Medieval Opinions on the Difficulty of Translating the Psalms. Some Remarks on Hafs al-Quti’s Psalms in Arabic rajaz Metre

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Published in:
Give ear to my Words. Psalms and other Poetry in and around the Hebrew Bible. Essays in honour of Professor N.A. van Uchelen

Citation for published version (APA):

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The difficulty of translating the Psalms in a satisfactory manner without the loss of the poetic sense of the original Hebrew has been stressed by more than one medieval author. The famous medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1266-1321) noticed in his Convivio that the original poetic qualities of the Psalms declined when they were translated from one language into another, and then again into another language:

And know therefore that nothing which is harmonised by musical ties can be transposed from one language into another without breaking its sweetness and harmony. And this is the reason that Homer's works have not been translated from Greek into Latin, like the other writings of the Greek that have come down to us. And this is the reason also that the verses of the Psalms are without music and harmony, because they have been translated from Hebrew into Greek and then

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1. M.-T. Urvoy, Le Psautier de Hafs le Goth, édition et traduction, Université de Toulouse-le Mirail, 1994. I wish to thank P.Sj. van Koningsveld, Leiden University, for his help in providing me with this book.

2. 'E però sappia ciascuno che nulla cosa per legame musaico armonizzata si può de la sua loquela in altra sanza rompere tutta sua dolcezza e armonia. E questa è la cagione per che Omero non si mutò di greco in latino come l'altre scritture che avevamo da loro. E questa è la cagione per i versi del Salterio sono sanza dolcezza di musica e d'armonia; ché essi furono transmutati d' ebreo in greco e di greco in latino, e ne la prima transmutazione tutta quella dolcezza venne meno.' (Convivio I:VII, Milano 1952, 41).
from Greek into Latin, and in the first translation all that sweetness became less.

Dante was not an isolated case. Before him Moses ibn Ezra (1055-1138) who lived in Spain and wrote there his famous treatises on Hebrew poetry in Judeo-Arabic, expressed himself in nearly the same way. In the chapter in his Book of Discussion and Memorization about the loss of the Hebrew language he remarks:

The splendor [rawnaq] of the [Hebrew] language was lost because of neglect [ighfal]. People considered it insufficient because of its small vocabulary and the scarcity of what was left in our hands. Then it was translated into both of the languages Arabic and Latin, and then into Aramaic [al-Surydni]. In one language exist nouns and verbs which are missing in the other so that the translator is forced to borrow words with a figurative meaning and to use metonymies which are close to the meaning, although not representing it exactly, to convey the meanings so that the original beauty and the essence on which they are built disappears, for it is impossible that nouns, conjunctions and that sort of things are the same in all the languages.

About his rajaz poem of the Psalms, Hafs al-Quti notes correctly that:

'[75.] In one language there are things for which in another language there are no nouns;
[76.] Every saying translated into another language becomes different from its original form in poetry.'

But someone to whom the meanings are clear must be on intimate terms with the most important nouns and have no disharmony with the way they are put together, because what is really sought for in the sciences is their meanings. And Galen says in the treatise Afdal al-Hay'at 'The most eminent bodies':

'The discrepancy of the peoples in giving names is a thing that one cannot be reproached for, for everyone calls things as he wants to. We would be better to

look at the conceptions we are discussing, not at the names themselves.'

The same argument is repeated in many of his books and in the third treatise of his Al-'Ilal wa-l'a'râd 'Diseases and Symptoms'.

In the days of my youth in one of the places where I grew up, one of the outstanding lawyers of the Muslims, whose confident and trustworthy friend I was, asked me if I would be so kind as to recite the Ten Commandments in the Arabic language. I understood his intention: he wanted to show the inadequacy of its eloquence. Then I asked him to recite the opening chapter of his Koran (fîfat hur 'anî-hi) in the Latin language, because he belonged to those who spoke it and understood it. And when he prepared himself to transpose it into that language, its sound became disgusting and the way the words were placed together ugly. Then he understood my intention and asked me forgiveness for what he had asked me.

In his book Moses ibn Ezra quotes many lines of Arabic poetry as examples of versification in Andalusian Hebrew poetry. Most of these lines are quotations taken from Oriental Arabic Poetry, but three come from Andalusian Arabic poetry. Two of these three derive from Hafs al-Quti's Christian Translation of the Psalms into Arabic rajaz verses, among which is the one mentioned above illustrating the difficulty of translating poetry. The quotations by Moses ibn Ezra show how important this 9th century translation was. The sources give insight, on the one hand, into how rapidly Christians were Arabised, i.e., in the 9th century, and, on the other hand, how long Latinity lasted, even in the 11th century.

Hafs al-Quti's work was the fruit of an already firmly established Arabisation among the Christians in his time. In a Latin text named Indiculus Luminosus, reportedly written by his father or grandfather, Alvaro [Albar] showed how the Christians were attracted to Arabic poetry far more than to the Latin equivalent. Alvaro deplored how the Christians were Arabised, i.e., in the 9th century, and, on the other hand, how long Latinity lasted, even in the 11th century.


