

# Levels of Interpretation

## Tracing the Trail of the Septuagint Translators<sup>1</sup>

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*The Septuagint, the “mother of all Bible translations”, is the angle from which I approach the theme of our symposium. However, by using examples from the Septuagint I hope to illustrate characteristics and dynamics of ancient translation that have more general applicability.*

*To what extent and in what sense is it possible to characterize the work of the Septuagint translators as interpretation? This issue is widely debated in Septuagint research today. In this paper, I am looking for criteria for distinguishing between different levels of interpretation. A basic distinction concerns interpretation on the level of decoding the source text, an obligatory part of all translation, and that of recoding in the target language, involving different optional strategies. A further level of interpretation, distinct from the normal, more or less universal strategies of translation, comprises the kind of interpretation that comes about as emergency solution in case of a problematic source text. Finally, it is necessary to bear in mind that the reception history of the target text may create new interpretations and adaptations of the text.*

*Speaking of interpretation in the strict sense of the word, i.e. interpretation involving semantic shifts or changes, I find it important to estimate the different motivations behind the interpretative steps taken by the translators: linguistic, narrational, socio-linguistic, exegetical, cultural, ideological, theological... Interpretation in the sense of adaptation or reinterpretation is not a translation strategy but may emerge as a result of such strategies. Recognizing it, however, is a matter of interpretation.*

The Septuagint – the early Jewish Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures – is the angle from which I approach the theme of our symposium “Translation – Interpretation – Meaning”. The Septuagint was named by the church fathers after the legendary *septuaginta interpretes* or ἑβδομήκοντα ἑρμηνεῖς who were credited for translating it, but it would be quite a different thing to call them by the modern

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<sup>1</sup> This article has been published earlier in Aejmelaeus, Anneli 2007. *On the Trail of the Septuagint Translators, Collected Essays*. Revised and Expanded Edition. Contributions to Biblical Exegesis & Theology 50. Leuven: Peeters. 295–312.

terms *hermeneuts* or *interpreters*. To what extent and in what sense it is possible, however, to characterize their work as *interpretation* is an issue widely debated in Septuagint research today. I hope that the symposium will help me and other Septuagint scholars to get a good deal further in our discussion, but I also hope that my thoughts have wider applicability and will be helpful from the viewpoint of other participants of the symposium so that this opening paper of mine may function as a kind of warm-up for a fruitful interdisciplinary exchange of ideas.

The problem that I wish to share with you is not entirely new in Septuagint research, but after several decades of oblivion it has been brought to the fore again by a new trend emphasizing theologically motivated interpretation as an essential part of the activity of the Septuagint translators. Traditionally the Septuagint has been viewed as a mainly word-for-word translation with a heavy Hebrew interference, containing, above all in its syntax, Hebraistic features that made it difficult, if not almost impossible, for a normal Hellenistic Greek speaker to understand it. This is the view that I grew up with. Interpretation was not a term that my teachers in Helsinki or in Göttingen would have found much use for. On the contrary, I learned to encounter with a certain scepticism any talk about interpretation in the Septuagint.

The recent decade, however, has witnessed a change of atmosphere in that there is now more and more talk about the Septuagint translators having performed a task of interpreting or reinterpreting their Hebrew source text. But it has also become clear that there are extremely different views of the Septuagint among the scholars: on the one hand, there are those who emphasize its Hebraistic character and see it mainly as a reflection of its Hebrew source text, and on the other hand those who regard it as a theological document in its own right, a product of Hellenization and thus alienated from its source. Both extreme views cannot hold true at the same time. But it is also obvious that neither one of them can be the whole truth.

The traditional view of the Septuagint as a word-for-word translation finds confirmation, above all, through observation of the text. If the two texts are aligned one with the other, it is easy to discern the correspondence between details of the Greek text and those of the Hebrew. It is true, we have to take into account that the Hebrew text of the scientific editions of today (the so-called Massoretic text = MT) is not identical with the Hebrew source text used by the translators, but as far as there is close correspondence between the Hebrew and the Greek texts compared, the source text was likely to be practically the same. The close correspondence with the Hebrew, however, by no means rendered the Septuagint incomprehensible, at least this is the impression created by its wide circulation, not only among Greek speaking Jews in the whole Mediterranean area in the

Hellenistic era, but also among Christians in the early church and up to the present day in the Eastern part of Christianity.

