

Does Truth Exist in the Original Hebrew Text?
Book Review: Teppei Kato, *Jerome's Bible Translation*
(Kyobunkwan, 2018)

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In advance of my review, allow me to cite some extracts, although perhaps a little too long, from the Preface and Postscript of his book.

Probably anyone interested in Western art may have seen more than once, when visiting art museums and exhibitions, some painting depicting Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus, or Jerome (347-420), the protagonist in this book. Jerome may have appeared to you sometimes as a wise man devoted to study in his sanctum with a skull placed nearby, or sometimes as a naked hermit with a lion in the desert, or sometimes as a cardinal wearing a scarlet robe. [...]

But no skull, lion and scarlet robe appear in this book. I would like to attempt to depict Jerome not as a saint who was idolized by such ornaments but as a flesh-and-blood person who actually lived in the Mediterranean world at the end of antiquity. Jerome [...] accomplished an unparalleled achievement by revising the Latin translation of the Gospels and translating all the Old Testament texts from Hebrew to Latin [...] (and) called this, his own idea, “Hebraica veritas” or Hebrew truth, that is to say, truth exists precisely in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament. I would like to clarify the logic of Jerome’s unique idea through the comprehension of his translation theory and the Old Testament citations in the New Testament.

If the readers of this book who see a painting of St. Jerome, are able to feel the world surrounding a human Jerome, imagine his ideas and understand his words, I would say my attempt has succeeded but it is not guaranteed. (Preface, pp. 3-4)”

As far as I remember, it was in 2008, the first year of my master course, when I had not yet decided on the subject of my study, that I [...] first read Jerome's writings in the original text. When I was looking for something good to read in order that the Latin language skills I learned during my undergraduate years did not rust, I happened to pick up the Vulgate Bible and casually started reading it, not the text but the prefaces, written by a Jerome. I was soon fascinated by the slightly pedantic, but beautifully arranged style reminiscent of Cicero, and his extensive philological knowledge that puts even modern scholars to shame. Since then, I have never tired of reading Jerome's writings.

While my Jerome studies started based on my personal interest as above, I have to say it is surprising that in recent years researchers, seeing the potential of studying Jerome just like me, are gradually increasing [...] As far as I know, this book is the first monograph about Jerome written in Japanese [...] My only wish is that this book continues to be read for generations to come, along with the enthusiasm at the forefront of Jerome studies. (Postscript, pp. 321-2)

As mentioned above, the characteristics of this book are briefly explained in the author's own words. My review of the new book "*Jerome Bible Translation*" by Teppei Kato follows hereafter.

While my specialty is Jewish narratives and I tend to turn my interest towards "a saint who was idolized by such ornaments" rather than "a flesh-and-blood person who actually lived", I was much interested in this book. Therefore, I may have misunderstood and perverted the book's intention in various ways, influenced by what the author describes as "the enthusiasm at the forefront of Jerome studies." So please take this into consideration when you read my review.

This book consists of three parts only, each three chapters long. Its main themes are simple and clear: How original was Jerome as a Bible interpreter among the fathers and how proficient in Hebrew was Jerome as a Bible translator? (Preface, p. 17)

Following the author's recommendation (Preface, pp. 28-9), I started reading the book from Part III. In the "Vulgate" or the Latin version of the Bible, each translation of Jerome's own prefaces is placed at the beginning of the Old Testament and the Gospels of the New Testament. In collaboration with Ritsu Ishikawa, Kato translated all these into Japanese, adding notes, and compiled them into Part III titled: "Words of Jerome."

This book is very useful because it arranges the sentences in the order Jerome wrote them, not relying on the table of contents in the current Bible. Through Jerome's words, we are not only able to appreciate his efforts in translating the Old Testament from Hebrew to Latin, but also to understand and reproduce a translation process to a certain degree.

Dare I say, this collection of prefaces to the Vulgate strongly reflects Jerome's personality? If so, it is interesting reading as a kind of autobiography in a positive way, but is very strange in a negative way since he scattered citations from Greek and Roman classics as mere rhetoric. It sounds good if you call it a "literary hobby" but it appears to me that in the case of Jerome, many of such classic citations are basically oblique expressions of boasting, self-vindication or slander (although he himself seemed to believe that he did so from humbleness and modesty). I, at least, feel his expressions to be in bad taste beyond essence. Although he may have been an extremely excellent scholar, I started reading from Part I (The World of Jerome) and had the impression that he might even have been malicious.

