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Title: In Pursuit of the Perfect Bible.

Subtitle: Attitudes to Bible Translation in Hellenistic Judaism

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Abstract:

This article investigates attitudes to Bible translation as mirrored in the Letter of Aristeas, Philo's treatise "On the Life of Moses", and the Prologue to the Book of Ben Sira. In each of these documents, its respective author reflects about the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. The author of the Letter of Aristeas was concerned about a possible revision of a translation that was highly esteemed and tried to preserve it by alluding to the "canon formula" (Deut 4.2). Philo considered the Greek Torah as divinely inspired, presuming a strictly literal translation which was the perfect image of its source text. The article mentions today's followers of these two writers whose views can be criticized from the point of view of modern translation theory. The translator of the Book of Ben Sira, on the other hand, showed a balanced opinion which can serve as a model for today's Bible translators.

Keywords: Letter of Aristeas, Philo of Alexandria, On the Life of Moses, Prologue to Ben Sira, Hellenistic Judaism, Septuagint, canon formula, revision, inspiration, King James Only Movement

The first known translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, the so-called Septuagint (LXX),<sup>1</sup> was produced in different steps, starting with the Pentateuch. This important milestone in the history of Bible translation began in Alexandria in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. In the following centuries, readers of this translation developed different attitudes towards it and towards the process of translation in general. Some of these attitudes have been preserved in the literature of this period. Their study gives insights not only into the mentality of Hellenistic Judaism but can also serve as a means for critically evaluating our own conceptions as to what a good Bible translation should be based upon.

The first source to look at is the so-called Letter of Aristeas, a pseudepigraphic document from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. which constitutes the foundation legend of the Septuagint. This legend was used and rewritten by Philo of Alexandria (ca. 25 B.C. - A.D. 50) when he composed his treatise “On the Life of Moses” (*De vita Mosis*). Finally, we will evaluate the prologue to the Book of Ben Sira (Ecclesiasticus) which was written by the author's grandson commenting on his own translation of his grandfather's work from Hebrew into Greek.

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1 For an introduction to the Septuagint see, among others, Dines 2004 and Fernandez Marcos 2000.

## 1. The Letter of Aristeas: Preserving a translation

The Letter of Aristeas<sup>2</sup> is a work of fiction in the form of a letter, written with the objective of proclaiming the benefits of Judaism in a Hellenistic context. It was written in Greek, most probably in the late second century B.C., and deals mainly with the translation of the Torah into the Greek language (see Wasserstein and Wasserstein 2006, 19-26). The author is supposedly a Hellenistic Jew who used the pseudonym of a certain Aristeas, a Greek courtier of the king Ptolemy II. Philadelphos (282-246 B.C.).

The courtier Aristeas tells his brother Philocrates how the Greek translation of the Torah came into being: Demetrios, librarian of the famous royal library in Alexandria, advises the king to supplement his library with a version of the Jewish law. Since this law exists only in Hebrew so far and is thus of no use for Greeks, the king sends an envoy to Jerusalem in order to ask the high priest Eleazar for help. Answering the king's written request, the high priest delegates 72 elders to Alexandria, namely, six from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, taking with them a copy of the Torah. King Ptolemy receives the

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2 The Greek text is provided by Pelletier 1962. For an online source of the Greek text, the reader is referred to The Online Critical Pseudepigrapha at <http://ocp.tyndale.ca/letter-of-aristeas>. The English translation by R.H. Charles is provided online by the Christian Classics Ethereal Library (CCEL): <http://www.ccel.org/c/charles/otpseudepig/aristeas.htm>.

elders and invites them to a seven day symposium. On this occasion, the guests are asked to answer the king's questions concerning philosophy and ethics in order to demonstrate their extraordinary wisdom. Having successfully passed the test, they translate the Torah into Greek within 72 days. To perform this demanding task, they compare their individual drafts and adjust them to each other's so that a collaborative version develops.