5 For the other quotation, see Moses ibn Ezra, Kitab al-Muhadarah wa'l-Mudhakarah 28r.; speaking about muqâbalah 'antithesis', Moses ibn Ezra indicates that this figure of speech occurs also in the Holy writ (wa-fi-l-nazî min-hu kathir, wa-hwa: halequ mahama'ot piw u-perab libbo ... etc.= Psa. 54[55]:22), saying afterwards that this was also Hafs al-Quti's intention in translating this verse, and he succeeded in combining paronomasia and antithesis, although he was neglectful in his other translations ('alâ 'azîm sahwi-hi fi ghayri-hi). Moses ibn Ezra's judgement, however, did not take into consideration the changes text underwent due to poor transmission.

Alas! the Christians do not know their own law and the Latins pay no attention to their own tongue, so that in the whole community of Christ there can scarcely be found one man in a thousand who can send letters of greeting properly to his fellow. While there are found crowds of people who can produce learnedly Chaldaic [=Arabic] parades of words so that they adorn their final phrases with the bond of a single letter in metrical fashion. 7

In this text, Alvaro exhibited a good acquaintance with Arabic poetry and metre. Hafs al-Quti had devoted himself entirely to the Arabic rajaz metre which true Arab poets considered to be inferior. He explained, however, why this was the best metre for rendering into Arabic the original poetic flavour of the Psalms. His Psalm translation has two introductions in prose, as well as an introduction in rajaz poetry in which he defends why the Psalms must be translated in poetry and not in prose:

17. They are psalms that are sung in the churches; the most delicate singing that can fall in your ears;
18. More touching than the melody of female singers and sweeter than the groaning of camels;
19. Or the complaint of the lute and the flute and every other kind of sound.
20. The Psalm book makes the insensible and cruel heart tender and makes praiseworthy tears flow;
24. They are all in a foreign language and the original version has an elaborate metre;
25. They are in a fine and regular measure perceived by an expert in melodies.
26. The original metre looks nearly like Arabic rajaz and is subdivided in the same way.
28. Whosoever took the risk to translate it into prose would hurt its poetry and its interpretation.
29. It would make the style of its discourse absurd, and would take away the elegance of its versification.
30. If he tries to reproduce its verses in Arabic word after word, it will indeed make the impression of someone inexperienced.

Hafs al-Quti’s discourse about the fitness of the rajaz metre continues some twenty lines, comparing rajaz metre to western metres like iambus.4 Then he expounds on the difficulties of translation:


73. Sometimes it is possible in a foreign tongue to put first what is not first.
75. In one language there are things for which in another language there are no nouns;
76. Every saying translated into another language becomes different from its original form in poetry.
77. The meanings of verbs and nouns are not like bodies and colours which have exclusive names, not possible to interpret otherwise.
79. I have translated every word conserving its place in the translation.

In the introduction there is also a historical note which reveals how popular the poet’s undertaking was at the time:

104. All people have encouraged me and have exerted pressure on me
105. Because they have seen a recompense and a salary; they thought it contain­ed a treasure of rewards,
106. With the permission of the best bishop of the church, Valens, a man of great qualities.
127. This is written in the era of Christ, the master of the souls which are on the path most right.
128. In the year 889 with the help of the Almighty and Glorious Lord.
129. The servant of God Hafs has translated them and they are complete and their text is correct.
130. He hopes for the reward from the Creator and for the thanks and the prayers of the reader.

After these quotations and translations of theoretical and historical interest from Hafs al-Quti’s work, we turn to an investigation of a small piece of Hafs al-Quti’s Christian Psalm Translation into Arabic, comparing them with the Hebrew original on the one hand and the Jewish Psalm Translation by Sa’adyah Ga’on (892-942; born in Fayyum, Egypt; lived in Baghdad) into Arabic on the other. It must be taken into consideration that Hafs’ translation is not directly based upon the Hebrew, but upon translations into Latin by Saint Jerome (347-420),6 and possibly on a mixture of three of his translations, the Psalterium Romanum (composed 384), the Psalterium Gallicanum (composed in Palestine in 389-90) and Psalterium ex hebratico (composed from 390 - 391).10 The latter was directly derived from the

Hebrew and seems to dominate in Hafs' rendering of the Psalms. We will try to determine how far his 
ra'az text of one passage deviates from the original, as compared with the two other translations. The passage is 
chosen arbitrarily namely, the first four verses of Psalm 50 (Christian 
order) or 51 (Hebrew order), not considering the prose introduction, i.e., 
starting with verse 3 of the Hebrew version. According to the tradition, 
these verses were sung by king David when he asked forgiveness from 
God after the prophet Nathan reproached him with his relation with 
Bath Sheba. First, we will give the Hebrew followed by a traditional English rendering 
(based upon the translation of the American Bible Society 1856):

1. Lahumma fa-rham-ni bi-hasbi ruhmi-ka // - - - / - - - / - - - / - - - / wa-mhu dhunubi bi-kathri hann-ka // - - - / - - - / - - - / - - - /

