

PROJECT 1:

GREEK SCRIPTURE AND THE RABBIS

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Up to the present, views of Scripture in Judaism from antiquity to the rise of Islam have been shaped by the fact that rabbinic literature is written in Hebrew and Aramaic, even though many Jews in the eastern Mediterranean and their religious leaders knew only Greek. Even the recent *Cambridge History of Judaism* (2006) failed to include a chapter on the role of Greek language and literature. The project will be an investigation of Jewish Greek versions of the Bible among Jewish communities of the first to sixth centuries CE, both from rabbinic sources and from internal indicators in what remains of the translations themselves.

The background

The Greek language has played an important part among Mediterranean Jewish communities from the Hellenistic Period until the mid-twentieth century. Its role in the translation of Scripture among Jews commenced as far back as the third century BCE. The resulting collection of books known as the Septuagint was eventually adopted from Jews by the Greek-speaking Church. However, dissatisfaction among Jews with the perceived mismatch between the Septuagint and the Hebrew text had already led to a number of revisions, starting before the turn of the Era and leading to the versions of Aquila, a Jewish proselyte in c.130 CE, and of Symmachus, a convert to Judaism from the Samaritans, in c.200 CE. Other unnamed Jewish Greek versions and revisions also circulated into the medieval period and beyond. Some of these have been preserved in the Cairo Geniza, in the form of a few pages in either Greek script or Hebrew script. Readings from the older Jewish versions were recorded in fragmentary form by Christian scribes and scholars as alternative readings to 'their' Septuagint, while in their full and separate forms they gradually faded away.

However, knowledge of Aquila and citations of his version appear from time to time in Judaism. For instance, there is an inscription from Aquila's version of Psalms from a synagogue in Nicea, dating from the fourth to sixth century. In 553 CE the emperor Justinian allowed Jews to read Scripture in the synagogues in either the Septuagint or the version of Aquila. Furthermore, the later versions, particularly that of Aquila, appear to have formed the basis for Byzantine and medieval Greek versions up to and including the

Constantinople Pentateuch of 1547, where the Greek is given in Hebrew characters. Azariah de' Rossi also mentions Aquila readings in his work *Me'or 'Enayim* (1573–75).

Because the surviving readings of the later Jewish Greek versions are scattered throughout commentaries and the margins of biblical manuscripts, gathering them together in order to study their relationship to the Hebrew text and to Jewish exegesis has proved very difficult. The last attempt at a full edition was that of Frederick Field, published by the Clarendon Press in Oxford in 1875. However, much new material has been found since then, including the Cairo Geniza texts. Fresh editions of biblical commentaries, published in the twentieth century to the present, have yielded new or superior readings to the ones used by Field for his edition.

Given the availability of more complete Greek data and the development of the academic study of rabbinic literature, there are a number of questions that could now be addressed more satisfactorily than hitherto:

A) Rabbinic reception

- 1) How did Jews in antiquity, especially rabbis in Eretz Israel, regard the later Jewish Greek versions, and how far did they try to control the production and transmission of the translations? From indications in rabbinic literature, the Greek translation of 'Aqilas ha-Ger' was recognised and approved by the rabbis, but doubts have recently been expressed as to whether he produced his translation under their auspices. As for the translator Symmachus, is there any connection between him and 'Sumkhos', whose legal opinions are often cited by the rabbis? If there is, has the tradition of his translational activities been suppressed, and if so, why?
- 2) It is been suggested by a number of scholars that the renderings of Aquila and Symmachus reflect rabbinic exegesis of the second century CE as well as ideas found in the Targums, and thus they may be the earliest witnesses to traditions that were not recorded in Hebrew and Aramaic until later. This subject has not been systematically researched.
- 3) A related issue is the use of Greek loanwords in Talmud, Midrash and Targum. Little new research has been carried out in this area since the work of Saul Lieberman (*Greek in Jewish Palestine*, 1942), and yet the publication of new editions of many rabbinic texts and recent work on the phenomenon of Greek written in Hebrew characters should make possible a reassessment of the situation.

B) Analysis of the Greek material

- 1) The later versions help us understand the state of knowledge of Hebrew language and grammar in antiquity. For instance, did translators analyse Hebrew according to a bi- or triconsonantal root system, and how was the aspectual Hebrew verbal system represented by the very different Greek verb system? Can we perceive any development, or is biblical translation inherently conservative in its approach?
- 2) Evidence from the translations can help us see how far vocalisation traditions varied when transmitted orally, and whether there was a gradual standardisation leading up to fully notated vocalisation.
- 3) There is also the puzzle of the Hebrew text in Greek characters transmitted by the Christian scholar Origen but now only partially extant. Is this just one of many 'crib' texts in circulation, to aid Jewish readers in pronouncing the unwritten vowels, or was it a novelty commissioned specially by Origen?

The workshop

Attention until now has been focused on preservation and transmission of this material within Christian circles. What is needed now is a thorough study of the nature and significance of these Greek versions within the Jewish circles that originally fostered them. The existence of three named, and at least three unnamed, Jewish Greek versions beyond the Septuagint, would indicate a tremendous interest in Scripture in Greek form among Jews of the first century BCE to third century CE and beyond. The tendency to make such translations conform more and more closely to the emerging standard Hebrew text is attributable to the growing importance of Hebrew and probably also to a desire to control the nature of Scripture available to Jews who were not conversant with Hebrew. But there is more than one way to translate, and analysis of the different versions may reveal different emphases and priorities.

This residential workshop in Oxford for European and other scholars will enable a varied group of participants in rabbinics, biblical versions and lexicography to work on the questions raised above, and to produce an overview of the subject that at present has not been achieved. The workshop will run for six months, in the second half of 2010. The long-term residential aspect will enable each person to produce a substantial study within a particular field, without the pressure of teaching or administration, and to meet regularly

with the other members. The resources offered by the Muller Library and the Bodleian Library are second to none, and should prove an attractive prospect for a number of scholars who normally have more limited facilities. They will also be in a position to interact with the many Oxford-based scholars in related fields such as palaeography, Byzantine studies, Classics, and Theology.

A series of regular, weekly seminars involving residential participants will take place, with two or three mini-conferences to which outside contributors will be invited. The first conference will examine the *status quaestionis*, and the last will provide the opportunity for participants to present their collective findings to outside scholars in related fields. The papers presented and revised at these occasions will be edited as a volume on Greek Scripture and the rabbis.