

Translations of the Bible

Overview

This paper reviews some of the more important translations of the Tanach (תנ"ך), the 24 books of the Hebrew Bible (in short, The Bible), with somewhat higher focus given to the first five books, the Torah. Issues related to translating The Bible will be discussed – a fundamental one of them is the question what is the source that was being translated.

The translations will be reviewed according to their chronological order: starting with the Septuagint translation (the most ancient one known today), and following with translations to Aramaic (Targum and Peshitta), Latin (Vulgate), Arabic (the Tafsir by Rabbi Sa'adia Gaon), and finally to English (King James Bible, Leeser and the Jewish Publication Society 1917 Bible).

In conclusion, a few of the issues arising from translating The Bible (and the resulting interpretations) in modern time with the revival of the Hebrew as a current, spoken, language will be explored using a few examples.

Introduction

The Bible was written mostly in Biblical Hebrew. There is also some use of Biblical Aramaic, especially in the books of the prophets Ezra and Daniel (dated around the sixth and the second centuries BCE respectively). Biblical Hebrew, even though very similar, is different from the current modern spoken Hebrew. Today, there are less than 10 million that speak Hebrew to some extent, a mere 0.13% of the world's 7.5 billion inhabitants. Without even going into the importance of The Bible, this explains the need for translations. To date, The Bible has been translated into 636 languages, with

many different translations existing in some languages (English and German, for example with more than 80 different translations in English only, made since 1900). In fact, there is even a translation which is quite controversial of the Bible into modern Hebrew.

Against and In Favor – “on the other hand...”

The approach of our Sages to translations of The Bible – and especially of the Torah was ambivalent. In Megilat Ta’anit¹ it is said: “on the 8th day of Tevet, during the days of King Ptolemy [*The II, Philadelphus, 309-246BCE*] the Torah was written in the Greek language, and darkness came onto the world for three days”.

[בשמונה בטבת נכתבה התורה בימי תלמי המלך בלשון יוונית, והחושך בא לעולם שלושה ימים]

Sofrim Tractate² explains: “... five wise older men wrote the Torah to King Ptolemy in Greek, and that day was as difficult to Israel as the day that the Golden Calf was made, since the Torah could not be adequately translated”.

[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]

The reason behind this is that the Torah was perceived as a Divine text that has multi-layered, innumerable, meanings: Pshat (simplistic, direct), Drash (deeper, implicit, allegoric interpretation), Remez (typological, mystical interpretations of interrelated

¹ This chronicle, dated circa 66 CE (predating even the Mishna), lists mourning and fasting rules regarding important dates in the Jewish calendar, considered the most ancient written source of our sages. Its rulings were voided at the third century CE.

² This is a post-Talmud, 8th Century CE, composition that was written in Eretz Israel, and deals with rules related to the preparation of holy books.

events) and Sod (mystical, Kabbalistic interpretation). These interpretations and understandings can only be retained in the original language the text was given in. Once translated – one loses the depth and ability to understand the intricacy of the teaching. One can find the substantiation to this claim in the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin, Pg. 34a):

Said Abayey [in the name of] Kra: “One thing God has spoken; two things have I heard: that might belongs to God.” (Psalms 62:12). One [Torah] reading generates many reasonings [=interpretations], [however] there is not a single reasoning that is the [only] outcome from many [Torah] readings. Words of the Tanah Rabbi Yishma'el: “Behold, My word is like fire—declares the LORD—and like a hammer that shatters rock: (Jeremiah 23:29). Just as this hammer is split into several sparks – so is one [Torah] reading that generates many reasonings.

אמר אב"י אמר קרא: "אַחַת דְּבָר אֱלֹהִים שָׁמַעְתִּי כִּי עֵז לְאֱלֹהִים:" (תה' סב:י"ב). מקרא אחד יוצא לכמה טעמים, ואין טעם אחד יוצא מכמה מקראות. דבי רבי ישמעאל תנא: " הַלּוֹא כֹּה דְבָרִי כְּאֵשׁ נֹאֵם יְהוָה וּכְפִטְיֵשׁ יִפְצֹץ סֶלַע:" (יר' כג:כט), מה פטיש זה מתחלק לכמה ניצוצות - אף מקרא אחד יוצא לכמה טעמים.

Eventually, The Bible was translated not just to Greek but also to Aramaic and so many other languages, by choice of our Sages. They realize that there was no other choice – not everyone understood the Holy Language [=Biblical Hebrew]. Hadn't The Bible been translated to all these languages, its universal message wouldn't have reached all the human race. Still, one should not forget that it is at the expense of

sacrificing the multi-tones and colors, as well as the depth of the many meanings of the original text.

On the other hand, the same Talmud rules for an opposite Halacha. It is the "Twice Scripture and Once Translation" [שניים מקרא ואחד תרגום] Halacha, which requires one, in addition to hearing the Torah portion read in the synagogue, to read it himself twice during that week, together with a translation and/or Rashi's commentary. The source is Brachot Tractate Page 8A:

Rav Huna bar Yehuda said that Rabbi Ami said: A person should always complete his Torah portions with the congregation. The congregation reads a particular Torah portion every Shabbat, and during the week prior to each Shabbat, one is required to read the Bible text of the weekly portion twice and the translation once.... as one who completes his Torah portions with the congregation is rewarded that his days and years are extended.

