Chapter 2

Biblical Translations and Literalness in Early Modern Spain

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In his edition of the Inquisition’s trial of Fray Luis de León (around the 1570s), Ángel Alcalá provides a summary of the accusations made against the professor of Theology and Sacred Scripture from Salamanca and his colleagues. Among them, we find the following:

The Song of Songs is a love poem written by Solomon to the Pharaoh’s daughter, and to teach anything else is absurd; the Song can be read and explained in the vernacular tongue; when citing explanations by the Saints that run counter to their own, they wave them aside and dismiss them as allegories. One of these authors has the habit of saying, ‘Here comes el sabio Alegorín (Alegorín the Wise)’ if he is cited; there is no allegorical meaning in the Scriptures.²

As has been pointed out by Ángel Alcalá himself along with other historians, the trial of Fray Luis did not revolve so much around the fact of having translated a biblical text into the vernacular (though this was also part of the accusation), but rather around his criticism of the Vulgate and defense of a literal rather than an allegorical interpretation.³

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2 ‘El Cantar de los cantares es un poema amoroso de Salomón a la hija del Faraón, y enseñar lo contrario es fútil; el Cantar se puede leer y explicar en lengua vernacular; cuando se aducen explicaciones de los Santos contrarios a las suyas las tienen en nada y las tachan de alegorías. Uno de esos autores acostumbra a decir “Ya está el sabio Alegorín” si le aducen; en las Escrituras no hay sentido alegórico’; Ángel Alcalá, El proceso inquisitorial de Fray Luis de León, 2nd ed. (Valladolid: Junta de Castilla y León, 2009), pp. xxxii–xxxiii.

This essay will address the problem of literalness, starting with the relationship between the interpretation and the translation of the Bible (insofar as literalness is the first interpretive question that the translator is faced with). It is important to bear in mind the uniqueness of a certain medieval Spanish biblical tradition, which in simplified terms could be described as: more respectful of the differences between manuscripts, closer to the Hebrew tradition than to the Vulgate, closer to the text of the Bible than to the Church Fathers. Moreover, this was a local tradition that ran in parallel to Hispanic Judaism, which was more closely attached to philological and grammatical analysis of Scripture.4

This medieval Hispanic tradition resulted in a sizable output of Bibles in Hebrew,5 but also of translations into the vernacular Romance languages, which were carried out by Jews. Some of these Romance translations were made for the Jewish communities’ internal use, but the majority of those that have survived appear to have been made for Christian patrons. The most famous example is without a doubt the so-called Alba Bible, an extraordinary manuscript completed in 1430, which contains a translation made by Rabbi Moses Arragel of Guadalajara for the Grand Master of the Order of Calatrava. More influential still was the translation made by Yom Tov Atias and Abraham Usque, ‘word for word and from the true Hebrew’, printed in Ferrara in 1553. The Ferrara Bible and its literal translation were mainly aimed at the Sephardic Jewish readership, but its influence was to extend much further, as we shall see is some of the examples to come.6

In parallel to the production of translations into Spanish, there was also a growing movement to repress them.7 Apart from a handful of cases during the medieval period, we may cite the (unsubstantiated) prohibition by the Catholic Monarchs; the (equally debated) prohibition by Carlos V, coinciding with the Reform crisis; and, lastly, the inclusion of translations of the Bible in the Index of Forbidden Books starting in the 1550s. Although this prohibition must be heavily qualified (the prohibition sometimes referred to the Bible as a whole but not to its parts), it is clear that the repression grew steadily

4 David Coles, ‘Humanism and the Bible in Renaissance Spain and Italy: Antonio de Nebrija (1441–1522)’, (PhD Diss., Yale University and UMI Ann Arbor, 1983), vol. 1, p. 9.
5 Francisco Javier del Barco (cur.) Biblias de Sefarad / Bibles of Sefarad (Madrid: BNE, 2012).
6 For a general overview, see Iacob M. Hassán (ed.), Introducción a la Biblia de Ferrara. Actas del Simposio Internacional, Sevilla, noviembre de 1991 (Madrid: Sociedad Estatal Quinto Centenario, 1994); and more specifically, along the lines of this article, see esp. Natalio Fernández Marcos, ‘La Biblia de Ferrara y sus efectos en las traducciones bíblicas al español’, pp. 445–71.
7 For a general overview of this subject, see Sergio Fernández López, Lectura y prohibición de la Biblia en lengua vulgar. Defensores y detractores (León: Universidad de León, 2003), esp. pp. 89–150.