

The First English Translation of the LXX
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This is the story of the first person to translate the LXX into English.

Charles Thomson was born in November 1729, the son of John Thomson, a linen worker in County Derry. By the time Charles was ten years old he had lost his mother, and so his father decided to make a home for the family in the new world.

John Thomson sailed to America with his six young children, but died just before he reached Delaware. The children were separated, and Charles was taken into the home of a blacksmith at New Castle. When he overheard that he was to be apprenticed as a blacksmith he ran away. On the road he met a lady who asked about him, and when he said that he wanted to be a scholar, she took him to her own home and sent him to school. Nobody knows the name of the lady who changed the young Charles Thomson's life.

Thus he became a pupil of the Revd Dr Francis Alison, another Irish man, in his academy in New London, Pennsylvania. There were no fees to pay as the academy was supported by the local Presbyterian church. Charles was taught languages, philosophy and divinity, and he excelled at classical Greek. On one occasion he asked whence the writers of theology drew their ideas and was told: 'From the Holy Scriptures'. Charles replied: 'Well then, if they whom you so highly recommend as models drew their religious instruction from the Scriptures, I shall apply directly to the same source, instead of taking knowledge second hand.' Thus began his life-long study of the Bible.

For a while Charles taught Latin at the Philadelphia Academy, and then became a business man, importing dry goods and hats from London. He became wealthy and influential in the province of Pennsylvania and so became involved with the protests against paying high taxes to Britain and the growing movement in the American colonies for independence. Less than a year after the Boston Tea Party on December 16th 1773, Charles Thomson was elected on Monday September 5th 1774 as the Secretary of the First Continental Congress. He had been married the previous Thursday, and so had to abandon his bride and go to take the minutes of Congress. The Journals of Congress, from September 1774 to March 1789 are almost all in Thomson's own handwriting.

On April 7th 1789, Charles Thomson was sent to Mount Vernon with a momentous message. He had to tell George Washington that he had been elected as the first President of the United States. Three months later, he decided to retire from public life at the age of 60. George Washington wrote to him:

I cannot withhold any just testimonial in favour of so old, so faithful and so able a public officer, which might tend to sooth his mind in the shades of retirement. Accept then this serious declaration, that your services have been important as your patriotism has been distinguished; and enjoy that best of all rewards, the consciousness of having done your duty well.'

Thus began a whole new phase in his life; his work as the biblical scholar who made the first translation of the LXX into English.

The LXX has not been much used in the Western Churches, but the text in the Vatican Codex becomes the next part of our story. It is not complete: most of Genesis is missing, as are Psalms 105-137. These parts were added in the 15th century to make a complete Bible. The text in the Vatican Codex was republished in 1665 by the University of Cambridge, and Charles Thomson had a copy of this Cambridge edition when he began work on his translation in 1789.

He acquired his copy of the Cambridge edition by chance. He was in an auction house and he heard the auctioneer inviting bids for an ‘unknown, outlandish book’. He made a small bid, and the book was his. It proved to be one part of the Cambridge edition of the Vatican Codex. Thomson was intrigued by his purchase and tried to find the rest of the work. He had no success until, two years after his first purchase, he visited the same auction house and found the rest of the work.

We now have to imagine Charles Thomson in his retirement, living on the farm where his wife had been born and brought up. He had a small stone house there and some 600 neglected acres. When he had been living there only a few months, a visitor came and observed: ‘It will take him the rest of his life to bring it into complete order; but this, though attended with trouble, will be a constant source of pleasure.’ Maybe he combined his scholarly work with work on his farm.

He began the translation early in 1789, at about the time when he took the historic message to George Washington that he had been elected the first President of the United States. Three months later he retired, and his enthusiasm for the translation work may have been a factor in his decision to retire only three months after taking the historic message to George Washington. Among Thomson’s papers was found a small but valuable fragment which tells why he wanted to translate the LXX into English:

As the quotations which the writers of the New Testament made from the Old... are taken chiefly from the Septuagint, and as, upon enquiry, I could not find that there was any translation of this into English...

That is all that remains, but we can guess the rest. Perhaps this was intended as part of a preface to the work, but this was never published. And in one of his notebooks he wrote about the work of a translator:

To translate well is:

1. To give a just representation of the purpose of an author;
2. To convey into the translation the author’s spirit and manner;
3. To give it the quality of an original by making it appear natural, a natural copy without applying words improperly, or a meaning not warranted by use, or combining them in a way which renders the sense obscure, and the construction ungrammatical or harsh.

