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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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:¹

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

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 musaicco 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 avemo da loro. E questa è la cagione per i versi del Salterio sono sanza dolcezza di musica e d’ armonia; chè 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 [lighfa]. 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’rād '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 (fathat qur’ani-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.5 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.6

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 devoted themselves to Chaldaic [=Arabic] poetry and neglected Latin:

5 For the other quotation, see Moses ibn Ezra, Kitāb al-Muhādarah wa-l-Mudhakarah 128r.; speaking about maqābalah 'antithesis', Moses ibn Ezra indicates that this figure of speech occurs also in the Holy writ (wa-fi l-mānas min-hu kāthār, wa-hwa: halequ mahamā'ot piw u-perah lilbo ... 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 (‘alā ‘azm 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.8 Then he expounds on the difficulties of 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),9 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 hebräico (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 *rajaz* 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):

3. Honne-ni 'elohim ke-hasde-ka / have mercy upon me, o God, according to thy loving-kindness
   ke-robh rahame-ka meheh peJa.ay according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies, blot out my transgressions.

4. Hereb kabbese-ni me-,oni / thoroughly wash me from mine iniquity
   u-me-hattati tahare-ni and from my sin cleanse me.

5. Ki peSa.ay 'ani 'eda, / for my transgressions I acknowledge
   we-hattati negdi tamid and my sin is before me ever.

6a. Le-ka le-badde-ka hatati / against thee, thee only, have I sinned
   we-ha-ra" be-,ene-ka a^iti and this evil in thy sight have I done.

We proceed now to a comparison of the Arabic prose translation of Sa'adyah Ga'on which was translated directly from the Hebrew, with the metrical Arab translation of Hafs al-Quti translated from the Hebrew via Saint Jerome's translation into Latin. The focus will be on two aspects: faithfulness and conciseness, without adding and padding, and Semitism, i.e., the frequency of Arabic words which are from the same root as the Hebrew original.

Psalm 50 according to Hafs,' which is Psalm 51 according to Sa'adyah Ga'on, given between square brackets:

1. Lahumma fa-rham-ni bi-hasbi ruhmi-ka // - - - / - - - / - - - ///
   wa-mhu dhunubi bi-kathTri hanni-ka // - - - / - - - / - - - ///
   [3. allahumma raf-ni bi-ilsani-ka / wa-mhu dhunubi bi-kathrat rahmati-ka]

2. wa-ghsil shadida say'ati wa-naqqi-ni // - - - / - - - / - - - ///
   min-adh-dhuunubi 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 yazalu 'Aridan li ithmi // - - - / - - - / - - - ///
   [5. fa-inni mu.tarifun bi-jurumi / wa-khatTyati hidha'T dayiman]

4. ilay-ka wahdi-ka la-qad adhna butterfly
   wa-inda-ka l-ma'thama qad raktibu // - - - / - - - / - - - ///
   [6a.aqulu laka wahdi-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/H/H* indicating ‘God’. Both translations use the Arabic root *M/H/W* for the Hebrew root equivalent *M/H/H* ‘blotting out, wiping out’. Hafs’ translation has Arabic root equivalents *rham-* and *ruhm-* for the Hebrew *raliame-* ‘mercy, compassion’; and the Arabic root *H/N/N-* corresponds to the Hebrew root *H/N/N-* ‘mercy’.

Line 2[4]: in this line Sa'adya Ga'on uses the following root, reminiscent from the Hebrew: Arabic *tahir*—corresponding with Hebrew *tahare-* ‘cleanse’ and Arabic *khatyati* 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 *khatyati*, reminiscent of Hebrew *hattati*. Both use *mu.tarifun* ‘I recognise’ as a translation of ‘eda, ‘I know’.

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12 *Tehillim 'im targum we-perush ha-ga'on rabbenu Sa'adyah ben Yosef Fayyumi*, tr. into Hebrew, expl. and ed. by Y. Kafah, Jerusalem 1966 [5726], 138.
13 Semitic roots are represented by capitals.
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-QQti’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 inguistizia, / 
e che mi guaridi da gli occulti lacet, / 
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 Sa'adyah 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 Sa'adyah’s translation which did come directly from the Hebrew.

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14 Dante Alighieri, Rime, Milano 1952, 162.