

The Meaning of Torah in Ancient Times

Malka Z. Simkovich
Class 2: Translating the Torah

1. Pseudo-Hecataeus of Abdera, fourth century BCE, cited in Josephus, *Against Apion*, I. 183–189:

Of a different nature is the evidence of Hecateus of Abdera, at once a philosopher and a highly competent man of affairs, who rose to fame under King Alexander and was afterwards associated with Ptolemy, son of Lagus. He makes no mere passing allusion to us [Jews], but wrote a book entirely about the Jews, from which I propose briefly to touch on some passages

Hecataeus relates that after the battle of Gaza Ptolemy became master of Syria, and that many of the inhabitants, hearing of his kindness and humanity, desired to accompany him to Egypt and to associate themselves with his realm. Among these, he says, was Ezekias, a chief priest of the Jews, a man of about 66 years of age, highly esteemed by his countrymen, intellectual, and moreover an able speaker and unsurpassed as a man of business. Yet, he adds, the total number of Jewish priests who receive a tithe of the revenue and administer public affairs is about fifteen hundred. Reverting to Ezekias, he says: This man, after obtaining this honor and having been closely in touch with us, assembled some of his friends and read to them the whole scroll, in which was written the story of their settlement and the constitution of the state.

2. Prologue to Ben Sira

Many great teachings have been given to us through the Law and the Prophets and the others that followed them, and for these we should praise Israel for instruction and wisdom. Now, those who read the scriptures must not only themselves understand them, but must also as lovers of learning be able through the spoken and written word to help the outsiders. So my grandfather Jesus, who had devoted himself especially to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other books of our ancestors, and had acquired considerable proficiency in them, was himself also led to write something pertaining to instruction and wisdom, so that by becoming familiar also with his book those who love learning might make even greater progress in living according to the law.

You are invited therefore to read it with goodwill and attention, and to be indulgent in cases where, despite our diligent labour in translating, we may seem to have rendered some phrases imperfectly. For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have exactly the same sense when translated into another language. Not only this book, but even the Law itself, the Prophecies, and the rest of the books differ not a little when read in the original.

When I came to Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of the reign of Euergetes and stayed for some time, I found opportunity for no little instruction. It seemed highly necessary that I should myself devote some diligence and labour to the translation of this book. During that time I have applied my skill day and night to complete and publish the book for those living abroad who wished to gain learning and are disposed to live according to the law.

3. The Letter of Aristaeas

Aristaeas 1–8:

A trustworthy narrative has been compiled, Philocrates, of the meeting which we had with Eleazar, high priest of the Jews, arising out of your attaching great importance to hearing a personal account of our mission, its content and purpose. By detailing each aspect I have tried to give you a clear exposition of it, realizing your scholarly disposition, which is a supreme quality in any man who has tried continually to increase his learning and understanding, whether from the accounts (of others) or by actual experience. This

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is the way in which a pure disposition of mind is acquired, by the attainment of the noblest ends, and which, turning to piety, the highest of all ends, lives by adopting a rule which does not err. We have a set purpose devoted to the special study of the things of God, and offered ourselves as a deputation to the aforesaid gentleman, whose integrity and reputation have won him preeminent honor in the eyes of citizens and others alike, and who has gained a very great benefit for his own circle and for (fellow) citizens in other places.

Our deputation (waited upon him) with a view to the translation of the divine Law, due to its being written by them on parchments in Hebrew characters. We undertook this task with enthusiasm, seizing an opportunity with the king in connection with those who were transported to Egypt from Judea by the king his father, who was the original founder of the city and took over the government of Egypt. It is worthwhile telling you this as well, for I am convinced that because you are more favorably inclined toward the piety and disposition of those who live by the sacred Law, concerning whom we propose to write, you will gladly listen, since you have paid a special visit to us from your island, and wish to hear with us of matters pertaining to the edification of the soul. I had previously sent you the account of what I regarded as the most memorable matters. We received this account of the people of the Jews from the most renowned high priests in renowned Egypt.

