

### **#1 - Letter of Aristeas (probably 2nd century BCE)**

Demetrius of Phalerum, the president of the king's library, received vast sums of money, for the purpose of collecting together, as far as he possibly could, all the books in the world. By means of purchase and transcription, he carried out, to the best of his ability, the purpose of the king...

I am told that the laws of the Jews are worth transcribing and deserve a place in your library.'... 'They need to be translated,' answered Demetrius, 'for in the country of the Jews they use a peculiar alphabet (just as the Egyptians, too, have a special form of letters) and speak a peculiar dialect' ... And the king when he understood all the facts of the case ordered a letter to be written to the Jewish High Priest that his purpose (which has already been described) might be accomplished... [T]he king ordered a letter to be written to Eleazar [the High Priest] on the matter ... The High priest selected men of the finest character and the highest culture, such as one would expect from their noble parentage. They were men who had not only acquired proficiency in Jewish literature, but had studied most carefully that of the Greeks as well. They were specially qualified therefore for serving on embassies and they undertook this duty whenever it was necessary...

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 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. And when the whole company expressed their approval, they bade them pronounce a curse in accordance with their custom upon any one who should make any alteration either by adding anything or changing in any way whatever any of the words which had been written or making any omission.

### **#2 – Philo – The Life of Moses**

Philo's elders are most concerned with achieving a proper state of purity before engaging the divine texts. Philo goes even further, arguing that the translation was a direct result of an encounter between the translators and God Himself:

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. . . . Therefore . . . they, like men inspired, prophesied, not one saying one thing and another, but every one of them employed the selfsame nouns and verbs, as if some unseen prompter had suggested all their language to them. . . . these translators [were] not mere interpreters but hierophants and prophets to whom it had been granted in their most honest and guileless minds to go along with the most pure spirit of Moses.<sup>21</sup>

### **#3-תלמוד בבלי מסכת מגילה דף ט עמוד א-ב**

דתניא: מעשה בתלמי המלך שכינס שבעים ושנים זקנים, והכניסן בשבעים ושנים בתים, ולא גילה להם על מה כינסו. ונכנס 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 בראשית א-להים ברא בראשית, אעשה אדם בצלם ובדמות, ויכל ביום הששי, וישבות ביום השביעי, זכר ונקבה בראו ולא כתבו בראם, הבה ארדה ואבלה שם שפתם, ותצחק שרה בקרוביה, כי באפם הרגו שור וברצונם עקרו אבוס, ויקח משה את אשתו ואת בניו וירכיבם על נושא בני אדם, ומושב בני ישראל אשר ישבו במצרים ובשאר ארצות ארבע מאות שנה, וישלח את זאטוטי בני ישראל, ואל זאטוטי בני ישראל לא שלח ידו, לא חמד אחד מהם נשאתי, אשר חלק ה' א-להיך אתם להאיר לכל העמים, וילך ויעבוד אלהים אחרים אשר לא צויתו לעובדם, וכתבו לו את צעירת הרגלים, ולא כתבו לו ואת הארנבת, מפני שאשתו של תלמי ארנבת שמה, שלא יאמר: שחקו בי היהודים והטילו שם אשתי בתורה

### **Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 9a-b**

It is related of King Ptolemy that he brought together seventy-two elders and placed them in seventy-two [separate] rooms, without telling them why he had brought them together, and he went 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 conceived the same idea. And they wrote for him “God created in the beginning”; “I will make a person in a form and image”; “And he stopped on the sixth day and rested on the seventh”....

#### **#4-מסכתות קטנות מסכת ספר תורה פרק א הלכה ו**

אין כותבין לא עברית ולא עילמית, לא מדית ולא יונית. שבעים זקנים כתבו כל התורה לתלמי המלך לשון יונית, והיה אותו היום קשה לישראל כיום שעשו בו את העגל, שלא היתה תורה יכולה להתרגם כל צרכה. שלשה עשר דברים שינו בה....

#### **שולחן ערוך אורח חיים הלכות תענית סימן תקפ סעיף א-ב**

סעיף ב בשמונה בטבת נכתבה התורה יונית בימי תלמי המלך והיה חשך בעולם שלשה ימים; ובט' בו לא נודע איזו היא הצרה שאירע בו.

