Chapter 8

Translation Technique

The rest of Part Two addresses the translation technique employed in ArabSyrian. Starting from the relationship between translation and Vorlage, the aim is to describe the strategy employed by the translator to transfer particular structures, concepts, or ideas from the source language into the target language. Several modes of convergence and divergence will be discussed. As Barr put it in his seminal The Typology of Literalism in Ancient Bible Translations (1979), the description of converging tendencies “has to concern itself much of the time with variations within a basically literal approach; different kinds of literality, diverse levels of literal connection, and various kinds of departure from the literal.”¹ He emphasizes that the spectrum ranging from “literal” to “free, paraphrastic,” although customarily applied to translation technique, is largely inadequate. Varying degrees of literalism on different levels need to be identified. A translation may be literal on one level but tend to greater freedom on another. Concentrating on the Septuagint, Barr isolated six categories for measuring the differences between a more literal and a less literal translation.²

The first category, “the division into elements or segments,” addresses the way in which the individual elements of the source text are represented in translation. It assesses the translator’s underlying principle for segmenting his Vorlage into units, ranging from entire sentences or phrases to single lexical items and on to attached morphemes, particles, and conjunctions. Biblical translations that show an uncompromising concern to render every individual element by closely corresponding equivalents in the target language, often at the expense of its stylistic and grammatical rules, are usually referred to as mirror or word-for-word translations. In the terms of the classical philosophy of translation, the approach is *verbum e verbo* rather than *sensus de sensu*. The second category, “quantitative addition or subtraction of elements,” looks at the quantitative divergence from the original. For example, textual expansions of a theological and interpretative nature, ranging from single words to phrases

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² See also Emmanuel Tov, The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Simor, 1997): 20–24. His categories for measuring the literalness of a translation overlap with Barr’s. He combines Barr’s third and fifth category to “internal consistency” and omits the sixth category.
and lengthy excursuses, are prominent in some Aramaic targumim. The opposite tendency, subtraction and omission, is expressed in the translator’s initial choice to leave elements of the source text out of his translation. “Consistency or non-consistency in the rendering,” Barr’s third category, refers to the translator’s use of the same equivalent for all (or most) occurrences of a given lexical item—lexeme, morpheme, or constructions—in the Vorlage. The fourth category, “accuracy and level of semantic information,” describes translators’ different approaches to the semantic gap between source and target language. A departure from the semantic field of a term in the Vorlage, for example, through a lexical substitution that limits the meaning or makes it more precise, is a move away from literalness and towards a freer rendering. Barr’s fifth category, “coded ‘etymological’ indication of formal/semantic relationships obtaining in the vocabulary of the original language,” refers to instances in which the translator intentionally employs translation equivalents that are etymologically related or homophonically similar to the lexemes they render. The final category, “level of text and level of analysis,” refers to the reflection in the translation of certain formal aspects of the Vorlage. A translator working from an unvocalized Hebrew source must engage in a certain degree of analysis of the consonantal text that leaves him with different choices in his rendition of homographs.

In addition, Barr pointed out that a proper characterization of translation technique requires identifying the translator’s specific concerns. A full understanding of the translator’s strategy depends on his motivation and must take account of the translation’s intended Sitz im Leben. For example, it is implicit that translations produced for didactic purposes in a school milieu differ from those directed to an educated elite. Translations intended to serve communal educational needs are usually marked by greater literalism. Here the translator’s primary concern is the basic elucidation of the source text. Hence echoes of the words of the original by means of imitative renderings into the vernacular are an essential part of translation technique. Translations in scholastic contexts often deliberately adhere to a formal representation of all functional elements, retaining the word order of the Vorlage, mirroring individual textual elements, and rendering lexical units in a consistent fashion. The idea is to enable pupils to back-translate into the source language without any loss of detail. A literal approach was also the norm in non-biblical school texts, including bilingual

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