Biblical Hebrew as Mirrored in the Septuagint:
The Question of Influence from Spoken Hebrew

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The LXX version is a vast depository attesting to the knowledge of Hebrew during the Hellenistic period, only part of which has been researched to any degree. Generally, the use of the Septuagint in linguistic analysis of Hebrew is limited to the phonological data contained in Greek transcriptions of Hebrew names and words.[1] This aspect is certainly important, but it represents only a small part of the contribution the Greek version could make to the study of the Hebrew language. In fact, as regards both quantity and quality, the indications given by the translated parts of the Septuagint are of much greater moment than those that can be gained from the transcribed parts.

Imagine discovering a complete lexicon of biblical Hebrew, and the outlines of a grammar, from the early Hellenistic period—the relevance of such documents for the history of the Hebrew language would be doubted by none. Of course, such a lexicon and grammar do not exist. But it is possible, from the Greek text of the LXX, to extrapolate the mental dictionary of the translators, as well as the main grammatical rules they applied to their source text. In the course of rendering the source text, the translators constantly invoked the knowledge of the Hebrew language available to them. The recovery of that knowledge could be a major asset to the study of the Hebrew language in a historical perspective.

1 See E. Y. Kutscher, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (Jerusalem, 1982) 106–107.

To be sure, a number of caveats need to be observed in approaching this problem.[2] Working with the LXX means working with three unknowns: we lack information about the Hebrew *Vorlage* of the Septuagint, we do not possess the original Greek text of the version, and we have imperfect knowledge of the translation technique applied by the translators. By necessity, the LXX scholar will usually set out from the supposition that the *Vorlage* of the version is the consonantal text of the MT (or another attested Hebrew text), and that the eclectic text printed in the critical editions is a fair approximation of the Old Greek. Neither supposition is necessarily true, however, and one should always be ready to entertain the possibility of a divergent *Vorlage* or of a corrupted Greek text. In these cases, it would become practically impossible to extrapolate linguistic information from the Septuagint. The third unknown, translation technique, is even more of an obstacle to the linguistic approach. Indeed, knowledge of biblical Hebrew is not the only factor that guided the translators. Ideological considerations, exegetical traditions, and above all sensitivity to the context played an important role in the creation of the Greek text.

What this means is that one cannot simply take any Greek rendering of a Hebrew word and regard it as a lexical gloss equivalent to what one would find in a bilingual dictionary. Consider one example:

Hos 10:1

MT גפן בוקק ישראל פרי ישוה לו "Israel is an empty vine, he bringeth forth fruit unto himself" (KJV)

LXX ἄμπελος εὐκληματοῦσα Ισραηλ ὁ καρπὸς αὐτῆς εὐθηνῶν "Israel is a vine **with goodly branches**, her fruit is abundant"

The translation of בּוֹקֵק as εὐκληματοῦσα "growing healthy branches" does not necessarily mean that the translator knew a Hebrew root בקק "to be

luxuriant" cognate to Arabic *baqqa* with the same meaning.[3] Since the meaning "to grow healthy branches" could have been arrived at from the context, it is problematic to use this rendering in order to recover the knowledge of Hebrew of the translator. The equivalence בקק – εὐκληματέω may not represent the mental dictionary of the translator but merely a felicitous contextual guess as to the meaning of a rare Hebrew word.

When a Hebrew word is translated in a certain way more than once, and in different contexts, it can be posited with greater confidence that the translators' knowledge of Hebrew is operating. Moreover, in some cases the Greek rendering is clearly not conditioned by the context but seems to be due to Aramaic or post-Biblical Hebrew influence.

Judg 9:33

MT והיה בבקר כזרח השמש תשכים ופשטת על העיר "Then in the morning, as soon as the sun is up, rise early and rush upon the city" LXX καὶ ἔσται τὸ πρωὶ ἅμα τῷ ἀνατεῖλαι τὸν ἥλιον καὶ ὀρθρίσεις καὶ ἐκτενεῖς ἐπὶ τὴν πόλιν "And it shall come to pass in the morning at sunrising, you will get up early and **stretch out** towards the city"

The genesis of this remarkable rendering may tentatively be described as follows. The translator was unfamiliar with the BH meaning "to make a dash, to raid" for the verb פשט. He knew, however, another meaning for this verb, namely the meaning "to stretch out" which is the usual one in Aramaic and postbiblical Hebrew.[4] Following this linguistic information, he translated the verb in a way that fitted the context poorly.[5]

Divergences caused by linguistic interference of late Hebrew or Aramaic are not the rule in the LXX translation. Usually, the translators rendered

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[3] Cf., e.g., F. I. Andersen and D. N. Freedman, *Hosea* (AB 24; Garden City, N.Y., 1980) 549–550.