#### **רשימה מן הגניזה הקהירית**

בי"ח בו כתבו זקנים את התורה לתלמי המלך בלשון יונית והיה אותו היום קשה מאותו יום שעשו בו את העגל לפי שלא היתה התורה צריכה ליתרגם כל צרכה

#### **תלמוד בבלי מסכת חגיגה דף טו עמוד ב**

אחר מאי זמר יווני לא פסק מפומיה אמרו עליו על אחר בשעה שהיה עומד מבית המדרש הרבה ספרי מינין נושרין מחיקו

#### **תוספתא מסכת עבודה זרה (צוקרמאנדל) פרק א הלכה כ (מצוטט בבבלי מנחות דף צט עמוד ב)**

שאלו את ר' יהושע מהו שילמד אדם את בנו יווני ספר /ספר יווני/ אמר להן ילמד בשעה שאינה לא מן היום ולא מן הלילה שנ' והגית בו יומם וליילה:

### **Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 9b**

Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel taught: even for [Torah] scrolls they only allowed them to be written in Greek. Rabbi Abahu said Rabbi Yohanan said: The Halakhah is like Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel. And Rabbi Yohanan said: What is the reason of Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel? The verse says: “

God should enlarge Yefet (*yafit*), and he shall dwell in the tent of Shem” (Gen. 9:27). The words of Yefet will be in the tents of Shem. And maybe it's Gomer and Magog [rather than Yavan who inherits Yefet's role here]? Rabbi Hiyya bar Abba: This is the reason, because the verse says “God should make nice to Yefet” – the beauty of Yefet should be in the tent of Shem.

### **The Challenges of Translation**

#### **Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator” (written 1921), trans. Harry Zohn**

Just as a tangent touches a circle lightly and at but one point-establishing, with this touch rather than with the point, the law according to which it is to continue on its straight path to infinity—a translation touches the original lightly and only at the infinitely small point of the sense, thereupon pursuing its own course according to the laws of fidelity in the freedom of linguistic flux....The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens to be instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue. Particularly when translating from a language very remote from his own, he must go back to the primal elements of language itself and penetrate to the point where work, image, and tone converge. He must expand and deepen his language by means of the foreign language.

#### **Dr Louis Feldman, Torah and Secular Culture: Challenge and Response in the Hellenistic Period (Tradition Journal)**

and he who adds thereto is a blasphemer and a libeller.” Franz Rosenzweig, who together with Martin Buber undertook to translate the Bible into German, once wrote in a letter to Gershom Scholem: “Only one who is profoundly convinced of the impossibility of translation can really undertake it.” Indeed, in a very real sense, as Leo Baeck once remarked, “All translation is commentary.” If, as

language. We may here illustrate the dangers of the translation by noting how the Septuagint renders four key terms: *Torah*, *emunah*, *hesed*, and *nefesh*.<sup>5</sup>

The usual translation of the word *Torah* in the Septuagint is *nomos*, “law” or “custom.” But *Torah* really means direction or instruction in the broadest sense. The five books of the *Torah* contain

not only law but also a record of the encounter of God and man, and, in particular, a history of the development of the Jewish people. Otherwise, as Rashi on the very first verse of the *Torah* comments, the *Torah* should have begun not with the creation of the world but with the first commandment. Indeed, when we read in Psalms (78:1), *Ha'azinah ami torati*—“Give ear, O my people, to my *Torah*,” what follows is not a recapitulation of the laws but a history of the Jewish nation.

The word *nomos*, however, was by the Greeks traditionally contrasted with *physis*, “nature.” To illustrate the difference, Herodotus<sup>6</sup> tells the story of King Darius of Persia, who asked some Greeks how much money he would have to give them in order to induce them to eat the dead bodies of their fathers. Of course, they were horrified and utterly refused, since they were accustomed to burn the dead. He then asked some people from India how much money he would have to give them to get them to agree to burn their dead. They, too, were horrified, since they were accustomed to eat their parents' dead bodies. Hence, concludes Herodotus, quoting Pindar the poet, *nomos*, “custom,” is king. Again, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, Creon stands for *nomos*, “man-made edict,” as against *Antigone*, who espouses the cause of *physis*, the unwritten law of nature, which, she says, transcends *nomos*.

