Translating Gods: 
Religion as a Factor of 
Cultural (Un)Translatability

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Translation

The Babylonians were the first to equate two gods by defining their common functional definition or cosmic manifestation. We may call this method “theological onomasiology.” By onomasiology is meant a method that starts from the referent and asks for the word, in opposition to semasiology, which starts from the word and asks for its meaning. Onomasiology is by definition cross-cultural and interlingual. Its aim is to find out how a given unit of meaning is expressed in different languages.

The Babylonians very naturally developed their “theological onomasiology” in the context of their general diglossia. Their constant concern for correlating Sumerian and Akkadian words brought them to extend this method into fields outside that of lexicography proper. But as long as this search for theological equations and equivalents was confined to the two languages, Sumerian and Akkadian, one could argue that it remained within the frame of a common religious culture. The translation here operates translingually but not transculturally. In the late Bronze Age, however, in the Cassite period, the lists are extended to include languages spoken by foreign peoples. There is an “explanatory list of gods” that gives divine names in Amoritic, Hurritic, Elamic, and Cassitic as well as Sumerian and Akkadian. There are even lists translating theophorous proper names of persons.

Among the lists from the private archives of Ugarit, a city-state on the northern Syrian coast, are quadrilingual vocabularies that contain Sumer-
ian, Akkadian, Hurritic (an Indo-European language), and Ugaritic (a west Semitic language). Here, the translation concerns three fundamentally different religious cultures and consequentially meets with serious difficulties. Sumero-Babylonian Anum (the god of heaven) is no problem: it is rendered in Ugaritic by shamuma (heaven). But for Antum, his wife, there is no linguistic equivalent in Ugaritic. It is obviously impossible to invent a feminine form of shamuma. Therefore a theological equivalent is found in the form of Tamatum (sea) which in Ugaritic mythology may act as a feminine partner of heaven. The sun god, utu in Sumerian, Shamash in Akkadian, Shimigi in Hurritic, is masculine; his feminine counterpart is called Aia in Sumerian and Ejan in Hurritic. But the Ugaritic Shapshu, notwithstanding its etymological identity with Akkadian shamshu, is a feminine deity, for whom there has to be found a masculine counterpart. Again, this problem requires a theological solution. Thus, the god Kothar, the god of craftsmen and artisans, appears as a translation of the goddess Aia!

In these cases, there can be no doubt that the practice of translating divine names was applied to very different cultures and religions. The conviction that these foreign peoples worshiped the same gods is far from trivial and self-evident. On the contrary, this insight must be reckoned among the major cultural achievements of the ancient world. One of the main incentives for tolerance toward foreign religions can be identified in the field of international law and the practice of forming treaties with other states and peoples. This, too, seems a specialty of Mesopotamian culture. The first treaties were formed between the Sumerian city-states of the third millennium B.C.E. With the rise of Ebla in northern Syria and with the Sargonid conquests this practice soon extended far into the west, involving states outside the cultural horizon of Mesopotamia. The Hittites, in the middle of the second millennium, inherited this legal culture from the Babylonians and developed new and much more elaborate forms of international contract. The treaties they formed with their vassals had to be sealed by solemn oaths invoking gods of both parties. The list of these gods conventionally closes the treaty. They had necessarily to be equivalent as to their function and in particular to their rank. Intercultural theology thus became a concern of international law. It seems to me probable that the interest in translations and equations for gods of different religions arose in the context of foreign policy. We are here dealing with the incipient stages of "imperial translation" destined to reach all the politically dependent states, tribes, and nations. Later, in the age of the great empires, official multilingualism becomes a typical phenomenon. The book of Esther tells us how in the Persian empire royal commandments were sent to every province in
its own script and to every people in its own language. A similar practice seems already to be attested for the Assyrian empire. In this context belong the many bi- and trilingual royal decrees from Persia, Anatolia, and Egypt. Even the Buddhist king Asoka—roughly a contemporary of the Egyptian Manetho, the Babylonian Berossos, and the translators of the Hebrew Bible known as the Septuagint—published his edicts in Sanskrit, Aramaic, and Greek.7

