



THE SEPTUAGINT PSALTER INTERPRETATION AND ACTUALIZATION OF SACRED SCRIPTURE

Ariane Cordes

My lecture will take you to the third and second centuries BCE, to a city that at this time must have been an impressive metropolis: the Ptolemaic Alexandria on the Nile Delta. Whoever came to this city then must have marvelled over the variety of economic and cultural life that existed there. The Hellenistic-Ptolemaic rulers led a “tolerant” regime in the sense that they allowed the great number of various ethnic groups in the Egypt of that time to organize and administer themselves to a certain extent. The *politeuma* institution, which guaranteed to a large extent one’s own internal administration and dispensation of justice, served this purpose.

The Jewish community in Alexandria, which was one of the largest minority groups in the city at that time, probably formed such a *politeuma* and thus also had the right to practice their religion freely. The large synagogue in Alexandria was a huge building; it is described as a basilica with five naves and two double rows of pillars. There is a tradition that says that the person serving the synagogue had to wave cloths so that the community could see his liturgical instructions. Surely only a community that was economically not too badly off could afford such a building.

A social rise within the Alexandrian community was also definitely possible for Jewish community members; however, precisely here there was also quite a potential for conflict, since whoever wanted to rise socially had to become integrated, and integration into a polytheistic society is definitely a balancing act for a Jew, to whose fundamental religious conviction belongs the profession of the one and only God. The Jews of Alexandria must have been in constant tension between maintaining their own cultural identity and adapting to the majority culture. In order to maintain their own identity (as well as to counter the anti-Jewish polemic that, in spite of all the “tolerance” on the part of the state, was also already present at that time), the Jewish diaspora community held on to the cultural elements that distinguished them from the majority culture and that made up what was specifically theirs: Sabbath observance, circumcision, dietary commandments, and their holy texts.

But the holy texts that were decisive for maintaining their religious identity were themselves also going through a process of acculturation in that they were being translated from Hebrew into the language of the majority culture, so into Greek. For the Jews of Alexandria spoke Greek, and it is difficult to say to what extent Hebrew was still understood within the Jewish community or whether it had already become the purely religious language; presumably Hebrew was no longer really familiar to most of the people.

At any rate, what can be said is that in the 3rd century BCE a project was undertaken that so far had not existed in this form: the translation of Judaism's Sacred Scriptures into Greek, first of all only of the Torah. A legend says that seventy Jewish scholars came from Palestine for this purpose, and that with the support of heaven, they created a complete and perfect work. Philo of Alexandria later described this as follows: After the Seventy prayed for God's help, "they translated as if under divine inspiration, not each into different, but all into the same expressions for concepts and deeds, as if a teacher were dictating invisibly to each of them." (*De vita Mosis* II,34) The name of the product is derived from the number of seventy translators: the Septuagint. Strictly speaking, this concept applies first of all only to the Greek version of the Torah. But in the broader sense, "Septuagint" then means the Greek version of all the other books of the Hebrew Bible, as well as those books which were written in Greek from the start or of which the Hebrew original is no longer extant, and which became part of the Catholic biblical canon.

The Septuagint project had no precedent; of course there were already translations of texts into other languages before that, but translating the whole of the central religious writings of a community – that was something entirely new.

Scholars are still not agreed on who ultimately had the idea of creating the Septuagint. In the meantime, the majority assumes that the initiative came from the Jewish community itself, since the Hebrew Torah was really no longer understood; and since it was the central, identity-creating document of Judaism, it was to be made accessible to all Greek-speaking Jews. In contrast to this, some scholars are of the opinion that it was the Ptolemaic ruling dynasty itself that ordered the translation in order to be able to document the Sacred Scripture of the group over whom they ruled. As so often, the truth is probably in the middle, and it can be assumed that several factors simply coincided. Why should the interest of the Ptolemies in the writings of the peoples they conquered not have combined with the Jewish community's own need?

Whatever is to be imagined, the Septuagint phenomenon came into existence: the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, which the Christian communities later took as their Old Testament and which the Jewish side increasingly rejected, the greater the status given to the Hebrew language became in Jewish theology.

But first of all, Judaism emphasized the authority and divine inspiration of the Septuagint. This theme has a place precisely with Philo of Alexandria; he emphasizes that the translation came about completely without error thanks to divine help and that it is to be placed at the same level as the Hebrew Torah. But the fact that he emphasizes this so, already shows clearly that there were other voices as well. For there was also scepticism within Judaism as to the quality and status of the Septuagint. Over the course of time, this scepticism led on the one hand to extensive revisionist activity. People tried to ameliorate the translation by bringing it closer to the original, by trying to make it more literal. – And by the way, for scholarly work on the Septuagint this means that one first has to filter out the revisions from the available manuscripts and to reconstruct the original Septuagint, before being able to work with the texts.