Therefore, the translation of *Torah* by *nomos* is utterly misleading; and yet, so far as we can tell, the translation was never challenged in Hellenistic Jewish literature. The result of this was that Paul,<sup>7</sup> speaking to Hellenized Jews, could refer to Judaism as a purely legalistic religion and could speak of the abrogation of the *Nomos* and of its displacement by the religion of the spirit. Sometimes, as Rosenzweig once perceptively remarked, history is made in dictionaries; this was one of those instances.

The translation of *emunah* by the Greek *pistis* supplies a second example of what we may call "creeping assimilation." It was Martin Buber, in his *Two Types of Faith*, who noted the difference between *emunah*, the unconditional trust in the relationship with God as in one's relationship with one's friend, and *pistis*, faith in an intellectual proposition. Plato, who was probably the most important single intellectual factor in the process of Hellenization in the East during the Hellenistic period,<sup>8</sup> speaks of *pistis* in the *Republic* as an opinion (*doxa*). In his discussion of epistemology in the *Line*,<sup>9</sup> it is the next-to-lowest degree of knowledge, being inferior to the knowledge of the Forms and of mathematical objects and being superior only to the knowledge of images. While it is true that Philo<sup>10</sup> speaks of *pistis* as the queen of virtues, for him it is, as for Plato, more of an intellectual quality, and hence removed from the central connotation of *emunah*.

The Talmud,<sup>16</sup> on the one hand, speaks of the Septuagint as divinely inspired, for it says that God put counsel into the heart of the seventy-two translators, so that, despite the fact that they worked independently of one another, they emerged with exactly the same version of the Torah. And yet, in the treatise *Soferim*,<sup>17</sup> the Rabbis compare the day when the translation was made to the one when the Israelites made the golden calf. Apparently they came to realize that

while the idea of a translation was an excellent one, once the translation came to be read to the exclusion of the original this was equivalent to worship of an idol, a substitute for the truth. Indeed, we may suggest, the translation was praised only when those who consulted it recognized that it was not primary but derivative from the original Hebrew.

### **Harav Aharon Lichtenstein, God and Man According to Judaism and Hellenism**

It is only natural that, starting from childhood, we carry with us cultural baggage (obviously with profound historical roots) which portrays the Greeks as cruel enemies, forces of darkness who came to destroy our world. As a result, this culture is usually drawn in broad, ugly strokes, identifying Greek culture in general with a crude type of idolatry. As a result of this approach, our work is made somewhat easier: in contradistinction to this world of statues and gods stands our true faith. Needless to say, this approach engenders a certain measure of disdain for Greek culture and philosophy.

The disadvantage of such an approach is in fact twofold. Firstly, it does not enable us to get to the crux of the issue and prevents us from understanding the full significance of the conflict between the two cultures in a profound way. Turning the opponent into a "straw man" makes it easier for us to deal with him, but the real battle - in terms of faith and belief, philosophy and culture - is never addressed.

In addition, the diminution of Greek culture and turning it into something childish cuts us off, to some degree, from a culture which does, after all, represent one of the cornerstones of the civilized world, whose influences are felt on many different levels. In the ancient world, Greece represented the dominant culture. Without doubt its contribution to humanity was great, not only in practical matters but also culturally and spiritually. This was a culture which even the great names among the Rishonim could appreciate. Rambam regarded Aristotle as a "half-prophet," and other Rishonim, too, benefited from Greek culture and valued it. Thus, erecting a wall between us and this culture can lead to us voluntarily cutting ourselves off from its considerable wealth.

Thus, on the one hand, it is appropriate to recognize the values espoused by Greek culture, some of which we can agree with. On the other hand, we need to pinpoint where we stand in conflict with this culture - because the conflict is no less heated today that it was in the days of the Chashmonaim.

As a point of departure, I have chosen one specific subject. This aspect - one of the most central ones - in the debate between our world and that of the Greeks can be highlighted by comparing the character of Iyov (Job) with, lehavdil, that of Prometheus (as portrayed both in mythology and in literatures, and especially in Aeschylus' work, Prometheus Bound).

...Prometheus represents the tragic situation in which a man suffers despite his innocence. At the same time, there certainly exists a possibility that some day Prometheus may succeed in freeing himself of his chains, as presented in Shelley's play of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century – "Prometheus Unbound."

