MELEY MULUGETTA, Addis Ababa University

*Reflections on Abu Rumi’s Amharic Translation of the Book of Ruth*

Aethiopica 12 (2009), 136–142

ISSN: 1430–1938

Published by

Universität Hamburg

Asien Afrika Institut, Abteilung Afrikanistik und Äthiopistik

Hiob Ludolf Zentrum für Äthiopistik
Reflections on Abu Rumi’s Amharic Translation of the Book of Ruth

MELEY MULUGETTA, Addis Ababa University

Abba Abraham, d. 1819, also known as Abu Rumi translated the Old and the New Testament of the Bible into Amharic. He spent a considerable number of years in Jerusalem and Egypt. His translation work was done in close collaboration with M. Asselin, the French Vice Consul in Cairo. Abu Rumi’s text was later purchased by the British and Foreign Bible Society and was published in its entirety in 1840.

It is a widely held assumption that Abu Rumi’s Amharic Old Testament follows the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT) closely, in preference to the Greek and often also in preference to the Ga’az text. There is also a tendency in Abu Rumi to provide a literal and even a word for word rendering of the Hebrew MT text. But such attempts often fall short of transmitting to us the full impact of the story nor do they do justice to the artistry of the narrative. We will look at the extent of Abu Rumi’s deviation from the Ga’az and the degree to which he successfully transmits to us the full impact of the Hebrew story with all its niceties. A Hebrew short story such as Ruth is ideal for such reflections. The advantage of this story lies precisely in its brevity, enabling us to draw general conclusions on Abu Rumi’s text and the choices influencing his translation.

The preference for the Hebrew reading over the Ga’az or the LXX in Abu Rumi ranges from the names of the characters in Ruth, which fluctuate in orthography not just between one Ga’az text and another, but also within the same text itself—a variation also reflected in the numerous manuscripts of the LXX (see Table 1)—to the obliteration of readings unique to the Ga’az.1

1 Certainly these variations can be explained not as a preference for the Hebrew over the LXX, but rather as an adherence to an Arabic text, which we know Abu Rumi often consulted. But the history of Bible translation(s) into Arabic is complex. Arabic translations of the Bible date back as early as the eighth century from the Vulgate, and in the succeeding centuries translation of the Old and/or New Testament were made from Syriac, the LXX, Coptic, the Hebrew Masoretic and the Samaritan Pentateuch. Frequently the process of translation itself was performed with collateral referencing from all these sources so that Arabic manuscripts began to exhibit considerable variety and heterogeneity. Abu Rumi may have also used portions of the Arabic Bible which were in print since the early 16th century. A complete critical edition of the Arabic Bible is essential to determine where and how Abu Rumi may have been influenced by the Arabic text.
Table 1: Rendering of names in *Ruth* in the various versions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Naomi</th>
<th>Ruth</th>
<th>Elimelech</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hebrew</td>
<td>נואם</td>
<td>רות</td>
<td>אֵלִימלך</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LXX</td>
<td>Νουημυ</td>
<td>Ροηθ</td>
<td>Αβμυεληχ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abu Rumi</td>
<td>אביוורימי</td>
<td>רות</td>
<td>אֵלִימלך</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulgata</td>
<td>Noemi</td>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>Helimelech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arabic, MSA³, Ar. MSS⁴</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>גא'ז</td>
<td>גא'ז</td>
<td>גא'ז</td>
<td>גא'ז</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Such unique readings include, for instance, 1:14, שפ'צ': להכ: : שפ'צ': (Cf. Abu Rumi: יכ'צ': ליכ'צ': יכ'צ': MT: נואם וירא' לועוֹכַי; LXX: καὶ κατεξίλησεν Ὀρφα τὴν πενθερὰν αὐτῆς = “And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law”). The גא'ז version is curious. There are within *Ruth* a series of something like mini-scenes, acts, within the larger sequence of events. Each act was opened skilfully with symbols and the same act is swiftly closed by employing the same symbols, so that in v. 1:9, it is Naomi who kisses Orpah. The ancient versions, including the MT, LXX, the Vulgate and the Peshita are uniform on this verse. But what has began as a ritual of farewell does not conclude until verse 14, when it is Orpah who returns the kiss of farewell and takes leave of her mother-in-law (cf. MT, LXX, Peshita). The symbol the author employs for opening and concluding the episode and highlighting Orpah’s decision to leave is a two-way farewell kiss. When Orpah returns the kiss of her mother-in-law, it signals her departure. An act is brought to an end. The gesture also brings to contrast Ruth’s decision to “cling” to her mother-in-law. The גא'ז seems to have missed the nuance of this two-way farewell kiss in the design of the story. Abu Rumi though, by virtue of a literal and word by word translation of the Hebrew, recaptures and restores (consciously or unconsciously) the details of the story’s craft.