The Hellenization, on the other hand, certainly was very limited in its scope. Yet, in those parts of the text where the correspondence is less conspicuous, it is relevant to ask what might be the reason behind it. A translation always brings along some shifts or transformations, the Septuagint being no exception in this regard; but the situation in Septuagint research is extraordinary in that part of the discrepancies are explainable by a difference in the Hebrew source text. Exactly at this point we have one of the most difficult issues of Septuagint studies today. When describing the activity of the translator one constantly has to keep in mind the alternative solution to the discrepancies, that is, the Hebrew source text used by the translators having differed from the Hebrew text known to us. The only way to recognize cases with a different source text is to know the general pattern followed by a certain translator and to judge whether or not a given case fits into it. My interest in defining interpretation thus also serves the purpose of finding the borderline between interpretational activity and discrepancies caused by a different source text. Consistent with this aim, I find it most important in a methodological respect to focus on the activity of the translators, to try to discern the steps taken by the translators and the motivation behind them.

My concern here is thus to find methodological and terminological clarity in view of the current discussion. It is obvious that the various translators of the Septuagint – each in their individual ways – at times departed from the strict word-for-word procedure in order to give expression to their understanding of the source text and in doing this occasionally revealed a motivation other than linguistic. It is not a question of whether there was interpretation, even reinterpretation and adaptation of the text to new situations, the question that I wish to discuss is how to recognize different kinds of interpretation or to distinguish between different levels of interpretation in the work of the Septuagint translators. This quest of mine is not intended to result in overall characterizations of the various books of the Septuagint as translation units but to help to recognize and describe interpretative elements in smaller portions and details of the text. All of these translators – in reality probably less than seventy in number – could employ different strategies using interpretative elements and Hebraisms side by side.

In speaking of interpretation in connection with translation, there are essentially two different aspects of the task of the translator that may be referred to as “interpretation”. They could be described as the input and the output – or decoding and recoding – the former aiming at an understanding of the source text and the latter at expressing this understanding in the target language.<sup>2</sup> Both of these

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2 Cf. the discussion on aspects of literalism in ancient biblical translation by Barr 1979, esp. 22–23.

aspects must be taken into account in an attempt to define levels of interpretation. Proceeding beyond this basic dichotomy, however, is complicated by the fact that the word “interpretation” is used in different ways, with different connotations. If “interpretation” is understood to be both decoding and recoding, the word is used in a very broad sense. The kind of interpretation that I am interested in defining is interpretation that reaches beyond the normal level of translating or interpreting and involves a semantic shift, even a change in the information or message of the text. “Reinterpretation” is a term that is often connected with such changes, but where to draw the line between interpretation in the narrow sense and reinterpretation also needs some clarification.

### Level 1: Interpretation on the Level of Decoding

The most basic level of interpretation consists in the linguistic decoding of the source text, that is, identifying the lexical items and analyzing the grammatical forms used. This is an inherent and self-evident part of all translation. It is obligatory, so to speak. Before the translation can be formulated in the target language the translator must read and understand the source text. In case of Hebrew and other Semitic source texts the reading of the text presupposes vocalization of the consonantal characters and this goes hand in hand with the identification of lexical items and analysis of grammatical forms of verbal conjugation or nominal declension (Barr 1979, 16–18). The words cannot be pronounced before they have been identified. In all languages there are homonyms and grammatical forms that can be confused with one another, but in the case of a consonantal writing system the overlap is much greater since differences in vowels do not show in writing. This also means that confusion of individual consonants can easily produce alternative readings that make sense in the context.

For instance, the three consonants מטה can mean various things: a noun ‘a bed’ (pronounced miṭṭā), ‘a staff, a rod’ (pronounced maṭṭē), ‘a tribe’ (pronounced maṭṭē), or an adverb ‘down’ (pronounced maṭṭē), or a verbal form ‘swaying’ (part. fem. < מוט; pronounced māṭā) or ‘perverting’ (part. masc. < גטה; pronounced maṭṭē).