During the last three millennia B.C.E., religion appears to have been the promoter of intercultural translatability. The argument for this function runs as follows: peoples, cultures, and political systems may be sharply different. But as long as they have a religion and worship some definite and identifiable gods, they are comparable and contactable because these gods must necessarily be the same as those worshiped by other peoples under different names. The names, iconographies, and rites—in short, the cultures—differ, but the gods are the same. In the realm of culture, religion appears as a principle counteracting the effects of what Erik H. Erikson called “pseudo-speciation.” Erikson coined this term to describe the formation of artificial subgroups within the same biological species.8 In the human world, pseudo-speciation is the effect of cultural differentiation. The formation of cultural specificity and identity necessarily produces difference and otherness vis-à-vis other groups. This can result in the elaboration of absolute strangeness, isolation, avoidance, and even abomination. Among the Papuas in the highlands of New Guinea where communication is geographically difficult, this process has led, over some 50,000 years, to the formation of more than 700 different languages.9 Here, under laboratory conditions, the forces of pseudo-speciation could operate relatively undisturbed. Normally they are checked by other factors promoting communication and translation. The most important among them seems to be commerce, that is, cross-tribal, cross-national, and cross-cultural economy. If we look for regions in which these factors were most operative in prehistory and antiquity we must think of the Near Eastern commercial networks which already in the fourth millennium B.C.E. extended east to the Indus valley and west to Egypt and Anatolia. Along the lines and on the backbone, so to speak, of these early commercial contacts, political and cultural entities crystallized in the third and second millenia, very much according to the principles of pseudo-speciation which, however, were always counterbalanced by cultures of translation.

The profession of interpreter is attested in Sumerian texts from Abu Salabih as early as the middle of the third millenium B.C.E.10 The term eme-bal, meaning something like “speech changer,” designates a man able to change from one language into another. The Babylonian and Assyrian
equivalent of the Sumerian *eme-bal* is *targumannum* (interpreter), a word that survives not only in the Aramaic *targum* (translation), but also in the Turkish *dragoman, turguman*, and so on, that by metathesis eventually led to the German form *dolmetsch* (interpreter). In Egypt, too, interpreters appear as early as the Old Kingdom. The nomarchs of Elephantine, the southernmost province of Egypt, acting as caravan leaders for the African trade, bore the title “chief of interpreters.” Contacts with neighboring and even more remote tribes were always supported by at least an attempt at verbal communication.

The practice of translating foreign panthea has to be seen in the context of this general emergence of a common world with integrated networks of commercial, political, and cultural communication. This common world extended from Egypt to the Near and Middle East and westward to the shores of the Atlantic. I am not arguing that this process of intensified interrelation and unification was a particularly peaceful one—quite the contrary. What might have begun as occasional raids and feuds developed into larger forms of organized warfare. We are not speaking here of peaceful coexistence. But even war has—in this particular context—to be reckoned among the factors of geopolitical unification promoting the idea of an *oikoumene* where all peoples are interconnected in a common history, an idea already expressed by the Greek historian Polybius. And the idea of universal peace reigning in that *oikoumene* developed along with this process, leading to the efforts at imperialistic pacification known as *pax ramessidica* and *pax salomonica* and ultimately culminating in the *pax romana*.

First the conviction of the ultimate identity of the culturally diversified gods, then the belief in a supreme being beyond or above all ethnic deities formed the spiritual complement to this process of geopolitical unification. Polytheistic religion functioned as a paradigm of how living in a common world was conceivable and communicable. The complete translatability of gods founded a consciousness of dealing with basically the same species in spite of all other kinds of cultural alterity.

**Conversion**

*Energeia: Language in Its Magical Function*

This interpretation of religion as a principle counteracting the factors of cultural pseudo-speciation seems rather paradoxical, for religion is generally held to be the most forceful promoter and expression of cultural identity, unity, and specificity. This needs no further elaboration.
ilation, the giving up of a traditional cultural identity in favor of a dominating culture, is necessarily accompanied by religious conversion, and religion is universally recognized as the strongest bastion against assimilation. Movements of resistance against political and cultural domination, oppression, and exploitation universally assume the form of religious movements. Jewish history provides the model for these movements of liberation, and the Exodus story has been shown to be more or less universally adopted wherever people have revolted against an oppressive system.