Chapter I of Part I, titled "The Life and Works of Jerome," is a biography of Jerome based on enormous primary sources (see Bibliography, pp. 326-30). The image of Jerome, restored by the empirical historical approach, is very persuasive. Ōgai Mori is very similar to him. Both men are troublesome geniuses who demanded the same qualities of others. However, Jerome, who did not know how to get ahead in the world, was probably less malicious than Ōgai. (As such, the first impression I had in the preface to the Vulgate changed).

Historians and philologists might oppose this, but in my opinion, the image of Jerome as "a flesh-and-blood person who actually lived" whom Kato restores in his book is unexpectedly similar to the one whom Albrecht Dürer and Leonardo da Vinci drew in their paintings. Because Jerome was so fastidious he failed to gain close relationships with peers in the real world and thus would have had no choice but to talk to beasts (at least lions), skulls (at least the remains of those who had longed for him) or God – but eventually he had to rely on his proficient language skills. Compared to the image of Jerome, depicted as "a saint who was idolized by ornaments," his image, discussed in modern historical philology which should be objective, is rather more virtual. At the least, it unjustly lacks respect for Jerome.

Chapter II of Part I titled "Dialectics of Patristics and Science of Judaism" says that many of the enormous amount of research papers on Jerome, which have been written in modern times, especially from the 19th century onwards (see Bibliography, pp. 331-41), deal with the problems of "Jerome's uniqueness" or "Jerome's language skills" (see

Preface). It is hard to imagine that a person like him who is remembered as a father in the history of Christ's Church for twenty centuries has no uniqueness. In this case, it means uniqueness in biblical interpretation. Jerome asserted the validity of his own theory by demonstrating his broad knowledge of the original Hebrew (and criticized obliquely, I mean, in elegant rhetoric those who did not understand when he held different ideas on the interpretation of the Old Testament). Therefore, the two problems, i.e. "Jerome's uniqueness" and "Jerome's language skills" are fundamentally one and the same: Jerome's Hebrew skills. According to Kato's analysis, at least in the early period of Jerome studies, Jewish researchers tend to rate him as "competent" and Christian (especially German Protestant) researchers are apt to regard him as "incompetent."

As a reviewer, I do not support either side.

The basis of the "incompetent" arguments is so weak that it is not worth verifying and makes me suspicious that such arguments may have some pregnant meaning, (for example, that Jews cannot be trusted, or that it would matter if the Roman Catholic father was more proficient in Hebrew than Master Martin Luther). The basis of the "competent" arguments is indeed stronger so deserves verification, which requires the greatest care.

Firstly, Jerome's Bible translation was not completed in one continuous effort, but took about half a century to complete. His language skills could have varied from time to time, depending on the environment, his vitality and physical strength. In addition, it cannot be necessarily concluded that many strange Latin translations, which are defined as "Jerome's misunderstanding" among the Vulgate (Old Testament) passages are mistranslations because the original Hebrew text itself is difficult to understand. As for these passages, the Judaic biblical interpretation (Midrash) and the Jewish lore (Aggadah) contain teachings similar to Jerome's interpretations (pp. 89-100). This fact may validate Jerome's proficient language skills and broad knowledge. However, it is doubtful whether it can be said, "Now is the time to pay attention to Jerome. Owing to his long association with and especially his attempt to learn from Jews, Jerome would bring us a bigger harvest [than any other father]." (see Heinrich Graetz, p. 85) I cannot completely agree with this view.

Both "Jews" and "Hebrews" appear in Jerome's works. Of course, it is basically impossible to distinguish between the two clearly, and also it might be meaningless (see Nicholas de Lange, pp. 88-9). However, as far as Kato's examples are concerned, Jerome seems to have only considered "masters of Hebrew" to be "Hebrews." Did Jerome willingly try to associate with Jews who were not good at Hebrew, or did he dare to call Jews who were proficient in Hebrew and had different opinions from himself "Hebrews"?

As is also shown in Chapter 3 of Part I titled “History of Greek and Latin Bible Study,” the Christian community before Jerome had officially used the ancient Greek Old Testament or what is called “Septuagint.” But the Septuagint Greek text often differs significantly from the corresponding original Hebrew text. Even a father like Augustine who adhered to the authority of the Septuagint did not deny the fact. Some revised the Septuagint, and some produced tentative translations of other Greek Bibles. One great achievement is the book *Hexapla*, a six-columned synopsis of Scripture, produced by Origen whom Jerome praised as “an immortal genius.” Origen himself was not proficient in Hebrew, but through exchanges with Jews, carefully picked up the differences between the Septuagint Greek text and the original Hebrew text, and compared them with other Greek Bibles, which are all personal translations including Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion’s versions. Although their origins are unknown, some say they were former Christians naturalized Jews, and others say they were Jewish Christians. Origen and those other translators had already associated with and attempted to learn from Jews, as did Jerome.