It cannot have been easy to make a translation of the Septuagint as there were no existing English versions on which to model his work. The work was eventually published in four volumes in Philadelphia in 1808, together with his translation of the New Testament, and it was known as Thomson’s Bible. It was well received by reviewers, being commended for its accuracy, and it was consulted by the scholars who made the Revised Version of the Bible in 1881.

The next person to make a translation was the British clergyman Sir Lancelot Brenton, whose work was published in London in 1844, 36 years after Thomson’s Bible was published. He knew of Thomson’s work but does not seem to have used it, and Brenton’s translation became far more widely known and used than Thomson’s. Both scholars worked from a single ancient version of the Septuagint, the Vatican Codex, but Brenton also mentioned the slight differences found in the other ancient version known in his time, the Alexandria Codex.

LXX study today is very different from anything Thomson knew, or perhaps could have imagined. But Charles Thomson worked in a very different world! He worked alone, and had around him none of the resources of a great library. What lexicon did he use? This is an important question, since he made some interesting choices when he translated technical terms, and it would be fascinating to know why he did this.

When I discovered Charles Thomson, I was working on temple textiles, and a friend pointed out to me that Thomson found a lot of cotton in the LXX where other translators had found linen. There

are several words for linen in the LXX, and since it is not easy to work out the distinction between the various Hebrew words for linen, the translators of the LXX could have left important clues as to what the various Hebrew words meant.

- *pēšet*, means either linen fabric or flax: it was the fabric of Jeremiah's loin cloth (Jer.13.1); and Rahab hid the spies under the flax that was drying on her roof (Josh.2.6)¹ The LXX says that the fabric of Jeremiah's loin cloth was *linon*, the Vulgate has *lineum*, the King James Bible has linen, Brenton has linen, Thomson has linen. This probably meant simple or coarse linen. The LXX says that Rahab hid the spies in the flax straw, *linokalamē*. and here the translations differ: the 2007 translation of the LXX has 'flax straw', the Vulgate has *linum*, the King James Bible has 'stalks of flax', Brenton has flax stalks, but Thomson has simply 'flax'.
- *šēš*, which means both linen thread and linen fabric, but we assume a different type of thread or fabric. As thread it is *šēš mošzār*, twisted linen (e.g. Exod.28.6), for which the King James Bible has 'fine twined linen' and the LXX has *byssos keklōsmenē* fine twisted linen, the Vulgate has *byssus*. Brenton translated this as 'fine linen spun' and 'fine twined linen', but Thomson has '**cotton thread**'. As a fabric, *šēš* is a fine linen. In the King James Bible, Pharaoh dressed Joseph in 'fine linen' (Gen.41.42), and the prophet Ezekiel knew about embroidered² fine linen from Egypt (Ezek.27.7). The word *šēš* may itself have been borrowed from Egypt, because Hebrew had another word for this fine fabric. The LXX says Joseph's robe was *bussinē*, made of fine linen, and that Ezekiel knew of *bussos* from Egypt. The Vulgate said Joseph's garment was *stola byssina*, and that Ezekiel knew of byssus from Egypt. Brenton translated both these words as 'fine linen', but Thomson says that Pharaoh gave Joseph a **cotton** robe, and that Ezekiel knew of **cotton** from Egypt. Why did Thomson choose '**cotton**' rather than linen? Remember, his father had been a linen worker.

This is why it would be interesting to know what lexicon he used. It was almost certainly a Greek to Latin lexicon, because a Greek to English lexicon did not appear until some years after Thomson had published his translation of the LXX in 1808.³ He could have had a reprint of Stephanus' Greek-Latin lexicon published in Geneva in 1572, or he could have had Shrevelius' Greek-Latin lexicon reprinted in London in 1738.

The other Hebrew word for this fine linen was *būš*. In Chronicles, King David had a robe of *būš* (1 Chron.15.27), which the King James Bible translated as 'fine linen'. The LXX has *bussinē*, which Brenton translated 'fine linen' and the Vulgate as *lineum*, a garment of linen. Thomson chose '**cotton**.' The veil in the tabernacle was woven from red, blue and purple yarn and *šēš mošzār*, fine linen thread (Exod.26.31). Here the King James Bible translated as 'fine twined linen'; the LXX has *bussos nenēsmenē*, 'fine spun linen', the Vulgate has *byssus*; Brenton has 'fine linen spun'; and Thomson has **cotton** thread. The temple curtain described in Chronicles, however, was woven from coloured yarn and *būš* (2 Chron.3.14). Here the King James Bible has 'fine linen', the LXX has *bussos*; the Vulgate has *byssus*, Brenton has 'fine linen'; and Thomson has '**cotton yarn**'. We conclude that *būš* and *šēš* were synonyms, and Thomson thought both these were words for **cotton**.