[4] See M. Jastrow, *A Dictionary of the Targumim, the Talmud Babli and Yerushalmi, and the Midrashic Literature* (New York, 1950) 1245–1246.

[5] The same equivalent was used in Judg 9:44 and 20:37 [B only]. This again indicates that the Hebrew knowledge of the translator caused the rendering.

their Hebrew source quite faithfully (though of course their capacity varied from book to book), correctly distinguishing Classical usage from Late biblical or post-biblical usage. Only occasionally did the translators' sensitivity and training let them down. Examples of BH words rendered incorrectly because of Aramaic or late Hebrew influence occur in every translation unit.[6] For modern-day linguists, such slips are interesting because they allow a glimpse into the knowledge of Hebrew available to the translators in the Hellenistic period.[7]

The present paper will be oriented specifically towards the question of the impact of *spoken Hebrew* on the Septuagint translation. The claim for the influence of spoken Hebrew, usually considered to be of a proto-Mishnaic type, has been made more than once,[8] although, it has to be said, with

[6] Examples have been noted by, e.g., Z. Frankel, *Vorstudien zu der Septuaginta* (Leipzig, 1841) 201–203; F. Wutz, *Die Transkriptionen von der Septuaginta bis zu Hieronymus* (Stuttgart, 1933) 150–151; E. Tov, *The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research* (2nd ed.; Jerusalem, 1997) 109 and 179–180 (bibliography).

[7] See E. Y. Kutscher, *The Language and Linguistic Background of the Isaiah Scroll (I Q Isaᵃ)* (Leiden, 1974) 74–77

[8] See C. Rabin, "Hebrew and Aramaic in the First Century," in *The Jewish People in the First Century* (ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern; 2 vols.; CRINT; Philadelphia, 1976) 2:1007–1039, in particular 1023: "... the way the Septuagint translates some Hebrew words shows that the translators understood them in mishnaic Hebrew senses rather than biblical ones..." Rabin himself does not provide even one example of the phenomenon he alleges. In an oral communication, Professor A. Hurvitz informed me of an example Rabin used in his teaching: in Ps 63:2, the Hebrew verb כמה "to yearn" is translated ποσαπλῶς "how often" in a way that could reflect MH על אחת כמה וכמה "how much more" (the same example is brought by Margain in his article quoted below). It seems to me, however, that this rendering can be sufficiently explained from the biblical use of כמה "how much." In Ps 78:40 כמה is rendered ποσάκις "how often," a synonym of ποσαπλῶς. See also J. Blau, "Zum Hebräisch der Übersetzer des AT," *VT* 6 (1956) 98–100; J. Margain, "La Septante comme Témoin de l'hébreu post-exilique et michnique," in *Mosaïque de langues mosaïque culturelle: Le bilinguisme dans le Proche-Orient Ancien* (ed. F. Briquel-Chatonnet; Paris, 1996) 191–197.

flimsy evidence.[9] The claim itself is quite reasonable. The Alexandrian translators' knowledge of biblical Hebrew—though not, as the Letter of Aristeas would lead us to believe, the translators themselves—very probably derived from the land of Israel, where Hebrew was still spoken in the third and second centuries BCE. Influence of spoken Hebrew on the version is therefore something one would expect to find. Actually demonstrating it, however, is not easy—as will be seen.

For reasons of method, a somewhat round-about way will be taken in addressing the problem. Indeed, the question of spoken Hebrew cannot be treated in isolation from other questions such as that of Aramaic influence and of written Hebrew in the Hellenistic period.

1. "Aramaizing" renderings

The influence of Aramaic was one of the principal factors affecting the development of the Hebrew language, particularly in the post-exilic period. Old Hebrew words changed their meaning under the influence of Aramaic cognates and an increasing number of new words were borrowed from the contemporary world language. This state of affairs is reflected in the LXX. The Greek translators very often translated their Hebrew text in a way that betrays Aramaic influence.[10]

Many of the relevant renderings involve Aramaic words that are also frequent in Mishnaic Hebrew, thus suggesting that they were borrowed into spoken Hebrew sometime during the Second Temple period.[11] This raises the possibility that the translators knew the words in the "Aramaic" meaning not from Aramaic directly but from the spoken Hebrew of their

[9] See A. Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (trans. J. Elwolde; Cambridge, 1993) 164: "…there has still not been a thorough study of possible RH influence in the Septuagint…"

[10] The question of Aramaizing renderings has been discussed more fully in an article to be published in a forthcoming Festschrift.

