

Translating Cultures across Linguistic Divides:
The Making of the Septuagint

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Text 1: Paper outline: Five Central Points

1. The translators of the Greek Scriptures worked in conditions that reproduced the primordial conditions of the created world.
2. The translators were therefore able to do what Moses had done: to produce in human language a perfect copy of the law of nature itself, the law prescribed by the creator.
3. They were possessed by an external, divine spirit that produced utterances through them, and they were thus akin both to hierophants and to scriptural prophets, including Moses.
4. Consequently, the Greek translation is not a mere imitation, inferior to the original, but rather a “sister” text to the Hebrew. Both Hebrew and Greek versions of the law of Moses are, paradoxically, perfect images of the law of nature, and thus share the same parent.
5. The promulgation of the Law of Moses in Greek is an important step on the way towards the eventual universalization that this law, as a copy of the law of nature, deserves.

Text 2: Philo of Alexandria, Life of Moses II, 35-36:

(35) The island of Pharos lies in front of Alexandria, the neck of which runs out like a sort of tongue towards the city, being surrounded with water of no great depth, but chiefly with shoals and shallow water, so that the great noise and roaring from the beating of the waves is kept at a considerable distance, and so mitigated. (36) They judged this place to be the most suitable of all the spots in the neighborhood for them to enjoy quiet and tranquility in, so that they might associate with the laws alone in their minds; and there they remained, and having taken the sacred scriptures, they lifted up them and their hands also to heaven, entreating of God that they might not fail in their object. And he assented to their prayers, that the greater part, or indeed the universal race of mankind might be benefited, by using these philosophical and entirely beautiful commandments for the correction of their lives. (37) Therefore, being settled in a secret place, and nothing even being present with them except the elements of nature, the earth, the water, the air, and the heaven, concerning the creation of which they were going in the first place to explain the sacred account; for the account of the creation of the world is the beginning of the law; they, like men inspired, prophesied, not one saying one thing and another, but every one of them employed the self-same nouns and verbs, as if some unseen prompter had suggested all their language to them.

Text 3: Philo of Alexandria, On the Decalogue, 10-11:

God had a second reason [for giving the law in the wilderness] in mind. Those who were about to receive the sacred laws had to cleanse and wash away the stubborn stains inflicted on the cities by the mixed and promiscuous throng of people. But this purging could not take place unless one was separated from the city. Furthermore, this could not occur immediately, but only after a long period of time, after the deep-set marks of former wrongdoings became dim, faded from memory and disappeared.

Text 4: Philo of Alexandria, The Contemplative Life, 13:

Then such is their longing for the deathless and blessed life that thinking their mortal life already ended they abandon their property to their sons or daughters or to other kinsfolk, thus voluntarily advancing the time of their inheritance, while those who have no kinsfolk give them to comrades and friends.

Text 5: Philo of Alexandria, The Contemplative Life, 90:

So much then for the Therapeutae, who have taken to their hearts the contemplation of nature and what it has to teach, and have lived in the soul alone, citizens of Heaven and the world, presented to the Father and Maker of all by their faithful sponsor Virtue, who has procured for them God's friendship and added a gift going hand in hand with it, true excellence of life, a boon better than all good fortune and rising to the very summit of felicity.

Text 6: Philo of Alexandria, On the Creation of the World, 146:

Every human being, as far as his mind is concerned, is akin to the divine Logos and has come into being as a casting or fragment or effulgence of the blessed nature, but in the structure of his body he is related to the entire cosmos. For it is a compound made from the same things, earth and water and air and fire, each of the elements making the required contribution for the completion of an entirely sufficient material, which the creator had to take to hand in order to fabricate this visible image.

Text 7: Philo of Alexandria, Who is the Heir? 282-283:

Just as nouns and the 'elements' in the grammatical sense are finally resolved into the same, so too each of us is composed of the four mundane elements, borrowing small fragments from the substance of each, and this debt he repays when the appointed time-cycles are completed, rendering the dry in him to earth, the wet to water, the cold to air, and the warm to fire. These all belong to the body, but the soul whose nature is intellectual and celestial will depart to find a father in ether, the purest of the substances.

Text 8: Philo of Alexandria, Life of Moses, II, 37:

Sitting here in seclusion with none present save the elements of nature, earth, water, air, heaven, the genesis of which was to be the first theme of their sacred revelation, for the laws begin with the story of the world's creation, they became as it were possessed, and, under inspiration, wrote, not each several scribe something different, but the same word for word, as though dictated to each by an invisible prompter.

Text 9: Philo of Alexandria, Life of Moses I, 283:

In this solitude, he [Balaam] was suddenly possessed, and, understanding nothing, his reason as it were roaming, uttered these prophetic words which were put into his mouth.

Text 10: Philo of Alexandria, Life of Moses, II, 40:

Not as translators but as prophets and priests of the mysteries, whose sincerity and singleness of thought has enabled them to go hand in hand with the purest of spirits, the spirit of Moses.

Text 11: Plato, Phaedrus, 244a-b:

In reality the greatest of blessings come to us through madness, when it is sent as a gift of the gods. For the prophetess at Delphi and the priestesses at Dodona when they have been mad have conferred many splendid benefits upon Greece both in private and in public affairs, but few or none when they have been in their right minds; and if we should speak of the Sibyl and all the others who by prophetic inspiration have foretold many things to many persons and thereby made them fortunate afterwards, anyone can see that we should speak a long time.

Text 12: Philo of Alexandria, Life of Moses, I, 158-159:

Happy are those who imprint, or strive to imprint, that image [of Moses] in their souls. For it were best that the mind should carry the form of virtue in perfection, but, failing this, let it at least have the unflinching desire to possess that form.

Text 13: Philo of Alexandria, Life of Moses, II, 40:

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; 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.

Text 14: Philo of Alexandria, Life of Moses, II, 51-52:

He considered that to begin his writings with the foundation of a manmade city was below the dignity of the laws, and, surveying the greatness and beauty of the whole code with the accurate discernment of his mind's eye, and thinking it too good and godlike to be confined within any earthly walls, he inserted the story of the genesis of the 'Great City,' holding that the laws were the most faithful copy of the world-polity.

Text 15: Philo of Alexandria, Life of Moses, II, 41-44:

(41) 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. (42) 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. (43) 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 honor 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.

Text 16: Walter Benjamin, "Task of the Translator" 152-3

The notion of the life and continuing life of works of art should be considered with completely unmetaphorical objectivity. . . it is only when life is attributed to everything that has a history, and not to that which is only a stage setting for history, that this concept comes into its own. For the range of the living must ultimately be delimited on the basis of history and not of nature, without mentioning such unstable notions as sensitivity and soul. From this arises the philosopher's task, which is to understand all natural life on the basis of the more comprehensive life of history.