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## „Negev” in Gen 13:1. Translation and Interpretation

„Negew” w Rdz 13,1. Tłumaczenie i interpretacja

Genesis 13:1 belongs to the story of Abram’s journey to Egypt due to famine (Gen 12:10-20). After an apparently extremely successful encounter with the pharaoh, Abram is on his way back. He had gone down to Egypt subsequently to the theophany in Bethel, and after leaving Egypt he went back *to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai* (Gen 13:3).

The opening verse that informs about the direction of his journey, is described by the word „הנגבה” (ha-negeva)<sup>1</sup>. The term „negev” has a double meaning in the Hebrew language – it indicates a geographical area, the desert „Negev”, but also signifies a cardinal direction, „the south”.

The translational tradition of this verse makes use of both meanings. The problem undertaken in this article deals with the difficulty in understanding the usage of this word in this particular passage and also with problems in translating it. The final word „הנגבה” (ha-negeva), due to its double meaning, may be translated either as the name of the geographical area „Negev”, and as a cardinal direction „South”. In a few cases translators choose some sort of compromise and use the term „South” as the name of the area.

### THE HEBREW TEXT OF GEN 13:1

וַיֵּעַל אַבְרָם מִמִּצְרַיִם הוּא וְאִשְׁתּוֹ  
וְכָל-אֲשֶׁר-לָו וְלוֹט עִמּוֹ הַנֶּגֶב:

In Pentateuch the word „negev” (negeva) appears in multiple cases in the meaning of the cardinal direction (e.g. Gen 12:9; Ex 27:9; 36:23; Num 34:3;

<sup>1</sup> Końcowe ה, oznacza kierunek.

35:5). However, in this case the concept of using this meaning generates problems. Even if the story in Gen 12:10-20 is lacking precise description where Abram encountered the pharaoh, the way to Bethel from any place in Egypt never follows the southern direction. Different translations appeal to different interpretations not only of the word „ha-negeva”, but, in my opinion, they give witness to a symbolic understanding of the direction that Abram followed during his journeys.

Below I present the major translations of this verse, focusing on the word „הנגבה”. First, I bring up the most important ancient versions, and later a few of the major translations into English and Polish, starting from the Middle Ages to contemporary times. At the end, as an extremely interesting case, I quote the translation by Martin Luther. The date of each translation is given in parentheses.

### ANCIENT TRANSLATIONS

The ancient versions translate:

Targum Onkelos – .... *towards south*

וּסְלִיק אַבְרָם מִמִּצְרַיִם הוּא וְאִיתְתִּיהּ וְכָל דְּלִיהּ וְלוֹט עִמִּיהּ לְדִרְוּקָא: ONK

Septuagint – ... *towards wilderness*

ΛΥΓ ἀνέβη δὲ Ἀβραμ ἐξ Αἰγύπτου αὐτὸς καὶ ἡ γυνὴ αὐτοῦ καὶ πάντα τὰ αὐτοῦ καὶ Λωτ μετ' αὐτοῦ εἰς τὴν ἔρημον

Vulgate – ... *towards southern parts of the country*

<sup>VUL</sup> ascendit ergo Abram de Aegypto ipse et uxor eius et omnia quae habebat et Loth cum eo ad australem plagam

The problem with using the word „south” is that this particular direction is absolutely irrational in this story. The narrative in Genesis 12 says that Abram stopped in Egypt; knowledge of history and geography allows us to suppose that it was probably in the Delta, since he was escaping the famine. Whatever return way he chose, he had to follow the northern, or alternatively, the north-eastward, direction. None of the possible ways led south.

Commenting on this verse Rashi wrote: „*He went up*” to proceed to the Southern part of the land of Israel – as it is said above (XII.9) „going more and more to the Negeb” – to the Mount Moria. Still, when one goes from Egypt to the land of Canaan, one proceeds from South to North, because Egypt is to the South of the land of Israel... (see Numb. XXXIII and XXXIV)<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> *Chumash with Rashi's Commentary*, thum. i red. Rabbi A.M. Silbermann, Jerusalem 1993, Genesis, pp. 52.