This is true, but it applies to specific political and cultural conditions which might be subsumed under the general term of “minority conditions.” Minority conditions arise where a hegemonic culture dominates and threatens to swallow up a culturally and ethnically distinct group. Here we are dealing with what may be interpreted as an “immune reaction” of the cultural system, a tendency to build up a deliberate “counter-identity” against the dominating system. The cultural system is intensified in terms of counterdistinctivity. This mechanism may be called second-degree pseudo-speciation, to be distinguished from normal pseudo-speciation, which occurs always and everywhere. Second-degree or counterdistinctive pseudo-speciation, however, occurs mostly under minority conditions. Identity then turns normative, based on “normative self-definition.” It is typically under these conditions of resistance to political and cultural domination that religions of a new type emerge which I would like to call “second-degree” or “secondary” religions. These religions defy translatability. They are entered via conversion and left via apostasy.

I shall not recapitulate Jewish history here, which is a sequence of typical minority situations, starting with Abraham in Ur and Moses in Egypt and continuing via less mythical events such as the Babylonian exile, the situation of Judaea under the Persians, the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, and the Romans, through the various diaspora places from Alexandria to Cernovic (the historical exception, of course, being the modern state of Israel). The Jewish paradigm is the most ancient and the most typical; perhaps it is also the model and origin of all or most other cases. Egypt is a far less conspicuous case, but also far less known. I shall therefore concentrate on the Egyptian example in showing how religion can work in the direction of promoting untranslatability.

Egypt entered into minority conditions only after the Macedonian conquest. The Libyan and Ethiopian conquerors had adopted the Egyptian culture rather than imposing their own. Even the Persians did not really
impose their culture on the Egyptians because there were too few immigrants from Persia to form an upper class with an elite culture as the Greeks did later.\textsuperscript{25} Under Macedonian rule, the Egyptians found themselves in very much the same situation as the Jews but without a stabilized tradition. While the Israelite tradition achieved its final state of the Hebrew canon, the Egyptian tradition had to undergo profound transformations. Some features developed under minority conditions are strikingly similar. The extreme stress laid on purity, laws, life form, and diet in many ways parallel the emergence of \textit{halakha} in Israel. We also find the belief in the untranslatability of the Egyptian language.

Hellenized Egyptians were as active in producing Greek texts as hellenized Jews. Quite a few of these texts present themselves as translations from the Egyptian. Translation and interpretation were central among the cultural activities of Greco-Egyptian and Greco-Jewish intellectuals in the literate milieus of Alexandria and Memphis.\textsuperscript{26} The question of translation and translatability itself became a major topic in this literature.\textsuperscript{27} But there is also a theory of untranslatability that rejects even the principle and practice of translating gods. In Iamblichus (\textit{De mysteriis} 2:4–5) we read, for example, that names of gods should never be translated.\textsuperscript{28} In dealing with divine names one has to exclude all questions of meaning and reference. The name is to be regarded as a mystical symbol. It cannot be understood and for this very reason it cannot be translated. Knowledge of the names preserves the “mystical image of the deity” in the soul. For this reason we prefer to call the sun god not Helios but Baal, Semesilam (Shamash?), or Re, and the god of wisdom not Hermes but rather Thoth. The gods declared the languages of holy peoples like the Assyrians and the Egyptians holy, and communication with the gods can only take place in these languages. The Egyptians and other barbarians “always kept to the same formulas because they are conservative and so are the gods. Their formulas are welcome to the gods. To alter them is not permitted to anybody under any circumstances.” The \textit{Lautgestalt} here becomes a taboo, the phonetic form of language functioning not as a \textit{signifiant} which stands for some \textit{signifie} but as a mystical symbol, a kind of verbal image full of mysterious beauty and divine presence.

In opposing Celsus’s view on the arbitrariness of divine names, the Christian church father Origen uses exactly the same arguments as the pagan magician and philosopher Iamblichus.\textsuperscript{29} Both agree that there is a natural link (\textit{sympátheia}, “sympathy”) between name and deity and that the magical and “presentifying” power of language rests in the sound and not in the meaning and is therefore untranslatable. A less well known treat-
ment of the same topos can be found in the opening chapters of treatise XVI from the *Corpus Hermeticum*. It is presented as introduction to a translation and thus deals with both translating and untranslatability.

