

Abstract

The current research examines the ideological aspect of the translation of Jewish sacred texts from the point of view of Rabbis and Jewish legal authorities. Thus, it attempts to describe how leading rabbinical figures regarded the translation of sacred sources and texts from Hebrew into other languages. Did they encourage such activity or were they deterred by it and why?

The translation of Hebrew sources into foreign languages is an ancient phenomenon. The ancient rabbinic authorities tell us, that already in the desert Moses was given the Torah in seventy languages. The Sages claim, that when it was re-given in the days of Ezra, a translation was appended to it as well.

The current research includes two introductory chapters which describe the history of translation in the Judaism, while focusing on the first known translations: the translations of the Torah into Aramaic and Greek. In addition to the background these chapters provide us with, they also examine the motives for translation in Ancient Judaism.

The research raises the question whether the translation of the sources was merely the outcome of a culturally existential need of the Jewish people, which in certain eras ceased to be thoroughly familiar with the Hebrew, yet wished to continue to read and understand its sources, or perhaps we are encountering a wider trend which perceived the Jewish doctrines as encapsulating a universal message which should be distributed among all nations and in all languages?

Previous studies have answered the aforementioned question in various ways: some of the researchers regard the Jewish translations as intended for Jewish needs alone. According to this approach, Judaism regarded translation a necessity which rather be avoided. Such an attitude can explain various Jewish sources which discuss the restrictions set upon translation and translators. Researchers who belong to this school of thought claim that these sources exhibit the will to protect the Holy Scriptures from

damaging their sanctity that characterize them by translating them, or causing indirectly assimilation and attacks by non-Jews. An opposing opinion in the world of research sheds light on other texts which praise the translations of the sources and on some *Midrashim* (homiletic interpretations of Bible) which regard the Torah as a universal message. Our research attempts to determine which of the two opinions/methods is correct, by examining rabbinical responsa thus far poorly examined.

The Responsa are among the most widely spread means of Jewish religious legal ruling ever since the early Middle Ages. Questions were presented to the Rabbis of communities and towns by members of the communities as well as by others, then put in writing and gathered into compilations of questions and answers. These questions, which deal with all aspects of life, are a direct and reliable source for examining the issues which Jewish communities throughout the diaspora dealt with, as well as the attitudes and concepts concerning various issues.

The current research made use of wide-ranged computerized resources which include tens of thousands of responsa, i.e., the CD-ROMs of *Bar-Ilan University's Responsa Project* and of *Otzar Ha-hokhma*. The combination of these two resources provides a comprehensive picture of the responsa literature accessible to us today.

With the aid of the search program we examined and classified many Responsa which deal with translation, and selected from them those which discuss the ideological aspect of translation, i.e., those which forbid or approve translation for various reasons. Indeed, the rabbinical deciders (*Poskim*) tend to explain their responses and from their explanations one can conclude what their ideologies are as well as the manners in which they interpret the sources.

From the relevant responsa that we gathered, we discovered that many of them deal with the translation of the Torah, which was ordinarily used to accompany the reading of the Torah at the Synagogue. The responding Rabbis reject the possibility of translating the reading of the Torah to other languages apart from Aramaic (and Greek). The prohibition on translating became more severe after the invention of printing, as books and their translations became increasingly common and wide-

spread. The trend of limiting translations was motivated by the fear that they might serve as a means for attacks on traditional Judaism by hostile elements from within (reformers) and outside Jewry.

Another reason our research discovered for the resentment of translation is the fear of detracting from the sanctity of the text. This phenomenon is not particularly Jewish and exists in both Christianity and Islam. Its origin lies in the canonization of the Holy Scriptures at the time of the sealing of the Mishnah and it continued throughout history in the ruling and responsa of Rabbis and codifiers (*Poskim*). The latter emphasize the sanctity of Hebrew, the divine language, which encompasses layers of plain, symbolic, homiletic and esoteric meanings. For all these reasons they emphasize the difficulty in making a correct and reliable translation.

It should be stressed that there is no total prohibition against translation, since it was a pragmatic necessity and a common phenomenon that no one could control any longer by occasionally burying a manuscript.

Indeed, the Holy Scriptures were translated by Jews throughout the ages, beginning with the translation of the Bible and continuing with that of the writings of the Sages and the Kabbalah. Some translations became famous, whereas others remained private. Some translations attempted to innovate, whereas others merely tried to transfer the traditional commentaries into a foreign language. Usually, the translators did not seek approval of their translations, and their fate was determined merely by need, quality and means of distribution. Thus, all that was usually left for the Rabbis and legal rabbinical deciders (codifiers, *Poskim*) was to approve or oppose the existing translations. Usually, the attitude towards the translation was determined post-factum. If the Rabbis were fond of the translation and of its author, they approved it; if not – they rejected it. Nevertheless, occasionally, Rabbis were asked for their approval in advance concerning the translation of a certain book, and from their responses one can learn about the reasons and motives for the prohibition or approval of the translation of Jewish sacred texts. One cannot claim that a prohibition against the translation of Jewish Sources has been maintained throughout the ages, but rather that restrictions had been set in order to prevent the damages that might be caused by translations written by unreliable people.

Thus, we are dealing with limitations set by the codifiers who defined a framework for authorized translations, such as translations which were not intended for the rituals in Synagogues (reading the Torah, praying), but rather for private needs alone, translation of Halakhic rulings (and not mystical writing, explanations of ruling etc.), and only reliable translations written by authorized people who are loyal to rabbinical Jewry.

We did not discover a rabbinical attitude which regards Judaism as a missionary religion (as opposed to Islam and Christianity). Nor have we detected any encouragement of translations for the sake of exposing other nations to Judaism. Such an idea may exist in certain texts with an apocalyptic tendency but the reality, often marked by hostility and persecution towards Jews because of the content of Jewish texts, shows the Jews how far-fetched this apocalyptic idea was.

We also tried to determine whether there were differences in attitude between ancient and modern Rabbis, as well as between European and Sepharadi Sages. We found no chronological differences, apart from the aforementioned more wide-ranged occupation of modern Sages with the issue, which we explain as a result of the invention of printing and its outcomes, which include the movement of Reformed Judaism and Emancipation which spread throughout Europe. Yet, we found no meaningful differences between European Sages and those from North Africa, Asia or America. Such differences may have existed during the era of the Geonim, but in modern times the frequent connections and transportation facilities narrow the differences and the gaps between continents and cultures - including the various communities of the Jewish diaspora.

Our research concludes with a contemporary rabbinical perspective on translation and a summary of the reasons that led to a deterred and limiting attitude of Rabbis and codifiers (*Poskim*) in all eras towards translating Jewish texts.