The Septuagint translators who only had the consonantal text in front of them often had to make choices between such alternative interpretations of the source text. If the translation is compared with the later vocalization of the MT, we can see that it was possible to come to different results. For example:

Genesis 47:31

at the head	על-ראש	ἐπὶ τὸ ἄκρον	on the top
of the bed	המטה	τῆς ῥάβδου	of /staff
		αὐτου/	/his

The passage is about Jacob in his old age; it is told that Jacob ‘bows down,’ and this movement of his is modified by the phrase in question על־ראש המטה. The translator chose the alternative ‘staff’ and formulated: “Jacob bowed down on the top of his staff”, i.e. leaning on his staff, whereas the MT vocalizes the text as ‘at the head of the bed’, i.e. leaning on his pillow. Both of these make about as much sense in the context. The other choice in this context concerns the noun ראש ‘head’ that can in Hebrew refer to the upper part or top or summit of living beings or objects etc. For a linguist this is another kind of choice, but for a translator without a dictionary it perhaps made no difference if he had to choose between homonyms or different uses of the same lexeme.

Much of the content of the Septuagint has been produced as a word-for-word translation in which the translator allows the results of his basic decoding of the Hebrew source text to flow into his Greek text without any special effort on the expression side. He sticks to the very minimum of what a translator can do: reporting in the target language his basic decoding of the source, using basic meanings and standard renderings of lexical items and grammatical forms. His output stays as close to the input as possible. This does not necessarily mean atomistic translation, since the context plays a role in the choice between the alternatives. And in several cases nothing more is required; the basic decoding is often enough. But as we know, the problem with such word-for-word translation – or heavy emphasis on formal equivalence – is that the sum of the details in the target text, no matter how faithfully each item has been reproduced, is not necessarily – or is more probably not – the same as it was in the source text. That is, the message is predestined to change.

This brings me to the question of the role of *semantic shifts* in defining interpretation in the more specific sense. Is a semantic shift always a sign of special interpretative activity? I am inclined to say: no. The interpretative activity of the translator does not exceed the level of linguistic decoding of the text, even if a semantic shift can be observed, if this is merely a result of the word-for-word procedure and the fact that languages do not function in the same way. These kinds of changes in the meaning are not under the control of the translator. The new meaning cannot be said to be intended; it is not based on deliberate interpretation (cf. Joosten in this volume).

In that other group of cases where the translator could choose and had to choose between alternatives he had a somewhat more active role, but even this activity stays on the very basic level of interpretation, representing an obligatory step of decoding the source. This concerns both the correct choices and the incorrect choices among the existing alternatives.

A third possibility of semantic shift on this basic level consists in cases in which the translator makes an erroneous analysis of the source text. He may have

confused some letters or his manuscript may have been unclear in some respect or he may have taken forms of a rare verb as those of a more common one that is partly similar to it. For instance:

Hosea 12:2

רָעָה רֹדֵף	ποινησὸν πνεῦμα
shepherding wind	evil spirit

Zechariah 10:2

כִּי־אֵין רֹעָה	δὸς οὐκ ἦν ἰασις
for there was no shepherd	for there was no healing (< רפא)

In Hos 12:2 there was confusion between the roots רעה and רעע, רעה being taken as רעה, but not only this, the syntactical analysis is incorrect: רעה was taken as an attribute to the following word which is not possible in Hebrew. In Zech 10:2 the consonants רעה were obviously confused with רפא.

In such cases the translator has failed in his analysis of the source text, but even if the meaning resulting in the target text shows a major divergence from the source, the translator is not performing a reinterpretation of the source. If the context happens to be theological, it may be tempting to explain such cases as examples of theological interpretation, i.e. ideologically motivated reinterpretation. But an incorrect analysis of details of the source cannot be said to be anything more than basic decoding of the source text and as such incorrect and probably unintentional. Some of my later examples will further illustrate this point.

I have talked thus far about the basic level of interpretation because this is the level where much of ancient translation, especially Bible translation, has its main emphasis. It was a common attitude that an accurate translation could be achieved by following the source text word-by-word, even retaining the word-order. This was, however, never a conscious policy for the Septuagint translators, but just a kind of “easy technique” (Barr 1979, 6 & 26). But it was a conscious policy for Aquila, a later colleague of the seventy.<sup>3</sup> For Aquila the word-for-word procedure was a consciously chosen method that aimed at bringing the reader literally to the Hebrew source with the purpose that the exegesis of the Greek text would be identical with that of the Hebrew text. In that sense the translation of Aquila can be characterized as *interlinear*. The same has been suggested by Albert Pietersma in the case of the Greek Psalter which he thinks was meant as an interlinear aid giving access to the Hebrew Psalter for people with little knowledge of Hebrew. But the Septuagint, in general, does not deserve to be called interlinear, and I do not

<sup>3</sup> On the translation of Aquila, see for instance Treballe Barrera 1998, 313–317.

think even the Psalter does.<sup>4</sup> The deviations from the word-for-word method are too numerous to allow such a characterization.

