 1962; *Aristeas to Philocrates,* edited and translated by Moses Hadas (Jewish Apocryphal Literature; New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951); *Aris-*

be regarded as a historical document telling us what really happened. The problem with Aristeas is that it is impossible to distinguish in which details it happens to be right and in which details it is not. No detail of the story can thus be relied on as such but must be backed up with evidence from other sources. Why then consider the Letter of Aristeas at all? Why let Aristeas determine the agenda for the discussion?[3]

Indeed, more than anything else, the Letter of Aristeas informs us of the circumstances at the time of its writing, in Alexandria of the late second century B.C.E., namely: (1) the existence of the Torah in Greek, known as the Law (ὁ νόμος), and (2) its status as Scripture equivalent to the Hebrew Scriptures.

It is important to note that the Letter of Aristeas speaks only of the Law, the Greek Torah, although towards the end of the second century B.C.E., its time of writing, there must have been other translated books, as witnessed by the translator of Ben Sira. This means that the Torah—Hebrew and Greek—had a special, authoritative status above all the other books, and the Greek Torah obviously derived its authority from the Hebrew original. If this was the situation as late as the final quarter of the second century, I think we should more clearly distinguish between the Pentateuch and the other books when we speak of the process of translation. I am not suggesting that we should use the name Septuagint in its original meaning—that would only cause confusion—but we should take seriously the difference between "the Scripture" and "the other writings."

I agree with Ben Wright that the Letter of Aristeas shows us the end result of a long process: what became of the translation that was initiated more than a hundred years earlier.[4] In the beginning, there was probably no intention to create an authoritative text. What was the original intention? How did the process that led to authoritative Greek Scripture begin? In this panel we are trying to put together a few pieces of this big puzzle. These pieces—hints and clues to what really happened—should be looked for in the sociology of groups like the diaspora Jews in Alexandria, in the history of the diaspora and the Jewish religion, as much as can be known of it, and most importantly in textual studies, in the text of the Septuagint itself, although its witness is not always easy to interpret.

---

teasbrief, übersetzt und kommentiert von Norbert Meisner (Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit, 2.1; Gütersloh, 1977).

3. See Sylvie Honigman, *The Septuagint and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria: A study in the narrative of the Letter of Aristeas* (London: Routledge, 2003).

4. Benjamin Wright, "Translation as Scripture," 47–61. A need to argue for the authoritative status of the Septuagint is an explanation given to the Letter of Aristeas by Benjamin Wright.

2. When and Where—Why and How?

There is no need for me to start from the very beginning and argue for the when and the where of the translation of the Torah. There seems to be a broad consensus among us about the second quarter or the middle of the third century B.C.E., and this can be made plausible even on linguistic grounds.[5] There also seems to be a firm connection with Alexandria, especially with the Jewish community that was established in the newly founded city from the turn of the century (fourth–third B.C.E.).

What interests me are the why and the how. I would like to see the origins of the Septuagint as a gradual process and a communal enterprise that arose from the need of the community to keep up and strengthen its Jewish identity in the Hellenistic society. The Hellenization of the Jewish immigrants happened very rapidly and an essential part of it was, of course, the adoption of the Greek language, first as a second language alongside their native Aramaic, but soon as the main language of everyday life. Two generations is normally a time long enough for immigrants to change even their home language.

The language seems not to have been constitutive for the identity of the Jewish community. Instead, their Jewish identity must have had a strong religious element. Unfortunately, we know just about nothing about Jewish religious institutions and practices during that time. Did they practice reading the Torah in one form or the other? The Torah itself prescribes gatherings of the community for the celebration of the annual festivals as well as for the reciting of the Torah.

The question of which was first, the Synagogue or the Septuagint, is almost like the question about the chicken and the egg. The emergence of both of them—the προσευχή houses and the translation of the Torah—in the mid-third century hints at a definite connection between the two. Assuredly, both can be seen as parts of the strategy of the community—an ethnic minority group in the Hellenistic society—to strengthen its Jewish identity. As we know, it was a successful strategy.