אמר רב הונא בר יהודה אמר רבי אמי לעולם ישלים אדם פרשיותיו עם הצבור שנים מקרא ואחד

תרגום... שכל המשלים פרשיותיו עם הצבור מאריכין לו ימיו ושנותיו

One should read each Torah portion twice and its translation once. Even those verses for which the translation is identical to the original Hebrew should be read in this manner. This reading along with the community should begin on the Sunday preceding the Shabbat when that particular Torah portion will be read. The beginning of that portion was already read at the Shabbat Mincha [afternoon] service the day before and ideally one should complete this reading before eating one's meal on Shabbat day. The reason for reading the portion in translation is to understand the verses according to

their rabbinic interpretation. Therefore, one who reads Rashi's commentary on the Torah fulfills his obligation to read the translation. A God-fearing individual reads both the Aramaic translation and Rashi.³

Rabbi Asher Ben Yekhi'el⁴ commented on this Gmara: "... to all the non-Hebrew, their foreign language is similar to the Targum [the Aramaic translation of the Torah], because the Targum [=translation] is for the simple people [=uneducated people] that do not know the Holy Language. Even if one knows some [Hebrew] but still does not understand, the translation [to the Foreign Language] explains a few things that one can not understand directly from the Mikrah [Torah in its original text].

... לכל הלועזות לעז שלהן הוי כמו התרגום. כי התרגום הוא בשביל עמי הארץ שאינם יודעים לשון הקודש ואם כן הלא הוא לעז למכירין בו. ולא נהירא לפי שהתרגום מפרש כמה דברים שאין להבין מתוך המקרא.

Later, Rabbi David Halevi Segal⁵ [הטורי זהב – הט"ז] wrote that whomever does not understand Hebrew or Aramaic, should read an interpretation that he does understand, such as the Yiddish Tzena Ur'ehna [צאנה וראנה]⁶ or any other interpretation.

³ Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz Halacha note to the quote in his English rendition of the Talmud.

⁴ Born 1250, lived in Germany (mostly), died in 1327. An Important interpreter of the Talmud that many of his ruling were later used by Rabbi Karo in the Shulkhan Arukh.

⁵ Lived in Poland between 1586 and 1667, nicknamed TAZ, author of the "Turey Zahav" [=Gold Columns] commentary and interpretation of the Shulkhan Arukh.

⁶ Tzena Ur'ehna is a Yiddish book that follows the structure of the Torah parashiot including the Haftarat. It adds Midrash stories that aimed to elaborate on the role of women in the Torah stories. Written by Ya'akov Ben Yitzkhak and first published in 1616.

Roadmap of Translations

Fig. 1 presents the various Bible translations that will be discussed in this paper:

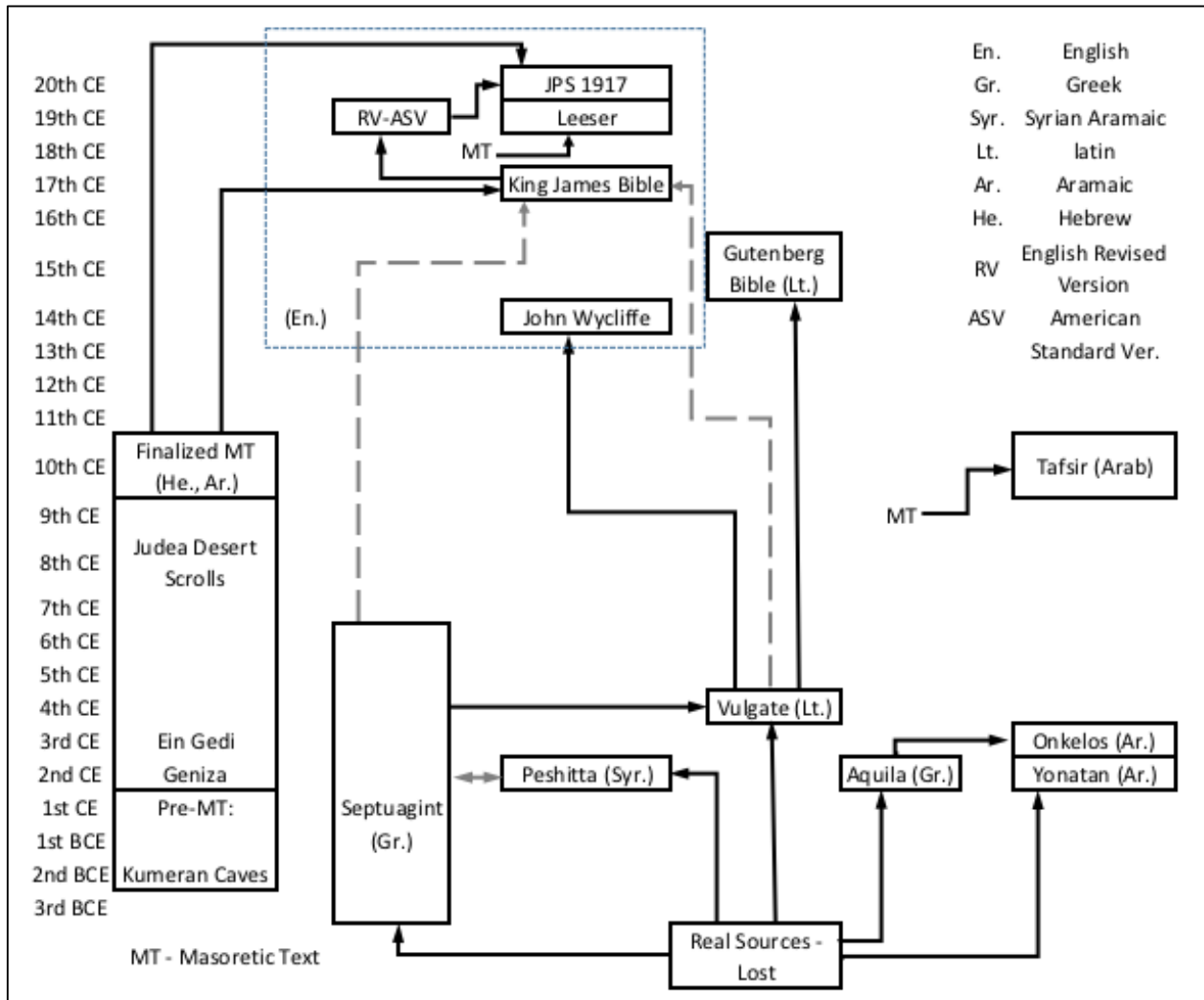


Fig. 1: Important translations of The Bible, shown in relation to each other along historical timeline. Thick lines denote the source, while broken ones denote influence. The abbreviations denote the language of the translation.

Unfortunately, we do not have The Source, the origin, that was used to translate the various early compositions (the Aquila, Septuagint, Yonathan). Furthermore, many of the manuscripts of the older translations do not exist in full, which makes the task of the researchers even more interesting.

The first translation is the Septuagint translation to Greek. It was first completed in the 3rd Century BCE, and was later developed into many versions, only a few of them remained available in almost complete condition. This translation could be viewed as the most important one, because it is the earliest written document of The Bible that we know of. Other important translations to Greek are the Theodotion and Aquila that relied on a different original source than the Septuagint.

A few translations to Aramaic are also very important, as they served as a relatively accurate reflection of the original lost source. Aquila was the pupil of Rabbi Akiva, and was very particular in his approach to the translation to appease his Teacher. His translation was to Greek; it was the main source of Onkelos to translate the Torah into Aramaic; hence the importance. Rabbi Yonathan Ben Uziel, who lived before the destruction of the second Temple, translated the Prophets (נביאים) to Aramaic. Another translation to a dialect of Aramaic, the Syrian dialect, is called the Peshitta – meaning the simple. It is believed to date back to the late 1st Century – early 2nd Century CE. Interestingly, it puts the book of Job right after the Torah, even before the book of Joshua. It contains all the books of the Tanach, but also some of the external books, being translated directly from the Hebrew; the Wisdom of Sira is the most famous of them.

The Vulgate is the first translation of The Bible to Latin, completed towards the end of the 4th Century CE. The translation was done directly from Hebrew, probably relying on a written source that was available then, along with referencing the Septuagint (one of its later versions, the Hexapala, which contains the original Hebrew text next to Greek translations). The Vulgate became the official, authorized version of

the whole Bible (Old and New Testaments) by the Catholic Church and was the very first book ever printed – the Gutenberg Bible.

In parallel, the Jewish Sages were researching and compiling a Standard Version of the Bible, the Masoretic Text (MT). The final (until further notice...) version was canonized in the 10th Century CE, and included punctuation, vowels and cantillation tropes, both in Hebrew and Aramaic. The MT was checked against recent archeological findings and other authentic sources, (e.g. Dead Sea Kumeran Scrolls, the Cahiro Geniza, Ein Gedi Scrolls of Leviticus) and underwent a few minor modifications. The examination of the MT against the new findings continues to amaze with the accuracy of the original MT. For over a millennium, the MT is used as a reliable source for the Jewish Bible.

The MT was the source that Rabbi Sa'adia Gaon relied on in the 10th Century CE to translate the Bible to Arabic, writing it in the Arabic alphabet. His reason for that was that he wanted the Mikra (The Bible) to be available to non-Jews as well. He took more liberty in the translations, adding commentary within the translation itself, and using the then current names of places that he could identify.

The MT was used to generate the first complete English version of the Bible, the King James Bible. Its importance is manifested by its use as a source to many other translations that followed: the English Revised Version (that modernized the language) that was adopted to become the American Standard Version, and indirectly, together with direct reference to the MT, the Jewish Publication Society 1917 edition of the Bible (JPS 1917). The predecessor to the JPS 1917 Bible was the translation of Rabbi Aharon Leeser, to the MT, dating approximately half a century earlier.

In the next sections, the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, the Aramaic Targum (Onkelos and Yonatan), The Vulgate and the English versions leading to (and including) the JPS 1917 will be discussed in details.

The Masoretic Text (MT)

The need for a benchmark, “golden”, reference

The principal premise of the biblical text is that it is sacred, of Divine-origin. As such, it has only one version, and any deviation from that version is destructive and forbidden, as one can see in Talmud Bavli, Sotah Tractate, pg. 20A:

GEMARA: Rav Yehuda says that Shmuel says in the name of Rabbi Meir: Afterward, when I came to learn Torah before Rabbi Yishmael, he said to me: My son, what is your vocation? I said to him: I am a scribe [*lavlar*] who writes Torah scrolls. He said to me: My son, be careful in your work, as your work is the work of Heaven, lest you omit a single letter from the Torah scroll or add a single letter, and in this you are found to be destroying the entire world if the mistake alters the meaning of the verse and results in blasphemy.