Afterwards the translation is read to the Jewish population of Alexandria whose leaders ratify it as follows (Arist 310):

“Since the books have been translated in such a good and pious and completely accurate manner, it is appropriate that they should remain as they are and that no alteration of any sort should be made.”<sup>3</sup>

The account then continues (Arist 311):

Since everybody solemnly agreed to what had been said, they had a curse pronounced according to their custom over anybody who might introduce an alteration by adding anything, or by rearranging anything at all of what had

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3 [...] Ἐπεὶ καλῶς καὶ ὀσίως διηρμήνευται καὶ κατὰ πᾶν ἠκριβωμένως, καλῶς ἔχον ἐστίν, ἵνα διαμείνη ταῦθ' οὕτως ἔχοντα, καὶ μὴ γένηται μηδεμία διασκευή. – All translations from Greek into English are the author's.

been written or by taking away anything. This was a good thing to do so that the translation would be preserved for all times unaltered and everlasting.<sup>4</sup>

Obviously, the author of the Letter of Aristeas alluded to the prohibition of Deut 4.2, using the terminology of the Septuagint text and adopting the order of the key-terms:<sup>5</sup>

You shall not add anything to the word I command you, and you shall not take away anything from it. Preserve the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you today.<sup>6</sup>

Readers who knew the Greek text of Deuteronomy could see this reference clearly, even though the grammatical forms used in Arist 311 do not conform to those in Deut 4.2 and in spite of the additional verb “to rearrange” (μεταφέρω) which does not occur in the

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4 πάντων δ' ἐπιφωνησάντων τοῖς εἰρημένοις, ἐκέλευσαν διαράσασθαι, καθὼς ἔθος αὐτοῖς ἐστίν, εἴ τις διασκευάσει προστιθεὶς ἢ μεταφέρων τι τὸ σύνολον τῶν γεγραμμένων ἢ ποιούμενος ἀφαίρεσιν, καλῶς τούτο πράσσοντες, ἵνα διὰ παντὸς ἀέννα καὶ μένοντα φυλάσσηται.

5 This does not hold for the “parallel passage” Deut 13.1 (12.32) where the order is “preserve – add – take away”.

6 οὐ προσθήσετε πρὸς τὸ ῥῆμα, ὃ ἐγὼ ἐντέλλομαι ὑμῖν, καὶ οὐκ ἀφελεῖτε ἀπ' αὐτοῦ· φυλάσσετε τὰς ἐντολὰς κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ ὑμῶν, ὅσα ἐγὼ ἐντέλλομαι ὑμῖν σήμερον.



biblical passage. There is no external evidence for a Jewish “custom” of cursing in the Hellenistic context; however, the motif of a divine curse was probably adopted from Deuteronomy as well (Hengel 1994, 237).<sup>7</sup> Other common themes are the acts of reading aloud the law for the whole people (cf. Arist 308 with Deut 31.9-13) and of producing a copy of the law (cf. Arist 309 with Deut 17.18-19).

The instruction of Deut 4.2 is usually referred to as the “canon formula” (see, e.g., André 1990, 122). This designation is, of course, anachronistic, for there was no biblical canon whatsoever in view when the Book of Deuteronomy was composed. In its actual context, the prohibition in Deut 4.2 refers to adding something to or omitting something from the commandments that Moses is about to give the Israelites in the course of his speech. In particular, it is the First Commandment that the Israelites are supposed to “preserve”, i.e., to keep in their daily life and conduct. The exclusive worship of Israel's God must not be neglected, and a new commandment that legalizes the worship of foreign gods must not be added (Christensen 2001, 80; Tigay 1996, 43-44). Hence, the scope of the biblical prohibition has been considerably altered in the Letter of Aristeas.

By alluding to the text from Deuteronomy, the author seeks to preserve the wording of a

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<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Deut 11.26,28,29; 21.23; 23.6; 27.13-26; 28.15-19; 29.18-20,26; 30.1,19. While in the Greek Deut the verb ἐπικαταράομαι (rendering אָרַר) and the nouns κατάρα (rendering קְלָלָה) and ἄρα (rendering אָלָה) occur, the verb διαπάομαι is used in Arist 311.

Bible translation.