How great is the disparity between this description and the one we find in Sefer Iyov! The question of the relationship between power and justice runs through Sefer Iyov, too. According to certain opinions among Chazal, sharp criticism is leveled against Iyov's stand. At the conclusion of the first chapter of [Bava Batra \(15b\)](#), very serious accusations are raised against his blasphemy and cursing. At the same time, these opinions must be seen within a broader context: Iyov knows his place in relation to the Holy One. It never enters his mind that he is engaging in battle against an "equal opponent" with a chance of emerging victorious. Within the very depths of his being he may await Elihu's response, but he is conscious throughout of the fact that the Power concerned is not within his understanding.

Even nearer to the end of the Sefer, God does not provide a real answer to the questions which Iyov raises. The essence of the Divine response is "Lav ba'al devarim didi at," Iyov is not a legitimate claimant of God: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? Speak if you have understanding. Do you know who fixed its dimensions, or who measured it with a line?" ([Iyov 38:4-5](#)). In other words, we are talking about a different dimension of reality. It is as if God is telling him, "You don't know, you don't understand. After all is said and done, you are a mortal, and are not capable of debating with Me." The very most a human being can say, in fear and trembling, is: "You will be in the right, O Lord, if I make claim against You, yet I shall [nevertheless] present charges against You" ([Yirmiyahu 12:1](#)). In short, Iyov is not – and does not perceive himself as – an equal opponent or partner for discussion with God.

Two fundamental principles are involved here. One pertains to the relationship between God and man, the other to the nature of the reality in which man lives. With regard to the first point, in the Greek perception there is no fundamental difference between man and his gods. The gods may perhaps be wiser, stronger and richer, but the difference is not a qualitative one. From this point of view, it is the humanistic outlook of Greek culture which represents both its greatness and its weakness.

Other religions which had preceded it had not perceived the gods as being in any way on a par with man. They perceived their gods as being hostile to man, laying in wait for him and threatening him. Their gods were depicted in grotesque form (as we see from their sculptures) as something inhuman and completely dissimilar from man. These philosophies highlighted the fear and terror which characterize man's relationship with his gods.

The world of the Greeks, on the other hand, displayed a considerable rapprochement between the transcendent world and that of mortals. The fear and terror which had surrounded the gods in other cultures diminished, to a large degree, and in its place came a closeness between man and his gods. Thus the Greeks largely succeeded in overcoming much of the primitive instinctual fear of the gods, attaining a position of relative peace of mind and equilibrium, a belief based on logic rather than primitive fear. Obviously, what we describe here refers to a long process....

As mentioned above, this progression represented a great achievement. The Greeks perceived their existence in the world as being under the aegis of forces which could be understood and which one could deal with. This perception allowed for some of the self-assurance characterizing Greek culture, which was so distant from the primitive feelings of other pagan cultures which preceded it.

**Indeed, this very point is the source of the main weakness inherent in Greek culture, when viewed from a religious standpoint. Toynbee was correct when he wrote, in his book about Greek culture, that the cardinal sin of Greek culture – from the Christian point of view – was its humanism. On one hand, this was an achievement: a culture with a profoundly humanistic basis. They held man in high esteem and viewed the world through human lenses. On the other hand, the achievement in no way diminished the problematic nature of this philosophy. Together with abandoning all the primitive feelings of fear associated with paganism, the transition to Greek humanism also did irreparable harm to the concept of holiness.**

**The sense of awe – not the primitive fear of the early pagans, but true religious fear, the awe associated with “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts,” the God on High – this diminished and disappeared. When we see gods as humans (only slightly more sophisticated, perhaps) or as philosophical abstractions, then there is no longer any room for a sense of fear, awe or majesty.**

As mentioned above, together with the question of the relationship between man and God there is also the question of whether man is a legitimate claimant on God or not, i.e., man's ability to comprehend events. God tells Iyov: You don't know, you'll never understand; you are simply not My "ba'al devarim" (claimant). Your lack of understanding is not the REASON for your not being My "ba'al devarim," but rather the RESULT: since you are not My "ba'al devarim," therefore you will never be able to understand. You are composed of a different substance; the infinite gap between God and man cannot be bridged. "To whom will you compare Me, that I will be similar? says the Holy One" ([Yishayahu 40:25](#)). There is no common basis. The chasm is complete. "Creator" and "creation" inhabit two completely separate worlds, and man must recognize this and accept the yoke of Divine Kingship with humility and submission.