“South” as the meaning of „הנגבה” is used in an ancient Jewish translation by Onkelos, who knows very well the geographical condition of Palestine. Hieronymus chooses a compromise version, translating „southern parts of the country”. Quite an interesting solution is offered by LXX, also very well familiar with the geographical layout of Palestine, which uses the word „wilderness”. This translation also does not really cope with the following story – Abram’s return journey to Bethel – because the way to Bethel crosses the semi-arid areas and not particularly wilderness (τῆν ἔρημον).

### ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

English translations translate the Hebrew word „הנגבה” in the following manner:

– as the cardinal direction, „south”: *And Abram went up out of Egypt... into the south.*

- Jewish English translations: Rashi / Silberman (1934);
- National English translations: Wycliffe Bible (1395); King James Version (1611<sup>3</sup>); Webster Bible (1833); Young Literal Translation (1862); Revised Webster Bible (1995);

– as a geographical area „South”: *And Abram went up out of Egypt... into the South.*

- Jewish English translations: Jewish Publication Society TaNaKh (1917);
- National English translations: Geneva Bible (1599); English Revised Version (1885); American Standard Version (1901); Hebrew Name Version<sup>4</sup>; The Bible in Basic English (1949); New King James Version (1982).

– as the name of a geographical area, „Negev”: *Avram / Abram went up from Egypt ... into the Negev / towards Negev (Negeb).*

- Jewish English translations: Jewish Publication Society TaNaKh (1985); Complete Jewish Bible (1998); Jewish Study Bible (2004);
- National English translations: Revised Standard Version (1952); New Jerusalem Bible (1985); New American Bible (1986); New International Version (1973); New Revised Standard Version (1989); English Standard Version (2001);

– one example: *And Abram went up out of Egypt... into the wilderness*

- English translation of Septuagint (LXE).

<sup>3</sup> This also is used in revised New King James (1902).

<sup>4</sup> Update of the American Standard Version (1901).

## POLISH TRANSLATIONS

Polish translations use two words, „south (południe)” and „Negev (Negew)”.

– as the direction, „south”: *Wyszedł Abram z Egiptu... ku południowi....*

- Jewish Polish translations: Cyłkow (1895); Pardes Lauder (2001);
- National Polish translations: Biblia Brzeska (1563); Biblia Leopoldy (1561); Biblia Jakuba Wujka (1599); Biblia Gdańska (1632); Stary Testament, ks. Kruszyński (1935);

– as the name of a geographical area, „Negev”: *Wyszedł Abram z Egiptu... do / w kierunku Negebu....*

- National Polish translations: Biblia Warszawska (1975); Biblia Poznańska (1982); Biblia Tysiąclecia (1979); Pauliści (2008).

## TRANSLATION OF MARTIN LUTHER

(1545) Also zoch Abram er auff aus Egipten... gegen dem Mittag<sup>5</sup>.

## COMMENTS

The translations into English and Polish through the ages indicate that there have been two tendencies – using the name of the direction or the geographical name. The first option, that follows the Targum, generally appears in the older English and Polish national translations. Modern translations in both countries generally use the geographical name, *Negev*.

In Jewish translations into Diaspora languages two tendencies can be observed – the American Jews rather conform to the tendencies of Christian translations while the Polish Jews kept (until now) the traditional line. In English one more feature can be observed – the 19th century Christian translation and early 20th century Jewish translation tend to use the word „South” that connotes the area.

The explanation of this tendency might appear quite simple at first glance – the older versions accept the authority of an ancient Jewish tradition, while the modern ones follow the more rational option. An additional complication emerges in the curious translation by Martin Luther, who did not want to follow either the Jewish interpretation in Targum, nor the Vulgate. However, he also felt that

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<sup>5</sup> Revision of 1912:..., *ins Mittagsland*. Revision of 1984:..., *ins Südländ*.

he could not simply step out of the whole tradition that the meaning of the word „הַנֶּגֶב” is broader than simply the name of the geographical area. His translation „around the Noon-time” can be understood not so much as a sort of compromise between rationality and the Tradition, but above all as giving new theological meaning<sup>6</sup>. While distancing himself from the traditional interpretation, Luther saved the symbolic meaning, at the cost of accuracy of the text.