What was the reason for this application of a biblical text against its original literary context? Probably, the quality of the Greek translation that was in use at the time in Alexandria was being challenged and the author of the Letter of Aristeas felt obliged to counter these challenges. Perhaps Jews with a Palestinian background who were able to compare the Alexandrian Torah with their own Hebrew version pointed to inaccuracies and called for a revision (Brock 1972, 23-24). Contrastingly, Arist 310-311 clearly states that no alteration (διασκευή) should be made, given the high quality of the translation which was assured by the quality of its Hebrew parent text. The latter had been brought in from Jerusalem and was superior to the text of the Hebrew scrolls already found in Alexandria. Concerning these books, it is said (Arist 30):

For they have been written in Hebrew script and language; however, they were noted very carelessly and not how it should have been.<sup>8</sup>

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8 [...] τυγχάνει γὰρ Ἑβραϊκοῖς γράμμασι καὶ φωνῇ λεγόμενα, ἀμελέστερον δέ, καὶ οὐχ ὡς ὑπάρχει, σεσήμανται [...]. – In the early research on the Letter of Aristeas it was usually assumed that the verb σημαίνω in Arist 30 had the meaning “translate” and the passage referred to different *Greek* versions of the Torah that were available in Alexandria before the translation in question was produced. The meaning “translate”, however, is not attested elsewhere and is hence doubtful. In the present context, the meaning “interpret” or “write” (or “note” as in our rendition) is more appropriate

The high esteem the author has for the Greek version current in his milieu is mirrored by the fact that in the account, the king not only reveres (προσκυνέω) the translation (Arist 317) but also the Hebrew scrolls of Jerusalem provenance (Arist 177) which are about to serve as a parent text for the translation (cf. Borchardt 2012, 10).

In the end, the translation has been sanctioned by three instances: First, the Palestinian Jews sanction the project in general by sending the Hebrew scrolls and the translators. Second, the Alexandrian Jews read the translation aloud publicly and praise its quality. And finally, it is God himself who sanctions the translation, a fact that the author expresses by mentioning the curse that shall prevent any revision (Tcherikover 1958, 74). Hence, the Letter of Aristeas advocates one specific translation. This translation is perfectly sufficient and must not be altered. It is based on a specific Hebrew text, namely, on the reliable text from Jerusalem and not on the dubious Hebrew textual forms found in Alexandria.

Having presented the reasoning of the Jewish-Hellenistic author of the Letter of Aristeas we shall now ask: Does this reasoning reflect certain present-day attitudes towards Bible translation? Are there similarities between the author's attitude and modern

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(Liddell, Scott, and Jones 1951, s.v. σημαίνω). Consequently, for several decades now, it has been believed that Arist 30 refers to *Hebrew* versions of the Torah that had not been edited according to the text-critical methods current in Alexandria (Gooding 1963, 360-362).

conceptions? We can summarize such an attitude as follows: “The Bible translation we are using is perfect and sufficient. It need not be revised. It is based on the most reliable textual form available.” Hence, any Bible user who prefers one single translation and promotes it fervently claiming it to be the “only reliable” translation shares certain conceptions with the Letter of Aristeas. Moreover, any Bible user who favors one specific translation because it is based on the “one true” source text has a prejudice in common with this document's unknown author.

A concrete example for this attitude is the preference that some people give to the King James (or Authorized) Version. Of course, a discussion of the so-called “King James Only Movement” is beyond the scope of this article.<sup>9</sup> Some short remarks shall suffice. First, the New Testament of this version is based on the Majority Text which is deemed superior to other textual forms. To the advocates of this view the fixity of this textual basis might be appealing. There is no need to reconstruct an eclectic text from conflicting witnesses. This is very similar to the view of the Letter of Aristeas which promotes the fixed text from Jerusalem against the fluid Hebrew text as preserved in differing Alexandrian manuscripts. Textual unity is thought to safeguard the Bible against textual variety. Secondly, those who strongly adhere to the King James Version (i.e., those who don't accept the *New King James Version*) claim that the translation

<sup>9</sup> For critical responses, see, e.g., White 2009 and Carson 1979.

need not and must not be revised since it is already perfect. Obviously, this is the basic point of view being defended in the Letter of Aristeas (310-311).

