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

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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 Gəʿəz 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 Gəʿəz 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 Gəʿəz or the LXX in Abu Rumi ranges from the names of the characters in *Ruth*, which fluctuate in orthography not just between one Gəʿəz 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 Gəʿəz.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

English, ASV, BBE, KJV ²	Naomi	Ruth	Elimelech
Hebrew	נָעֻמִי	רוּת	אֵלִמֶלֶךְ
LXX	Νωεμιυ	Ρουθ	Αβιμελεχ
Abu Rumi	ናዕሚ	ሩት	ኤሊሚልክ
Vulgata	Noemi	Ruth	Helimelech
Arabic, MSA ³ , Ar. MSS ⁴	نعمة نعيمي/نعيمًا	اعوث اعوت/ر اعوث	أليمالك أليمالك/أبيمالك
Gəʿəz	ኑሕ(ኑ)ሚን/ናኑ(ሕ)ሚን	ሩት	ኤሊሚልክ

Such unique readings include, for instance, 1:14, **ወሰመታ ፡ ለዑርፍ ፡ ሐማታ** (Cf. Abu Rumi: **የርዳም ፡ አማትዋን ፡ ሳመቻት** MT: **רָצְפָהּ הַצִּיּוֹן הַחֲמוּמָה**; LXX: **καὶ κατεφίλησεν Ορφά τὴν πενθερὰν αὐτῆς** = “And Orpah kissed her mother-in-law”). The Gəʿəz 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 Gəʿəz 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 **ወጽዕት ፡ እምነየ ፡ እደ ፡ እግዚአብሔር** (lit. “The hand of God has gone out from me”; Cf. MT: **הַיָּד הַזֹּאת הָיְתָה כַּיּוֹם** = “Because, the hand of God has *come against me* [italics mine]”; LXX: **ὅτι ἐξῆλθεν ἐν ἐμοὶ χεὶρ κυρίου**; Abu Rumi: **የእግዚአብሔር ፡ እጅ ፡ በላይ ፡ ከብደኛልና** = “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 PER Å. BENGTSSON, *Two Arabic Versions of the Book of Ruth* (Lund, 1995).

gression. The Gəʿəz 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, እስመ ፡ መረርኩ ፡ ፈድፋድ ፡ ውበዙኅ (“Because I am exceedingly bitter”) with MT: רַמְּיָיִךְ יְדַשְׁנִי לְיָ:דָאָמ (“Because the Lord has been exceedingly bitter to me”; Abu Rumi: ሁሉን ፡ የሚችል ፡ አምላክ ፡ እጅግ ፡ አሳዝኖኛልና = “Because the omnipotent God has made me exceedingly bitter”; LXX ὅτι ἐπικράνθη ἐν ἔμοι ὁ ἱκανὸς σφόδρα), where clearly the Lord is the source of all of Naomi’s woes, as is implied in the MT and the LXX. The Gəʿəz presents Ruth as being exceedingly bitter, but not by the hand of God(!).⁵ In contrast, Abu Rumi translates closer to the spirit and meaning of the Hebrew MT.⁶

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.⁷ 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 Gəʿəz manuscripts consulted are uniform in this verse. The Gəʿəz manuscripts consulted were exclusively from the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library (EMML).

⁷ See especially ADELE BERLIN, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Indiana, 1985), 103–126; JAMES KUGEL, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (London, 1981).

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 *éres*, marked by a disjunctive accent (*zaqef qatton*), hence signaling a sort of comma, and finally an *'atnah* 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 וְעַסְנֵנוּ עִמָּךְ הַדְּבָקִין and 2:2, 2:10, 2:13 וְעֵינֵינוּ אֶצְמָקֶיךָ. Again, Abu Rumi's rendering of these verses betrays a certain randomness. He translates 2:8 as ሲቶች፣ ባሮቹን፣ ተከተዱ. ("Follow my female servants!") and 2:21 as ከጫጆቹ፣ ጋር፣ ሁኙ ("Be with my harvesters!"). Furthermore, 2:2 as በፊቱ፣ ምሕረት፣ የማገኘው, 2:10 ሞገስ፣ በፊትህ፣ አገኘው, 2:13 በዓይኑክ፣ ሞገስ፣ ላገኝ. 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" (אליו תשמע ולו לו תאבה לא הטעמים פרוש על שאיננו פרוש כל). 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 וָאֵל (‘‘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 וָאֵל: ‘‘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 Gəʿəz 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

Verse	Hebrew	LXX	Gəʿəz	Abu Rumi
1:5, 4:16	לָד [Lad]	υἰῶν υἰῶν	ውሉድ ውሉድ	ልጅ ሕፃን
1:8, 2:20, 3:10	רַחֵם [Mercy]	ἔλεος ἔλεος ἔλεος	ምሕረት ምሕረት ምሕረት	ምሕረት ምሕረት ቸርነት
1:9, 3:1	הַרְחֵם [Rest]	ἀνάπαυσις ἀνάπαυσις	ዕረፍት ዕረፍት	ዕረፍት ስፍራ ዕረፍት ስፍራ
1:14, 2:8, 21, 23	דָּבַק [To cling]	ἀκολουθεῖω κολλάω προσκολλάω προσκολλάω	ተለወ ተለወ ተለወ ተለወ	ተጠጋቻ ተከተዩ ጋር ሁኝ ተቀመጧ
1:16, 3:13	וָלַךְ [To lodge]	αὐλίσσομαι αὐλίσσομαι	ጎደረ ቢቲ	ተቀመጠ ተኝ
1:21, 3:17	רֵקֵם [Empty]	κενή κενή	ዕራቅየ ዕራቀኪ	ባዶ እጅ ባዶ እጅ
2:1, 3:2	עָרֵם [Empty]	— —	አእመረ ማእምርነ	ዘመድ ዘመድ
2:1, 3:11	לָיִן [Worthy]	γνώριμος γνώριμος	ከሀሊ ኃይሉሙ	ኃይለኛ ምግባረ መልክም
2:10, 2:19	חָזַק [To take notice of]	ἐπιγνῶναι ἐπιγνούς	ዑቕኒ አእመረኪ	ለመጠየቅ ያሰበሰበኸም
2:12, 3:9	כַּנְּף [Wing]	πτέρυγαι πτερόγιον	ክንፍ ልብስ	ክንፍ ልብስ

There is one particular *inclusion* worth our attention. It involves the Hebrew הַרְחֵם (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 re-marriage 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” (לִיְהוֹנָתָן), 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.

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- EMML = A Catalogue of Ethiopian Manuscripts microfilmed for the Ethiopian Manuscript Microfilm Library, Addis Ababa, and for the Hill Monastic Manuscript Library, Collegeville. Volumes I–III (1975, 1976, 1978) were compiled by WILLIAM F. MACOMBER, volume IV (1979) by GETATCHEW HAILE, volumes V–VII (1981, 1982, 1983) by GETATCHEW HAILE and WILLIAM F. MACOMBER, volumes VIII–X (1985, 1987, 1993) by GETATCHEW HAILE.

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 Gə'əz, 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.