You are studiously disposed toward what can help the mind and it is my duty to share this with all like-minded persons, and all the more so with you, for you have a kindred spirit, being not only blood brother in character but also in the pursuit of beauty the same as we are. The value of gold or any other treasure among those highly prized by the empty-headed does not possess the same value, as compared with the pursuit of culture and caring for these things. But lest we prolong the introduction and indulge in idle chatter, we will proceed to the main part of the narrative.¹

Aristeas 38–47:

[Ptolemy II Philadelphus wrote a letter to the High Priest in Jerusalem Eleazar:] "...It is our wish to grant favors to [those loyal to us] and to all the Jews throughout the world, including future generations. We have accordingly decided that your Law shall be translated into Greek letters from what you call the Hebrew letters, in order that they too should take their place with us in our library with the other royal books. You will therefore act well, and in a manner worthy of our zeal, by selecting elders of exemplary lives, with experience of the Law and the ability to translate it, six from each tribe, so that an agreed version may be found from the large majority, in view of the great importance of the matters under consideration. We believe that the completion of this project will win (us) high reputation. We have dispatched on this business Andreas of the chief bodyguards and Aristeas, men held in high esteem by you, to confer with you; they bring with them first fruits of offerings for the Temple and one hundred talents of silver for sacrifices and the other requirements. Write to us on any matters you wish, and your requests will be gratified; you will be performing also an act worthy of friendship for what you choose will be carried out with all dispatch. Farewell."

In reply to this letter Eleazar wrote in acceptance as follows: "Eleazar the high priest to King Ptolemy, dear friend, greeting. Good health to you and to Queen Arsinoe, your sister, and to your children; if that is so, it would be well, and as we wish. We too are in good health. On receipt of your letter we rejoiced greatly because of your purpose and noble plan; we therefore collected together the whole multitude and read it to them, that they might know your piety toward our God. We also showed them the vessels which you sent, twenty of silver and thirty of gold, five cups, and a table for offering, and for the performance of the sacrifices and the furnishing of the Temple requirements one hundred talents of silver, brought by two men highly esteemed by you, Andreas and Aristeas, gentleman of integrity, outstanding in education, worthy in every respect of your conduct and justice. They also communicated to us your messages, in reply to which

¹ Aristeas 1–8.

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they have heard from us also sentiments consistent with what you wrote. Everything which is to your advantage, even if it is unnatural, we will carry out; this is a sign of friendship and love. You have also bestowed great unexpected benefits upon our citizens in many ways. We therefore offered sacrifices without delay for you, your sister, your children, and your friends. The whole multitude made supplication that it should come to pass for you entirely as you desire, and that God the ruler of all should preserve your kingdom in peace and glory, and that the translation of the sacred Law should come to pass in a manner expedient to you and in safety. In the presence of the whole assembly we selected elders, honorable men and true, six from each tribe, whom we have sent with the Law in their possession. It will be a noble deed, O righteous King, if you command that once the translation of the books is complete these men be restored to us again in safety. Farewell.”

Aristeas 308-311:

When it was completed, Demetrius assembled the company of the Jews in the place where the task of the translation had been finished, and read it to all, in the presence of the translators, who received a great ovation from the crowded audience for being responsible for great blessings. Likewise also they gave an ovation to Demetrius and asked him, now that he had transcribed the whole Law, to give a copy to their leaders. As the books were read, the priests stood up, with the elders from among the translators and from the representatives of the “Community,” and with the leaders of the people, and said, “Since this version has been made rightly and reverently, and in every respect accurately, it is good that this should remain exactly so, and that there should be no revision.” There was general approval of what they said, and they commanded that a curse should be laid, as was their custom, on anyone who should alter the version by any addition or change to any part of the written text, or any deletion either. This was a good step taken, to ensure that the words were preserved completely and permanently in perpetuity.

4. Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 12.2.13–14

Accordingly, when three days were over Demetrius took them, and went over the causeway seven furlongs long: it was a bank in the sea to an island. And when they had gone over the bridge, he proceeded to the northern parts, and showed them where they should meet, which was in a house that was built near the shore, and was a quiet place, and fit for their discoursing together about their work. ¹⁰⁴ When he had brought them thither, he entreated them (now they had all things about them which they wanted for the interpretation of their law), that they would suffer nothing to interrupt them in their work. Accordingly, they made an accurate interpretation, with great zeal and great pains; and this they continued to do till the ninth hour of the day; ¹⁰⁵ after which time they relaxed and took care of their body, while their food was provided for them in great plenty: besides, Dorotheus, at the king’s command, brought them a great deal of what was provided for the king himself. ¹⁰⁶ But in the morning they came to the court, and saluted Ptolemy, and then went away to their former place, where, when they had washed their hands,⁸ and purified themselves, they betook themselves to the interpretation of the laws.