Notice also 1:13 שפ'צ': להכ: : שפ'צ': (lit. “The hand of God has gone out from me”; Cf. MT: נקָרָבָה ךְּנָרָיָהוּ = “Because, the hand of God has come against me [italics mine]”; LXX: ὅτι ἐξελέξαν ἐν ἑμὶ χειρὶ κυρίου; Abu Rumi: שפ'צ': מָכ: : שפ'צ': מָכ: = “For the hand of God is heavy upon me”). Both the LXX and the MT depict the sense that the hand of God “has come against me” implying outright assault and ag-

---

2 ASV = American Standard Version (1901); BBE = The Bible in Basic English (1949/64); KJV = King James Version (1611/1769) with codes.  
3 MSA = Modern Standard Arabic (1982).  
4 Arabic manuscripts of Syriac origin were consulted for this comparison; see BENGTSSON, *Two Arabic Versions of the Book of Ruth* (Lund, 1995).
gression. The Gǝz rendering of the text, “Because the hand of God has left me” implies not assault, but loss of protection from God. The choice of the scribe, to diffract blame from God, is not accidental and happens in other instances in the text. For instance, contrast 1:20, ληδέματα: σουκάδη: δικέρι: διυλισμένη (“Because I am exceedingly bitter”) with MT: יַרְבָּהָ שֶׁלֶחָ: (“Because the Lord has been exceedingly bitter to me”); Abu Rumi: וְנָשָׁא: יהוה: יהוה: יהוהיה (“Because the omnipotent God has made me exceedingly bitter”); LXX ὅπι ἐπιχωράνθη ἐν ἐμοί ὁ Ιανάς σφόδρα, where clearly the Lord is the source of all of Naomi’s woes, as is implied in the MT and the LXX. The Gǝz presents Ruth as being exceedingly bitter, but not by the hand of God(!). In contrast, Abu Rumi translates closer to the spirit and meaning of the Hebrew MT.

There seem to be two primary preoccupations in Abu Rumi’s text. One is to provide a word for word rendering of the MT. The second is to transmit meaning in a text. The two concepts are linked and they both obliterate the other subtleties of story telling including rhythm, intonation and symbols, all of which abound in the MT and in the Ruth story. Indeed, one of the manners in which the Ruth storyteller unveils his story is by the use of word-plays, *inclusions*, which serve as linking devices throughout the story. These *inclusions* may consist of entire phrases or of single words, but the effect is similar. They serve almost as mnemonic devices between characters and themes of the story, connections and little sparks, in addition to rounding off the themes of the story and delighting the hearer who discovers the inclusions every time the story is read.