But on the other hand, this scepticism also led to an ultimately complete rejection of the Septuagint. This rejection finally went so far that outside of the canon, in the Talmud tractate *Soferim* (1,7) there is a note that compares the translation of the Torah with the making of the Golden Calf – so idolatry. The reason given for this strong rejection is usually simply the fact that the Septuagint had in the meantime become the Sacred Scripture of Christianity and that people wanted to distance themselves from it as clearly as possible. This might also have played a part, but presumably another factor was decisive: the dignity of the Hebrew language, which was emphasized more and more. For every translation means interpretation, a change, possibly even a falsification of the original. As a consequence, Sacred Scripture was considered to be fundamentally untranslatable.

With this problematic in the background, we can now take a closer look at the Greek texts themselves. Once the Torah existed in Greek, the translation of all the other biblical books gradually followed – the sequence is still controversial. There is also controversy around the place where some of the books were translated. It has been proven that not all were translated in Alexandria; some certainly came into being in Palestine itself. The individual books of the Septuagint also differ as to the way they were translated. Some were transmitted very literally; on the other hand, some translators – for example the one for the Book of Isaiah – definitely took certain liberties and deviated in part quite considerably from the text he was translating. And by the way, reconstructing this original text is a further problem in scholarly work on the Septuagint. For of course we no longer have the corresponding Hebrew manuscripts; most of the Hebrew manuscripts that are available to us are a few centuries younger than the Septuagint. This means that we have the strange reality that the Greek text at times represents a Hebrew text that is older than the one on which we stand today.

Relatively soon after the Torah and also relatively soon after it existed in its final form, the Psalter was also translated into Greek; with that we are now in about the middle of the 2nd century BCE. It has also been suggested that the Psalter came into being in Palestine. However, I don't think so. There are a few places that clearly show an Egyptian colouring – for example the fact that the Septuagint Psalter does not know of "summer and winter", as does the Hebrew text, but only "summer and spring", which refers to the dry period and to the season of the flooding of the Nile.

In any case, the Septuagint Psalter is a strange phenomenon. Over the last few years an increased amount of research is being done on it, and it has already given rise to some controversies. Whereas some say that we have to do here with a book that sticks to the original text and translates it completely literally, even almost slavishly, so that nothing other than some doubtlessly interesting philological observations having to do with the science of translation can be derived from it, others find a whole abundance of theologically inspired changes to the original text, historical allusions, re-interpretations, etc.

Here too the truth probably lies more or less in the middle. It is true that the Psalter is one of the books that were translated literally. But it is also true that the Hebrew consonantal text without any written vocalization used by the translator, in many places offered several reading possibilities, and thus left the translator the freedom to decide in favour of a particular interpretation or to write an interpretation that was valid in his own reading tradition. And this interpretation could certainly have differed from the one established later and which today seems to us to be the only normative one.

As a representative of the Jewish community in Alexandria, the translator would have naturally understood the Psalms in relation to the community's reality; he actualized them as it were into his own historical context. And this precisely not by making big changes or even by rewriting the holy texts, but rather through a subtle process by which he benefited from the openness and ambiguity of the Hebrew text he was using, as well as from the huge structural differences between the two languages Hebrew and Greek. When the Hebrew text remains ambiguous, the Greek one must decide in favour of one possibility. The relatively open and flexible Hebrew system of conjugation has to be transferred into an exact Greek system of tenses. And let us not forget that quite a few places in the Psalter are difficult to understand and still today cause exegetes quite a headache; the translator into Greek was often very creative in his attempt to transfer these in such a way as to make the text more easily understandable.

Thus what the text says can change because of a deviating translation or also because of literal translation. For example, it can happen that one Hebrew word, that is used repeatedly in the Psalm and that can be considered to be a key word, is translated with various synonymous Greek words. Thus the word's function as a key word is lost. Or the other way around, when synony-

mous Hebrew words are translated with only one Greek word which thus occurs repeatedly, new key word structures can come into being.

When one analyses the Septuagint Psalter, theme fields become apparent, which were clearly important to the translator. One example is God's transcendence: In the Hebrew Psalms, God is often called "rock", for example in

Ps 78:35 "And they remembered that God is their *rock*
and God the highest their redeemer"

or

Ps 73:26 "Even if my body and my heart pine away –
God is the *rock* of my heart and my part forever".

It is clear that the Greek translator doesn't particularly like this. He prefers to replace "rock" with "help" or also "God".

Ps 77:35LXX: "And they remembered that God is their *help*
and God the highest their redeemer."

Ps 72:26LXX: "Even if my body and my heart pine away –
God is the *God* of my heart and my part forever."

More examples could be given. The reason for these obvious changes: On the one hand, the translator often has difficulties with the images used in the language of the Psalms. And here it seems that in view of God's transcendence and grandeur, he believes that it is inappropriate to use an object of nature as a title for God. On the other hand, such a title for God could also lead to YHWH being classified as a nature god in the polytheistic pantheon, thereby causing doubts to arise as to God's singleness and exclusivity.