The reasoning of this Jewish-Hellenistic source might seem bizarre to modern readers. It relies heavily on an interpretation of Deut 4.2 against its literary context. This interpretation threatens putative revisers with a curse calling the divine wrath on them. It has to be noted, though, that the Letter of Aristeas does have its followers even today.

## 2. Philo of Alexandria: The inspired translation

In his treatise “On the Life of Moses” (*De vita Mosis*),<sup>10</sup> the Jewish-Hellenistic philosopher Philo of Alexandria presents Moses as the perfect king, lawgiver, high priest and prophet (2.2-3). In order to demonstrate that the Mosaic law is highly appreciated also by non-Jews (2.25), Philo relates the story of the translation of the Torah into Greek (2.25-44). This account is very similar to the story told in the Letter of Aristeas which is more than 100 years older, and it is likely that Philo knew it and used

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10 The standard text is Cohn, Wendland and Reiter, 1962-1963. The English translation by C.D. Yonge is available at <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book24.html> for Book 1 and <http://www.earlyjewishwritings.com/text/philo/book25.html> for Book 2.

it (Wasserstein and Wasserstein 2006, 37-38). But there are also striking differences which will be noted in due course.

Philo tells his readers that the translators, having finished the royal symposium, search for an appropriate place where they can begin their work (2.34):

[...] Considering among themselves what a challenging task it was to translate laws that had been given by divine revelation – for they could neither take away anything nor add or rearrange anything but were supposed to preserve their original content and form – they searched for the purest place of all places outside the town. [...] <sup>11</sup>

In comparison with Arist 311 it is noteworthy that the order of the key-terms taken from Deut 4.2 – “add, take away, preserve” – has been altered. Moreover, whereas the Letter of Aristeas expresses a potential “rearranging” of the text with the additional verb μεταφέρω, Philo used μετατίθημι which is (more or less) synonymous to the former. Hence, Philo was not interested in providing a verbatim quotation of either Deut 4.2 or the respective passage from Arist 311.

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11 [...] λογισάμενοι παρ' αὐτοῖς, ὅσον εἶη τὸ πρᾶγμα θεσπισθέντας νόμους χρησιμοῖς διερμηνεύειν, μήτ' ἀφελεῖν τι μήτε προσθεῖναι ἢ μεταθεῖναι δυναμένους, ἀλλὰ τὴν ἐξ ἀρχῆς ἰδέαν καὶ τὸν τύπον αὐτῶν διαφυλάττοντας, ἐσκόπουν τὸ καθαρώτατον τῶν περὶ τὸν τόπον χωρίων ἐξω πόλεως: [...]

What is more important, however, is the fact that Philo adopted the “canon formula” *before* relating the account of the translation and not *afterwards* as in the Letter of Aristeas. For Philo, it is not the finished translation that needs to be preserved (διαφυλάττω) by safeguarding it against alteration but rather the contents and the form of the Hebrew source text. Whereas the Letter of Aristeas claims a certain characteristic of the translation, Philo claims a certain objective for the translators.

The translators find a suitable working place on the island of Pharos, ahead of Alexandria, which is not only ritually clean but also calm. Here they retire with the Hebrew scrolls at hand and start their work after having prayed to God for success in their task (2.35-36). The operation of their work is described as follows (2.37):

Sitting in solitude [...], they prophesied, as if being inspired, not each of them different things but all of them the same words and phrases as if a prompter talked invisibly into the ears of each of them.<sup>12</sup>

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12 καθίσαντες δ' ἐν ἀποκρύφῳ [...], καθάπερ ἐνθουσιῶντες προεφήτευον οὐκ ἄλλα ἄλλοι, τὰ δ' αὐτὰ πάντες ὀνόματα καὶ ῥήματα, ὥσπερ ὑποβολέως ἐκάστοις ἀοράτως ἐνηχοῦντος. – Instead of “words and phrases”, ὀνόματα καὶ ῥήματα could be rendered “nouns and verbs” (cf. Liddell, Scott and Jones 1951, s.v. ὄνομα VI.1, VI.2; s.v. ῥῆμα I.2, II). The latter translation takes Plato's dichotomic classification of the parts of speech into account (Kamesar 2009, 66). Be that as it may, Philo is using a merism in order to express a complete agreement of the individual translators'