3. The Question of Oral Translation

The outcome of the process makes me believe that Torah reading played a part in it. In the beginning, it must have happened in Hebrew. As long as Aramaic was spoken in the community, they may have translated the recited verses

5. J. A. L. Lee, *A Lexical Study of the Septuagint Version of the Pentateuch* (SCS 14; Chico, Ca.: Scholars Press, 1983) 129–144.

orally into Aramaic, as we have learned about the origins of the Targum. As Aramaic was more and more replaced by Greek, there must have been an increasing need to find Greek expressions for central concepts of the Jewish religion and the content of the Torah. What could have been more natural than translating Scripture orally into Greek for those members of the community who could not follow Hebrew reading?[6] In fact, there are features in the Greek Pentateuch that hint at a practice of oral translation as a preparatory phase behind the written form.

Already the general impression of the translation technique speaks for some kind of a preparatory phase. The standard equivalents and the conventions of translating are there from the very beginning. I find it difficult to think that the individual translators would have coined the equivalents for the religious terms and other recurring expressions in the course of their work as they were confronted with such words for the first time and that these translation choices would have been simply followed by later translators. The use of the *religious terminology* is remarkably consistent from the very beginning. I am thinking of words such as δικαιοσύνη for צְדָקָה, διαθήκη for בְּרִית, νόμος for תּוֹרָה, ἔλεος for חֶסֶד, δόξα for כָּבוֹד, προσήλυτος for גֵּר—Greek words that were used in a new way, corresponding to certain Hebrew words. One could argue that it would suffice if these words had become part of the speech of the community. The language of the translation was derived from the language usage of the community.[7]

However, this does not explain everything. There are phenomena that presuppose *preconceived equivalences between Hebrew and Greek words* that can only be based on translation practice. It is hardly possible to prove this, but there are details of translation technique that possibly serve as cumulative evidence for oral translation behind the written text of the Greek Torah.

My first example is εὐλογέω, corresponding to the Hebrew root ברך, which has the two very different functions, 'to praise' and 'to bless,' requiring different renderings in most other languages.[8] The Greek word actually corre-

6. According to Elias J. Bickerman, "The Septuagint as a Translation," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* XXVIII (1959), 1–39, "in the Alexandrian synagogue a dragoman standing beside the reader translated the lesson into Greek" (8). Sebastian Brock, *TRE* 6:163–172, seems to have had a similar idea.

7. Jan Joosten, "Language as Symptom: Linguistic Clues to the Social Background of the Seventy," in *Text-Criticism and Beyond: In Memoriam of Isac Leo Seeligmann* (*Textus* 23; ed. A. Rofé, M. Segal, S. Talmon & Z. Talshir; Jerusalem: Magnes 2007) 69–80.

8. I am grateful to Jan Joosten who suggested this example to me. See also his discussion of the lexical item in his contribution to this volume. It is interesting that the verb εὐλογέω, just like its Hebrew counterpart, is used to denote not only the act of speaking

sponds to the first function only ('to speak well of,' 'to praise'),[9] and this must have been decisive for the coinage of the equivalence. The first occurrences of the word in Genesis (1:22, 28, 2:3, 5:2, 9:1), however, represent the meaning 'to bless'—in fact most occurrences of the verb and its derivatives in Genesis (> 80) represent this meaning. It is impossible to think that this translator would have coined the equivalent. Rather, he knew that the Hebrew word ברך should be translated by εὐλογέω. The next book, Exodus has fewer occurrences of the word, but the result is the same. The meaning 'to praise' occurs in the well-known acclamation בָּרוּךְ יְהוָה—εὐλογητὸς κύριος (Gen 9:26, 24:27; Exod 18:10), and this could be the origin of the equivalence. How it actually came about we do not know. What concerns me here is that it could not have come about at the point where the translator of either Genesis or Exodus or any other book in the Pentateuch was first confronted with the Hebrew word. Nor is it possible to think that the meaning 'blessing' would have come about in the language usage of the community. It clearly presupposes the combination of the two ideas in the Hebrew term and could thus originate with translation from Hebrew only.