Origen’s objective aimed only to revise the Septuagint Greek text and create an orthodox translation of the Greek Old Testament. In this case, the original Hebrew Old Testament is virtually only a reference. Jerome only aimed to create a Latin Bible translation based on the original Hebrew Old Testament. This is the uniqueness of Jerome that differs significantly from the other fathers. His translation approach seems to be extremely appropriate, but it is not so simple.

Part II titled “The Idea of Jerome” offers in Chapter 1 “In Greek or Hebrew?” Jerome’s translation theory. According to Kato, Jerome progressively inherited Cicero’s translation theory, and “basically adopted as his translation approach, a free translation when translating the Bible, even if a verbatim translation is required.” (pp. 166-. Kato’s view here appears to be a little bit different from common approach, but I think his view is correct). In this regard, the following question and answer exchange between Augustine and Jerome is really interesting.

- “Dear Jerome. I am ready to evaluate your language skills. But how do you prove your much-vaunted Hebrew ability?”
- “Thank you, Augustine. If you read my past papers, you would understand. And regarding my Hebrew ability, please ask the Hebrews” (Frankly outlined for Augustine Letter 75 and Jerome Letter 57. pp. 171-9)

To be blatantly honest, Augustine had good reason for suspicion. The mainstream Christian world had actually understood the Old Testament by reading the Septuagint. Naturally, in the case where the Septuagint Greek text differs from the original Hebrew text, the former is more highly revered than the latter. However, if the mainstream understands the Old Testament based on the original Hebrew text, the Septuagint loses authority, which might provide opposition groups an excuse for claims. Augustine demanded that if Jerome still dared to adhere to the Latin translation from the original Hebrew, he should explain his intention and prove the validity or legitimacy of his approach. But Jerome replied simply, “I’ve already explained my intention elsewhere and so believe me anyway.”

It is said that Jerome once named the reason for this great confidence “*Hebraica veritas*” or Hebraic Truth (see Introductory Chapter, pp. 18, and the preface of *Hebrew Studies in the Genesis*) and made it a cornerstone of his Bible translation theory. (It was a kind of “*Mono ni yuku michi*” in *Kojiki-den*, or Commentary on the Kojiki, written by Norinaga Motoori.) But the term Hebraic Truth is in itself only a slogan which signifies nothing, the same as “*Mono ni yuku michi*.”

In Chapter 2 of Part II titled “Old Testament Citations in the New Testament,” Kato organized Jerome’s subtle explanations in a very smart way as below (pp. 181-224). In a paper entitled “On the Best Type of Translation” (see Letter 57, pp. 196-213), Jerome compared the original Hebrew Old Testament phrases cited in the original Greek New Testament, i.e., “Old Testament citations” (in Greek) in the New Testament and the corresponding parts of the Septuagint (in Greek), and then classified the similarities and differences as follows:

- (1) An Old Testament citation matches up with the original Hebrew text, but is different from the corresponding part of the Septuagint.
- (2) An Old Testament citation, the original Hebrew text and the corresponding part of the Septuagint are all different.
- (3) An Old Testament citation differs from a phrase in the original Hebrew text and the corresponding part of the Septuagint, but the latter two match up with each other.

Based on the above classification, Jerome judged the quality of the Septuagint Greek translation as follows:

In case (1), the part of the Septuagint is a mistranslation.

In case (2), the part of the Septuagint is a free translation.

In case (3), the part of the Septuagint is a literal translation.

However, Kato clearly points out that Jerome did not deal with the following cases.

- (4) An Old Testament citation, the original Hebrew text and the corresponding part of the Septuagint all match up with each other.
- (5) An Old Testament citation and the corresponding part of the Septuagint match up with each other, but the original Hebrew text differs from both texts.

This is probably because there are no problems to be dealt with in case (4). But case (5) is dealt with in Jerome's *Isaiah Commentary* (pp. 220-2).

In the case (5), Jerome stated that the Old Testament citations in the New Testament as well as the corresponding part of the Septuagint are free translations. That is to say, the criteria for judging whether the Septuagint translation is a mistranslation, free translation or literal translation is actually the New Testament Greek text, not the Old Testament Hebrew text.