גמ' א"ר יהודה אמר שמואל משום ר"מ: כשבאתי אצל ר' ישמעאל א"ל בני מה מלאכתך אמרתי לו לבלר אני אמר לי בני הוי זהיר שמלאכתך מלאכת שמים היא שמא תחסיר אות אחת או תתיר אות אחת נמצאת אתה מחריב את כל העולם כלו.

We also know that the Second Holy Temple held more than a single scroll of the Torah (actually, three...) that had small differences among them. The Rabbis ruled

according to the majority (Talmud Yerushalmi, Ta'anit Tractate Ch. 4 2nd Ruling) and that there were proofreaders that were on the Temple's payroll (Bavli, Ktubot 106a)⁷.

Issues and Methods in Compiling the MT

So the question as to which is the correct "original" text occupied the sages to great extent. Until the canonization of the Bible (the 1st Century CE) there were quite a few versions of the various parts of the Bible. In fact, some of them (as is evident from the Dead Sea scrolls that were found in the caves of Kumeran dated between the 2nd Century BCE and the 1st Century CE) were controversial to the main stream of Jewish thought and ruling. The Canonization process was expedited because of that and the Roman pressure on Judea and Jerusalem. In fact, the later Dead Sea scrolls (dated to the 2nd Century CE) show little deviations of the text, and almost conform with the later documents found in the Cairo Geniza (dated the 9th Century CE and onwards). The destruction of the Temple (70 CE) left only few copies, elevating the need and urgency to preserve the original text. Translations by Aquila and Theodotion into Greek, as well as the Peshitta (Syrian Aramaic) were considered to stem from the original canonized version of the Bible by virtue of the homogeneity of the texts and transliterations of names and words that could not be translated.

Between the 7th and the 10th centuries CE the "Ba'aley HaMasora" – the owners of the Masora – the original text were active in Eretz Israel (Jerusalem and Tiberias)

⁷ **"Rabba Bar bar [son of] Hana said that Rabbi Yoḥanan said: The proofreaders of the Torah scrolls in Jerusalem would take their wages from the collection of the chamber."**

אמר רבה בר בר חנה אמר ר' יוחנן: מגיהי ספרים שבירושלים היו נוטלין שכרן מתרומת הלשכה.

and in Babylonia. Collecting shreds of Proof Texts, comparing for differences among various sources, digging for quotes in other rabbinic texts (e.g. Talmud) and back-translating sources in other languages were the methods used. The Masoretes (Hebrew: בעלי המסורה - Ba'alei ha-Masora) developed punctuation, grammar and cantillation tools as well as notes regarding the division to sentences, verses and paragraphs to help in the proper reading and understanding of The Bible.

Finalizing the MT

Two of the later, most notable Masoretes are Aharon son of Moshe of the Ben-Asher family and Moshe son of David of the Ben-Naftali, family both lived in Tiberias during the first half of the 10th Century CE. They came up with two slightly different versions of the Masoretic Text. The Maimonides endorsed the Ben-Asher family version, and this is the one that is the accepted dominant version today. The Tafsir (Rabbi Sa'adia Ga'on's translation) is based on the Ben-Naftali Masoretic Text.

Two very important manuscripts that represent the Ben-Asher MT are The Keter Aram Tzova (קֶטֶר אֲרָם צוֹבָא) – the Aleppo Codex and the Leningrad Codex, both follow the Ben-Asher MT.

Keter Aram Tzova was written in Tiberias around 930 CE, and was endorsed for its accuracy by Maimonides. The Leningrad Codex was written in Cairo in 1008 CE (or possibly 1009). Because of a missing portion of the “Keter”, the Leningrad Codex is the oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible in Hebrew.

New archeological discoveries and many researches (Kumeran scrolls, Geniza, Ein Gedi Scrolls – even the Priestly blessing that is dated to the 6th Century BCE –

reaffirm the accuracy of the MT. It has been sanctified by use for over 1000 years, and that by itself is a strong argument against modifying it further.

The Septuagint Translation and its Derivatives

Septuagint, abbreviation LXX, is the earliest extant Greek translation of the Old Testament from the original Hebrew. The Septuagint was presumably made for the Jewish community in Egypt when Greek was the common language throughout the region. Analysis of the language has established that the Torah, or Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament), was translated near the middle of the 3rd Century BCE and that the rest of the Old Testament was translated in the 2nd Century BCE.

The name Septuagint (from the Latin septuaginta, “70”) was derived later from the legend that there were 72 translators, 6 from each of the 12 tribes of Israel, who worked independently to translate the whole and ultimately produced identical versions.⁸

The importance of the Septuagint can not be underestimated. It is the first, still existing (to a certain extent) translation of the Bible, while the source that was used for the translation does not exist at all. It was used for centuries as The Source for various translations and as an anchor to generate and validate versions of texts that would be then assumed as an accurate representation of the original Hebrew Text.