Josephus, who came from a family of temple priests, described the temple veil but gave no decisive evidence as to whether the warp was linen or cotton. He says that the *bussos* thread in the temple

¹ Flax of wood, *pištê hā'ēš*, so flax stalks.

² The word is from *rqm*, coloured?

³ This was J R Major's translation of Schrevel's Greek lexicon, published in London in 1841. Liddell and Scott were not born until 1811.

curtain symbolised the earth in which it grew (*Jewish War* 5.212), but that could apply to linen or cotton.

The word *šēš* also meant marble (e.g. *Esth.* 1.6), implying that the fabric had a similar sheen. This suggests that *šēš* was a fine linen which we know was beaten or trampled in running water to make it soft and shiny.⁴ Pliny described the process,⁵ If so, then the synonym *bûs* could have been related to the verb *bûs*, trample, and we can ask whether such fine linen was produced at two places near Jerusalem: '*ēyn rogel*, the treader's spring (1 Kgs 1.9); and *s^edhēh khôbhēs*, the trampler's field (*Isa.* 7.3). But Thomson chose to translate both *bûs* and *šēš* as **cotton**.

The quest for his lexicon centres on this word *bussos*, used in the LXX and in the Vulgate for both *šēš* and *bûs*.

He could not have taken his translation from Stephanus' lexicon, because this does not include the word *bussos* even in the reprints after Thomson published his Bible. Schrevelius' Greek-Latin lexicon, however, was translated into a Greek-English lexicon, and the preface to the third edition of this says that it was based on the latest American edition of Schrevelius. This Greek-English lexicon was the first to list cotton as a meaning for the Greek *bussos*. The Vulgate, you will recall, used *byssus* to translate both *šēš* and *bûs*, and in Latin the primary meaning of the word is **cotton**. Is it possible that Thomson followed Jerome and chose cotton as the meaning for *šēš* and *bûs*, and that his choice was then included in the Greek-English version of Schrevelius' lexicon?⁶

Now for another of his choices. Even though he felt free to change the 'linen' of the King James Bible into 'cotton', in many other ways he stayed close to this traditional version.

He only translated the books of the LXX that were also in the Hebrew Bible. He kept the books in the order of the King James Bible, even though the order in the LXX is different. He also kept the traditional names. For example, the LXX II Esdras contains both Ezra and Nehemiah.⁷ Thomson translated II Esdras but divided it and called it Ezra and Nehemiah. The Exodus description of the tabernacle is shorter in the LXX than in the Hebrew, and in some cases the text is in a different order. Here, Thomson kept the verse numbers of the King James Bible, whilst translating only such words as were in the Greek text. Thus his Exodus 40 lacks verses 7, 11 and 30-32, because these are not found in the Greek text.

He did the same with Jeremiah, where the Greek text is about one eighth shorter than the Hebrew, and some chapters are in a different order. Thomson kept the familiar Hebrew order for the chapters, but translated the shorter Greek text. Thus chapter 26 in the King James Bible is chapter 33 in the Greek, and chapter 29 in the King James Bible is chapter 36 in the Greek. This chapter, however, does not have anything corresponding to the Hebrew verses 16-20. Thomson gives the

⁴ The word *bûs* may even be related to *bûs* meaning 'trample'. Linen was trampled or beaten to matt the fibres and make it shiny. This required running water, and so Ein Rogel (1 Kgs 1.9) was probably a place where linen was trampled, as too was the field of the treader, *kôbhēs*, usually translated 'fuller' where Isaiah met Ahaz by the conduit of the upper pool (*Isa.* 7.3).

⁵ *Natural History* 19.18.

⁶ Some Greek writers of the 2nd and 3rd centuries CE also used the word *bussos* to mean the fabric spun from the fibres of the cotton tree. Pliny in his *Natural History* described this tree, *gossypinus*, which he said grew on the island we now call Bahrein: 'There are trees that bear wool... and the fabric made from this is finer than the linen of India.' (Pliny, *Natural History* 12.21-22).

⁷ The Hebrew Ezra corresponds to chapters 1-10 and the Hebrew Nehemiah to chapters 11-23

text with its Hebrew chapter number, 29, but leaves out the verses that are not in the Greek. The verses of his chapter 29 are numbered 14, 15 then 21, 22. Nor did he include Jeremiah's letter which usually appears in the Deutero-canonical texts as Baruch 6. On the other hand, he did include Psalm 151.