## Level 2: Interpretation on the Level of Recoding

Having defined the basic level of interpretation and its outcome in the word-for-word method, I have given a general negative definition of the following higher levels: it can be expected that deviations from the word-for-word method possibly reveal a more active role of the translator in the recoding of the message of the source text in the target language. Interpretation on the level of recoding consists in *optional steps* taken by the translator beyond those *obligatory steps* discussed so far.<sup>5</sup> Interpretation, in the strict sense of the word, is found to emerge as a result of the various strategies that can be used by a translator in his attempt to give expression to his understanding of the meaning or message of the source text.<sup>6</sup> I do not envisage giving an exhaustive treatment of this area. I can only cite examples of a few different kinds of cases to illustrate the vast variety of possibilities on this level of interpretation.<sup>7</sup>

### Examples of Idiomatic Translation

If word-for-word translation aims at reproducing the form of the source text in the target language even at the cost of the meaning, idiomatic translation aims at preserving the meaning at the cost of the form. Essential for this translation strategy are *semantic shifts on the level of vocabulary*.

In the following examples the Hebrew word  $\text{שָׁלוֹם}$ , *peace, welfare* occurs in the idiom ‘to ask about someone’s peace’, meaning ‘to greet’.

Exodus 18:7

And they asked	$\text{וַיִּשְׁאַלֵּנוּ}$	καὶ ἠσπάσαντο	And they greeted
a man his neighbour	$\text{אִישׁ-לְרֵעֵהוּ}$	ἀλλήλους	each other.
about peace.	$\text{לְשָׁלוֹם}$		

4 For the concept of interlinear translation, see Pietersma 2002, 337–364.

5 The distinction obligatory/optional was emphasized by Austermann 2003, 32–38.

6 This applies mainly to the various semantic (e.g. “abstraction change”, “paraphrase”, “trope change”) or pragmatic (e.g. “cultural filtering”, “explicitness change”, “illocutionary change”) strategies, as described by Chesterman 1997, 101–112.

7 Barr 1979, 7: “Freedom in translation is not a tangible method, so suitably to be grasped and comprehended.”

This is a very idiomatic rendering – including the pronoun ‘each other’.<sup>8</sup> There is hardly any formal correspondence between the two texts. But the semantic change only concerns vocabulary and not the information conveyed by the clause. In another case, the same idiom received a different rendering:

Genesis 43:27

And he asked them about peace.	וַיִּשְׁאַל לָהֶם לְשָׁלוֹם	ἠρώτησεν δὲ αὐτούς πῶς ἔχετε	And he asked them: “How are you?”
And he said: “Is (there) peace (for) your father?”	וַיֹּאמֶר הַשָּׁלוֹם אֲבִיכֶם	καὶ εἶπεν αὐτοῖς εἰ ὑγιαίνει ὁ πατήρ ὑμῶν	And he said to them: “Is /well /your father?”

Instead of the verb ‘greet’, this rendering retains the verb ‘to ask’ but employs another strategy, changing to direct speech,<sup>9</sup> although there is another line of direct speech asking about the ‘peace’ of the father a few words later – in an idiomatic formulation: “Is your father well?” The rendering “how are you?” reveals a slight interpretative touch, containing a tiny semantic plus. It is Joseph meeting his brothers who do not recognize him. The formulation “how are you?” is not only idiomatic in the linguistic sense, but seems to bring out more of an attitude of concern for the brothers. The motivation of this change could be said to be *narrational*.

But idiomatic rendering can be idiomatic in another sense than the linguistic. The Greek psalms frequently employ the verb ‘to hope’ to render a few different Hebrew verbs, such as ‘to trust’ and ‘to seek refuge’. In most cases the reference is to the attitude of the believers to God. For instance:

Psalm 7:2

Yahweh, my God, in you I seek/sought refuge.	יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי בָךְ הִסִּיתִי	κύριε ὁ θεός μου, ἐπὶ σοὶ ἤλπισα	Lord, my God, in you I have hoped.
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For this use of the verb ‘to hope’ – meaning ‘to place one’s hope in some one’ – I have not found any parallels in genuine Greek texts; it is thus not idiomatic in the linguistic sense. But it may be idiomatic in a socio-linguistic sense. I cannot think of any other explanation for this very frequent rendering. The translator must have been motivated by a desire to formulate the prayers in the psalms in accordance with what he and his contemporaries – Jews in Hellenistic Alexandria – found