Talmudic (and Other) References to the Creation of the Septuagint

The Letter of Aristeas (one of the External Books), believed to be written in the 2nd Century BCE provides quite a detailed account of the event. It was repeated later

⁸ Quoted from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Septuagint>

by Philo of Alexandria (circa 15 CE), and Josephus Flavius's "Antiquities of the Jews" (circa 93 CE). The 'Readers' Digest' version of the story is as follows:

The king of Egypt, Ptolemy II Philadelphus, is urged by his chief librarian Demetrios of Phaleron to have the Hebrew Law translated into Greek, and add the knowledge of the Hebrews to the vast collection of books the empire had already collected. The king responds favorably, including giving freedom to Jews who had been taken into captivity by his predecessors, and sending lavish gifts (which are described in great detail) to the Temple in Jerusalem along with his envoys. Eliezer, the then High Priest, chose exactly six from each of the twelve tribes, 72 scholars in all; he gave them a long sermon in praise of the Torah before sending them off. When the translators arrive in Alexandria the King welcomed them and for the next seven days asks them philosophical questions (the translators' wise answers are represented in full in the document). The 72 translators, separated and isolated from each other, completed their task in exactly 72 days.

The story of this translation appears in the Babylonian Talmud, Megilah Tractate Page 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...

...וּכְתַבּוּ לוֹ אֶת צְעִירַת הַרְגָלִים וְלֹא כָתְבוּ לוֹ (וַיִּקְרָא יֵא, ו) אֶת הָאַרְנַבֶּת מִפְּנֵי שֶׁאֲשַׁתּוֹ שֶׁל

תַּלְמֵי אַרְנַבֶּת שְׁמָה שֶׁלֹּא יֵאמֵר שֶׁחָקוּ בִּי הַיְהוּדִים וְהִטִּילוּ שֵׁם אֲשֶׁתִּי בַּתּוֹרָה:

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.** Not only did they all translate the text correctly, they all introduced the same changes into the translated text **And they wrote for him: God created in the beginning [bereshit]**, reversing the order of the words in the first phrase in the Torah that could be misinterpreted as: “Bereshit created God” (**Genesis 1:1**). They did so to negate those who believe in the preexistence of the world and those who maintain that there are two powers in the world: One is Bereshit, who created the second, God. And they wrote: **I shall make man in image and in likeness**, rather than: “Let us make man in our image and in our likeness” (**Genesis 1:26**), as from there too one could mistakenly conclude that there are multiple powers and that God has human form instead of: “And on the seventh day God concluded His work”

(Genesis 2:2), which could have been understood as though some of His work was completed on Shabbat itself, they wrote: **And on the sixth day He concluded His work, and He rested on the seventh day.** They also wrote: **Male and female He created him, and they did not write** as it is written in the Torah: “Male and female **He created them**” (**Genesis 5:2**), to avoid the impression that there is a contradiction between this verse and the verse: “And God created man” (**Genesis 1:27**), which indicates that God created one person....

....they wrote for him: **The short-legged beast [tze'irat haraglayim].**
And they did not write for him: “And the hare [arnevet]” (Leviticus 11:6), since the name of Ptolemy’s wife was Arnevet, so that he would not say: The Jews have mocked me and inserted my wife’s name in the Torah. Therefore, they did not refer to the hare by name, but by one of its characteristic features.

The Talmudic description of the event is clearly of a miraculous nature and of Divine intervention. Yet, as was mentioned earlier (pg. 2 above) initially it was not blessed by the Sages. By the way, only 4 of these 12 deviations that the Talmud elaborates on appear in the Septuagint itself...

From the Original to What is Available Today

Unfortunately, the very original manuscript does not exist in full. Only fragments from the 2nd Century BCE and the 1st Century BCE probably exist, with uncertain reliability. One must remember that print did not exist at that time, and every copy was actually hand-written, copied from an earlier version (that was copied from yet another

source, hence prone to interpretations, errors, additions and omissions of the scholar copying the document). In the first centuries CE we know of a few versions of the original translation as well as a newer translation into Greek of the Bible, some of which is worth noting.

The Aquila translation to Greek (~128CE) – fragments of which were found later in the Cairo Geniza – is one of them. The Theodotion Translation (~150CE) that probably was revising the Septuagint translation to better match the Hebrew sources, and Symmachus Translation are also of importance. Not much is known about Symmachus – one version considers him to be a convert to Judaism and a student to Rabbi Me'ir.⁹

The most important early CE researches on the Septuagint is the Hexapala, made by the Greek Church Biblical Scholar Origen (Oregenes Adamantius – born c. 185CE, probably Alexandria, Egypt and died c. 254, Tyre, Phoenicia, today Lebanon). The Hexapala, that was composed in Caesarea (Eretz Israel) around 245CE, takes its name from its six columns format. It compares the Hebrew text of the Bible in Hebrew letters parallel to the Hebrew transliteration in Greek letters, and four Greek translations: the Aquila, the Summachus and the Theodotion translations, along with the Septuagint translation. He edited the Septuagint column with comments and symbols the various variations and deviations with respect to the other translations and the Hebrew origin. The work took some 20 years to complete and spanned over 7000 pages. It is known that it was available in Caesarea until 600CE, and was used by Jerome in his

⁹ Babylonian Talmud, Eruvin 13b, Mishnah Eruvin 3:1; Baba Metzia 6:5; Hullin 5:3

compilation of the Vulgate translation of the Bible to Latin. Some fragments of this work survived in the form of quotations and copies in other manuscripts.