Thus, the catchphrase on the book band – “Truth exists in the original ‘Hebrew’ text!” – is not true. But “the original Old Testament ‘Greek’ Septuagint text does not prove truth of the original New Testament ‘Greek’ text,” whereas “the original Old Testament ‘Hebrew’ text does prove truth of the original New Testament ‘Greek’ text.” Strictly speaking, “the authority of truth is the ‘Hebrew’ text!” – This is an insight embedded in Jerome's Hebraic Truth. And it seems to me that “Truth” itself without the adjective “Hebraic” is the “right answer” in the philology and is also an “axiom” in Christian theology, i.e., “the Gospel of Christ.”

Following on from the previous chapter, Chapter III titled “Hebrew, Apostle and Christ” deals with problems of “Old Testament citations in the New Testament.” Jerome's skills in solving such problems are described in detail in Kato's book, which is highly recommended reading. However, it must be noted that we should not affirm or deny Jerome's conclusion at this stage. The first priority should be to confirm the logic that leads to his conclusion.

In the Final Chapter, Kato proposes “examination of Jerome's argument about all the Old Testament citations” and “a complementary study of Jerome's *Apology against Rufinus* and Rufinus's *Apology against Jerome*” (pp. 249-55), which should be seriously

addressed not only in Christian theology and Patristics, but also in Old Testament and New Testament studies. And we may also rethink Jerome as a very unique man of letters and the Vulgate as an individually created masterpiece of translation literature, from the perspective of world literary history. (It is the same as *Faust*, translated by Ōgai, which has been highly criticized as having different values from Goethe's original play).

I would like to take this opportunity to recommend reviewing Jerome's Letter 34 from the standpoint of narrative studies (pp. 181-2). Jerome is said to have referred to a Hebrew word saying, "cum ita se veritas habeat" in Section 2 of Letter 34. However, Kato does not specify the Hebrew word (although this is not unreasonable because it is irrelevant to the context of this book).

The Hebrew word in question is *'ašāḥîm* (tribulation) of *leḥem hā 'ašāḥîm* (the bread of tribulation) – "shin-ku (辛苦)" of "shin-ku no kate (辛苦の糧)" in the Meiji Version translation (明治元訳 *meiji genyaku*, Meiji era Original Translation) – in the translation of Psalm 127:2. Jerome, however, insisted that the Hebrew word should not be translated as "tribulation," but as "idols" of "*'ašābbê* (idols) of *'ašābbê haggoyîm* (the idols of the nations) – "gūzō (偶像)" of "moromoro no kuni no gūzō (もろもろのくにの偶像)" in the Meiji Version – in the translation of Psalm 135:15 (because truth has truth in itself).

In the Septuagint, the former was translated as *odynē* (tribulation) and the latter as *eidōla* (idols) separately. Indeed, both words *'ašāḥîm* and *'ašābbê* are said to have a common form (i.e., the basic form without inflected forms is *'ešeḥ*, and the radical of the words is *'šb*). Therefore, Jerome had every reason to claim that the same translation should be applied.

But if so, both words could be translated as "tribulation." If they are homonyms, there could be another possibility. Perhaps tribulation and idols were close enough for "Hebrews." Anyway, if you examine Rabbinic literature and Jewish tales, we could develop various interesting discussions concerning these matters. (Jerome said, "Ask the Hebrews").

Finally, here is my hopeful request:

Unfortunately, the voluminous bibliography of this book does not include *A Complete Translation for the Vulgata Old Testament* (舊約聖書ウルガタ全譯), 4 volumes, Kōmyōsha (Volume 1, 1954; Volume 2, 1955; Volume 3, 1957; Volume 4, 1959). The parts of the Preface and Publisher's Preface in Volume 1 are as follows:

[...] Learned Fr. Eusebius Breitung, the representative of Kōmyōsha has

dedicated himself completely to the Japanese translation of the Old Testament with his right-hand man, Mr. Shigeo Kawanami [...] (Preface in Volume 1)

This Bible as a version of “the Old Testament for popular Catholics” is based on the Latin Vulgate, which is recognized as accurate, and has been translated verbatim in word-by-word expert review. (Publisher’s Preface in Volume 1)

Although few people read it now, *A Complete Translation for the Vulgata Old Testament* is a valuable work in the history of Japanese Bible translations. And it may be no exaggeration to say that it is a pioneer of Jerome studies in Japan. At present the publishing industry is in the midst of a recession, but I would be very glad if this translation was reprinted and reread together with Kato’s masterpiece.