

Philo Judaeus
(c.20 B.C.-50 A.D.)

THE LIFE OF MOSES (II. 37-40)

The translators shut themselves away in seclusion, alone except for the four natural elements of earth, air, fire and water (for the Law begins with the creation of the world). And then they prophesied as if in ecstasy, but they used, not different words, but the same words and sentence structures, as if each was under the guidance of the same invisible Spirit. But is there anybody unaware that every language, and particularly Greek is rich in words, and that the same thought can be rendered in many ways by ringing the changes on words, using synonyms and, in each case, seeking out the *mot juste*? According to tradition, this did not happen in the translation of our Law, for each Chaldean word was exactly translated by a precise Greek equivalent, which was perfectly adapted to the thing signified. As I see it, this is the same as what happens in geometry or dialectic. There, meanings can not survive ambiguity of expression, as once terminology is established it remains constant. And similarly, our translators found the expressions exactly suitable to the things signified. And these words were the only, or at least the words most apt to render the things signified with perfect clarity. And here is the most striking proof of our claim: whenever a Chaldean who read Greek, or a Greek who understands Chaldean finds himself before both versions at once, he looks on the Greek and the Chaldean with wonder and respect as two sisters, or rather, as one and the same work in both matter and style...