[11] Some of these words may always have existed in early non-Judaean Hebrew dialects.

time. Examples include the verb פשט "to extend" signaled above, as well as the following:

> Isa 33:11
>
> MT תהרו חשש "You conceive chaff"
>
> LXX νῦν ὄψεσθε νῦν αἰσθηθήσεσθε "now you will see, now you will feel"

This rendering reflects the verb חשש "to feel, to suffer" found in both Aramaic and MH.[12]

Other instances are the rendering of the root פרש as "to separate" (Ezek 34:12), the word גו "back" as "what is in it" (Isa 51:23), the word דמים "blood" as "price" (Isa 9:4) and the root גבל as "to mix" (Exod 28:14). In all these cases BH words were wrongly analyzed under the influence of a homonymous word attested in Aramaic and MH.[13]

In practice, however, it is impossible to be certain that in any of these cases the confusion was induced specifically by spoken Hebrew. It is just as likely, and perhaps even more likely, that the interference was caused by Aramaic directly.

Indeed, other instances of interference involve Aramaic elements that are not well attested in MH—e.g., כליל "crown" (instead of BH כליל "entire"[14]), דכא "to purify" (instead of BH דכא "to crush"[15]), פקד "to command" (instead

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[12] See Jastrow, *Dictionary*. The cognate חוש is attested in Eccl 2:25 מי יאכל ומי יחוש, but it is unlikely that the translator of Isaiah was influenced by this passage in Qoheleth. It seems rather that whatever factor, i.e., Aramaic or spoken Hebrew, influenced the translator of Isaiah also affected the author of Qoheleth.

[13] Some of these words are attested in Qumran Hebrew as well. See J. Joosten, "The Knowledge and Use of Hebrew in the Hellenistic Period: Qumran and the Septuagint," in *Diggers at the Well: Proceedings of a Third International Symposium on the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls & Ben Sira* (ed. T. Muraoka and J. F. Elwolde; Leiden, 2000) 115–130.

[14] Ezek 28:12; Lam 2:15.

[15] Isa 53:10.

of BH פקד "to muster, etc."[16]). Other instances involve words unattested, or practically unattested, in any kind of Hebrew, such as אבולה "gate" (for the river אובל[17]), אשל a measure of land (for אשל "tamarisk"), רחץ "hope" (for רחץ "to wash"[18]) or the following:

> Josh 6:5
>
> ונפלה חומת העיר תחתיה ועלו העם איש נגדו MT "and the wall of the city will fall down flat, and the people shall **go up** every man straight before him"
>
> LXX πεσεῖται αὐτόματα τὰ τείχη τῆς πόλεως καὶ εἰσελεύσεται πᾶς ὁ λαὸς ὁρμήσας ἕκαστος κατὰ πρόσωπον "The walls of the city will fall by themselves and all the people will **go in** each man rushing straight ahead."

The divergence in the rendering of the second clause seems to indicate that the translator derived the Hebrew verb from עלל "to enter" instead of עלה "to go up." The former is well known from Aramaic but unattested in Hebrew, whether biblical or postbiblical.[19]

None of the latter "Aramaizing" renderings are likely to derive from any type of spoken Hebrew. They were created because the translator confused two languages—Aramaic and Hebrew—not two registers of the same language. In view of the likelihood that some of the Septuagints' renderings go back to Aramaic directly, it is only a short step to argue that all of the renderings involving words attested in Aramaic were created by the same process.[20]

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[16] See also Isa 13:4, 11; 1 Sam 25:7, 15, 21.

[17] Dan 8:2, 3, 6.

[18] Ps 60:10, 108:10.

[19] See also Josh 10:9.

[20] The influence of Aramaic on the translators of the LXX is indicated by several other phenomena as well. See the study referred to in n. 10.