## HYPOTHESIS

While working on the concept of space in the Pentateuch<sup>7</sup> I found that in the Book of Genesis the movement of heroes denotes space and has a symbolic meaning. In the sacred writings of the ancient Near East the concept of space plays a very important role, because events described in those narratives stand as the archetypes for human activities. The sacral space (either mythical or cultic) belonged to the gods, therefore it had archetypal meaning. Human relation towards it was always perceived in symbolic terms<sup>8</sup>.

In the Pentateuch all the events occur on the earthly territory which can be easily defined in geographical terms, however, as a sacred story, the Pentateuch also needs symbolic space. It was created through the movement of the heroes of those narratives, as it is assigned to them. Analysis shows that the direction of movement has an inner meaning in the characterization of the figure presented.

Coming back to the story of the patriarchs, one can clearly observe there a movement in the North – South direction. In fact, Abram starts his journey from the East to the West (Ur to Haran), however it is not his real „life journey”, as it was invented by his father. The call of God that marks the beginning of the *history of Israel* finds Abram in Haran (Gen 12:4), and his way to fulfilment of the promise leads southwards. When looking for a wife for his son, Abram sent his servant to his family in the north (Gen 24:3-4). The same journey is also undertaken by Jacob (Gen 27:46-28:2). Interpreting it in symbolic terms, we can say that „north” is connected with a place (and environment) familiar to the hero and the „south” symbolises something unknown, however bound with God’s promise.

Concerning all of this I suggest that the translation of Onkelos, followed faithfully by a great number of biblical scholars of the previous ages up to 18th/

<sup>6</sup> The noon in Christian understanding of time applies to Crucifixion. More about the meaning of the noon in early Hellenistic literature: W. Speyer, *Mittag und Mitternacht als Heilige Zeiten in Antike und Christentum* in: *Vivarium*, Münster 1984, pp. 314-326; J. Block Friedman, *Euridice, Heurodis, and the Noon-Day Demon* in: *Speculum* 41 (1966), pp. 22-29.

<sup>7</sup> T. Stanek, *Struktura retoryczna pięcioksięgu...*, forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> Comp. N. Wyatt, *Space and Time in Religious Life of the Near East*, Sheffield 2001.

19th century, comes from a deep understanding and appreciation of symbolism – going towards „South” from Egypt Abram followed the way bound with God’s promise. Only the modern commentators and translators, strongly bound to the rational and historical trend in explanations of biblical stories, chose the geographical name „Negev”. Such translation not only stays in agreement with the letter of the text but is also logical from the point of view of maps of that Region. The only problem is that the modern tradition does not see any more the mystery of the biblical text.

## STRESZCZENIE

Opisując powrót Abrama z Egiptu do Betel, dla określenia kierunku drogi Rdz 1,13 używa terminu *na południe* (הַנִּנְבָּה). W przekładach Księgi Rodzaju tłumacze wyraźnie zmagają się z tym określeniem, a najpełniejszy wyraz temu problemowi daje komentarz Rasziego. Artykuł przytacza reprezentatywne przykłady tłumaczeń na język angielski i polski. Starsze tłumaczenia podążają za znaczeniem *południe*, które ma sens symboliczny – w Księdze Rodzaju bohaterowie podążający w kierunku południowym, podążają za wezwaniem Boga, ku Jego obietnicy. Tłumaczenia nowsze używają, uzasadnionej racjonalnie, nazwy geograficznej – Negew, tracąc przy tym aspekt symbolu. Ciekawym przyczynkiem jest tłumaczenie Lutra, który nadal pozostaje w obrębie symboliki, ale zamienia znaczenie przestrzenne na czasowe.

## Słowa kluczowe

Biblia Hebrajska, interpretacje, przekłady