Now when the law was transcribed, and the labor of interpretation was over, which came to its conclusion in seventy-two days, Demetrius gathered all the Jews together to the place where the laws were translated, and where the interpreters were, and read them over. The multitude did also approve of those elders that were the interpreters of the law. They withal commended Demetrius for his proposal, as the inventor of what was greatly for their happiness; and they desired that he would give leave to their rulers also to read the law. Moreover they all, both the priests and the ancientest of the elders, and the principal men of their commonwealth, made it their request, that since the interpretation was happily finished, it might continue in the state it now was, and might not be altered. ¹⁰⁹ And when they all commended that determination of theirs, they enjoined, that if anyone observed either anything superfluous, or anything omitted, that he would take a

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view of it again, and have it laid before them, and corrected; which was a wise action of theirs, that when the thing was judged to have been well done, it might continue forever.

So the king rejoiced when he saw that his design of this nature was brought to perfection, to so great advantage: and he was chiefly delighted with hearing the laws read to him; and was astonished at the deep meaning and wisdom of the legislator. And he began to discourse with Demetrius, "How it came to pass that, when this legislation was so wonderful, no one, either of the poets or of the historians had made mention of it." ¹¹¹ Demetrius made answer, "that no one durst be so bold as to touch upon the description of these laws, because they were divine and venerable, and because some that had attempted it were afflicted by God."

He also told him, that "Theopompus was desirous of writing somewhat about them, but was thereupon disturbed in his mind for above thirty days' time; and upon some intermission of his distemper, he appeased God [by prayer], as suspecting that his madness proceeded from that cause." Nay, indeed, he further saw in a dream, that his distemper befell him while he indulged too great a curiosity about Divine matters, and was desirous of publishing them among common men; but when he left off that attempt, he recovered his understanding again.

Moreover, he informed him of Theodectes, the tragic poet, concerning whom it was reported, that when in a certain dramatic representation he was desirous to make mention of things that were contained in the sacred books, he was afflicted with a darkness in his eyes; and that upon his being conscious of the occasion of his distemper, and appeasing God [by prayer], he was freed from that affliction.

5. Philo, *The Life of Moses*, 2.39-43:

In olden time the laws were written in the Chaldean language, and for a long time they remained in the same condition as at first, not changing their language as long as their beauty had not made them known to other nations; but when, from the daily and uninterrupted respect shown to them by those to whom they had been given, and from their ceaseless observance of their ordinances, other nations also obtained an understanding of them, their reputation spread over all lands; for what was really good, even though it may through envy be overshadowed for a short time, still in time shines again through the intrinsic excellence of its nature. Some persons, thinking it a scandalous thing that these laws should only be known among one half portion of the human race, namely, among the barbarians, and that the Greek nation should be wholly and entirely ignorant of them, turned their attention to their translation. And since this undertaking was an important one, tending to the general advantage, not only of private persons, but also of rulers, of whom the number was not great, it was entrusted to kings and to the most illustrious of all kings: Ptolemy, surnamed Philadelphus...

Who is there who does not know that every language, and the Greek language above all others, is rich in a variety of words, and that it is possible to vary a sentence and to paraphrase the same idea, so as to set it forth in a great variety of manners, adapting many different forms of expression to it at different times. But this, they say, did not happen at all in the case of this translation of the law, but that, 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. ⁴⁰ 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

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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; considering these translators not mere interpreters but hierophants and prophets to whom it had been granted it their honest and guileless minds to go along with the most pure spirit of Moses.

