SEPTUAGINT READINGS AS ADDITIONAL EXEGETICAL LAYERS

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INTRODUCTION

The Septuagint (LXX) is the Greek translation of the Torah, prepared in the early third century BCE. The term has come to include the old Greek translation of the rest of the Bible as well. This is a Jewish work, intended for Jews who were no longer familiar with Hebrew. The great significance of LXX for biblical studies is that the Hebrew source used differs in a number of places from the Masoretic Text (MT) that is used in all Hebrew Bibles today.[1]

The MT includes vowel signs and cantillation symbols created by the Jewish scholars known as the Masoretes sometime between the years 500 and 700 CE, much after the writing of LXX. These symbols preserved a reading tradition, indicating how words should be pronounced and where pauses should be made in the biblical text, functioning as punctuation. Since words can change their meaning when the consonantal text is vocalized differently, and verses can change their meaning when the clauses are divided differently, MT vocalization and cantillation is a reflection of the exegetical traditions preserved by the Masoretes.[2]

In this article we will examine some places where MT and LXX appear to have the same consonantal text, yet have different vocalization or cantillation, leading to a different understanding of the text of the verse. We will compare the LXX version with midrashic and other rabbinic sources that appear to accept its reading over that of MT, and then apply this approach to additional verses as well.

EXODUS 22:13

Exodus 22:12 describes the case of a watchman who had an animal in his care which was killed by a wild animal. The Torah rules that this watchman does not have to replace the killed animal. The reading of MT is: *If it was torn by beasts, he shall bring a witness* [ed]*, for a torn animal he does not*

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pay.[3] LXX has: *he shall take him to* [ad] *the torn animal, he does not pay*.[4] MT and LXX differ in two respects. One is the vocalization of the word spelled *ayin-dalet* in Hebrew, where MT has *ed* (witness) and LXX has *ad* (to). The second difference is where to divide the clauses in the verse. MT ends the clause with the word *ed* using the *etnaḥta* sign which functions as a comma. LXX ends the clause one word later, with the word *ha-treifa* (the torn animal).

Both of these readings are reflected in Targum Pseudo-Jonathan, an early Aramaic translation of the Torah. His reading is: *If it was torn by beasts, he shall bring witnesses or take him to the torn animal, he does not pay*, a combination of MT and LXX. The two readings are also reflected in the midrash on Exodus, the *Mekhilta*. There R. Yochanan states that in order to not be responsible for payment, the watchman must bring witnesses that the animal was torn by wild beasts, like MT, while R. Yonatan states that the watchman must bring the owner to the place where the body of the torn beast is and show him the carcass, like LXX. The ruling of R. Yonatan is also found in JT *Baba Kama* 1:1 in the name of Bar Pedaya.[5]

We see that although the reading of LXX was rejected by the Masoretes, it was preserved in rabbinic sources as an exegetical possibility. Having seen that rabbinic sources here explicitly preserved a reading tradition rejected by MT, yet which served as the basis for LXX, we can now examine another place where LXX and MT differ, and see if perhaps the LXX version again survived in rabbinic exegetical literature, but in a less obvious fashion.

GENESIS 47:31

Genesis 47:31 is the last verse in the narrative where Jacob makes Joseph promise that he will bury him back in Canaan, not in Egypt. MT reads: *And he said: Swear to me. And he swore to him. Then Israel bowed at the head of the bed* [mita]. Since the text does not explicitly indicate who Jacob bowed down to, rabbinic sources derive from here that the Divine Presence is above the head of the bed of a sick person, and that is what Jacob was bowing to. This idea is found in TB *Shabbat* 12b, *Tanḥuma* and *Sifri*.[6]

LXX has a different reading of the end of this verse: *Then Israel bowed upon the top of his staff* [mateh]. While the consonants are the same, *mem-*

tet-hay, the different vocalizations lead to understanding this word as either bed or staff.

While there is no explicit rabbinic tradition that incorporates the "staff" reading of LXX, TB *Megilla* 17b brings a teaching based on this verse that "A fox in his time, bow down to him." This means that even if someone is of lower standing, if it is his time to be in charge, others, even of higher position, should bow to him, as Jacob did to Joseph. R. Menashe Grossberg suggests that Jacob bowed down to the staff of Joseph, a sign of submission similar to that recorded in Esther 5:2, *The king extended to Esther the golden scepter which he had in his hand, and Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter.* In Esther, this act accompanied the king listening, and agreeing, to her request, and the act may serve a similar purpose in the interaction between Jacob and Joseph. Since it seems remarkable for Jacob to act with his son as a subject would to a king, TB *Megilla* 17b brings the adage about bowing to a fox. Thus, the Talmud there can be understood as reflecting the reading tradition preserved much earlier in LXX, that Jacob bowed to Joseph's staff.[7]

Having seen an explicit and a less explicit example of rabbinic teachings based on LXX readings, let us try to apply this idea to other places where LXX is at variance with MT.[8]

ISAIAH 9:7

Isaiah 9:7 begins a warning of the destruction that God will send against Israel in the form of invading enemy armies. MT reads: *My Lord let loose a word* [davar] *against Jacob, and it fell upon Israel.* LXX reads: *My Lord let loose death* [dever] *against Jacob...* Here again, the consonants are the same, *dalet-vet-resh*, but the vocalization leads to two different readings of the same word.

