

Translating the Torah

Introduction

This week's Torah portion, *Shemini*, includes the middle of the Torah. The middle letter (the *vav*, in גָּחֹן *gachon* [Lev. 11:42], and the middle words דָּרַשׁ דָּרַשׁ *darosh darash* [Lev. 10:16] are there. The middle letter comes after the middle word, so there are more long words in the second half of the Torah than in the first!

Also, the two sides of the scroll weigh about the same, which makes lifting the scroll during services (הגבהה *hagbahah*) easier!

Among other things, we read about unkosher animals:

וְאֶת־הָאֲרֵנֶבֶת כִּי־מַעֲלֶלֶת גֵּרָהּ הִוא וּפְרָסָה לֹא הִפְרִיסָה טְמֵאָה הִוא לָכֶם:

And the hare, although it chews the cud, has no true hoofs, [so] it is unclean for you. [Leviticus 11:6]

So the hare is not kosher. What more can we say about it? This. When King Ptolemy made rabbis translate the Bible into Greek (the Septuagint), they made some changes to avoid unintended insults or misconceptions. The Talmud says:

And [in listing unclean animals], instead of writing “The hare [אַרְנֶבֶת -- *arnevet*]”, they wrote “The short-legged beast [צְעִירַת הָרַגְלִים -- *tze'irat haraglayim*]”, because Ptolemy's wife was named Arnevet, and they were afraid the king would say: The Jews have mocked me and inserted my wife's name in the Torah. [Therefore, they referred to the hare only by one of its characteristics.] [Megillah 9b]

The story of the Septuagint

The Septuagint was written ~250 BCE. Here is the rest of its full story, expanded from the Talmud [Megillah 9a-b, Soferim 1:8]:

There was an incident involving King Ptolemy of Egypt, who assembled 72 Elders of Israel, and put them into 72 rooms, and did not tell them why [so they would not coordinate their responses]. He approached each and every one, and said to each of them: Write for me a translation of the Torah of Moses your

teacher. The Holy One, Blessed be He, placed wisdom in their hearts and they all [tacitly] agreed on one common understanding. They wrote for him:

-Instead of “*Bereshit bara Elokim* – In the beginning God created” [Genesis 1:1] they wrote “*Elokim bara bereshit* -- God created in the beginning” ... to avoid the misinterpretation “Bereshit created God” and the mistaken conclusion that there are two powers and the first, Bereshit, created the second, God.

-Instead of “Let us make man in our image and in our likeness” [Genesis 1:26], they wrote: “*I* shall make man in image and in likeness”, to avoid the mistaken conclusions that there are many powers and that God has human form.

-Instead of “And on the seventh day God concluded His work” [Genesis 2:2], they wrote “And on the *sixth* day God concluded His work, and He rested on the seventh day”, to avoid the mistaken conclusion that God completed some of His work on Shabbat itself.

-Instead of “Male and female He created them” [Genesis 5:2] they wrote “Male and female He created *him*”, to avoid the mistaken conclusion that this contradicts the earlier verse “And God created man” [Genesis 1:27].

-Instead of: “Come, let us go down, and there confound their language” [Genesis 11:7], they wrote: “Come, let *me* go down, and there confound their language”, to avoid the mistaken conclusion that there are many gods.

-Instead of “And Sarah laughed within herself [*bekirba*]” [Genesis 18:12], they wrote “And Sarah laughed among her relatives [*bikroveha*]”. This was to distinguish between Sarah’s laughter, which God criticized, and Abraham’s laughter, to which no reaction is recorded. The change implies that Sarah’s laughter was offensive because it happened in the presence of others.

-Instead of “For when they are angry [Simeon and Levi] slay men, and when they are pleased they maim oxen.” [Genesis 49:6], they wrote “For when they are angry they maim oxen and when they are pleased they uproot a trough”, to avoid the implication that they were murderers.

-Instead of “And Moses took his wife and his sons, and set them upon a donkey” [Exodus 4:20], they wrote “And Moses took his wife and his sons, and set them upon a *carrier of people*”, to create the implication that it may have been a horse or a camel rather than a lowly donkey.

-Instead of “And the children of Israel resided in Egypt for 430 years” [Exodus 12:40], they wrote “And the children of Israel resided in Egypt *and other lands* for 400 years”, to avoid the mistaken conclusion that they lived in Egypt continuously that long.

-Instead of “And he sent the youth of the children of Israel, who brought burnt-offerings” [Exodus 24:5], they wrote “And he sent the *elect* [*za’atutei*] of the children of Israel”, to avoid the question of why young men were sent to perform that service. Similarly, they later replaced “And upon the nobles of the children of Israel He laid not His hand” [Exodus 24:11] with “And upon the *elect* of the children of Israel He laid not His hand.”

-Instead Moses saying “I have not taken one donkey [*hamor*] from them” [Numbers 16:15], they wrote “I have not taken one item of value [*hemed*] from them”; to avoid the impression that Moses may have taken other items.

-Instead of “Which the Lord your God has allotted to all the nations” [Deuteronomy 4:19], when referring to worship of the sun and the moon, they wrote “Which the Lord your God has allotted to *give light to* all the nations,” to avoid the mistaken conclusion that God gave the heavenly bodies to the gentiles so they worship them.

-Instead of God saying “And... worshipped... the sun, or the moon, or any of the host of heaven, which I have not commanded” [Deuteronomy 17:3], they added “Which I have not commanded *to serve them*”, to make it clear that it does not mean that these entities created themselves and that God did not command their existence.

