

**PROJECT 1 (2009-10): Greek Scripture and the Rabbis**

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It is a fact barely acknowledged even by scholars that in the early centuries of the Common Era the spoken language of the majority of Jews was Greek—not Hebrew, or even Aramaic. With communities spread all over the Eastern Mediterranean, from present-day Turkey to deep into Egypt, throughout Greece and Syria and even in the land of Israel, Jews communicated with each other and with non-Jews in Greek. Yet our view of Jewish society in Antiquity to the rise of Islam is so coloured by the extensive rabbinic literature written in Hebrew and Aramaic that we miss the significance of the many Greek loanwords in the Mishnah and Palestinian Talmud, and the references to the use of Greek in the liturgy.

It is hard to imagine Rabbi Akiva and Yehudah Ha-Nasi negotiating with local tradesmen or arguing with Roman officials in fluent Greek, but there is plenty of evidence to suggest that this is in fact what happened. Synagogue inscriptions and epitaphs in the early rabbinic period show that Greek was widely used among Jews in Palestine. The Jerusalem Talmud records that the sons of R. Gamaliel were allowed to learn Greek because of their proximity to the Roman government (ySota XV, 322.6).

R. Simeon ben Gamaliel believed that the Torah could not be properly translated except into Greek (yMeg I.11, 71c). R. Yehudah Ha-Nasi even said that the Aramaic language should not be used in Palestine, but only Hebrew or Greek (bSota 49b). Rabbinic literature, especially from Eretz Israel, is peppered with Greek loanwords, ranging from common ones such as *doron* ('gift'), *ochlosin* ('crowds'), and *ananqi* ('through necessity'), to specialized technical, military and administrative terms whose Greek origins are often obscured by corruption of their Hebraized form.

It is well known that the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek in Egypt, a text that became known as the Septuagint, literally the version of the 'Seventy'. This name is an allusion to the legend that in the third century BCE seventy-two Jewish scholars travelled from Jerusalem to Alexandria to translate the Torah into Greek at the request of King Ptolemy. Although many assume that the Septuagint was just absorbed quietly into the Church as its Old Testament while it vanished from Judaism, the reality is more complex. Even though the rabbis championed the Tanakh in Hebrew, Scripture in Greek continued to evolve through a constant process of revision in comparison with the Hebrew text, as can be seen from Greek biblical texts that survive from Jewish sites such as Qumran, Masada and the Cairo Geniza, as well as those manuscripts copied by Christians. Thus Greek Scripture was used into the medieval period and beyond. In later centuries it was even written in Hebrew characters – not so strange considering that Yiddish is a German dialect written in Hebrew letters. The culmination of this process can be seen in the Judaeo-Greek of the Constantinople Pentateuch of 1547.

My personal fascination with Jewish Scripture in Greek goes back to my undergraduate studies in Classics and Hebrew in Oxford. I became aware of the role of the Septuagint as an aid to understanding the development of the traditional Hebrew 'Masoretic' text, because it was translated book by book from early unvocalized Hebrew texts, long before the rabbinic Bible reached its present form in the early medieval period. Professors and commentaries also referred to 'the later Greek versions' to help clarify a difficult word in the Hebrew Bible, but never explained what their origin had been and how they related to the older Septuagint.

In doctoral work and beyond I came to see how important these mysterious Jewish Greek translations were to both formative Judaism and early Christianity. Rather than disappearing down a crack between the synagogue and the church, for centuries they acted as a bridge between the communities for both communication and controversy over the Bible. Yet the field of Jewish studies has barely recognized the phenomenon of Jews reading the Scriptures in Greek, while until recently patristics experts have focused on the development of doctrine and virtually ignored the impact of the Old Testament text on the Church Fathers.

The recent European Seminar on Advanced Jewish Studies project was a unique opportunity to bring together scholars in the main areas of relevance to the topic, namely rabbinics, patristics, palaeography and biblical studies. Most of the twelve participants were in residence at Yarnton for between three and six months. They were scholars at various stages in their careers, from advanced doctoral students to emeritus professors. They came from several countries, including Belgium, Israel, the Netherlands, the UK and the United States.

We met at least twice a week during term, once for a seminar open to anyone in the University, and once for a workshop to which graduate students were invited. In this we discussed the main sources from the point of view of our different disciplines. Less formally, smaller groups regularly gathered (often in local pubs) to air new ideas. We also held two conferences, one in March entitled 'Greek Culture and the Rabbis', and a final one in June on 'Aquila and the Rabbis'.