He said that those who read my books [Hermes Trismegistos speaks] will think that they are very clearly and simply written, when in fact, quite the contrary, they are unclear and hide the meaning of the words and will become completely obscure when later on the Greeks will want to translate our language into their own, which will bring about a complete distortion and obfuscation of the text. Expressed in the original language, the discourse conveys its meaning clearly, for the very quality of the sounds and the [intonation] of the Egyptian words contain in [themselves] the force of the things said.

Preserve this discourse untranslated, in order that such mysteries may be kept from the Greeks, and that their insolent, insipid and meretricious manner of speech may not reduce to impotence the dignity and strength [of our language] and the cogent force of the words. For all the Greeks have is empty speech, good for showing off; and the philosophy of the Greeks is just noisy talk. For our part, we use not words, but sounds full of energy.

The energetic theory of language is magical. The magical force of spells resides in their sound. It is the sound, the sensual quality of speech, that has the power to reach the divine sphere. The energetic dimension of language is untranslatable.

Conversion: Revelation Versus Evidence

One of the surest signs that we are dealing with a secondary religion is the phenomenon of conversion. As long as there is the possibility of translation there is no need of conversion. If all religions basically worship the same gods there is no need to give up one religion and to enter another one. This possibility only occurs if there is one religion claiming knowledge of a superior truth. It is precisely this claim that excludes translatability. If one religion is wrong and the other is right, there can be no question of translating the gods of the one into those of the other. Obviously they are about different gods.

A very interesting borderline case is provided by the opening scene of the eleventh book in the *Metamorphoses* by Apuleius, in which Lucius prays to the rising moon and sees in a dream the goddess herself. The speech of the goddess first displays the well-known topos of the relativity of names. One people calls her by this name, the other by that name, all adoring her in their specific tongues and cultural forms. But beyond all her conventional ethnic names there is a *verum nomen*, her true name, and this one is known only to the Egyptians and the Ethiopians. Up till now it made
little difference whether you worshiped Venus in the way of the Paphians, Minerva Cecropeia in the way of the Athenians, Diana in the way of the Ephesians, or Proserpina in the way of the Sicilians. But now it turns out to be of utmost importance to follow Isis in the way of the Egyptians because only they know the true name and rites. If you are really serious about it, there is no alternative: you must convert to the Isis-religion and enter into the group of the initiated.32

But still, Isis is a cosmotheistic deity. She belongs to the class of supreme beings who embody the universe in its totality. Her particular power and attraction lie in her double role of cosmic deity and personal rescuer; she is mistress of the stars and of luck and fate. Being a cosmotheistic deity, her name has a rich signifié. Presenting herself she may point to every divine role possible as a manifestation of her power. “I am this, and that, and that, . . . in short: everything,” she says to her believers. The god of Israel is the exact opposite. He does not say “I am everything” but “I am who I am,” negating by this expression every referent, every tertium comparationis, and every translatability.33 He is not only above but displaces all the other gods. Here, the cosmotheistic link between god and world, and god and gods, is categorically broken.

This is what the enlightened and cultured among the pagans were unable to understand. It was not a problem that the Jews were monotheists: monotheism had long been established as the leading philosophical attitude toward the divine. Every cultivated person agreed that there is but one god and it little mattered whether his name was Adonai or Zeus or Ammon or whether he was just called Hypsistos (Supreme). This is the point Celsus made in his Alethes Logos. The name is “Schall und Rauch,” as Goethe, another cosmotheist, put it. Varro (116–27 B.C.E.), who knew about the Jews from Poseidonios, was unwilling to make any difference between Jove and Jahve nihil interesse censens quo nomine nuncupetur, dum eadem res intelligatur.34 But the Jews and the Christians insisted on the very name. For them, the name mattered. To translate Adonai into Zeus would have meant apostasy.