Another interesting case is the use of δόξα for כָּבוֹד. In genuine Greek δόξα has mostly a neutral meaning 'esteem,' 'opinion,' 'reputation,' then also 'good reputation,' but in biblical Greek it has a special meaning 'glory,' 'splendour,' especially of God, referring even to a visible radiance in the presence of God, corresponding to the Hebrew כָּבוֹד.[10] The first occurrence of כָּבוֹד in Genesis 31:1, however, has the meaning 'property,' 'wealth,' in reference to Jacob's possessions in Mesopotamia.[11] Even in this human context כָּבוֹד is translated by δόξα. This could not possibly have been the first case of this equivalence, but presupposes the biblical usage and the coining of δόξα as an equivalent for כָּבוֹד in other contexts, particularly in Exodus and Numbers.[12]

---

either 'praise' or 'blessing,' but also the act of 'effecting blessing.' Cf. Takamitsu Muraoka, *A Greek–English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Louvain: Peeters, 2009), *sub loco*.

9. See Liddell–Scott–Jones, *Greek–English Lexicon*, *sub loco*: the usage to denote 'blessing' is clearly Hebraistic and originates with the Septuagint.

10. Although it also translates a few other related terms, δόξα predominantly corresponds to כָּבוֹד and most probably originated as a rendering of it. The more neutral senses that are common in Classical Greek (see Liddell–Scott–Jones, *sub loco*) have hardly any use in the Greek Bible.

11. See also the parallel verse Gen 31:16 where the Hebrew text has changed to עֹשֶׁר but the Greek text has a double translation with δόξα.

12. The only other cases in Genesis (45:13, 49:6) speak of human honour, whereas examples for the connotation 'visible splendour (of God)' are found in Exodus and Numbers (e.g. Exod 16:7, 10; 24:16, 17; Num 14:10, 21, 22; 16:19).

I am still looking for more such hints and clues that would speak of experience in oral translation preceding the writing down of the final translation. One group of cases could be inappropriate renderings that show influence of another, totally different, later context. One example might be אַף, a very basic Hebrew word that has a concrete basic meaning 'nose' and a derived abstract meaning 'anger' (regularly translated by ὀργή or θυμός). I was surprised to find that the concrete 'nose,' 'nostrils' is quite rare and rarely appears in the Greek translation.[13] The concrete dual אַפַּיִם 'nostrils,' occurs in the idiom "to bow one's face to the ground," for which πρόσωπον 'face' is very natural. Now, the first occurrence of אַף in Genesis is 2:7, in the context of the creation of the human being out of dust, God breathing "into his nostrils the breath of life." A concrete equivalent is needed, and the translator offers εἰς τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ, using the concrete rendering that is appropriate in the idiom "to bow one's face to the ground," which appears later in Genesis (19:1, 42:6, 48:12) and in several other books of the OT. In the Pentateuch it appears however only once outside of Genesis, namely Numbers 22:31. The translator of Genesis seems to be equipped with two alternatives for אַף, the abstract 'anger' in the singular and the concrete 'face' in the dual, which hit the target in the majority of cases, but not in the first occurrence of the Hebrew word.[14]

Further cumulative evidence for my thesis of oral translation practices could possibly be found in various *translation conventions* that spring from an obvious religious motivation and stay the same throughout most of the Septuagint. For instance, there seems to have been an agreement not to translate directly the divine epithet צוּר "Rock." This well-known phenomenon is frequent in the Psalms,[15] but the rule is also followed in those few cases where צוּר appears in Deuteronomy. For instance,

Deut 32:15 וַיִּטֹּשׁ אֱלוֹהַ עָשָׂהוּ וַיְנַבֵּל צוּר יְשֻׁעָתוֹ
καὶ ἐγκατέλιπεν θεὸν τὸν ποιήσαντα αὐτὸν καὶ ἀπέστη ἀπὸ θεοῦ σωτῆρος αὐτοῦ.

