

Lost in Translation: Reading the Bible in Translation

Reading the Bible in Greek

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Where did it come from?

Letter of Aristeas (c. 150-100 BCE), trans. R. H. Charles, 1913

There he assembled them in a house, which had been built upon the sea-shore, of great beauty and in a secluded situation, and invited them to carry out the work of translation, since everything that they needed for the purpose was placed at their disposal. So they set to work comparing their several results and making them agree, and whatever they agreed upon was suitably copied out under the direction of Demetrius. And the session lasted until the ninth hour; after this they were set free to minister to their physical needs. Everything they wanted was furnished for them on a lavish scale... In the early morning they appeared daily at the Court, and after saluting the king went back to their own place. And as is the custom of all the Jews, they washed their hands in the sea and prayed to God and then devoted themselves to reading and translating the particular passage upon which they were engaged ...As I have already said, they met together daily in the place which was delightful for its quiet and its brightness and applied themselves to their task. And it so chanced that the work of translation was completed in seventy-two days, just as if this had been arranged of set purpose.

When the work was completed, Demetrius collected together the Jewish population in the place where the translation had been made, and read it over to all, in the presence of the translators, who met with a great reception also from the people, because of the great benefits which they had conferred upon them. They bestowed warm praise upon Demetrius, too, and urged him to have the whole law transcribed and present a copy to their leaders. After the books had been read, the priests and the elders of the translators and the Jewish community and the leaders of the people stood up and said, that since so excellent and sacred and accurate a translation had been made, it was only right that it should remain as it was and no alteration should be made in it.

Megillat Ta'anit (first century CE?)

On the eighth of Tevet, during the rule of King Ptolemy, the Torah was written in Greek, and darkness fell on the world for three days.

Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 9a (Soncino trans.) (c. 300-c. 500 CE)

ותניא, אמר רבי יהודה: אף כשהתירו רבותינו יונית לא התירו אלא בספר תורה, ומשום מעשה דתלמי המלך. דתניא: מעשה בתלמי המלך שכינס שבעים ושנים זקנים, והכניסן בשבעים ושנים בתים, ולא גילה להם על מה כינסן. וכנס אצל כל אחד ואחד ואמר להם: כתבו לי תורת משה רבכם. נתן הקדוש ברוך הוא בלב כל אחד ואחד עצה, והסכימו כולן לדעת אחת. וכתבו לו...

Rabbi Judah said, 'When our teachers permitted Greek, they permitted it only for a scroll of the Torah.' This was on account of the incident related in connection with King Ptolemy, as it is taught: 'It is related of King Ptolemy that he brought together seventy-two elders and placed them in seventy-two [separate] rooms, without telling any of them why he had brought them together, and he went in to each one of them and said to him, Translate for me the Torah of Moses your master. God then prompted each one of them and they all conceived the same idea and wrote for him....'

Soferim 1:7 (eighth century CE?)

מעשה בחמשה זקנים שכתבו לתלמי המלך את התורה יוונית, והיה אותו היום קשה לישראל כיום שנעשה בו העגל, שלא הייתה התורה יכולה להתרגם כל צרכה. שוב מעשה בתלמי המלך, שכינס שבעים ושנים זקנים, והושיבם בשבעים ושנים בתים, ולא גלה להם על מה כינסם, נכנס אחר כל אחד ואחד מהם, אמר להם, כתבו לי תורת משה רבכם, נתן המקום עצה בלב כל אחד ואחד, והסכימה דעתן לדעת אחת, וכתבו לו תורה בפני עצמה, ושלושה עשר דבר שינו בה

Once there were five elders who wrote the Torah in Greek for King Ptolemy, and that day was as hard for Israel as the day the golden calf was made, for the Torah could in no way be translated adequately. According to another story, King Ptolemy gathered together seventy-two elders and placed them into seventy-two houses, without revealing to them why he had summoned them. Then he went to each and every one of them and told them to write for him the Torah of Moses your Teacher; the Omnipresent put wisdom into the heart of each one of them, so that they became all of one mind and wrote him the Torah itself, making thirteen changes.

Justin Martyr (100-165 CE), *Dialogue with Trypho*

But I am far from putting reliance in your teachers, who refuse to admit that the interpretation made by the seventy elders who were with Ptolemy [king] of the Egyptians is a correct one; and they attempt to frame another. And I wish you to observe, that they have altogether taken away many Scriptures from the translations effected by those seventy elders who were with Ptolemy, and by which this very man who was crucified is proved to have been set forth expressly as God, and man, and as being crucified, and as dying; but since I am aware that this is denied by all of your nation, I do not address myself to these points, but I proceed to carry on my discussion by means of those passages which are still admitted by you.

Early manuscripts of the Septuagint

Name	Date	Location
Codex Vaticanus	4th century CE	Vatican
Codex Sinaiticus	325-360 CE	British Library; see http://www.codex-sinaiticus.net/en/
Codex Alexandrinus	5th century CE	British Library

What is in it, and what are its main features?