Our main focus was the two major Jewish revisions of the second century CE, one by a Greek proselyte to Judaism, Aquila or 'Aqilas Ha- Ger' in around 130 CE, and the other by Symmachus, who may have been a Samaritan before he converted to Judaism at the time of the Mishnah (the end of the second century CE). We examined the references in rabbinic literature to Aquila's translation, of which the rabbis seem to have approved, and which strongly influenced subsequent Jewish Greek translations of the Bible into the sixteenth century. We also discussed how Christian scholars first rejected and then made enthusiastic use of the versions of both Aquila and Symmachus for their own work. We examined the degree to which the surviving fragments of Aquila and Symmachus reflect a Jewish milieu, and whether this was rabbinic or some other type of Judaism in Palestine. What was the fundamental attitude of the rabbis towards translation of the Scriptures in general? Were they idealists who insisted on Hebrew only, or were they pragmatists, who preferred Jews to understand the basics of Torah in one or other approved language? In the sixth century, when the Christian Emperor Justinian legislated on which Bible version Greek-speaking Jews should read in synagogue, was he responding sympathetically to the request of Jews who could not understand Hebrew? Or was he imposing a Christian agenda by allowing them the choice only of the Septuagint or Aquila? Were the versions of Aquila and Symmachus directly available to Christian scholars from Jewish texts, or only through the work of the third-century churchman Origen, who brought several versions together in a vast multi-columned Bible known as the Hexapla? These and other questions were explored to the full, and we were able to make good progress not only in tackling these issues but in setting the agenda for future research.

More detailed findings were presented by individual scholars. Reinhart Ceulemans argued, on the basis of evidence from patristic sources, that the Jewish versions of Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion were not available among Christians independently of Origen's Hexapla and his biblical commentaries. Origen had used these versions to revise the Church's Septuagint text (LXX) to match the Hebrew text of his day, and thus words and phrases from the later Jewish versions became incorporated into the Christian

Greek Old Testament. Modern scholars therefore find it difficult to identify what the older Jewish and pre-Christian LXX text would have looked like. Lorenzo Cuppi dealt with this question in his research on the book of Proverbs (Mishle Shlomo), and was able to examine an early papyrus fragment of the book that is preserved in Oxford's Ashmolean Museum that demonstrates the beginnings of this process.

Reused parchment fragments of Aquila's version of Psalms and Kings were found at the end of the nineteenth century in the Cairo Geniza, proving that Aquila continued to be popular with Jews well into the Byzantine period. Michael Law examined how these brief but continuous texts of Kings reflect the development of the Masoretic text from the earlier, pre-rabbinic Hebrew text underlying LXX Kings. Julia Krivoruchko and Shifra Sznol showed that glosses based on Aquila's rendering, but recorded in Hebrew characters, still circulated in medieval times and influenced the Constantinople Pentateuch version in the mid-sixteenth century.

Theological issues played a part in the development of both Hebrew and Greek texts, as Emanuel Tov explained, which is why, where a Greek version does not match the Masoretic text, it is important to distinguish between several possible reasons for the difference. For instance, in some places a translator had a variant and often older reading in the Hebrew manuscript in front of him; in others he merely misread the Hebrew; while at times he simply chose to render it differently. By the end of the second century CE all kinds of Greek scriptural texts and variants were in circulation. Christians were at a loss to understand the nature and purpose of these differences before the work of Origen, and without the knowledge of Hebrew as a guide and control. They tended to fall back on the concept of the providential inspiration of the original Septuagint text and to accuse Jews of tampering with favourite Christian proof-texts.

Tessa Rajak focused on Justin Martyr and his Dialogue with Trypho the Jew, the apologetic work in which he compares different versions of important proof-texts with a fictitious Jewish interlocutor. Alison Salvesen followed on from this to trace Christian attitudes towards the later Jewish revisers, from Justin's antagonism in the late-second century, to Eusebius of Caesarea's appropriation in the mid-fourth century as actually supportive of Christian doctrine. Thus we find citations of Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion in several patristic authors, although the level of authority granted to their renderings in comparison to the Church's LXX varied somewhat, as Bas Romeny and Mike Graves demonstrated.

On the rabbinic side, Philip Alexander and Willem Smelik provided close readings of rabbinic texts that discuss scriptural translations. Jenny Labendz argued for a greater cosmopolitanism on the part of rabbis than is often recognized, in which an acceptance of Scripture in Greek would Greek Scripture and the Rabbis play a part. In Palestinian texts Aquila appears both as the ideal convert and as a translator whose renderings were sometimes useful for rabbinic interpretations of the text. Tim Edwards compared Aquila's renderings in Psalms to the interpretations of midrash, and Mike Graves examined those in Genesis for possible midrashic wordplays. The question of whether either Aquila or Symmachus actually moved within rabbinic circles was the subject of Alison Salvesen's investigation. She concluded that Aquila's translation received rabbinic approval after the event, while Symmachus's affinities were more generally Jewish than specifically rabbinic.

The project participants were most enthusiastic about the intellectual stimulus that Oxford has to offer in the way of libraries, seminars and access to colleagues in related areas. Especially gratifying was the development of strong academic ties between

scholars of different ages and from different countries and disciplines. We will be publishing the papers that emerged from our discussions, but the effects of the project will go beyond what can be conveyed by the printed page.

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