The translatability of gods depended on their natural evidence. They are accessible either to experience or to reason or to both in the form of indubitable, intersubjective, and intercultural data to which one can point in searching for a name in another language. What this form of natural evidence excludes is “belief”: where all is “given” there is nothing to believe in. The worship of gods is a matter of knowledge and obedience but not of belief. In his book Belief, Language and Experience, the philosopher and indologist Rodney Needham has shown that most languages lack a
word for what in the Greek of the New Testament is called *pistis* and what other languages translate as *fides*, *Glaube*, *foi* and so on; in English *pistis* is rendered by two words: *faith* and *belief*. Christian missionaries had great trouble finding words for *pistis* in the languages of the people they wanted to address. In most cases they had to invent a word. Translatability rests upon experience and reason, untranslatability on belief which in itself proves to be an untranslatable concept. Paul already made the difference quite clear by stating “we are walking not by the sight (*opsis*) but by the faith (*pistis*)” (2 Cor 5.7). People walking “by the sight” could point to the visible world in telling which gods they worshiped. People walking by faith had to tell a story the truth of which rests on matters outside the visible world. They could translate the story but not the god.

**Syncretism: Translation into a Third Language**

In a recent book, G. W. Bowersock has proposed that Hellenism was a medium rather than a message. Hellenism provided a common language for local traditions and religions to express themselves in a voice much more eloquent, flexible, and articulate than their own. “Greek,” Bowersock writes, “was the language and culture of transmission and communication. It served, in other words, as a vehicle.” Hellenism did not mean hellenization. It did not cover the variegated world of different peoples and cultures, religions and traditions, with a unified varnish of Greek culture. Hellenism, instead, provided them with “a flexible medium of both cultural and religious expressions.” Bowersock is perhaps somewhat underrating the strong anti-Greek feelings prevailing among the native elites, especially in Judaea and Egypt, and the frequent clashes and tensions between indigenous traditions and the world of the gymnasium. But he is certainly right in pointing out that the culture of late antiquity owed at least as much to indigenous influences as to the Greek heritage and that the Greek universe of language, thought, mythology, and imagery became less an alternative or even antithesis to local traditions than a new way of giving voice to them. This explains why from the Jewish and Christian points of view the differences between Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Syrian, Babylonian, and other religions disappeared. “Hellenism” became a synonym for “paganism,” because it served in late antiquity as a common semiotic system and practice for all these religions. As they were translated into the common semiotic system of Hellenism, the borders between the different traditions tended to become much more permeable than they had been within the original language barriers. A process of interpenetration took place which
not only for Jews and Christians but also for the “pagans” themselves made
the differences between them much less evident than what they had in com­
mon. Hellenism, in other words, not only provided a common language
but helped to discover a common world and a “cosmopolitan” conscious­
ness.

Nineteenth-century scholars used to refer to this process of cultural and
religious interpenetration as “syncretism.”38 The Greek term *synkretismós*
occurs only once: in Plutarch, where it refers to an archaic custom of the
Cretan people to overcome local feuds and to form a sacred alliance to
withstand foreign aggression. By way of an erroneous association with
*kerannymi* (to merge), which would yield *synkrásia*, the expression came
to denote the idea of a merging of gods (*theokrasía*) and then of cultures
in a more general sense. But syncretism, as opposed to “fusion,” is not sim­
ply merging. It describes a kind of merging which coexists with the original
distinct entities. The local identities are not altogether abolished; they are
only made transparent, as it were. They retain their native semiotic prac­
tices and preserve their original meaning. When translated into the third
language of Hellenism, however, they assume a new kind of transparency
which smoothes down idiosyncratic differences, allows for interpenetra­
tion, and opens up a common background of “cosmotheism.” Syncretism
requires or offers double membership: one in a native culture and one in a
general culture. It does not mean one at the expense of the other. The gen­
eral culture depends (or even “feeds”) on the local cultures.

We can distinguish three types of cultural translation: “syncretis­
tic translation” or translation into a third language/culture; “assimila­
tory translation” or translation into a dominating language/culture; and
“mutual translation” within a network of (economic/cultural) exchanges.

*Syncretistic translation* is exemplified by what may be called “cos­
motheistic monotheism.” The different divinities are not just “translated”
into each other but into a third and overarching one which forms some­
thing like a common background. Syncretistic translation renders the com­
mon background visible. It presupposes a fundamental unity beyond all
cultural diversities. As far as theology is concerned, this unity is guaranteed
by the oneness of the world. The world or cosmos serves as the ultimate
referent for the diverse divinities. We may compare the unity of syncretism,
which is founded on the cosmos, with the unity of anthropology, which
is founded on “human nature” (“die Einheit des Menschengeistes,” as
Thomas Mann called it).