Philo claims that the Septuagint translation is based on divine intervention. The vocabulary in this passage reminds the reader of terms which Philo used when he described Moses as a prophet (e.g., ἐνθουσιάζω, προφήτης, cf. 1.57). Later in the passage under discussion, Philo explicitly mentions the translators' special connection with “the spirit of Moses” (τῷ Μωυσέως καθαρῳτάτῳ πνεύματι, cf. 2.40). According to 2.34 (cf. above), because the original was prophetically transmitted, its translation must be without any shortening, expansion or alteration. In 2.37, Philo argues that the translators also need to be prophets and, further, the translation process needs to depend on divine intervention (cf. Borchardt 2012, 17).

It is frequently stated that, according to 2.37, the prophetic character of the translation becomes manifest through the fact that the translators worked independently and yet each one of them produced exactly and literally the same target text.<sup>13</sup> However, Philo does not say explicitly that the translators were separated. It is no more than the word ἑκάστοις that might suggest an independent working method (Wasserstein and Wasserstein 2006, 44).<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the translation is considered to be prophetic and

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verbal output.

13 Along the same lines, Philo is often referred to as “father of the belief in verbal inspiration” (cf., e.g., Kaiser 2014, 158).

14 The remark that the translators were sitting ἐν ἀποκρύφῳ most probably refers to their collective



divinely inspired, shown by the fact that the Greek words of the translation conformed exactly to the respective Hebrew words of the source text (2.38-39):

(38) For who does not know that every language, and the Greek one in particular, is rich in words, and that it is possible to render any thought and to paraphrase it and to shape it in many ways, each time putting together different expressions? This, they say, did not happen in the course of this legislation, but rather were the appropriate Greek words set in relation with the respective Hebrew<sup>15</sup> words so that they fitted perfectly with the things which were to be revealed. (39) For just as in geometry and in logic the signified things in my opinion do not allow any variety of interpretation, but what was set in the beginning remains unchanged, in the same manner, it seems, did these people find words conforming to the things, words that exclusively or as best as possible should explain clearly what was to be

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isolation on the island Pharos. The idea of individual isolation was common in the Christian reception of the legend, as can be shown by an assenting quotation from Augustine (*De civitate Dei* 18.42) and a dissenting one from Jerome (*Praef. in Pent.*) who complained about a “lying author” who “constructed seventy cells” (cf. Wasserstein and Wasserstein 2006, 124-126).

15 Throughout the treatise, *Χαλδαικός* is being used with the sense “Hebrew”.

revealed.<sup>16</sup>

This description implies a literal translation. Any sort of free rendering or “dynamic equivalence” is categorically excluded (cf. Kamesar 2009, 68). According to Philo, the formal equivalence between the Hebrew words of the source text and the Greek words of the target text is exact to such an extent that the original and the translation relate to each other like an archetype and its image.<sup>17</sup> In claiming this feature for the Greek Torah, Philo probably defends its hebraicizing style which stands in marked contrast to his own elegant Greek. Actually, the translation of the Torah *has* to be hebraicizing in style, for according to God's will, the original must not be shortened, expanded or