Charles Thomson did not only *translate* the Septuagint; he was also thinking about the structure and origin of the texts:⁸ how and where did the prophets speak.

There are indications that Thomson imagined the writings of the prophets as the scripts of a Greek-style drama, in which there were only two or three characters on stage, and then a chorus of others – citizens perhaps, or slaves – who commented on the action or the debate they had just witnessed. Having received an education in the Classics, he would surely have known about the Greek dramas that were constructed in this way, and marks in his translation show that he was dividing up the writings of the prophets as though they were play scripts that had lost their character designations and stage directions. He marked up some parts of Isaiah, Amos and Micah, and large sections of Hosea and Jeremiah with J for Jehovah, P for prophet and C for chorus.

Take the early chapters of Jeremiah as an example. The prophet questions the Lord and the Lord answers. These are the two characters. Presumably in the temple the high priest or king spoke as the Lord. The chorus is the people of Jerusalem, and sometimes the prophet speaks directly to them. Sometimes he himself reflects on the situation.

Use Jer.3.33b-5.7.as handout

More recent scholars have explored the possibility that Deutero-Isaiah was the script of a festival drama. John Eaton⁹ suggested this, but concentrated more on the content – the role of the king, the servant and so forth – rather than the more mundane aspects of staging such a drama in the temple. Klaus Baltzer returned to this topic¹⁰, but when dealing with Greek drama, he concentrated on literary matters and the distinction between tragedy and comedy. Some interesting possibilities present themselves if one explores the more practical aspects of Greek theatre.

- Is it possible that the roots of Greek drama lie in the Jerusalem temple?
- Is it possible that the pre-exilic prophets made public their oracles in a stylised way that later developed into something we recognise as Greek drama?

There were contacts between Jerusalem and Greece from at least the 8th century BCE, and such evidence as there is shows that ideas travelled west to Greece.

- The earliest Greek script was derived from Phoenician letters and was in use the early 8th century BCE, and there is archaeological evidence for Greeks in Jerusalem at the end of the first temple period.¹¹
- Pythagoras, born about 570 BCE, spent some time as a young man living near Mount Carmel, and it was widely believed that Pythagoras took many of his ideas from the Hebrews.¹²

⁸ This would be the great concern of biblical scholars working in the late 19th century, but the pioneers were already at work during Thomson's lifetime. Did he know of Lowth, of Michaelis, of Eichhorn? Thomson's time working on the LXX corresponded almost exactly to Eichhorn's time in Göttingen (1788-1827).

⁹ J Eaton, *Festal Drama in Deutero-Isaiah* London: SPCK, 1979.

¹⁰ K Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah. A Commentary on Isaiah 40-55*, tr. M Kohl, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001.

¹¹ B Sass, 'Arabs and Greeks in late-First Temple Jerusalem', *PEQ* (1990), pp. 59-61. Sherds with possible Greek letters.

- The great Dionysia festival in Athens at which plays were performed was established in the mid 6th century BCE, *after* the destruction of the first temple. Aeschylus was born in 525 BCE.

It is not impossible that memories of what took place in the Jerusalem temple went to Greece with refugees from the destruction of the first temple. Greek plays were performed at religious festivals, and many of the characteristics of those early plays could have originated in temple practice.

Perhaps the best known feature of Greek plays is that the actors wore masks, *prosōpa*. Might similar masks have been worn during temple rituals? When Ezekiel described the throne chariot, it is likely he was describing something he knew: a wheeled throne surrounded by four creatures. In the vision it was more glorious and more terrifying, no doubt, but had he known such a throne of the Lord in human form, with four attendants? These attendant figures, according to the LXX, had *prosōpa*, which is usually translated ‘faces’. But they could have been masked attendants, with the mask of a man, an ox, a lion and eagle. Priests in Egypt wore ritual masks in the form of animal heads. Perhaps there were similar attendants for the chariot throne of the Lord. It is possible that *pānîm* in a temple context did not always mean ‘presence’ or even ‘face’ and that sometimes it meant ‘mask’.

Did Immanuel - God with us – wear a mask? The king, in his role as the presence of the Lord with his people, could have worn the ‘face’ of the Lord. Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king, said the Chronicler (1 Chron.29.23). If the king was a masked figure, then the later reaction against seeing the face of the Lord is understandable. The high priest in the second temple wore the Name of the Lord, a vestige of the older custom, and this would explain why the Deuteronomists said that the Name was in the temple.