On which account, even to this very day, there is every year a solemn assembly held and a festival celebrated in the island of Pharos, to which not only the Jews but a great number of persons of other nations sail across, reverencing the place in which the first light of interpretation shone forth, and thanking God for that ancient piece of beneficence which was always young and fresh. And after the prayers and the giving of thanks some of them pitched their tents on the shore, and some of them lay down without any tents in the open air on the sand of the shore, and feasted with their relations and friends, thinking the shore at that time a more beautiful abode than the furniture of the king's palace.

In this way those admirable, and incomparable, and most desirable laws were made known to all people, whether private individuals or kings, and this too at a period when the nation had not been prosperous for a long time. And it is generally the case that a cloud is thrown over the affairs of those who are not flourishing, so that but little is known of them; ⁴⁴ and then, if they make any fresh start and begin to improve, how great is the increase of their renown and glory? I think that in that case every nation, abandoning all their own individual customs, and utterly disregarding their national laws, would change and come over to the honour of such a people only; for their laws shining in connection with, and simultaneously with, the prosperity of the nation, will obscure all others, just as the rising sun obscures the stars.

6. Mishnah Megillah 4:4:

הַקּוּרָא בַתּוֹרָה לֹא יִפְחַת מִשְׁלֹשָׁה פְּסוּקִים. לֹא יִקְרָא לְמַתְרַגְּמָן יוֹתֵר מִפְּסוּק אֶחָד, וּבִנְבִיא שְׁלֹשָׁה. הֵיוּ שְׁלֹשָׁתָן שְׁלֹשׁ פְּרָשׁוֹת, קוֹרֵין אֶחָד אֶחָד. מְדַלְּגִין בְּנְבִיא וְאִין מְדַלְּגִין בַּתּוֹרָה. וְעַד כַּמָּה הוּא מְדַלֵּג, עַד כַּדִּי שְׁלֹא יִפְסֹק הַמַּתְרַגְּמָן

Not less than three verses of the Holy Law may be read in the synagogue to each person [called to read]. One verse only of the law may at one time be read to the meturgeman, or interpreter, but it is lawful to read three consecutive verses to him from the Prophets, but if each verse should form a separate section, one verse only may be read to the meturgeman at a time. Passages may be skipped over in the reading of the Prophets, but not in that of the Holy Law. What time may be suffered to elapse to skip from one passage to another? While the meturgeman does not conclude his interpretation.

7. Babylonian Talmud. Shabbat 115a:

מִיתִיבֵי הָיוּ כְּתוּבִים תְּרַגּוּם וְכָל לְשׁוֹן מְצִילִין אוֹתָן מִפְּנֵי הַדְּלִיקָה תִּיּוּבְתָא דְרַב הוּנָא אָמַר לֵךְ רַב הוּנָא הָאִי תְנָא סָבַר נִיתְנּוּ לְקִרּוֹת בְּהֵן ת"ש הָיוּ כְּתוּבִין גִּיפְטִית מְדִית עֵיבְרִית עֵילְמִית יוּנִית אַע"פ שְׁלֹא נִיתְנּוּ לְקִרּוֹת בְּהֵן מְצִילִין אוֹתָן מִפְּנֵי הַדְּלִיקָה אָמַר ר' יוֹסִי מַעֲשֵׂה בָאבָא חֲלַפְתָּא שֶׁהֵלֶךְ אֶצְל רַבִּין גַּמְלִיאֵל בְּרִיבִי לְטַבְרִיא וּמְצָאוּ שְׁהִי יוֹשֵׁב עַל שְׁלַחְנּוּ שֶׁל (יֹהַנֵּן הַנְּזוּף) וּבִידּוֹ סָפַר אִיּוֹב תְּרַגּוּם וְהוּא קוֹרָא בּוֹ אָמַר לוֹ זְכוֹר אֲנִי בְּרַבִּין גַּמְלִיאֵל אָבִי אָבִיךָ שֶׁהִיא עוֹמֵד ע"ג מַעְלָה בְּהַר הַבַּיִת וְהִבִּיאוּ לַפְּנּוֹת סָפַר אִיּוֹב תְּרַגּוּם וְאָמַר לְבַנָּאֵי שְׁקֵעוּהוּ תַּחַת הַנְּדָבָךְ אִף הוּא צוּה עֲלֵיו וְגַנּוּ

If [the Scriptures] are written in a Targum or in any [other] language, they may be saved from a fire...R. Huna answered... If [the Scriptures] are written in Egyptian, Median, Aramaic, Elamitic, or Greek, they may be saved from a fire, but they may not be read...

