CHAPTER 2

Ţodros Ţodrosi’s Method of Translation: A Study of Language and Translation Techniques

1 Introduction

Any definitive assessment of Ţodros Ţodrosi’s work as a translator must necessarily await the analysis and publication of more of his translations. Nonetheless, if I confine my discussion to his translation of the treatise “On the Soul,” it is possible to arrive at some provisional conclusions concerning his approach and methods.

Like most other fourteenth-century translators involved in the Hebrew translation movement, Ţodrosi acquired his knowledge of Arabic through instruction, rather than an organic connection to the language.¹ In the preface to his translation of Averroes’s Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s Rhetoric,² Ţodrosi describes how he had initially refused a request from some scholars who considered him to know “a little bit” (me’at) of Hebrew and Arabic, to translate this work into Hebrew.³ Ţodrosi ultimately agreed to undertake the translation only after obtaining an Arabic dictionary, Khalil ibn Aḥmad’s Kitāb al-‘Ayn (The Book of ‘Ayn), which, as he writes, was brought to southern France by his twelfth–thirteenth-century predecessor Samuel ibn Tibbon.

There was not sufficient power in my knowledge of the Arabic language to produce this translation until God graced me with a noble book, which includes explanations of each Arabic word and its grammar. It is called Sefer ha-‘Ayn. It is a book that the noble sage, the greatest of translators,

² Be’ur Ibn Rushd le-Sefer ha-Halazah le-Aristo, 3. Ţodros’s introduction also refers to his translation of Averroes’s Middle Commentary on Aristotle’s Poetics.
³ A modest attitude toward one’s translation abilities was quite common among medieval Jewish translators. Another example of this may be found in Samuel ibn Tibbon’s introduction to Maimonides’s Guide of the Perplexed, in which he writes: “I am well aware that my knowledge of both languages [Hebrew and Arabic] is extremely insufficient.” The English comes from Zwiep, Mother of Reason and Revelation: A Short History of Medieval Jewish Linguistic Thought, 70 n. 168. The topos of a translator’s limitations is also treated in Rothschild, “Motivations et méthodes des traductions en hébreu du milieu du xiiie à la fin du xive siècle,” 279–302.
Rabbi Samuel ibn Tibbon, may his memory be a blessing, made great effort to bring from Islamic lands.  

Elsewhere in the preface, Todrosi writes how he regarded his translation project as a sacred mission to disseminate the truth. As he put it, to abandon the opportunity to translate the two Averroes commentaries in his possession after being “graced” with the means to do so—the dictionary that he now had at his disposal, combined with his knowledge of Arabic—would be to commit both a disservice to that rare and unique individual who takes the quest for knowledge to its ultimate conclusion, and a falsehood against truth itself (ve-’asiti be-nefesh ha-emet sheqer).

2 Todrosi’s Arabic Version

Uncertainties abound concerning the Arabic version Todrosi used for his translation. In addition to the difficulty, if not impossibility, of determining the accuracy of the Arabic text, it is likewise nearly impossible to determine which Arabic version Todrosi used for his translation, nor in fact how many Arabic manuscripts of The Salvation he consulted. However, an analysis of his deviations from the Arabic of the Cairo edition helps one arrive at a better understanding of the nature of the Arabic text he consulted. For one, it shows that Todrosi’s translation does not reflect the Arabic of the Cairo edition of The Salvation. It also indicates that the Arabic version (or versions) that he consulted was apparently not of the highest quality. Finally, the analysis suggests that Todrosi probably made use of Avicenna’s The Cure in his translation of “On the Soul.”

For the most part, the analysis reveals that Todrosi’s translation deviates from the Cairo edition in two ways. The first is through the use of words, phrases, or clauses that do not correspond to this edition, but reflect Arabic variants found in other extant manuscripts. Although Todrosi’s Hebrew often conforms to at least one of these manuscripts, his translation does not corre-

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