And what was the original meaning of seeking the face of the Lord? Or the high-priestly blessing that one would see the Lord’s shining face? (Num.6.25; Pss 17.15; 24.6; 27.8; 31.16’ 67.1 etc.). The old calendars prescribed pilgrimage to the temple three times a *year to see the face of the Lord* (Exod.23.17; 34.23; Deut.16.16), but this is always read as ‘to appear before the face of the Lord’. As BDB observes¹³ ‘The verb in all [examples] was originally qal, afterwards pointed niph‘al to avoid the expression “see the face of the Lord”’. There was a movement away from the original meaning of the texts, and it seems that the literal presence of the Lord disappeared with the sacral kings.

What did the pilgrims see? Here the answer lies in the original form of the ephod, which was the golden garment or perhaps the mask, worn by the king or priest when he was speaking as the Lord. The god kings in Babylon and the images of the gods wore golden garments. The golden ephod garment survived as the high priestly garment interwoven with gold and associated with oracle stones, but the original, shunned by later editors as idolatrous, had been the golden garment of the god-king. The family of Eli at Shiloh were chosen ‘to wear an ephod *before me*’, (1 Sam.2.28), but I suspect this originally meant ‘wear an ephod *as my presence*’. How do we understand *l’phānay?* ‘Being’ the presence of the Lord was part of the royal cult, and the ephod was necessary to consult the Lord. Hence the words in Hosea 3.4, that Israel would live for a long time without king or prince, without sacrifice or pillar, without ephod or teraphim and afterwards they would return and seek the Lord their God and David their king. Losing the ephod was a punishment, and it would return with the Lord their God and David their king. The Lord and David were not two but one person, as in 1 Chronicles 29.20 ‘They worshipped the Lord and the king’, followed by ‘Solomon sat on the throne of the Lord as king’, v.23.

¹² For detail see ‘Temple and Timaeus in my book *The Great High Priest*, London: T&T Clark, 2003, pp.262-293.

¹³ P. 816 under *paneḥ* and p 908 under *ra’ah*.

Similarly in the last words of David: ‘The Spirit of the Lord speaks *in me*’ (2 Sam.23.2). followed by the king ‘dawning like the morning light, like the sun shining forth.’ A golden mask, perhaps, to represent what St John saw in his vision? At the beginning of the Book of Revelation, the Lord spoke in the temple, possibly even in the holy of holies, to his prophet John. The Lord was dressed as a high priest, and his face shone like the sun in full strength (Rev.1.12-16).

Can we imagine some formal exchanges in the first temple between a prophet and the Lord when he emerged from his temple to respond to the questions of the prophet? Were those exchanges echoed in the old stories, such as Abraham debating with the Lord about the destruction of Sodom (Gen.18)? But did they originate in the ritual of questioning of the Lord in the temple?

Temple practices as the origin of Greek drama involves far more than trying to mark up the texts as play scripts. Here are some more possibilities:

The original stage set in a Greek theatre was a tent, *skēnē*, which served the practical purpose of being a place for actors to change costumes and masks, but it also represented action that was happening literally behind the scenes. The hidden part of the story happened within the tent, and at key moments, the hidden scene would be revealed by bringing it out on a wheeled chariot-like structure, the *ekklēma*. The temple parallels there are obvious. And the name itself, *drama*, means literally a work, something done, and would be a fair parallel to *ma^ašeh*. Can we imagine the drama of the chariot throne, the drama of the creation?

All too little is known about the great temple in Jerusalem, and some of the most interesting information comes from visitors who described what they saw. A Greek traveller in about 300 BCE, for example, looked down into the temple court from a neighbouring tower and saw the high priest emerging from the temple in his glorious robes. He saw the people bowing in worship before the high priest because he brought them messages from the Lord. On his forehead he wore a gold ornament which bore the name Yahweh, and so he was, for his people, the angel of the Lord (Hecataeus of Abdera, in Diodorus of Sicily XI.3).

Thomson could have been imagining the words of the prophets as a drama set in the temple: The prophet questioned the Lord, and the assembled people of the city were the chorus who commented on what they had seen and heard. Who knows?

How different might our perception of ancient Jerusalem have been had we for some 200 years followed the path implied by Thomson’s marginal marks, instead of the German path of source criticism and form criticism.

Just a thought!

Thomson’s translation of the Bible was published in 1808, and he died in August 1824 at the age of ninety five. For some 200 years his work as a translator has been almost forgotten, and I have found no comments on his marginal marks or his understanding of the words for linen or cotton.