2. The development of the literary tradition

Another important factor in the development of the Hebrew language is the study of ancient texts. On the one hand, the traditional reading of texts was a conservative force, contributing to the remarkable continuity in the writing of Hebrew in the pre-Mishnaic period.[21] But on the other hand, the literary tradition does attest a number of developments.[22] In some cases it seems that the Hebrew language of the late biblical books, the Qumran texts, and Ben Sira was influenced by changes in the spoken Hebrew of the time. At least those changes that cannot be traced back to Aramaic are best explained in this way.[23]

Where such late Hebrew elements are seen to underlie Greek renderings in the LXX,[24] the linguist finds himself in a difficult position. It is hard to decide whether the translator is showing influence from the spoken language or from the late Hebrew literary tradition.

Other innovations in LBH, QH or Ben Sira find their origin within the literary tradition itself. The most striking instances are the cases where a Classical BH expression was re-used in later texts in a way diverging from the classical use.[25] For example, the word מעוז is analyzed as meaning

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[21] See J. Joosten, "Pseudo-classicisms in Late Biblical Hebrew, in Ben Sira, and in Qumran Hebrew," in *Sirach, Scrolls and Sages: Proceedings of a Second International Symposium on the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Ben Sira, and the Mishnah, held at Leiden University, 15–17 December 1997* (ed. T. Muraoka and J. F. Elwolde; Leiden, 1999) 146–159.

[22] See especially the studies of A. Hurvitz, e.g., בין לשון ללשון: לתולדות לשון המקרא בימי בית שני (Jerusalem, 1972); *A Linguistic Study of the Relationship between the Priestly Source and the Book of Ezekiel* (Paris, 1981).

[23] Well-known examples include עמד "to stand up" versus Classical BH "to be in a standing position"; רצון "will" versus CBH "favour"; קץ "time" versus CBH "end."

[24] For examples, see Joosten, "Knowledge and Use of Hebrew."

[25] Joosten, "Pseudo-classicisms."

"strength" (from the root עזז) in both QH and the Septuagint.[26] In Classical BH, the word means "refuge" (from the root עוז).

Such re-use of literary idioms may in many cases have become known to the translators through their familiarity with written texts. But the spoken language, too, may have played a part. Let us consider one example illustrating the problem:

Isa 23:17

MT והיה מקץ שבעים שנה יפקד ה' את צר ושבה לאתננה "At the end of seventy years, the Lord will visit Tyre, and **she will return to her hire**"

LXX καὶ ἔσται μετὰ ἑβδομήκοντα ἔτη ἐπισκοπὴν ποιήσει ὁ θεὸς Τύρου καὶ πάλιν ἀποκατασταθήσεται εἰς τὸ ἀρχαῖον "And it shall come to pass after the seventy years, that God will visit Tyre, and **she shall be again restored to her primitive state**"

The Septuagint of Isaiah is notoriously free, and in many passages the relation between the Greek translation and the Hebrew original is hard to trace. What seems to have happened in the present verse is that the translator read, instead of the MT's ושבה לאתננה "she will return to her harlot's wages," ושבה לאתנה, "and she will be returned to her 'steady flow.'"[27] At the same time, the latter expression was interpreted in the light of the idiomatic expression חזר/שב לאיתנו "to resume one's normal condition" attested in postbiblical Hebrew.[28] To be sure, the Hebrew expression is attested in the Bible:

[26] Idem, "Knowledge and Use of Hebrew."

[27] See J. Fischer, *In welcher Schrift lag das Buch Isaias den LXX vor?* (BZAW 56; Giessen, 1930) 39. For another explanation see A. van der Kooij, *The Oracle of Tyre* (VTSup 71; Leiden, 1998) 70.

[28] See Jastrow, *Dictionary*, 62.

Exod 14:27 וישב הים לפנות בקר לאיתנו "And the sea returned to its wonted flow"[29]

There are reasons to doubt, however, that the translator of Isaiah was simply thinking of that passage. As it is used in Exodus, the phrase is not really an idiomatic expression. Indeed, the word איתן often figures with bodies of water—נהרות איתן, נחל איתן—and could be translated "steady flow" (BDB). In other words, the reed sea really has an איתן to which it can return. In contrast, talmudic חזר לאיתנו reflects a semantic development. The composite expression has taken on a single meaning unrelated to its parts.[30] The expression may now be used with a variety of subjects. The source of the talmudic idiom is the biblical phrase, but this is used in a extended way.

The semantics underlying the Greek rendering in Isa 23:17 are those of talmudic rather than biblical שב לאיתנו. But the idiom שב/חזר לאיתנו "to resume one's normal condition" is absent from written sources of the Second Temple period. Possibly the translator knew the idiom from the spoken Hebrew of his time.[31] Alternatively, the translator of Isaiah derived the metaphorical meaning from Exod 14:27 directly. The correspondence between the rendering of Isa 23:17 and the talmudic use of שב לאיתנו would then be due to chance.