The concept of *inclusions* is closely linked to that of parallelism in the Bible, in that both are devices used for emphasis through repetition. Such parallelisms in the Hebrew Bible may be composed of a series of assonance letters or words, or a repetition (or negation) of a word or thought previously expressed. So, for instance when Isaiah begins to speak, we become

---

5 Indeed this same verse has been a source of difficulty for many of the ancient translators so that the Alexandrian Codex of the LXX and the entire family of the Lucianic manuscripts simply omit this verse. Did the ancient translators see this verse as provocative or did they see it as repeating the essence of the following verse? This omission on the part of the ancient translators is an element partially shared by the Ethiopian scribes, so that the verse is altered in a manner which does not carry the full weight of the statement.

6 All Gǝz manuscripts consulted are uniform in this verse. The Gǝz manuscripts consulted were exclusively from the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (EMML).

Reflections on Abu Rumi’s Amharic Translation of the Book of Ruth

automatically aware of the assonance and word-plays in the initial verses (Isaiah 1:1–3) of the book. There are also a series of accents, conjunctive and disjunctive, which tell about the rhythm of the prophet’s speech. For instance there are a series of conjunctive accents, tying one word to the next in the first line of Isaiah 1:2 until we reach the word ēres, marked by a disjunctive accent (zaqef qatton), hence signaling a sort of comma, and finally an ‘atnab after the word dibbēr so that there is a prolonged pause, something akin in this case to a colon before the start of direct speech.8

Translators of the Hebrew often paid scanty attention to these parallelisms so that these literary fine points were either skipped inadvertently (or perhaps not) or paraphrased. The end result was that the Bible was often reduced to a treatise, primarily carrying meaning. Abu Rumi was not alone in this. The series of inclusions in Ruth, are frequently absent in Abu Rumi’s translation. Inclusions in Ruth may not merely be single words but may consist of entire phrases. For instance see 2:8, 2:21 and 2:2, 2:10, 2:13. Again, Abu Rumi’s rendering of these verses betrays a certain randomness. He translates 2:8 as אֱתַנְב: אַחֲלָה: אֵלֶּה (“Follow my female servants!”) and 2:21 as קְזָעְתֵּא: הַעֲרָה: הַטָּרָה (“Be with my harvesters!”). Furthermore, 2:2 as קְזָעְתֵּא: הַעֲרָה: הַטָּרָה, 2:10 קְזָעְתֵּא: הַעֲרָה: הַטָּרָה again, the non-conformity of these verses displays a lack of awareness on Abu Rumi’s part on the intricacies in Ruth’s story telling and of the inclusions which are a central tenet of its artistry. Table 2 presents a comparison of the inclusions in Ruth and the manner in which they are translated by the various versions. Abu Rumi’s ver-

8 These accents have largely been ignored in translating the Hebrew text, so that it is the meaning which has mattered in the task of translating. Ibn Ezra (1093–1167), the great Jewish medieval biblical commentator warned against this tendency and wrote “any interpretation of a verse that doesn’t agree with the Teamim (accents) should not be listened to” (אלא זאפה יהודה ולך קמך עות’ אורא ואת כתיב את שמכות פרע צד). But such blindness is not without its own serious repercussions on the translated and transmitted text and begins to affect, ironically, even meaning. See for instance, Ruth 2:14 which has been rendered in two different ways. The majority of English Bibles, amongst them the New International Version, New Jerusalem Bible, the Revised Standard Version and the Jewish Publication Society have ignored the accent on רַכָּף (“come!”) translating in something along the following lines “At mealtime, Boaz said to her ‘Come over here [italics mine], and partake of the meal, and dip your morsel in the vinegar.’” Contrast this translation to the version provided by a minority of English Bibles, including the King James Version, the Geneva Bible and Young’s Literal Translation of 1862, which take into consideration the accent placed on רַכָּף: “And Boaz saith to her, ‘At meal-time come [italics mine] nigh hither, and thou hast eaten of the bread, and dipped thy morsel in the vinegar.’”
sion, appears, in contrast to the Goʿaz and the LXX as the least consistent in its translation of pair inclusions occurring in the text.