2. wa-ghsil shadida say'ati wa-naqqi-ni // - - - / - - - / - - - / - - - / min-adh-dhunubi kulli-ha wa-najji-ni // - - - / - - - / - - - / - - - / [4. wa-asri, naqqi-ni min dhanbi / wa-tahhir-ni min khatiyati]

3. fa-inna-ni mu.tarifun bi-zulmi // - - - / - - - / - - - / - - - / wa-la yazal olridan li ithmi // - - - / - - - / - - - / - - - / [5. fa-inni mu.tarifun bi-jurumi / wa-khatiyati hidha'ti daayman]

4. ilay-ka wahl-ka la-qad adhnabtu // - - - / - - - / - - - / - - - / wa-in-da-ka t-ma'thama qad rakhb-ku // - - - / - - - / - - - / - - - / [6a.aqulu laka waldi-ka: akhtaytu / wa-amaltu 'sh-sharr bayna yaday-ka]  

Our first remark about Hafs al-Quti's translation in metre concerns the 
metre itself: the basic foot ought to be mustafjlun (- - - /), or: ----/, 
or: - - - /), although we see some deviations at the end of the verse. The 
two half-verses rhyme with each other, the rhyme changing with each 
verse. This is usual. The effect is praiseworthy, because each verse in 
Hafs' translation closely corresponds with a verse in the Hebrew, which 
usually contains a parallelism. Each half-verse corresponds with the first or 
last half of that parallelism. Sa'adyah Ga'on's translation is also fairly true 
and respects the parallelism. With regard to the word for word faithfulness 
of the text as well to its Semitism, we see in both translations the use of the 
same roots in Arabic and in Hebrew. 

To begin with line 1[3]: in both translations we find 'elohim translated 
with Lahumma respectively Allahumma, words corresponding with the 
Semitic root 'L\//'^ indicating 'God'. Both translations use the Arabic root 
MHW for the Hebrew root equivalent MHH 'blotting out, wiping out'. 
Hafs' translation has Arabic root equivalents -rham- and ruhm- for the 
Hebrew rahame- 'mercy, compassion'; and the Arabic root HNN- corresponds to the Hebrew root HNN- 'mercy'. 

Line 2[4]: in this line Sa'adya Ga'on uses the following root, reminiscent 
from the Hebrew: Arabic tahhir- corresponding with Hebrew tahare-
'cleanse' and Arabic khatiyati corresponding with Hebrew hattati 'my sin'. 
Both translators use dhunubi and dhanbi 'my sins', 'my sin' in line 1[3] 
and 2[4], and naqqi-ni 'cleanse me' in line 2[4] without having root 
equivalent in the Hebrew original. 

Line 3[5]: again Sa'adyah has khatiyati, reminiscent of Hebrew hattati. 
Both use mu.tarifun 'I recognise' as a translation of 'eda, 'I know'.

Semitic roots are represented by capitals.
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Line 4[6a]: Saadyah’s translation akhtaytu corresponds with the same Hebrew root hatai.

Both translations are relatively concise and have a number of Semitic words in common with the Hebrew, although Hafs did not even know Hebrew. Hafs al-Qaṭṭi’s case proved that a metrical translation needs no excessive padding but can be faithful, word for word.

That sometimes a metrical translation turns out to be extended and free is shown by the translation of Psalm 50 into Italian terzinas, wrongly attributed to Dante Alighieri, which we will present here in conclusion. The numbers which precede the verses are our own, given to indicate which lines correspond with the Arabic translations and the original Hebrew; the underlined words are paddings; the italicised words are slightly odd renderings of the original Hebrew, perhaps because the Latin of the Vulgate served as an intermediary:

1. O Signor mio, o padre di concordia,
io priego te per la tua gran pietate,
ti degni aver di me misericordia.
E pur per la infinita tua bontate
priego, Signor, che tu da me discacci
ogni peccato et ogni iniquitate.

2. io prego ancora, che mondo mi facci /
da ogni colpa mia et iniquità, /
e che mi guardi da gli occulti lacci, /
poi che conosco ben la mia malizia:/
e sempre il mio peccato ho ne la mente, /
lo qual con me s’è fin dalla puerizia.

3. In te ho io peccato solamente;
et ho commesso il male in tuo cospetto, [...]

The overwhelming baroqueness of this Italian translation, which in my view does not seem to be very medieval, remains in clear contrast to the sober and concise translations by Hafs and Saadyah Ga’on. Hafs’ translation does not seem to have suffered from the fact that it is not rendered from the Hebrew; rather, it has the same merits as Saadyah’s translation which did come directly from the Hebrew.

Was the Real First Printed Hebrew Biblical Text a Pocket-Sized Psalter?

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It is generally assumed that the first printed Hebrew Biblical text was an edition of the Psalms, printed in Italy. It is an edition in folio, dated 20 Elul 5237 (29 August 1477) in which the text is accompanied by David Kimhi’s commentary. The layout is somewhat exceptional: there is not, as is usual in later editions, a division into two separate columns, one for the text and one for the commentary, but, like in a Targum edition, one or two Psalm verses, in square type, are followed by their commentary in smaller semi-cursive type.

From an analytical-bibliographical point of view this edition is of


14 Dante Alighieri, Rime, Milano 1952, 162.