3. Influence from spoken Hebrew?

The case for influence from spoken Hebrew should in all rigour be based exclusively on examples involving words attested neither in Aramaic nor in any written texts of the pre-Mishnaic period. Linguistic elements

[29] Another verse that has sometimes been related to this expression is Gen 49:24, ותשב באיתן קשתו. The resemblance between this expression and the one occurring in Exod 14:27 is merely superficial, however.

[30] This is what is called an "exocentric" meaning by J.-M. Babut, *Les expressions idiomatiques en hébreu biblique* (CahRB 33; Paris, 1995) 24–29.

[31] A possible problem with this theory is the very late attestation of the expression in written sources. In the general sense of "to resume one's normal condition" the expression is not found before the Babylonian Talmud.

underlying the Greek translation that are absent from Aramaic and from Hebrew texts of the Hellenistic period, but attested in Mishnaic Hebrew, may with some probability be traced back to spoken Hebrew as known to the translators.[32] Examples that fully correspond to these criteria are hard to come by.

3.1. *Lexical items*

A possible instance is the LXX translation of BH כסת in Ezek 13:18, 20. The precise meaning of this word is unknown but according to the context something like "bands" seems to be called for.[33] The Septuagint, however, renders the word as "pillow," applying a meaning known to us from MH:[34]

> Ezek 13:20
>
> MT הנני אל כסתותיכנה... וקרעתי אתם מעל זרועתיכם "Behold, I am against your magic bands... and I will tear them from your arms"
> LXX ἰδοὺ ἐγὼ ἐπὶ τὰ προσκεφάλαια ὑμῶν... καὶ διαρρήξω αὐτὰ ἀπὸ τῶν βραχιόνων ὑμῶν "Behold, I am against your **pillows**... and I will tear them away from your arms"

The rendering fits the context poorly, both in the present verse and in v. 18. This indicates that the rendering reflects a piece of lexical information available to the translator. Thus it appears that the Greek translator of Ezekiel 13, who lived in the 2nd century BCE, knew the word כסת "pillow" whose first attestation in writing appears in rabbinic sources of the 3rd century CE.

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[32] Underlying this statement is the view that MH incorporates elements of spoken Hebrew of the Second Temple period. See, for a recent overview, M. Bar-Asher, *L'Hébreu mishnique: Études linguistiques* (Leuven, 1999).

[33] See *HAL*, 467, where an Akkadian etymology is proposed (*kasû* "to bind").

[34] See Jastrow, *Dictionary*. While the meaning of MH כסת is certain, its etymology is rather obscure. Since the semantic relationship between "band" and "pillow" is not self-evident it is preferable to view the words as homonyms (though belonging to different stages of the Hebrew language).

Another example is the Greek translation of BH מס. Whereas in the Bible
this word usually means "a body of forced labourers" (and then also
"forced service"), the LXX often renders the word as φόρος, "tribute, tax."[35]
This correponds to the meaning of the word מס in Mishnaic Hebrew.[36] The
rendering "tax" is found even where it is incompatible with the context:

> 1 Kgs 5:27
>
> MT ויעל המלך שלמה מס מכל ישראל ויהי המס שלשים אלף איש "King
> Solomon raised a levy of forced labour out of all Israel; and the levy
> numbered thirty thousand men"
>
> LXX (3 Kgds 5:13) καὶ ἀνήνεγκεν ὁ βασιλεὺς φόρον ἐκ παντὸς
> Ισραηλ καὶ ἦν ὁ φόρος τριάκοντα χιλιάδες ἀνδρῶν "and the king
> raised a **tribute** from all Israel and the **tribute** was thirty thousand
> men"

In other passages, the divergent meaning of the word leads to a different
interpretation. Thus the city that surrenders to the Israelite army will be
treated in different ways according to the Hebrew and Greek texts:

> Deut 20:11
>
> MT והיה כל העם הנמצא בה יהיו לך למס ועבדוך "Then all the people
> who are found in it **shall do forced labour** for you and shall serve
> you"
>
> LXX ἔσται πᾶς ὁ λαὸς οἱ εὑρεθέντες ἐν αὐτῇ ἔσονταί σοι
> φορολόγητοι καὶ ὑπήκοοί σου "All the people that are found in it
> shall be **subject to tax** and subordinate to you"

Probably the meaning "tax" reflects a semantic development in the word
מס, perhaps corresponding to societal changes in the late biblical period. In
an increasingly monetary society, forced labour became rarer and taxes
more common. However this may be, one may presume that the change in

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[35] See Judg 1:28, 30, 33, 35; 2 Sam 20:24; 1 Kgs 4:6; 5:27, 27, 28; 9:21; 12:18; 2 Chr 8:8;
10:18; Lam 1:1.