Reaction

The Sages did not want the Torah translated. Talmud:

The day the Torah was translated into Greek was as ominous for Israel as the day on which the Golden Calf was made, because the Torah could not be accurately translated. [Soferim 1:7, Sefer Torah 1:8]

They even decreed that the day the Septuagint was completed, the 8th of Tevet, will be marked on the Jewish calendar as “a day of darkness”:

On the 8th of Tevet, the Torah was written in Greek in the days of King Ptolemy, and darkness came to the world for three days. [Megillat Taanit]

It is now included in the reasons for fasting on the 10th of Tevet, which commemorates the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem.

Reasons: Accuracy, as stated above. Also, weapon for antisemites and founders of new religions.

Example: Isaiah 7:14, refers to an *almah*, or “a young girl”. The Hebrew word for a virgin is *betulah*. But the Greek word for both is the same. This led Christians (3 centuries later) to understand it as “virgin” and claiming “proof” of their religion and of the Virgin Birth.

Beyond the Bible, Talmud translations have been few and far between, partial, and sometimes edited. Detractors had to rely on apostate Jews (such as Pablo Christiani in “disputation” against Nachmanides). Translations opened door for antisemites to misquote the Talmud or quote it out of context.

There is an unwritten rule that commentaries must be written in Hebrew in order to endure. (Talmud is in Aramaic, but Aramaic very close to Hebrew.)

Most of all, it was felt the Septuagint opened the door for Greek culture into Judaism, and in general for Jews to identify with the culture of their birth land, even more so than non-Jewish fellow residents. The Jews indeed tended to out-German the German, out-Spanish the Spaniards and out-French the French.

Translations were not always unwelcome

When Torah writes about the “heap of witness”, it uses an Aramaic word which it quickly translates into Hebrew:

וַיִּקְרָא-לוֹ לָזֶן יֶגֶר שְׁהָדוּתָא וַיַּעֲקֹב קָרָא לוֹ גַּלְעָד

Laban named it Yegar-sahadutha, but Jacob named it Gal-ed. [Genesis 31:47]

Also, the Torah says, in stating the commandment of tefillin:

וּקְשַׁרְתֶּם לָאָזֶת עַל-יָדְךָ וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ:

And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes. [Deuteronomy 6:8]

In the Talmud, Rabbi Akiva explains that the word טֹטְפֹת -- *totafot* is extracted from two other languages and means that the tefillin must have four compartments:

The word *tat* in the Kapti language means two, and the word *pat* in the Afriki language also means two, [so *totafot* is a compound word meaning “four”]. [Sanhedrin 4b, Menachot 34b]

Beyond the Torah, the Book of Daniel was written in Aramaic. The “Sanhedrin”, the supreme legal council of the Jews in Talmudic times, derives from a Greek word meaning “assembly”.

Further, the Torah says:

וְכָתַבְתָּ עַל־הָאֲבָנִים אֶת־כָּל־דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת בְּאֵר הַיָּטֵב

And on those stones you shall inscribe every word of this Torah very clearly. [Deut. 27:8]

בְּעֶבֶר הַיַּרְדֵּן בְּאֶרֶץ מוֹאָב הוֹאִיל מֹשֶׁה בְּאֵר אֶת־הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת

On the other side of the Jordan, in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this Torah [to the children of those who took part in the Exodus]. [Deut. 1:5]

Rashi, based on the Midrash, explains this was done in the seventy languages of the nations of the world. [Midrash Tanchuma Devarim 2, Genesis Rabbah 49]

Rabbi Moshe Greenwald, from 19th-century Hungary, believes Moses' exposition was for Jews only and that he taught Torah in seventy languages in anticipation of the Exile and the Diaspora among the nations. [Arugat ha-Bosem, Oraḥ Ḥayyim 213]

Some say that only outside the Land of Israel (they were in Moab) is there a need for explaining Torah in a language other than Hebrew, the Holy Tongue.

Most prayers may be recited in the vernacular

The Mishnah says:

These are recited in any language: ... The Shema; the Amidah; the Grace after Meals ...

And these are recited only in the sacred tongue, [Hebrew]: ... The Priestly Benediction [Num. 6:23-26] [It says: "Thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them"] ... and the recitation at a ḥalitza ceremony... The verse in the Torah portion discussing ḥalitza states: "And she shall speak and say" [Deuteronomy 25:9], and below it states: "And the Levites shall speak and say" [Deuteronomy 27:14]. Just as there, the Levites speak in the sacred tongue, so too here, the recitation is in the sacred tongue. [Sotah 32a]

On the Shema, the Talmud elaborates:

What is the reason? It is stated: "Hear, O Israel" [Deuteronomy 6:4], [which implies it must be understood]. [Therefore, the Shema may be recited] in any language one can hear and understand. [Berakhot 13a]

Indeed, the Shulḥan Arukh (16th-century) permits saying prayers in any language, while illustrating the variety of opinions:

It is possible to pray in any language when praying with a congregation. However, praying alone should only be in the holy tongue. However, some say

this is only if one is asking something for himself, not for the regular liturgy. And some say that even for the regular liturgy one may pray in any language. [Orach Hayyim 101:4]

But the Mishnah Berura (19th-century Poland) warns that this should not become a habit. [Mishna Berura 101:13]

Jews are always strongly encouraged to learn Hebrew and pray in it.

Maimonides writes:

All blessings may be recited in any language, provided that the form instituted by the sages is followed. [Rambam, Mishneh Torah, Blessings 1:6]

Translations must be accurate and not “creative” or “poetic”.

Conclusion

Judaism slowly accepted the translation of all its sources and liturgy into other languages. While the original concerns remain -- inaccuracies, providing ammunition for antisemites, providing springboards for other religions to appropriate and twist the meaning of Jewish rituals, opening the door to assimilation by validating the input of other cultures into Judaism – it was felt that Jews must not create the impression they are hiding something.

Shabbat shalom.