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16 (38) καίτοι τίς οὐκ οἶδεν, ὅτι πᾶσα μὲν διάλεκτος, ἢ δ' Ἑλληνικὴ διαφερόντως, ὀνομάτων πλουτεῖ, καὶ ταῦτ' ἐνθύμημα οἶόν τε μεταφράζοντα καὶ παραφράζοντα σχηματίσαι πολλαχῶς, ἄλλοτε ἄλλας ἐφαρμόζοντα λέξεις; ὅπερ ἐπὶ ταύτης τῆς νομοθεσίας οὐ φασι συμβῆναι, συνενεχθῆναι δ' εἰς ταῦτ' ἐκ κύρια κυρίως ὀνόμασι, τα Ἑλληνικὰ τοῖς Χαλδαικοῖς, ἐναρμοσθέντα εὖ μάλα τοῖς δηλουμένοις πράγμασιν. (39) ὃν γὰρ τρόπον, οἶμαι, ἐν γεωμετρίᾳ καὶ διαλεκτικῇ τα σημαινόμενα ποικιλίαν ἐρμηνείας οὐκ ἀνέχεται, μένει δ' ἀμετάβλητος ἢ ἐξ ἀρχῆς τεθεῖσα, τὸν αὐτὸν ὡς ἔοικε τρόπον καὶ οὗτοι συντρέχοντα τοῖς πράγμασιν ὀνόματα ἐξεῦρον, ἅπερ δὴ μόνα ἢ μάλιστα τρανώσειν ἔμελλεν ἐμφαντικῶς τὰ δηλούμενα.

17 The idea of an “archetype” is prominent in Philo's thoughts, e.g., in 2.74-76 he develops this idea with regard to the tabernacle of which the archetype was revealed to the prophet Moses on Mount Sinai.

altered, not even with regard to its linguistic form (Wright 2006, 59-60).

The Greek Torah has therefore the potential to replace its Hebrew source text in the Hellenistic world. Unlike the Letter of Aristeas, Philo does not need to prevent a revision. Improving the translation would be impossible anyway since the translation is an exact image of its source and hence as inspired as the archetype. Consistently, Philo has used the Septuagint text for his own interpretative works of the Torah (Kaiser 2014, 155).

Not only the author of Aristeas' letter but also Philo has his modern followers. We might think of those contemporaries who consider their preferred Bible translation divinely inspired or at least as being the closest approximation of the inspired Hebrew or Greek original. Again, some adherents of the “King James Only Movement” can be mentioned who claim inspiration for the Authorized Version (White 2009, 26-27). But we can also imagine a completely different scenario: In developing countries, national Bible translators without any knowledge of Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic are compelled to use Bible versions of a language of wider communication like English, French or Spanish. These versions then serve as the basis for producing a secondary translation in the translators' mother tongue. Sometimes, it seems, translators have a hard time not to stick slavishly to their preferred, e.g., French translation, particularly if this version has a

long tradition and a high status in the local Church. Usually, those versions are rather literal and the envisaged secondary translation runs the constant danger of becoming literal, too, not resting primarily upon the *meaning* of the Greek or Hebrew text but on the *form* of a French or English version. From the viewpoint of modern translation theory this attitude and such an output are certainly worthy of being criticized. They are, however, fully understandable given the circumstances we just depicted. Not even Philo, philosopher of highest education in cosmopolitan Alexandria, could resist the temptation of assuming divine inspiration for “his Bible”, the Greek translation of the Torah. With the legend of the Septuagint at hand and with virtually no knowledge of Hebrew (Kamesar 2009, 71-72), this assumption is understandable, too.

### 3. Ben Sira's grandson: Realistic expectations of a translator's work

The book of Jesus Ben Sira (also known as Ecclesiasticus), a treatise on wisdom and piety, was composed in Hebrew before 175 B.C. It never found its way into the canon of Hebrew Scriptures but is part of the collection usually referred to as the Septuagint. For several centuries, the book was only available in Greek, Latin and Syriac translations.

This situation changed when in 1886, Hebrew fragments of Ben Sira were found, followed by more fragment discoveries in the Judean desert in the 20th century.

Within the scope of this article, it is the prologue to the Greek translation that provides some interesting insights.<sup>18</sup> This prologue, according to its own internal witness, was written by the author's grandson who translated his grandfather's book into the Greek language. This happened most probably in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.,<sup>19</sup> hence, we are looking into a document from the same period as the Letter of Aristeas. After having positioned his grandfather's book in the tradition of the Law, the Prophets and the “others that followed them” (Prol 1-14), the grandson starts his reflections about translation (Prol 15-20):

You are therefore asked to read with goodwill and attention and to forbear in cases where it seems that we did not fully succeed in rendering certain

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18 The standard text of the Greek version is Ziegler 1980. An English translation (Revised Standard Version) can be found online: <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/r/rsv/rsv-idx?type=DIV1&byte=3977004>.