[36] See Jastrow, *Dictionary*.

the meaning of the word מס occurred first in the spoken language and was used in written texts only later. If this scenario is correct, the translators may have known the word מס "tax, tribute" from the spoken Hebrew of their day.

The case is weakened somewhat by two possible occurrences of מס "tax" in Hebrew texts of the Hellenistic period:

> Esth 10:1 וישם המלך אחשרש מס על הארץ "King Ahasuerus laid tribute on the land"

The interpretation of the word as "tribute, tax" seems reasonable in the context. Some scholars, however, prefer to find here the usual biblical meaning, "forced labourers."[37]

> 1QpHab 6, 6–7 המה מחלקים את עולם ואת מסם מאכלם על כול העמים "They distribute their yoke and *msm* their food among all the people"

In this passage, *msm* has been interpreted by some as "their taxes" (מִסָּם) in reference to the taxes imposed by the Romans throughout their Empire.[38] The syntax of the phrase "their tax (which is) their food" is not quite regular, however. And perhaps it is preferable to take the problematic word as a derivation of the root סים (=שׂים), with the meaning "the burden."[39]

These attestations may indicate that the word מס "tax, tribute" had entered the literary tradition of the Hellenistic period. In that case, the translators may have been influenced by their reading of Hebrew texts and not by spoken Hebrew. In view of the scarcity of attestations, however, it is

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[37] See, e.g., L. Koehler, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti libros* (Leiden, 1958) 540 ("those levied to task-work").

[38] See e.g., B. Nitzan, *Pesher Habakkuk: A Scroll from the Wilderness of Judaea (1QpHab)* (Jerusalem, 1986) 70, 169 (Heb.).

[39] See H. Yalon, *Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Philological Essays (1949–1952)* (Jerusalem, 1967) vii and 67 (Heb., with English summary). In view of the context, Yalon glosses the word as "levying of taxes" (p. vii).

more likely that the LXX and the Book of Esther (and perhaps Pesher Habbakuk) independently reflect an element of spoken Hebrew.

3.2. Grammatical items

Grammar, too, provides some instances where the LXX reflects features unattested in pre-Mishnaic texts that may represent spoken Hebrew.

In Numbers, there appear to be two cases where the *nota accusativi* את followed by a third person pronominal suffix is taken as a demonstrative pronoun:

Num 6:13

MT ״וזאת תורת הנזיר ביום מלאת ימי נזרו יביא אתו אל פתח אהל מועד "And this is the law for the Nazirite, when the time of his separation has been completed: one shall bring him to the door of the tent of meeting" (RSV)[40]

LXX καὶ οὗτος ὁ νόμος τοῦ εὐξαμένου ᾗ ἂν ἡμέρᾳ πληρώσῃ ἡμέρας εὐχῆς αὐτοῦ προσοίσει αὐτὸς παρὰ τὰς θύρας τῆς σκηνῆς τοῦ μαρτυρίου "And this is the law of him that has vowed: in whatever day he shall have fulfilled the days of his vow, he **himself** shall **bring to the doors of the Tent of Witness**"

The translator has rendered אתו, which in the biblical text designates the direct object of the preceding verb, as a nominative pronoun thus turning it into the subject. The rendering recalls the Mishnaic use of אותו as a demonstrative pronoun.[41] Demonstrative אותו in MH is mostly limited to adnominal uses — אותו יום, אותו הספר, etc. — but a few cases that come close to

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[40] The Hebrew text is difficult and other interpretations have been proposed. According to *Sipre* and Rashi אתו is reflexive, "he (the Nazirite) shall bring himself". Ehrlich also takes the Nazirite as the subject but identifies נזרו "his hair" as the antecedent of אתו: "he shall bring his hair (i.e., he shall come before shaving his head)"; cf. A. B. Ehrlich, *Randglossen zur hebräischen Bibel* (7 vols.; Leipzig, 1908–1914) 2:130.