Rabbinic literature does not reflect the LXX reading. The classic commentators all accept the standard reading of *davar*. Even the midrashic interpretation found in TB *Hullin* 91a, where the verse is explained homiletically as referring to the commandment not to eat of the sciatic nerve, is based on the reading *davar*, there understood to have the sense of an order or command.

However, Amos Chacham points out that the words used to describe the prophetic message in the second half of the verse, *and it fell upon Israel*, hint

to a double meaning. The term for *it fell* [nafal] is regularly used to describe an occurrence taking place, as in Ruth 3:18, but can also hint to a downfall.[9] Similarly, the term *dalet-vet-resh* may represent an intentional ambiguous spelling that has both the connotation of "word" as well as "death", as in this case the word sent by God through his prophet is one of death and destruction.

ISAIAH 24:23

Isaiah 24:23 describes a future where the entire world recognizes the supremacy of God. *Then the moon* [ha-levana] *will be ashamed, and the sun* [ha-ḥama] *will be abashed, for the Lord of Hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem, and the Presence will be revealed to His elders.* The classic commentaries follow Targum Jonathan to this verse, explaining that the idolaters, those who bow to the sun and moon, will now be ashamed of their actions.[10]

LXX has a different reading of the beginning of this verse: *Then the brick* [ha-levena] *will be dissolved and the wall* [ha-ḥoma] *will fall. . .* Once again, the differing vocalization of the same consonants leads to different meanings.

Here, rabbinic literature consistently follows MT, TB *Pesaḥim* 68a, *Avoda Zara* 17a and *Sanhedrin* 91b all provide teachings based on the idea that the verse is referring to the moon and the sun. However, here too the verse can be understood as having an intentionally ambiguous consonantal reading in order to express two complementary ideas. As the end of the verse refers to God reigning in his Temple,[11] the earlier part of the verse can be referring to the bricks and walls of the places of idol worship being torn down and destroyed. The same spelling can be vowelized two ways, but both of the ways speak to the same idea, the end of idolatry.

CONCLUSION

Rabbinic literature is filled with teachings following the *al-tikre* formula, "do not read [*al-tikre*] X, rather Y." These teachings are understood to "reflect an exegetical play on words, especially on words with an addition or omission of a *mater lectionis* [the vowel letters *alef*, *hey*, *vav* and *yud*]."[12] We have seen that regarding Exodus 22:13 the rabbis viewed the reading also found in LXX as the source for a kind of *al-tikre* exegetical comment, though

without changing any of the letters of the word, just the vowelization. This seems to have been the case with Genesis 47:31 as well. It is not that the rabbis were necessarily familiar with the actual LXX text, but they were drawing on the same ancient reading tradition that was reflected in LXX.

Although there are no extant parallel exegetical interpretations for the LXX variations in Isaiah 9:7 or 24:23, these also may have reflected an early tradition of intentional consonantal ambiguity, meant to open the door to multiple interpretations. Of course, when translating or inserting vowel signs, this designed ambiguity cannot be preserved, so MT and LXX each had to choose a primary exegetical tradition. While modern readers of the Bible often take the MT notation as a given, reflecting the simple meaning of the text (*pshat*), in fact these notations are an interpretive tool, a form of exegesis not generally recognized as such.

NOTES

1. Armin Lange and Emmanuel Tov, *Textual History of the Bible – vol. 1A: Overview Articles* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 14-15.

2. Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), pp. 42-43, 68-69.

3. This translation is a fusion of the Artscroll and JPS translations, in order to emphasize the way the MT differs from the LXX here.

4. For quotes from LXX I have used Albert Pietersma and Benjamin Wright, *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Where the LXX and MT agree, I harmonized the English with that of JPS, in order to better emphasize the differences.

5. Menahem Kasher, *Torah Shleima – Exodus vol. 18* (Jerusalem: The Torah Shelemah Institute, 1992), p. 75, note 272 and p. 76, note 276; Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), pp. 70-71.

6. Shmuel Gelbard, *LiPeshutto Shel Rashi – vol. 1* (Petach Tikva.: Mifaal Rashi, 1989), p. 457.

7. Menashe Grossberg, *Chatzi Menashe* (London: 1901), pp. 37-38; Menahem Kasher, *Torah Shleima – Genesis vol. 7* (Jerusalem: The Torah Shelemah Institute, 1992), p. 1737, note 137.

8. I chose the two examples from Isaiah as they are brought as classic examples of variant vocalization in Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 41.

9. Amos Chacham, *Da'at Mikra – Isaiah – vol. 1*(Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1984), p. 103.

10. See for example, Rashi, Metzudat David, R. Yosef Kara, R. Isaiah diTrani.

11. Amos Chacham, *Da'at Mikra – Isaiah – vol. 1*(Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1984), p. 256.

12. Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), p. 59.