At this point it is probably necessary to stop and raise a question as regards the history of the text: How do we know that it was the Greek translator who wrote this change from "rock" to "help" or "God" into the text? Wouldn't it also be possible that the translator had a Hebrew text before him, which we no longer know now, but in which not "rock" was written but "God" or "help"? In principle, this is always possible, and really one has to ask this again at every deviation. But in reality, where the Septuagint Psalter is concerned, one can assume that the Hebrew text being translated must have been more or less identical with the Masoretic Hebrew text that we have today. So with this example as well, based on the explanation given above, it seems reasonable to suppose that the change was made by the translator.

Ps 74 is a good example of how the texts are brought into the present. The Hebrew Psalm talks about the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Babylonians in the year 586 BCE. An impressive lamentation over the sanctuary lying in ruins can be heard.

Ps 74:3: "Raise your steps to the eternal ruins!
The enemy has devastated everything in the sanctuary!"

However, at the time when the Psalter was translated, the sanctuary had long been reconstructed, and there was an intact temple in Jerusalem. Here it was not natural for the translator to lament over a pile of ruins. Instead, because of a different way of reading the consonantal text, a new interpretation comes about, which interprets the word for "ruins" as "arrogance".

Ps 73:3LXX: "Raise your hands against their arrogance forever!
How much evil has the enemy done in your sanctuary / among your holy ones!"

That is not just an invention but rather has to do with a different derivation of the difficult word for “ruins”. And then it also suggests itself that God should raise not his steps but his hands. And the sanctuary is skilfully translated by an expression that can also mean “the holy ones”. In addition, to make the possessive pronoun more clear, “your” is added. Now the text is no longer talking primarily about the destruction of the temple building, but rather about the arrogant attitude of a group in opposition to the holy people of Israel. As a minority in the midst of a non-Jewish majority, the Jewish community surely experienced being surrounded by opponents, whom one could certainly have experienced as arrogant and self-satisfied. Arrogance and exaggerated self-esteem are also highlighted in other texts, often more concretely than in the text being translated, or also in contrast to it, and then they are characterized as blasphemous.

The group of “opponents”, “sinners” or “enemies” is also often present in the Hebrew Psalms. The antagonism between the sinners on the one hand and the righteous on the other is one of the central themes in the Psalms. And here again the Greek translation places its own emphases. A whole series of Hebrew words for “sin”, “transgression”, etc. is translated with the same Greek word *anomía*, “lawlessness”, so “Torah-lessness”. The “sinners” are often those who have no Torah, so: the non-Jewish “others”. The Greek language has the advantage of being able to express something in this way. In the Hebrew, there is no prefix or suffix that corresponds with the English -lessness or the Greek a-. In Hebrew different nuances are expressed: Is the text talking about an individual sinful deed or about being fundamentally caught up in sin? Is it talking about the violation of an explicit commandment, etc.? In the Greek text, everything is brought back to the basic premise that sin, an evil deed or whatever one wants to call it, that which characterizes the group of “others” means that the Torah is not present.

But there is another kind of “opponents” who are not called “those without Torah”, but rather “those who are against the Torah”. For these, a different Greek prefix is used. And these could be those who really know the Torah, but who consciously disregard it. Then it is possible that conflicts within the Jewish community itself are in the background. There are indications that the people meant by those “who are against the Torah” means such community members who, in the opinion of the translator of the Psalter, have become too assimilated and who then perhaps forget or neglect their Jewish background. If this idea is correct, the Septuagint Psalter is also expressing a conflict of identity here within the Jewish community and is taking a position with regard to it.

The Septuagint is very valuable as a witness to the text of the Bible and also as a source for the history of how the Bible was received. And more than that: It was the normative text, the Sacred Scripture for the Christians of the first centuries. And still today it is the normative text for Orthodox Christians. However, as in Judaism, Catholics and Protestants today consider the Hebrew version to be the “original text”.

One can experience the difference as problematic, for we have seen that the Hebrew and the Greek versions can at times deviate from one another. This in turn can have consequences for communication around the biblical texts both within the Christian denominations and in Jewish-Christian conversation. Of course, this problematic also arises when we use as our basis present-day translations of the Bible into modern languages; for there as well there can be big differences, often even within one and the same language area.

But perhaps this plurality can also be seen as an enrichment, an opportunity to open one’s understanding to various possibilities of interpreting the text and to let several voices be heard in the biblical text. The Church Father Jerome also already saw this; in his exegesis, he liked to interpret

the Hebrew and the Greek biblical texts separately, and he brought his insights *iuxta Hebraicum* and *iuxta Septuagintam* into a constructive dialogue. In my opinion, a potential is hidden here from which we are invited to draw intensively when we study the biblical texts.

Translation: Sr. Katherine Wolff

The 44th International Jewish-Christian Bible Week is supported by these institutions:

Diocese of Osnabrück

Begegnung von Christen und Juden. Bayern e.V. – Association for Christian-Jewish Encounter, Bavaria

Dr. Buhmann Stiftung für interreligiöse Verständigung – Dr Buhmann Foundation for Interreligious Understanding

Begegnung – Christen und Juden. Niedersachsen e.V. – Association for Christian-Jewish Encounter, Lower Saxony