[41] See L. Prijs, *Judische Tradition in der Septuaginta* (Leiden, 1948) 57.

the exact syntax of Num 6:13 as analyzed by the Greek translator can be found, e.g.:

> *Gen. Rab.*[42] 181, 5 אותו שמע לאשתו אני לא שמעתי מאשתי "He (Adam) listened to his wife, I (Job) did not listen to my wife."[43]

And with the pronoun following the verb:

> *Gen. Rab.* 32, 11 יפנו אילו ויעמדו ויבאו אותן "Let these (humans) turn aside and let **those** (elements of nature) stand up and come"

Here we find את + 3rd pl. suffix as an independent demonstrative pronoun functioning as a verbal subject in the same way as in the analysis reflected in the LXX to Num 6:13.

To be sure, the Hebrew verse is difficult. However, the Greek rendering can hardly be said to be exegetical, for the crucial point, who is to bring what, is no more explicit in the LXX than it is in the MT. Rather the LXX is an unintelligent, word-for-word rendering of the type one often finds in Numbers. The correspondence between אתו and nominative αὐτός may therefore be traced back to the translators' knowledge of Hebrew.

The translators' identification of את + suffix as a demonstrative pronoun is further confirmed by a second instance. Here the translator vocalized the text differently from the MT:[44]

> Num 33:8
>
> MT וילכו דרך שלשת ימים במדבר אֵתָם ויחנו במרה "And they went a three days' journey in the wilderness of Etham, and encamped at Marah"

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[42] *Bereshit Rabbah*, quoted by page and line in the edition of Theodor–Albeck.

[43] See M. Sokoloff, "The Hebrew of *Bereshit Rabba* According to Ms. Vat. Ebr. 30," *Leš* 33 (1969) 135–149 (Heb.), in particular p. 138; A. Ben-David, *Biblical Hebrew and Mishnaic Hebrew* (2 vols.; Tel Aviv, 1967–1971) 2:645 (Heb.).

[44] See G. Dorival, *Les Nombres* (La Bible d'Alexandrie 4; Paris, 1994) 546.

LXX καὶ ἐπορεύθησαν ὁδὸν τριῶν ἡμερῶν διὰ τῆς ἐρήμου αὐτοὶ καὶ παρενέβαλον ἐν Πικρίαις "and they went a journey of three days through the wilderness, **they themselves**, and encamped in Picriae"

The place name Etham is mentioned in the preceding verses, and its location on the edge of a desert is noted in v 6. In v. 8, however, the translator didn't think of what he had just written in verses 6 and 7 and interpreted the consonants אתם as את followed by the 3rd m. pl. suffix pronoun. The resulting אוֹתָם he interpreted as a demonstrative pronoun in exactly the same way—and with no more contextual justification—as in Num 6:13.

The translation of אותו with a nominative pronoun is attested twice in the same translation unit. In neither passage can the rendering be explained as a contextual or exegetical rendering. This makes it very likely that the identification of אותו as a demonstrative pronoun was possible according to the linguistic information of which the translator disposed. This information could hardly have been derived from Aramaic.[45] Nor, according to the present state of our knowledge, does demonstrative אותו occur in any written texts of the Hellenistic period. Its most obvious source, therefore, is spoken Hebrew.

A second grammatical example concerns a case of morphology. A very striking rendering occurs a number of times in Jeremiah. E.g.:

Jer 1:6

MT וָאֹמַר אֲהָהּ אֲדֹנָי ה' הִנֵּה לֹא יָדַעְתִּי דַבֵּר "Then I said "**Ah**, Lord God! Behold I do not know how to speak"

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[45] For a possible attestation of demonstrative אותה (sic) in Qumran Aramaic see S. Fassberg, "Hebraisms in the Aramaic Documents from Qumran," AbrNSup 3 (1992) 48–69, in particular 55. In later Aramaic dialects one finds demonstrative ית + suffix, cf. M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic* (Ramat-Gan, 1990) 247.