19 In Prol 27-28, the grandson mentions his arrival in Alexandria (certainly from Judea) in the 38<sup>th</sup> year of the king Euergetes. Since Ptolemaios III. Euergetes did not reign for such a long time the translator must be referring to Ptolemaios VIII Euergetes (170-117 B.C.) Hence, the translation came into being after 132 B.C. and probably not long after 117 B.C. (cf. Skehan 1987, 8-9).

expressions in spite of all our labour in translating.<sup>20</sup>

It is first and foremost noteworthy that Ben Sira's grandson apologizes for his translation. He is fully aware that his work is far from perfect. In order to understand the meaning of the clause “we did not fully succeed in rendering certain expressions” we have to read a bit further (Prol 21-22):

For what was originally expressed in Hebrew does not have the same force when it is translated into another language.<sup>21</sup>

The verb ἰσοδυναμέω appears sparsely in the body of Greek literature, and dictionaries give its meaning as “to have the same power” (Liddell 1951, s.v.). In the context of the passage under consideration, “having the same power” is usually interpreted as “having the same sense”.<sup>22</sup> This would imply that in Prol 20 the grandson apologizes for not always having correctly rendered the sense of the Hebrew words and expressions into

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20 (15) Παρακέκλησθε οὖν (16) μετ' εὐνοίας καὶ προσοχῆς (17) τὴν ἀνάγνωσιν ποιεῖσθαι (18) καὶ συγγνώμην ἔχειν (19) ἐφ' οἷς ἂν δοκῶμεν (20) τῶν κατὰ τὴν ἐρμηνείαν πεφιλοπονημένων τισὶν τῶν λέξεων ἀδυναμεῖν.

21 (21) οὐ γὰρ ἰσοδυναμεῖ (22) αὐτὰ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς Ἑβραϊστὶ λεγόμενα καὶ ὅταν μεταχθῆ εἰς ἑτέραν γλῶσσαν.

22 See, e.g., the Revised Standard Version (cf. footnote 18 above).

Greek. The reason for having “failed” in this respect would be a given mismatch between Hebrew and Greek words, a difference in meaning that makes it generally impossible to translate the words of the former language exactly into the latter.

However, this interpretation has been challenged on the basis of the intended audience of the prologue (see Wright 2003, 14-18). In Prol 27-36, the grandson mentions that, when he came to Egypt, he found educational books of the same kind as his grandfather's and decided to provide his compatriots in the Egyptian diaspora with a Greek translation of Ben Sira's book. This indicates that the translation was intended for Jews whose competence of Hebrew was not sufficient to read the Hebrew original so that they were compelled to read Ben Sira's work in Greek. Hence, the readers of the Greek version were not in a position to criticize the translator for not having correctly rendered certain Hebrew words. It follows that it is probably not the meaning of the words that the grandson is concerned about when speaking of “not having the same force”. It is much more likely that he worries about the “rhetorical force” of his translation. The prologue shows that the translator was by all means able to compose good, literary *koine* Greek. When translating, however, he did not exhibit these abilities but produced a literal, word-for-word translation. He is thus not concerned about possible errors regarding the meaning but rather about the style of his translation as it

probably does not comply with the literary standards of his audience.

In the course of his *apologia*, he further justifies his translation technique (Prol 23-26):

And not only this work but also the law itself, the prophecies and the remaining books differ not a little when they are expressed in the original.<sup>23</sup>

The translator is aware that the style of his translation is not very elegant. However, he is in good company. The translations of those books that belong to the Hebrew canon of Holy Scriptures<sup>24</sup> – at least most of them – were not written in elegant, literary Greek either. Critics of the grandson's work are hereby asked to look at what they already know and value, that is to say, the Scriptures in Greek translation.