Later editors and copiers of the Septuagint used Origen's Septuagint column, but omitted the special symbols that referenced changes due to other sources. This makes it even much more so difficult to distinguish what was the original form of the XXL translation. Three of them are worth mentioning: the 4th Century CE Codex Sinaiticus (coded as X or S) was found in the Santa Katherina monastery in Sinai, a similar period Codex Vaticanus (coded as B) which is considered to be the most complete and in best condition of them all and currently resides in the Vatican's Library, and the century later Codex Alexandrinus (coded A) that is also in quite good shape and completeness. The Alexandrinus Codex shows editions and modifications resulting from the Hexapala and the then known Hebrew Masoretic text.

The importance of the Septuagint in the reconstruction of the New Testament is even higher than it is to the Old Testament, the Hebrew Bible, as it was almost the only source to rely on when reconstructing the New Testament.

Targum – Onkelos and Jonathan Translations

As was already discussed earlier in the Introduction, there is a Halacha (D'Rabbanan – from the Rabbis, in contrast to the Halacha D'Oraita – one of the 613 commandments in the Torah) to read the weekly Torah Portion twice in Hebrew (Mikra) and once Targum (=Translation), which at that time meant the translation to Aramaic. The Mitzvah refers both to the Torah portion and also to the Haftarah – the selection in the Prophets that corresponds to the Weekly Parashah.

Onkelos and Aquila – Are They the Same Person?

These two names may (or may not) be the same person. Onkelos is mentioned in the Talmud Bavli, while Aquilas is mentioned in the Talmud Yerushalmi. Both are Jews by Choice – pupils of Rabbi Akiva. In both Talmuds there are stories – very similar – that relate to Aquilas and Onkelos respectively.

Or maybe Aquilas is Aquila of Sinope, a Roman national who converted to Judaism in the Tannaic times. This Aquila is considered to be the translator of the Torah to Greek. His translation was considered to be very accurate in its adherence to the Hebrew – even at the expense of distorting the Greek language. This translation was highly praised, and was also used in the Hexapala – one of the comparative versions of the Septuagint. It is likely that this translation was also used in the creation of the Onkelos Aramaic translation of the Torah. Another support to the possibility that Aquila and Onkelos weren't the same person is that the common conclusion among researchers is that the Targum Onkelos is dated ~200 years later.

The Yerushalmi does not call Aquilas by name when it quotes the Aramaic translation of the Torah, but does cite Aquilas as the source to the Greek translation¹⁰. Comparing the apparent knowledge of Hebrew of the two translations (Greek and Aramaic) show that the Aramaic translator was much more proficient in Hebrew than the Greek Translator.

It really does not matter if Aquila and Onkelos are different names of the same person. The important fact is that the Onkelos Translation is considered reliable, almost

¹⁰ In Talmud Yerushalmi Shabbat Tractate, Chapter 8 Halacha 2

as being given to the translator by the Divine. Rambam and Rashi, as well as other commentators relied on the Onkelos Translation in their interpretations to difficult passages in the Torah. It is still used today by Orthodox that follow the Halacha of Twice Mikra Once Targum, and it is printed alongside the Hebrew text in most of the Chumashim (= books of the Torah that are used to follow the reader of the Parasha and to study it).

Targum Yonatan – Jonathan's Translation

The Jonathan Translation is the translation of the Prophets Portion of the Bible (Nevi'im - נביאים) that was prepared by Yonathan Ben Uzi'el (יונתן בן עוזיאל) who lived in Jerusalem during the reign of Herod (1st Century BCE) and was thought to be the pupil of Rabbi Hillel. The Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Megila, Pg 3A) praises him also by saying that his source to the translation came directly from the Prophets Chagay, Zecharia and Mal'Achi. In his translation he broadens the scope (more than Onkelos does to the Torah translation) and incorporates Midrash and Agaddah (parables). The final version was edited in Babylonia, as is evident from a few Babylonian Aramaic phrases and words, in contrast to the Galilean Aramaic of most of the text.

Vulgate (Latin: a Commonly Accepted Text)

The Vulgate is the first, comprehensive, translation of The Bible and of the New Testament to Latin. There were Latin translations of portions of The Bible and the New Testament earlier, but these were not reliable nor widely accepted. This work was done by St. Jerome (his Latin name was Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus), who lived between 347 and 420 CE. He was commissioned to do the translation of The Bible, collate and fix the old Latin fractions of earlier translated portions by Pope Damasus 1st.

His approach to the translation of the Old Testament (The Bible in this paper) was to start fresh directly from the Hebrew sources. Even though he had a good knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic, he moved to Jerusalem and Bethlehem, and worked with Hebrew scholars in the process of translation. Apparently, he did quite a good job: when examining his translation against the 600 years later Masoretic Text one can admire the close and accurate adherence to the Hebrew text. Another helpful feature of his translation is the use of transliteration of quite a few Hebrew words that help us know better the then prevailing dialect of the Hebrew.

Hieronymus checked himself against other translations of The Bible to Greek. He also used the Aquila and Theodotion translations that appeared as columns in the Hexapala (a comparative composition of the Septuagint). A few books, especially the External Books (ספרים חיצוניים) were translated from Aramaic and Greek sources, mostly because of lack of Hebrew Origin. His preference to the Hebrew origin over the Septuagint is also evident in the prologs he wrote after finishing to translate each book.

The influence of the Vulgate can not be underestimated. For over one thousand years, it served as the only version of The Bible (and the New Testament) known to the vast majority of the Western World Christians. In 1530 the Martin Luther translation of The Bible to German appeared. The appearance of that translation accelerated the process of authorizing and making the Vulgate the only official version of The Bible, announcement of which was made in 1546.