*Assimilatory or competitive translation* is exemplified by the early in­
stances of *interpretatio Graeca*, when Herodotus visited Egypt and formed
the opinion that “almost all the names of the gods came from Egypt to Greece.” This, he adds, is what the Egyptians say themselves. What Herodotus heard in conversing with Egyptian priests must have been the Greek names. They spoke to him in Greek using the hellenized names of the gods, speaking not of Re, Amun, Thoth, and Ptah, but of Helios, Zeus, Hermes, and Hephaestus. For them, it did not matter whether these gods were called Re or Helios, Amun or Zeus, Thoth or Hermes, as long as the same gods were recognized and addressed by these names. They claimed to have been the first to recognize these gods, to find out their nature by establishing their mythology and theology, and to establish a permanent contact with them: gnosis theon, as this particular cultural activity is called. The interpretatio Graeca of the Egyptian gods thus turns out to be not a Greek but an Egyptian achievement. We have always assumed this translation to be a manifestation of the Greek spirit and its interpretive openness toward foreign civilizations. But it seems now much more probable that the translation of their national panthea into Greek suited in the first place the interest of the “barbarians.” Morton Smith and others have shown that Greek language and learning tended already to be recognized and experienced as an elite or superior culture by oriental peoples under the Persian empire and long before the Macedonian conquest. All the stories about early Greek encounters with Egyptian priests, from Solon and Hekataios down to Herodotus and Platon, show the same Egyptian tendency to impress the Greek visitors by their superior cultural antiquity. What you call culture—the argument runs—and what you are so proud of has been familiar to us for thousands of years and it is from us that your ancestors borrowed it. This is a very familiar motif in “nativistic” movements of our days. Where western culture is met by primitive cultures, this is a typical reaction. Greek functions in this context as the other, not as a third language. Translatability into Greek is a question of cultural competitiveness.

Mutual translation seems to apply to the Babylonian material. This type of mutual translation is based on and develops within networks of international law and commerce. The history of these networks leads us back to the very roots both of translation and of mutuality or reciprocity, namely, to the exchange of gifts as the primal form of intergroup communication. Marcel Mauss, in his classic study on “le don,” was the first to point out the communicative functions of what Marshall Sahlins later called “Stone Age economics.” The basic function of exchange is not the fulfillment of economic needs but the establishment of community by communication, mutuality, and reciprocity. It is therefore anything but a sur-
prise that mutual translation turns out to be the earliest type and something like the "primal scene" of cultural translatability. Translate! is the categorical imperative of early cultures. It is the overcoming of autistic seclusion, the prohibition of incest, the constraint to form alliances outside the narrow circles of house, village, and clan, and to enter into larger networks of communication.

It is revealing to translate these three types into our time. To start with the last one, mutual translation: Today, when these networks have finally become global, they have lost something of their primary charm. The modern situation is characterized by a strange kind of reciprocity: on the one hand, western civilization is expanding all over the world; there is hardly any place left untouched by Coca-Cola. On the other hand, cultural fragments from all places and periods are brought into the musée imaginaire of western culture, which is rapidly growing into a supermarket or Disneyland of postmodern curiosity. In pre- and early historical times, reciprocity and mutuality meant a process of growth and enrichment for all cultures involved; today it means loss and impoverishment. Western culture is reduced to Coca-Cola and pidgin English, native cultures are reduced to airport art. The cultural imperative, today, points in the opposite direction: to regionalism, the preservation (or invention) of dying languages and traditions, and the emphasis on otherness. This is also why assimilatory translation or competitive otherness is no longer a valid option. Mutual acknowledgment is suppressed as one culture is used as the negative foil of the other.

There remains the first type to be considered, syncretism as defined in terms of double membership and a third language. Such a language is something not actually given but virtually envisaged and kept up in order to provide a framework in which individual cultures can become transparent without losing their identities.

Hellenism, seen not as a message but as a medium, not as a homogenizing cover but as a flexible and eloquent language giving understandable voice to vastly different messages, preserving difference while providing transparency, might serve as a model. Hellenistic culture became a medium equally removed from classical Greek culture as from all the other oriental and African cultures that adopted it as a form of cultural self-expression. In the same way, a transcultural medium that will not amount to westernization or Americanization could provide visibility and transparency in a world of preserved traditions and cultural otherness.