Why then did the translator use a hebraicizing style although he was aware of possible criticism and was indeed able to write a “better”, elegant Greek? According to Wright (2003, 19-20), Ben Sira's grandson deliberately imitated the translation technique of the Greek scriptures which was generally literal – as far as these translations already

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23 (23) οὐ μόνον δὲ ταῦτα, (24) ἀλλὰ καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ νόμος καὶ αἱ προφητεῖαι (25) καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ τῶν βιβλίων (26) οὐ μικρὰν ἔχει τὴν διαφορὰν ἐν ἑαυτοῖς λεγόμενα.

24 We cannot elaborate here on the question of when and how this tripartite canon came into being. Suffice it to say that the division into the groups of Law, Prophets and „other books“ occurs three times in the prologue (1-2, 7-10, 24-25). The question of a presumptive “Alexandrian canon” of Septuagint scriptures cannot be treated either.



existed. An alternative hypothesis (Schorch 2008, 50-51) supposes that for the author of the prologue, the Greek translation of a Hebrew text had always and had *per se* less force than the Hebrew original. Hence, in order to experience the maximal “effective force” of a book composed in Hebrew it was preferable that readers make use of the original if ever possible.

Be that as it may, the most important observation to make is the fact that Ben Sira's grandson did reflect on the task and the methods of translating. In certain respects, his attitude can serve as a model for present-day translators. From his remarks on the “difference” between the Hebrew and the Greek versions of the Scriptures we can conclude that he was able to compare a Greek translation to its Hebrew original.<sup>25</sup> It was obvious for him that there are differences between the source language and the target language that affect a translator's work. When translating his grandfather's book, his particular aim was to render his text “exactly” on the word level, and in order to do so he had to make a compromise with respect to the style of the target text. He did not claim perfection for his own translation but was modest enough to acknowledge that there might be critics challenging his work. In order to counter possible criticism he provided his readers with a prologue explaining his aims and justifying his methods.

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25 This is true notwithstanding the possibility that the Hebrew texts at his disposal might have differed from the actual source texts used by the translators.

#### 4. Conclusion

In Hellenistic Judaism, attitudes towards Bible translation were manifold. Some of them have been preserved in the literature of the Hellenistic-Roman period. The common subject of the sources under consideration is the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek.

The Letter of Aristeas disseminates the foundation legend of the so-called Septuagint, specifically the translation of the Torah. The author of this document was concerned about possible revisions of a translation that was held in high esteem in his milieu. This translation was deemed perfect because it was based on a perfect Hebrew parent text. Therefore it had to be preserved by protecting it against any revision. This was done mainly by detaching the so-called “canon formula” (Deut 4.2) from its original context and applying it to the text of the translation which was thereby supposed to stay as it was. The author mentioned the translators' team-work; however, this does not imply any prescription about how a translation ought to be produced. His one and only concern was that his favorite translation be preserved because he was facing the challenge of a

possible revision.

Philo of Alexandria probably used the account of the Letter of Aristeas in his treatise “On the life of Moses”. His aim was to show that Moses was the perfect lawgiver and the perfect prophet. Judging the Mosaic Torah to be a prophetic work, Philo applied the “canon formula” to its Hebrew source text. In order to comply with the prophetic standard thus set, the translation into Greek had to be based on divine intervention and the translators were considered prophets, too. Since the Torah could not be shortened, expanded or altered with regard to either contents or form, the translation had to be a literal one which related to the original like an image to its archetype. Philo was grappling with the challenges posed by the hebraicizing style of the Greek Torah.

The prologue to the Book of Ben Sira focuses more on the process of translation than the aforementioned sources. Like Philo, its author was facing the challenge of a hebraicizing style that could develop when translating a text from Hebrew into Greek. His main concern, though, was his own translation of his grandfather's book. In order to justify its style he referred to the style of the Greek Scriptures. In the course of his *apologia*, the grandson pondered about the methods of translation. Due to his own experience gained when translating his grandfather's work, he was able to form a more balanced opinion than his contemporary, the author of the letter of Aristeas. While the

latter believed in the perfect Bible translation, the experienced translator who was as well versed in Hebrew as in Greek was modest enough to admit that a perfect translation is an illusion.

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