R. Jose said: My father Halafta once visited R. Gamaliel Berabbi in Tiberias and found him sitting at Johanan the son of Nizuf's table reading the targum of the Book of Job. [Halafta] said to [R. Gamaliel], 'I remember that your grandfather R. Gamaliel stood on the Temple Mount, when the targum of Job was given to him. [R. Gamaliel] said to the builder, "Bury [the targum] under the bricks." [R. Gamaliel's grandson, R. Gamaliel] too gave orders, and they hid it.'

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8. Babylonian Talmud, Megilla 3a

וא"ר ירמיה ואיתימא רבי חייא בר אבא תרגום של תורה אונקלוס הגר אמרו מפי ר' אליעזר ור' יהושע תרגום של נביאים יונתן בן עוזיאל אמרו מפי חגי זכריה ומלאכי ונודעזעה ארץ ישראל ארבע מאות פרסה על ארבע מאות פרסה יצתה בת קול ואמרה מי הוא זה שגילה סתריי לבני אדם. עמד יונתן בן עוזיאל על רגליו ואמר אני הוא שגלית סתריך לבני אדם גלוי וידוע לפניך שלא לכבודי עשיתי ולא לכבוד בית אבא אלא לכבודך עשיתי שלא ירבו מחלוקת בישראל!
ועוד ביקש לגלות תרגום של כתובים יצתה בת קול ואמרה לו דיך מ"ט משום דאית ביה קץ משיח

R. Jeremiah (according to some, R. Hiyya b. Abba) said: Onkelos the proselyte wrote the targum of the Pentateuch under the guidance of R. Eleazar and R. Joshua. Jonathan ben Uzziel wrote the targum of the Prophets under the guidance of Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. [When he did so], the Land of Israel quaked over an area of four hundred parasangs by four hundred parasangs, and a Heavenly Voice proclaimed, "Who has revealed My secrets to humankind?" Jonathan b. Uzziel answered, "I have revealed Your secrets to humankind. You know that I have not done this for my honor or for the honor of my father's house. I did it for Your honor, in order that dissension may not increase in Israel. [Yonatan b. Uzziel] then tried to reveal [the Scriptures by writing] a targum of the Hagiographa [that is, the Writings], but a Heavenly Voice went forth and said, "Enough." What was the reason [that God prevented him from writing this targum]? Because the date of the Messiah is foretold in it.

9. Babylonian Talmud, Megilla 9a

ומשום מעשה דתלמי המלך דתניא מעשה בתלמי המלך שכינס שבעים ושנים זקנים והכניסן בשבעים ושנים בתים ולא גילה להם על מה כינסן ונכנס אצל כל אחד ואחד ואמר להם כתבו לי תורת משה רבכם נתן הקב"ה בלב כל אחד ואחד עצה והסכימו כולן לדעת אחת וכתבו לו אלהים ברא בראשית (בראשית א, א) אעשה אדם בצלם ובדמות (בראשית א, כו) ויכל ביום הששי וישבות ביום השביעי (בראשית ב, ב) זכר ונקבה בראו (בראשית ה, ב) ולא כתבו בראם

The Gemara continues: And this was due to the incident of King Ptolemy, as it is taught in a *baraita*: There was an incident involving King Ptolemy of Egypt, who assembled seventy-two Elders from the Sages of Israel, and put them into seventy-two separate rooms, and did not reveal to them for what purpose he assembled them, so that they would not coordinate their responses. He entered and 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 the heart of each and every one, and they all agreed to one common understanding.

10. Mesechet Sofrim 1:7

ז (מעשה בה' זקנים שכתבו לתלמי המלך את התורה יונית והיה היום קשה לישראל כיום שנעשה העגל שלא היתה התורה יכולה להתרגם כל צרכה:

11. Megillat Ta'anit Batra

בשמונה בטבת נכתבה תורה בימי תלמי המלך יונית והחשך בא לעולם שלשה ימים

On the eighth of Tevet, the Torah was written in Greek in the days of King Ptolemy, and darkness came to the world for three days.