The Greeks did not perceive things thus. They saw themselves as existing on the same plane as the higher powers, and even as "understanding" them. This "understanding" comes to expression not only in man's rational capacity (described by Rambam at the beginning of Moreh Nevukhim as part of "the image of God" in which he is created), but also in man's ability to control everything. If one can understand, one can control; and this applied not just to their perception of the gods but of the world as well. The dominant approach in Greek culture drastically diminished their sense of mystery; they saw the world as comprehensible. (Obviously, we cannot generalize - as E.M. Dodds explains in his book, "The Greeks and the Irrational.")

This is connected to our recognition of the dimension of mystery and the unfathomable difference between us and God. It is from here that we derive the feeling of a "God who is hiding" and of ourselves having to be commanded, where sometimes even the command itself is not completely comprehensible to us. This consciousness is what convinces us that we must conduct ourselves as "messengers of the Holy One," even without understanding everything.

### **Dr Moshe Shoshan, The Task of Translators: The Rabbis, The Septuagint, and the Cultural Politics of Translation**

Finally, these narrative traditions explore translation as a cultural and political encounter, thereby raising the larger question of the relationship of rabbinic Judaism to the Hellenistic and Christian cultures that surrounded them. Translation is a linchpin in the network of power relations that exist between dominant and subservient cultures; it can serve both as a means of the dominant culture to impose itself on the subservient culture as well as a mode of resistance by the subservient culture against the dominant hegemony.<sup>6</sup> The rabbinic Septuagint narratives show particular sensitivity to the cultural and political aspects of translation. The common denominator of the many variants of the legend is that its translation emerged as a result of an encounter between a powerful gentile king and a group of Jewish elders who embodied the collective cultural wisdom of their people. These texts explicitly portray the Septuagint as a product of a cultural and political exchange. The varying versions explore different possible constellations of the cultural politics of translation.

There are several similarities between the Palestinian account of the legend and the Babylonian rendition. Though longer than the Palestinian, the Bavli version is also quite brief. Like the Palestinian texts, the Bavli makes use of the verb *katav* (write) to describe the work of the elders, nowhere explicitly stating that a translation into Greek is involved. But there are two key differences between the Babylonian and Palestinian narratives. First, the Bavli states that there were seventy-two elders involved in the translation, agreeing with *Aristeas* and recalling the biblical elders in the wilderness and the Sanhedrin. As we shall see, unlike in *Aristeas*, however, in the Bavli this depiction does not serve to aggrandize the fruitful meeting of two great cultures. Quite to the contrary, it emphasizes the seriousness of the intercultural struggle portrayed in the story. The Bavli narrates a struggle between a gentile king who arguably represents Hellenistic culture, and a group of elders who represent the Jewish people and tradition.

In the Bavli, the motif of translation as emerging from a conflict appears in the very first line of the story. Ptolemy treats the translators as hostile witnesses. He places each elder into solitary confinement, without explaining his intentions. Only when the elders are isolated from each other does the king instruct each one to transcribe the Torah.<sup>37</sup> The king is concerned about the advantage held by the translators. Since in this scenario the only bilingual agents available are members of the subservient culture, the king has no independent way of checking their work. The translators are free to insert changes into the translation as it suits them and their own interests. The king uses his political power in an attempt to overcome the translators' cultural advantage, forcing them to work in seclusion from one another. The king can then use the trans-

These writers saw the production of the Septuagint, which made the text of the Old Testament accessible to all nations, as a necessary precursor to the revelation of Jesus and his gospel to all humankind.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, many patristic writers sought to combat the claim that the Septuagint was not a legitimate witness to and interpreter of the original text. This was especially important in the case of disputed texts such as Isaiah 7:14. Christians famously relied on the Septuagint's use of the term *parthenos* to argue that this passage foretells the Virgin Birth. Jewish interpreters rejected this reading, arguing that the original Hebrew, *ha'alma*, refers to a young woman who will have a child with Hezekiah and not to the miraculous birth of the Son of God.<sup>62</sup> The Septuagint legend was thus crucial to Christian writers to establish that the Septuagint was an authoritative and perhaps even divinely revealed text.<sup>63</sup>

The authors of the *Sefer Torah* text were almost certainly aware of the centrality of the Septuagint to the rise of Christianity. They may well have also been familiar with