Section	Books [Septuagint name in brackets if different]
Law	Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers [Arithmoi], Deuteronomy
History	Joshua [Iesous Naue], Judges [Kritai], Ruth, 1-2 Samuel [1-2 Reigns], 1-2 Kings [3-4 Reigns], 1-2 Chronicles [1-2 Paralipomenon], 1 Esdras, Ezra-Nehemiah [2 Esdras], Tobit, Judith, Esther (with additions), 1-3 Maccabees
Wisdom	Psalms, Psalm 151, Prayer of Manasseh, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Wisdom of Solomon, Ben Sira/Ecclesiasticus, Psalms of Solomon
Prophets	12 Minor Prophets/Trei-Asar, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Baruch, Lamentations, Letter of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel (with additions)
Appendix	4 Maccabees

1. Bereshit 1: 1-2

א) בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ : (ב) וְהָאָרֶץ הִיְתָה תְהוֹ וְנִהְיָ וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל-פְּנֵי תְהוֹם וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל-פְּנֵי הַמַּיִם :

Genesis 1: 1-2 (New English Translation of the Septuagint [NETS], Oxford University Press, 2007)

In the beginning God made the heaven and the earth. Yet the earth was invisible and unformed, and darkness was over the abyss, and a divine wind was being carried along over the water.

2. Bereshit 4: 7

הֲלוֹא אִם תִּיטִיב שְׂאֵת וְאִם לֹא תִיטִיב לִפְתַּח חַטָּאת רַבָּץ וְאֵלֶיךָ תִּשׁוּקָתוֹ וְאַתָּה תִּמְשָׁל בּוֹ :

Septuagint (NETS)

If you offer correctly but do not divide correctly, have you not sinned? Be still; his recourse is to you, and you will rule over him.

King James Version

If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.

New Jewish Publication Society

Surely if you do right,
There is uplift.
But if you do not do right
Sin couches at the door;
Its urge is toward you,
Yet you can be its master.

Esther, Septuagint, Addition A and 1: 1-9 (NETS)

In the second year when Artaxerxes the Great was king, on the first day of Nisa, Mardochaios the son of Iairos son of Semeias son of Kisaio, from the tribe of Benjamin, saw a dream. He was a Judaeen man dwelling in the city of Susa, a great man, serving in the court of the king. Now he was of the group of exiles which Nabouchodonosor, king of Babylon, took captive from Ierousalem with Iechonias, the king of Judea. And this was his dream: Look! Shouts and confusion! Thunder and earthquake! Chaos upon the earth! Look! Two great dragons came forward, both ready to fight, and a great noise arose from them! And at their sound every nation prepared for war, to fight against a nation of righteous people. Look! A day of darkness and gloom! Affliction and anguish! Oppression and great chaos upon the earth! And the whole righteous nation was in chaos, fearing the evils that threatened themselves, and they were ready to perish. Then they cried out to God, and from their cry, as though from a small spring, there came a great river, abundant water; light, and the sun rose, and the lowly were exalted and devoured those held in esteem. Then when Mardochaios, who had seen this dream and what God had determined to do, awoke, he had it on his heart and sought until nightfall to understand it in every detail.

And Mardochoais took his rest in the courtyard with Gabatha and Tharra, the two eunuchs of the king who guarded the courtyard. He both overheard their deliberations and inquired into their ambitions, and learned that they were preparing to lay hands on Artaxerxes the king, and he told the king about them. Then the king interrogated the two eunuchs, and when they confessed, they were led away. And the king wrote these things in the record, and Mardochoais wrote concerning these things. And the king ordered Mardochoais to serve in the court and gave to him gifts for these things. But Haman son of Hamadathos, a Bougean, was highly esteemed by the king, and he sought to harm Mardochoais and his people because of the two eunuchs of the king.

¹Now it happened after these things in the days of Artaxerxes—this Artaxerxes controlled one hundred twenty-seven lands from India—²in those days when King Artaxerxes was enthroned in the city of Susa, ³in the third year when he was king, he gave a feast for his Friends and for the other nations and for those highly esteemed of the Persians and Medes and for the rulers of the satrapies. ⁴And after these things, after he had displayed to them the great wealth of his kingdom and the glory of the celebration of his wealth for one hundred eighty days ⁵and when the days of the wedding feast were completed, the king gave a wine party for the nations present in the city, for six days, in the courtyard of the house of the king. ⁶It had been decorated with linen and cotton curtains hung on cords of linen and purple attached to gold and silver blocks on pillars of marble and other stones. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of emerald, mother of pearl and marble. There were gossamer throws in many colours embroidered with roses round about.

Esther 1: 1-9, New International Version

¹This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush: ²At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, ³and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present. ⁴For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. ⁵When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa. ⁶The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones.

Further Reading

Karen H. Jobes and Moises Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Baker Academic, 2000).

Tessa Rajak, *Translation and Survival: The Greek Bible of the Ancient Jewish Diaspora* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

For an online version of the newest (and best) English translation of the Septuagint and various other resources, see <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/>