LXX καὶ εἶπα ὁ ὢν δέσποτα κύριε ἰδοὺ οὐκ ἐπίσταμαι λαλεῖν "and I said '**Being One**, Master, Lord, behold I do not know how to speak"[46]

The Greek text is unstable in this and similar passages. Different Greek manuscripts propose different readings. But Septuagint scholars today agree that the original Greek reading is as it is given above.[47]

As is noted by several scholars, the rendering ὁ ὢν for אֲהָהּ is due to a perceived allusion to Exod 3:14, where אהיה אשר אהיה was translated ἐγώ εἰμι ὁ ὢν. The translator of Jeremiah identified אֲהָהּ as the first person singular of the imperfect of היה. In the light of Exod 3:14 he took this verbal form as a divine name, and rendered it by a corresponding allusion to the Greek version of Exod 3:14. In this connection it is usually supposed that the translation reflects the form אֶהְיֶה instead of the MT's אֲהָהּ. However, and this is the point which is relevant to our discussion, it is also possible that the rendering is based on the exact consonants of the MT which were read אֶהֶה (or the like), a first person singular imperfect of the verb היה as it is found in MH.

The existence of such shortened forms of the verb היה during the period the LXX was translated is confirmed by the form יהוא in Eccl 11:3 and by certain phenomena in the DSS and Ben Sira.[48] However, since these forms are not at all frequent in written sources from the Second Temple period it is unlikely that the translator of Jeremiah was familiar with them from his study of Hebrew texts. Rather this appears to be one more case where the translator was influenced by spoken Hebrew. Influence of spoken Hebrew would also account for the form in Ecclesiastes.

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[46] See also Jer 4:10; 14:13; 39:17.

[47] See S. Talmon and E. Tov, "A Commentary on the Text of Jeremiah: I. The Text of Jer. 1:1–17," *Textus* 9 (1981) 1–15, in particular 13–14.

[48] See Kutscher, *Language*, 329; W. Th. van Peursen, *The Verbal System in the Hebrew Text of Ben Sira* (Ph.D. diss., Leiden University, 1999) 81–82.

Short forms of the verb "to be" also turn up in Aramaic. However, in this case it is perhaps unlikely that the influence is from Aramaic. In any case, the written attestation of forms like יהה in Aramaic does not go back before the Christian era.[49]

These examples tend to confirm what seems likely on general grounds, namely that the translators of the Septuagint were in contact with a living practice of Hebrew. They knew Classical Hebrew and Late Biblical Hebrew through the study of ancient texts. They were familiar with Aramaic, which was still spoken and written in Ptolemaic Egypt. But, as the examples inspected indicate, they also had knowledge of the vernacular Hebrew spoken in Palestine in their time.

Ideally, the knowledge of Hebrew evidenced in the Greek translation should be investigated for every translation unit separately. In the meantime, however, the present study helps to define a general frame of reference within which the question of the translators' knowledge of Hebrew may be analysed.[50] While in practice it will often be impossible to determine which influence is operating, in theory three sources of linguistic information should always be taken into account: Aramaic, literary Hebrew, and spoken Hebrew.

4. Conclusions and perspectives

The LXX translators generally show great sensitivity to the archaic idiom of the Bible, knowing how to distinguish between biblical and later diction. Their knowledge of Hebrew, however, encompassed more than was necessary to interpret Scripture. In other words, their linguistic expertise

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[49] See J. Hoftijzer and K. Jongeling, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions* (2 vols.; Leiden, 1995) 1:273 (Palmyrene), 274 (Jewish Aramaic).

[50] This general frame of reference was already clear to Frankel at the beginning of the 19th Century, see Frankel, *Vorstudien*. It is hoped, however, that the present study contributes to clarify the relevant parameters and to set the approach on a surer footing.

did not just derive from the study of ancient texts. They had independent knowledge of Aramaic. They may have been versed in contemporary Hebrew literature. And it seems likely that they were able to converse, at least to a certain extent, in the spoken Hebrew of their time. This wider familiarity with the source language in its linguistic setting must in general have been very helpful to the task of translating the Hebrew Bible. Occasionally, however, it led to the confusion of distinct linguistic systems: Aramaic and Hebrew, different stages of biblical Hebrew (e.g., Classical BH and Late BH), or written Hebrew and spoken Hebrew.

The study of the LXX in this perspective is of obvious importance for Septuagint scholars. Often, a Greek rendering can be understood only when the linguistic background of the translators is taken into account and correctly evaluated. But this type of research could also be of interest to Hebrew linguists. Given the scarcity of materials for the study of Hebrew in the biblical period, no potential source of information should be neglected. The contribution of the LXX — and what is meant now is: the contribution of the translated parts of the LXX (not the transliterated parts) — is not, perhaps, on a par with that of the rabbinic reading traditions, the Samaritan tradition, or Qumran Hebrew; it is, however, substantial and should be given a place in a comprehensive approach.