MATTATHIAS’ FINAL SPEECH (1 MACCABEES 2):
FROM RELIGIOUS ZEAL TO SIMONIDE PROPAGANDA*

Daniel R. Schwartz

1. Introduction: The Heuristic Value of Deviant Translations

As the ancient rabbis pointed out, anyone who undertakes to translate a text must find a way between the Scylla of literalness and the Charybdis of freedom—a task which is often quite difficult.¹ That is especially the case when the style of the source language deviates seriously from that of the target language. In such cases both alternatives can be quite problematic, for a literal translation might not be understood while a smooth one may mislead readers into thinking the original said something it did not.

Thus, for example, readers interested in the question whether ancient Jerusalem was organized as a polis² might well take special interest in passages like Life 237, where Josephus, according to such translations as Whiston’s and Thackeray’s (Loeb), refers to Jerusalem’s “citizens,” which—as opposed to the more general term “city,” which might refer only to a geographical entity—seems quite clearly to imply the existence of a formal polis. However, if such readers check the Greek text, they will discover that in fact it says nothing about “citizens.” Rather, they will see that Josephus, using a standard Greek locution, first referred to “the city of the Jerusalemites” and then later referred to what “they” were asked to do; translators who (consciously or not) chose to use the standard and simple English name of the city, “Jerusalem,” rather than render the Greek literally, found themselves forced to create some noun for the people concerned since their translation, which did not include “Jerusalemites,” offered no antecedent for the pronoun. The

¹ “R. Judah says: Anyone who translates a (biblical) verse literally is a liar, and anyone who adds to it is a blasphemer and a curser” (b. Qiddushin 49a).

² For this general issue, see V.A. Tcherikover, “Was Jerusalem a ‘Polis’?,” IEJ 14 (1964): 61–78.

* This paper is one of the fruits of a wonderful period as fellow at Hebrew University’s Scholion Interdisciplinary Research Center in Jewish Studies.
other option would have been to opt for a “determined literalness,” as in S. Mason’s translation: “city of the Jerusalemites...they”—thus losing in English smoothness but gaining insofar as readers are not misled. Indeed, perhaps such literalness is useful, for although it may engender complaints about clumsy translationese it may also bring readers, more constructively, to think about why Greek prefers the lengthier formulation. Thus, when the styles appropriate to the two languages differ significantly, translators must choose the prices they prefer to pay according to the purposes they wish to serve.

That is, I believe, quite a well-known situation, and its usefulness, for those who notice cases of it, is, typically, in the way it focuses our attention upon the differences between the two languages. In the present paper, however, I would like to focus on the opposite case, the heuristic rule it indicates, and its usefulness—all of which seem to be less familiar if only because many readers of translations do not read the originals and vice versa. The rule is as follows: when a translator deviates from the phrasing of his or her source, although there is no stylistic difference between the two languages and so the original could have been rendered literally in the target language, the deviation directs our attention not to differences between the languages but, rather, to some problem with the original text itself. This rule derives from the presumptions that translators are familiar with both languages and generally see their job as rendering one into the other, so if they nevertheless avoid a plain rendition of the original although it would not have been infelicitous from a stylistic point of view, there is probably some other reason for the deviation—and that other reason is, frequently, a problem in the original that the translator, consciously or not, has endeavored to overcome or evade. This will be the case especially when translators see it to be their mission to make

3 S. Mason, Flavius Josephus: Life of Josephus (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 113. For the “determined literalness” of his translation, see ibid., x.

4 Perhaps they will link it up with the typical Greek emphasis, on the one hand, upon a city being composed of people more than it is a place (see, for example, Nicias’ famous statement that “a city is people, not walls or ships empty of men” [Thucydides 7.77; cf. S. Hornblower, A Commentary on Thucydides, III (Oxford: Oxford Univ., 2008), 720–721] or Aristotle’s “a polis is a partnership [κοινωνία] of similar people” [Politics 7.1328a]), and with the facts, on the other, that ancient Hebrew had no word for “citizen” and the modern Hebrew term, ʾezrah, which in the Bible means “native-born”, is not derived from the same root as “city” (ʾir). On the opposite situation in Greek and Latin, see esp. E. Benveniste, Problèmes de linguistique générale, II ([Paris:] Gallimard, 1974), 272–280.