Ps 17(18): 47 חַי־יְהוָה וּבָרוּךְ צוּרִי
ζῇ κύριος, καὶ εὐλογητὸς ὁ θεός μου.

---

13. "Nostrils," the plural of μυκτήρ for the singular אַף, appear at Num 11:20; 2 Kgs 19:28; 4 Macc 6:25, 15:19; Prov 30:33; Song 7:5; Job 40:26, 41:12; Ezek 16:12, 23:25.

14. The second occurrence is Gen 3:19 "in the sweat of your face," and in the third one, Gen 7:22 "the breath of the spirit of life in its nostrils," the word remains untranslated.

15. See Staffan Olofsson, *God Is My Rock: A Study of Translation Technique and Theological Exegesis in the Septuagint* (ConBOT 31; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1990).

Another such convention can be observed in the passages that contain the expression “to see the face of God.” As is well known, even the Masoretic vocalization changes the verb ראה to nif. in such cases. In the Septuagint, this device is however also applied to the verb חזה that does not have a nif. There are examples in the Psalter as well as in Exodus:

> Exod 34:24 בַּעֲלֹתְךָ לֵרָאוֹת אֶת־פְּנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ
> ἡνίκα ἂν ἀναβαίνῃς ὀφθῆναι ἐναντίον κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ σου.
>
> Exod 24:11 וַיֶּחֱזוּ אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים וַיֹּאכְלוּ וַיִּשְׁתּוּ
> καὶ ὤφθησαν ἐν τῷ τόπῳ τοῦ θεοῦ, καὶ ἔφαγον καὶ ἔπιον.
>
> Ps 16(17):15 אֲנִי בְּצֶדֶק אֶחֱזֶה פָּנֶיךָ
> ἐγὼ δὲ ἐν δικαιοσύνῃ ὀφθήσομαι τῷ προσώπῳ σου.

Obviously, certain details of the translation were already determined beforehand,[16] not only through the language spoken in the community but also through translation equivalences and conventions that had been developed in the course of oral translation—that is, there was a great deal of “know-how” concerning the correspondence of Hebrew words with Greek ones. And what is amazing and should be studied more closely is that there are many similarities with the Targum, for example, in the theological conventions of translating I just mentioned. Since the Targums were hardly influenced by the Septuagint, I see no other solution but to presuppose a common source or tradition of oral translation behind both.

Speaking of oral translation has not been popular in Septuagint studies lately.[17] Everyone knows Kahle’s theory that was refuted long ago, and I do

16. See my “Von Sprache zur Theologie: Methodologische Überlegungen zur Theologie der Septuaginta,“ in *The Septuagint and Messianism: Colloquium Biblicum Lovaniense LIII, July 27–29, 2004*, ed M. Knibb (BETL 195; Leuven: Peeters, 2006) 21–48 (reprinted in my *On the Trail of the Septuagint Translators: Collected Essays* [Revised and Expanded Edition; Contributions to Biblical Exegesis & Theology 50; Leuven: Peeters, 2007]).

17.About a century ago, Paul Kahle presented his Targum theory, maintaining that there was no one written translation in the beginning but several different oral translations that were written down and eventually unified in a process comparable to the development of the Targum. The weak point of this theory is that there is nothing in the textual history of the Septuagint to support it, whereas the discovery of different types of Targums does give evidence of this kind of a history of development. The textual tradition of the Septuagint clearly speaks for one text of the translation in the beginning, an *Urtext* so to speak, and later variation of this one text through corruption as well as correction according to the Hebrew text. Paul E. Kahle, “Untersuchungen zur Geschichte des Pentateuchtextes,”

not wish to return to it. Instead, I wish to describe the emergence of the Septuagint as the result of a long process in which the community was the active party, initiating the translation in oral form, authorizing its interpretations and translation conventions, and finally legitimating its writing.