Table 2: Inclusions in Ruth and with comparison in the various versions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>LXX</th>
<th>Goʿaz</th>
<th>Abu Rumi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1:5, 4:16</td>
<td>דִּי</td>
<td>יִוְנ</td>
<td>וְאָו</td>
<td>וְאָו</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:8, 2:20, 3:10</td>
<td>דָּס</td>
<td>אֶלֶּא</td>
<td>וְאָו</td>
<td>וְאָו</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:9, 3:1</td>
<td>לְָנִה</td>
<td>וְאָפָּפַי</td>
<td>וְאָפַּפַי</td>
<td>וְאָפַּלַפ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:14, 2:8, 21, 23</td>
<td>דַּכַּ</td>
<td>וּפּוּלַּוּ</td>
<td>וּפּוּלַּו</td>
<td>וּפּוּלַּו</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:16, 3:13</td>
<td>לְָקַ</td>
<td>יַוּלַ</td>
<td>יַוּל</td>
<td>יַוּל</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:21, 3:17</td>
<td>דָּרַע</td>
<td>יָּאָ</td>
<td>יָּא</td>
<td>יָּא</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:1, 3:2</td>
<td>הָּפַ</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>וַּד</td>
<td>וַּד</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:1, 3:11</td>
<td>דָּרַע</td>
<td>יַוּל</td>
<td>יַוּל</td>
<td>יַוּל</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:10, 2:19</td>
<td>דָּרַע</td>
<td>יַוּל</td>
<td>יַוּל</td>
<td>יַוּל</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:12, 3:9</td>
<td>הָּפַ</td>
<td>יָּא</td>
<td>יָּא</td>
<td>יָּא</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is one particular inclusion worth our attention. It involves the Hebrew בִּמ (lit. “rest” or “security”) in 1:9 and 3:1. Verse 9 is actually the sequel to the parallelism which began in verse 8. The Jewish Publication Society (JPS) provides this translation:

1:8 But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Turn back, each of you to her mother’s house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me!

1:9 May the LORD grant that each of you find security in the house of a husband!” And she kissed them farewell. They broke into weeping.

Indeed Naomi’s insistence that her two daughters-in-law return each to the house of their mother may hint, as Campbell has suggested (Campbell, 1975), at a custom referred to in Song of Songs and Genesis 24:28, that in...
fact the home of the mother is the center point for discussions “pertinent to the planning of a marriage”. Indeed, the two girls’ well-being and remarriage is a preoccupation foremost on Naomi’s mind (cf. 1:11–13), something which she cannot provide. The sense of “rest” or “security” for a young woman in Ancient Israel is certainly connected to marriage and finding solace in the house of her husband and children. The “woman of substance” (תִּתְנֵי), a woman at the peak of her wealth and happiness is one who wins her husband’s confidence, and rules with wisdom over her kingdom, i.e. her home (cf. Prov. 31:11–31).

Abba Abraham died in the year 1819. Successive Amharic versions of the Bible heavily relied on his translation. Abu Rumi’s text represents a continuation of a long line of translating “schools” whereby meaning ruled supreme over sign, intonation, rhythm, and the other subtleties involved in a literary piece. But even such translations of the Bible, with all their shortcomings, are jewels for language study, allowing us to dwell on the syntax of languages from a comparative perspective. They also represent in and of themselves the history of ideas and the transmission of these schools of ideas in time.

Bibliography


Meley Mulugetta


Manuscripts consulted from the EMML

EMML 39, 191, 199, 488, 510, 1163, 1839, 1842, 1888, 1929, 2098, 2388, 2436, 2532, 4434, 4437, 4752


Summary

This article will look at Abu Rumi’s Amharic rendering of the *Book of Ruth* with close comparison to the ancient and modern versions of the Bible, especially the Ge‘ez, the Masoretic and the Septuaginta texts. The article will also look at the extent of Abu Rumi’s close reading of the Hebrew text and the degree to which he successfully transmits to us the full impact of the Hebrew story with all its niceties.