The Vulgate was the very first book ever to be printed using movable metal plates in a mass-production process by Gutenberg, in the early 1450's.

The English Translations: King James and Jewish Bibles

The Very First

The very first full translation of The Bible (Old and New Testaments) was credited to John Wycliffe, appearing towards the end of the 14th Century (1384). The text used as the origin was the Vulgate. Initially it was banned (because the act of translation was not authorized by the Church), but since it was quite an accurate translation of the Vulgate it was de-facto allowed to be used.

King James Bible

The initiative to create a new translation of the Bible was the continuous bitter struggle between the Catholics and Protestants in England. King James the 1st initiated the translation that eventually would be accepted by both denominations. Committees were formed, instructions provided, and a team of 47 scholars (all of them were members of the Church of England) started working. The Bible (Old Testament) was translated from Hebrew and Aramaic sources – the Masoretic Text, while the New Testament was translated from Greek. Yet, when translating the Bible, the translators took a look at the Septuagint and the Vulgate, to make sure that the translation reflects Christian points of view.¹¹ The first edition was published in 1611. Several decades later, it was authorized as the sole Bible to be used in the Church of England.

¹¹ Psalm 22 Vs 16 is a good example: Hebrew origin is “כָּאֲרִי יָדַי וְרַגְלָי:”. Accurate translation is “like lions [they maul] my hands and feet”. King James translation is “They have pierced my hands and my feet”

From King James Bible to American Standard Version (ASV)

By 1769 the Oxford Standard Text was implemented into the King James Bible. The next major milestone would be the generation of the English Revised Version (this Bible completed the revision in 1885). American clergy were part of the Revised Version Team. However, their suggestions were incorporated into the RV only if 2/3 of the British Team agreed to incorporate the suggestions. If a suggestion was not incorporated, it would be then put in an appendix. In return to this arrangement, the American Team agreed not to publish their own version for 14 years. At the expiration of the 14 years, the American Version, that included the revisions that weren't incorporated in the original English Revised Version were embedded in the text itself. The official name of this edition became The Revised Version, Standard American Edition of the Bible or in short – the American Standard Version – ASV.

Isaac Leeser Bible

Isaac Leeser (December 12, 1806 – February 1, 1868) was born in Germany and emigrated to the US in his youth. He was an author, translator, editor, publisher and the founder of the Jewish press of America. He produced the first Jewish translation of the Bible into English.

First, in 1845, he translated on his own and published a Hebrew-English edition of the Torah in five volumes. Later he concluded the translation of the rest of The Bible from the Masoretic Text. This publication, released in 1853, nicknamed “the Leeser Bible”, served the American Jewish community as The Bible's definitive translation for half a century.

The Bible of the Jewish Publications Society of America (JPS 1917)

The Jewish Publication Society of America (AKA JPS) is a non-profit, non-denominational, publisher of Jewish books in English. It was established in Philadelphia in 1888. It is mostly famous for its translation of the TANACH (the Jewish Bible – the Old Testament).

Growing interest and more discriminating readers found the Leeser Bible inadequate, arcane and with too many errors. Following an initiative of the reform Central Conference of American Rabbis (founded in 1889) the Board of JPS decided (in 1892) to answer this need for a “New and popular English rendition of The Bible”¹² and assigned high priority to the task.

A Bible Committee was formed, with scholar representatives from The Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati (Reform), The Jewish Theological Seminary in New York (Conservative) and The Dropsie College in Philadelphia (unaffiliated Graduate School). The sources that were used for the translation were several: The American Standard Version (which in turn was relying on the English Revised Version of the King James Bible) and the Masoretic Text (using mostly the Seligman Baer edition of the Keter Aram Tzova along with the work of Christian David Ginsburg for the missing parts) as the main sources. The committee also agreed to “remove all un-Jewish and anti-Jewish phrases, expressions, renderings, and usages...”¹⁰ and introduce traditional Jewish interpretation to reflect Jewish feeling, law, faith and tradition.

¹² Quote from: Sarna, *JPS The Americanization of Jewish Culture 1888—1988*, pg 97, 104.

For years, as it is with all projects run by committees, the project made slow progress. More than a decade after starting the project, the JPS hired Max Margolis, one of American Jewry's leading scholars of Bible and Semitics, as the Editor-in-Chief. He edited the translation that was prepared by 32 contributors in one year. However, it had to go through yet another committee (the Board of Editors) to be approved. It was finally published in 1917, and in its first year alone, nearly 40,000 copies were sold. The translation presented a Bible which combined the spirit of Jewish tradition with the results of biblical scholarship, ancient, medieval and modern.

For many decades later the JPS 1917 was the mainstay to all denominations (including the Orthodox, despite not being involved in the translation itself) as the source of Scripture. It was also widely used by non-Jewish scholars and clergy when they needed to understand the Jewish view of the Old Testament. The JPS 1917 was superseded by the JPS Tanach – which was published in 1985. The Torah translation was published in 1963. This new revision wasn't merely editing and correcting errata. It followed faithfully as much as possible the Masoretic Text. Every word was re-translated from the original Hebrew text. Yet, the translators preferred the idiomatic approach over the mechanical word-to-word translation.