In proceeding from oral translation to writing, there were several factors that played a part in the formulation of the written translation in the various books. The final outcome was a combination of (1) translation conventions and standard equivalences, on the one hand, and (2) unparalleled renderings determined by the competence, creativity, and preferences of the individual translators, on the other. (3) A third factor might have been that different genres required different approaches.

I can imagine that the Greek Pentateuch was produced in writing by translators who had experience in the oral translation of these books. But there is at least one more factor causing variation in the quality of the translation: it is hardly thinkable that Scripture reading and the oral translation that accompanied it were practised in a systematic way throughout the Pentateuch from the very beginning. This would mean that the translators were not equally experienced in all parts of the books.

Furthermore, the theory of oral translation behind the Greek Pentateuch could be used to explain some of the differences in comparison with the books translated later. The variation in the quality of the translations cannot be purely a question of varying competence of the individual translators, but must depend, at least to a certain extent, on the status of the various books and the interest of the community in them.[18]

Theologische Studien und Kritiken 88 (1915), 399–439; the theory was repeated in *The Cairo Geniza* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947).

18. Similarities between the various books, on the other hand, could be explained, as they have been explained before, by familiarity with the translation of the Pentateuch (see Emanuel Tov, "The Impact of the LXX Translation of the Pentateuch on the Translation of the Other Books," *Mélanges Dominique Barthélemy études bibliques offertes a l'occasion de son 60e anniversaire*, ed. P. Casetti, O. Keel & A. Schenker; OBO 38; Fribourg/Göttingen: Universitätsverlag/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981; 577–92), either with its written form or with the oral process. That the later translators, however, fall short of the standard set by the Pentateuch is probably also due to the lower status of those books. Books that were less central for the religious praxis or identity must have been less intensively studied, which can be seen, for instance, in frequent errors in translation: false analyses of grammatical forms or failure to recognize less common words.

4. The Novelty of a Translation in Writing

However, what could be the reason for proceeding from oral translation to fixing the translation in writing? Perhaps it had to do with the gradual loss of understanding of Hebrew. One could also think that the number of persons that were capable of performing as oral translators became smaller as time passed.

One could also ask: Why did this happen in Alexandria and not in other Jewish communities elsewhere in the Hellenistic world? Certainly not by chance. The rapid Hellenization of the community and their interest in Hellenistic learning and culture were certainly important factors. It is not implausible that oral translation into Greek was practised also elsewhere. There was actually nothing very special about it. What was special was the fixing in writing of the wording of a sacred text in translation, and this may well have been inspired—if not by the royal librarian—at least by the cultural climate of Alexandria where so much emphasis was laid on books and learning.[19]

Once the translation of the Torah had been fixed in writing, there were radical consequences. From now on, it was possible for just anybody to read the sacred texts of the Jews, if only they could get hold of a copy. A missionary effect of the translation was probably not intended, although for instance Philo thought that the Septuagint was meant for the benefit of all humankind, not just for the Jews.[20] For Jews, the most radical step was giving up the Hebrew reading and using the translated Scriptures independently. Oral translation per definition could only function in the context of a Hebrew reading. As soon as the translation existed in writing, however, it was found to function on its own, and the way was open for the final step, regarding the Septuagint as authoritative, sacred, and equal in status to the Hebrew Scriptures, as witnessed by the Letter of Aristeas. An equally unintended consequence of the translation and its fixing in writing was that the Jewish Scriptures were spread further and wider than they ever could have been in their original form and had an influence on the cultural history of Europe, the importance of which cannot be overestimated.

---

19. See also Jennifer M. Dines, *The Septuagint*, 1–60.

20. Philo, *De vita Mosis* 2.26.