In Search for a Menschenbild: the Figure of Translator/Interpreter in the (Greek) Old Testament

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Introduction

In this paper, I aim to explore the function or better the absence of translators or translation activity within the biblical text, particularly in the Septuagint. In my previous papers, I explored the three words which might denote a translator or interpreter in the Greek language as well as their usage in the Greek Old Testament. I also concluded that the only verse, where an interpreter is mentioned is Gen 42:23, where Joseph communicates with hos brothers. Before delving into the said verse, the analysis will focus on instances where translation would have been necessary due to characters speaking different languages. The outline of the presentation is as follows: first, I shall present three case studies where direct communication between characters of different linguistic backgrounds occurs. Then, I will conduct a detailed analysis of Genesis 42:23, providing additional background information. Finally, I will conclude with insights on the role of translators or interpreters in the Bible.

Case Studies

The selected passages are Genesis 20:9-15, Judges 4:18-20, and 1 Kings 5/2 Chronicles 2. These case studies meet specific criteria: they involve direct bilateral communication (not indirect speech or unilateral communication), feature characters who speak or presumably speak different languages, and represent different periods of biblical history. This analysis is purely linguistic and does not delve into the historicity of the events. Additionally, witnesses from the post-exilic and Hellenistic periods, when Aramaic and Greek were commonly spoken, are excluded.

1. Genesis 20:9-15

   - *Context*: Abimelech, the king of Gerar, confronts Abraham upon learning that Sarah is his wife, not his sister.

   - *Analysis*: The text depicts a direct conversation between Abimelech and Abraham without mentioning an interpreter. This could suggest mutual intelligibility or the narrative's focus on the main characters.

   - *Implications*: The absence of an interpreter implies either linguistic commonality or a deliberate narrative choice to emphasize the interaction between key characters.

2. Judges 4:18-20

   - *Context*: Jael, a Kenite woman, speaks with Sisera, a Canaanite commander.

   - *Analysis*: The passage shows Jael and Sisera communicating directly without a military interpreter, despite their different ethnic backgrounds.

   - *Implications*: The lack of an interpreter suggests either that the languages were mutually intelligible or that the narrative technique prioritizes the central figures' interactions.

3. 1 Kings 5 / 2 Chronicles 2

- *Context*: Solomon and Hiram, king of Tyre, correspond regarding materials for building the Temple in Jerusalem.

- *Analysis*: The texts describe complex diplomatic correspondence without mentioning it being read by translators.

- *Implications*: The omission of translators might indicate that educated elites could communicate across languages or that the narrative centers on the principal actors' direct negotiations.

Detailed Analysis of Genesis 42:23

Now I will turn to the verse Genesis 42:23 and analyze it in detail:

Greek: αὐτοὶ δὲ οὐκ ᾔδεισαν ὅτι ἀκούει Ιωσηφ ὁ γὰρ ἑρμηνευτὴς ἀνὰ μέσον αὐτῶν ἦν

Translation: Now they [sons of Jacob] did not know that Joseph was listening, for the interpreter was between them.

Analysis:

- Greek term ἑρμηνευτής (hermeneutes): This relatively rare noun is widely attested in Graeco-Roman and Byzantine literature, particularly in patristic texts. However, its usage in Classical and Hellenistic texts is limited to four instances, including this verse and one with an unclear date. In these earlier periods, the noun ἑρμηνεύς was more commonly used to denote a translator or interpreter.

- Hebrew term מֵלִיץ (melitz): The Hebrew term used in this context in the Masoretic (Hebrew) text of the verse usually signifies a leader or ambassador and is otherwise attested with this meaning. There is no other instance of it being applied to signify any linguistic let alone translation activity.

Conclusions

From the analysis of these case studies and the detailed examination of Genesis 42:23, it becomes clear that a translator or interpreter is not typically mentioned in the biblical text. This absence can be explained by several factors:

1. *Mutual Intelligibility*: Languages spoken in Ancient Canaan may have been mutually intelligible to some degree, allowing basic understanding without an intermediary. Thus, a Hebrew-speaking Israelite might understand a Kenite or a Phoenician without needing a translator.

2. *Narrative Technique*: Biblical authors might have deliberately omitted mentions of interpreters or bilingualism to focus the reader's attention on the main characters, similar to how Homer made all Trojans speak Greek or how Herodotus described Cyrus communicating with Croesus. Alternatively, it might have been common to hide the translator, so he only appears when the narrative demands so.

3. *Bilingualism*: Despite explicit mentions being rare, there are numerous allusions to bilingualism among ancient Israelites throughout the biblical text, starting with Moses and

Aaron (or perhaps even Abraham). It is plausible that some statesmen and clergy received language education to communicate freely with Egyptians or Syrians, whose languages were distinct enough to require such skills.

Even in Genesis 42:23, Joseph, being bilingual, did not need an interpreter, as he understood both Egyptian and Hebrew.

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