Still, reflecting on the very problem of translation and the multi-layer understanding of the hidden meaning of the original text in Hebrew, in a much-discussed commentary review, Theodor Gaster of Columbia University demurred, lamenting that “with all its excellences and clarifications,” the translation somehow lacked “the magic of the Bible... the verbal tact, the economy of statement, the

pregnancy of phrase, the ability to catch a scene in a sentence and a situation in a word.”

A Few Examples of Misinterpretation Due to Translation

Genesis Ch. 18 Vs. 3 and 4

This is the story of the 3 visitors that predict to Avraham and Sarah that they will have a child. The first two verses are added, to provide context. The Hebrew Text is:

- א. וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו יְהוָה בְּאֵלֵי מַמְרֵא וְהוּא יֹשֵׁב פְּתַח-הָאֵהָל כְּחֹם הַיּוֹם:
 ב. וַיֵּשֶׂא עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא וְהִנֵּה שְׁלֹשָׁה אַנְשִׁים נֹצְבִים עָלָיו וַיֵּרָא וַיֵּרֶץ לְקִרְאתָם מִפְּתַח הָאֵהָל וַיִּשְׁתַּחוּ:
 אַרְצָה:
 ג. וַיֹּאמֶר אֲדֹנָי אִמֶּנָּה מָצָאתִי חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ אֵל-גַּא תַעֲבֹר מֵעַל עֲבֹדְךָ:
 ד. יִקַּח-גַּא מֵעֵט-מִים וְרָחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם וְהִשְׁעֲנוּ תַּחַת הָעֵץ:

The English Translation is (one of many possible...):

- 1) The LORD appeared to him by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot.
- 2) Looking up, he saw three men standing near him. As soon as he saw them, he ran from the entrance of the tent to greet them and, bowing to the ground,
- 3) "My lords," he told them, "if I have found favor with you, please don't leave your servant.
- 4) Let a little water be brought; bathe your feet and recline under the tree.

Verse 3 translation shown here (International Standard Version) correctly translates the word ADONAY (אֲדֹנָי) to the plural of my ADON (אֲדֹנִי) – my Sir. It

continues with the plural suggestion, supporting the interpretation and the subject matter: the three visitors are being addressed by Avraham.

Other translations – including the JPS 1917 – use the word lord (or Lord). Only the American King James Version uses the LORD expression. In contrast to Hebrew, the English words used for second person single and plural are identical: “you”, “your”. In Hebrew, verse 3 is all (except for the word “ADONAY”) is in second person single. Not plural. So whom does Avraham talk to? ADONAY – אֲדֹנָי – is GoD – The LORD. After all, verse 1 tells us that the LORD (this is the way it is translated in ALL English versions) visited Avraham. The switch between plural language in verse 2, to single in verse 3 and back to plural in verse 4 is astounding, enabling a mountain of interpretations at all levels: Pshat, Drash, Remez and Sod (see page 2 above...) is completely lost in all the English translations.

A single word in Verse 2 (נִצְבִּים – standing, stood) leads us to the second example.

Deuteronomy 29 Vs. 9, Parashat נִצְבִּים – Nitzavim

אַתֶּם נִצְבִּים הַיּוֹם כְּלָכֶם לִפְנֵי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם רָאשֵׁיכֶם שְׂבֵטֵיכֶם זְקֵנֵיכֶם וְשֹׁטְרֵיכֶם כָּל אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל

“You stand this day, all of you, before the LORD your God—your tribal heads, your elders and your officials, all the men of Israel”.

The translation of nitzavim to standing is pretty accurate. However, again, a lot of the additional meanings that add color and convey essence are lost.

Let us look at Judges 18 vs 16:

וְשֵׁשׁ-מֵאוֹת אִישׁ הַגּוֹרִים כָּלִי מִלְחָמָתָם **נִצְבִּים** פָּתַח הַשַּׁעַר אֲשֶׁר מִבְּנֵי-דָן

While the 600 Danite soldiers, armed with military weapons, **stood guard** at the entrance to the gate (International Standard Version). This is somewhat different standing than the casual one implied in the translation of the verse from Deuteronomy...

Now, let us see what the translation of Kings 1 ch. 4 vs 19 tells us:

...ועג מלך הבשן **ונציב** אחד אשר בארץ:

...Og king of Bashan. He was the only **governor** over the district. (New International Version). Other translations use the words **Deputy**, **Officer**.

Other appearances of this word are also translated into **Garrison**.

Or take the story of Lot's wife (Genesis 19 vs 17): "ותהי **נציב** מלח" – "she became a **pillar** of salt".

In current Hebrew, there are additional meanings: Perpendicular (perfectly vertical - erect), Commissioner (High level officer), stable, standing at attention to receive a new assignment (most likely a promotion). Well, it is also the hilt of a knife or sword...

So, when you read it in Hebrew with all the above mentioned meanings mixed together in your head and heart, the occasion takes a whole different meaning. The scene looks and feels completely different: "Today, at this very moment, here you are all together standing erect – all of you – the heads of your tribes, your elders, your officers to the very last of you – all equally, in full attention, ready to receive your assignment, all of you are as the highest rank officer assuming the full responsibility to adhere to the instructions of your assignment (to become אור לגויים – a shining example, a light unto the nations), lest you will become a pillar of salt".

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Various unattributable topics and titles in the Britannica and Wikipedia in both English and Hebrew.