8 As is well known, Hebrew does not possess actual indefinite pronouns but employs nouns instead.

9 An “illocutionary change”, Chesterman 1997, 110–111.



agreeable to say in their prayers.<sup>10</sup> The expression used must have been part of their *religious idiom*. If it was not before the translation, it certainly became part of the religious idiom of people using the translation. An example for the reception of the Greek Psalter can be seen in Paul's frequent reference to *hope*.

To go still a step further, consider the following example:

Deuteronomy 16:11

in the place	בַּמְקוֹם	ἐν τῷ τόπῳ	in the place
that /will choose	אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר	ὃ ἂν ἐκλέξῃται	whichever /will choose
/Yahweh your God	יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ	κύριος ὁ θεός σου	/the Lord your God
to let dwell	לְשַׁכֵּן	ἐπικληθῆναι	in order to be invoked
his name there	שְׁמוֹ שָׁמָּה	τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ ἐκεῖ	his name there

The phrase “in order that the name of the Lord will be invoked there” is used in the Book of Deuteronomy every time the Hebrew mentions the name of the Lord “dwelling” in the sanctuary chosen by the Lord.<sup>11</sup> Several different explanations could be assayed. One could maintain that the translator found it unacceptable to speak of the divine name in such a concrete manner. I do not quite agree with this view, but the Greek rendering could certainly be said to be on a higher level of abstraction. The “dwelling” of the name could be seen as a metaphor. Or perhaps the translator simply wanted to explicate what he understood by the “dwelling” of the divine name: the presence of the name is actualized in its being invoked by the believers. It is clear that we have to do here with interpretation in the strict sense, a kind of exegesis that has an ideological, more exactly theological, dimension. The purport of the Hebrew phrase is namely that there is only one sanctuary where the God of Israel may be worshiped, i.e., Jerusalem. The change in wording has the effect that worship is not necessarily limited to one place only, but the Jews in the Diaspora could perhaps think of their prayer houses also being referred to. If I am correct in my interpretation, this rather innocent looking rendering turns out to be a theologically motivated case of *reinterpretation*.

### *Examples of Explicitation of What Is Implicit*

A common strategy of translation is to complement the text with items that are not mentioned but are implicitly presupposed (Chesterman 1997, 108–109). The

<sup>10</sup> Certain other features of the Greek psalms point in the same direction. See Aejmelaeus 2001, 72, and 2006a, 375–376.

<sup>11</sup> Deuteronomy 12:5,11; 14:22(23); 16:2,6,11; 26:2; at 12:21 and 14:23(24) the MT reads לְשׁוֹם ‘to set’, but the *Vorlage* of the Septuagint probably agreed with the Samaritan Pentateuch, reading לְשַׁכֵּן ‘to let dwell.’

source of the filling in is normally the context or the general understanding of the text.

The simplest and most common cases are those adding pronouns (see Gen 43:27, 47:31 above) or filling in names. Some languages use possessive pronouns more often than others, and the use of names becomes more often necessary, for instance, if the target language (like Greek) cannot make the distinction between feminine and masculine in its verbal forms (as Hebrew does). In the following example, Isa 60:1, the referent of the imperative in the second person singular is not self-evident, but adding the name of the city Jerusalem is a very good choice.

Isaiah 60:1

Arise, shine	קוּמִי אוֹרִי	φωτίζου φωτίζου	Shine, shine,
		Ἰερουσαλήμ,	Jerusalem,
for /has come	כִּי בָא	ἦκει γάρ	for /has come
/your light	אוֹרְךָ	σου τὸ φῶς	/your light.

Leaving aside the assimilation of the two verbs at the beginning, the filling in of the name does not change the message but is merely explication of what was meant in the first place. But filling in names that are less obvious may result in interpretation on a clearly higher level. For instance:

Isaiah 42:1

Behold, my servant,	הֵן עַבְדִּי	Ἰακώβ ὁ παῖς μου,	Jacob is my servant:
(whom) I uphold;	אֶתְמַדְּבֵהוּ	ἀντιλήμψομαι αὐτοῦ.	I will help him;
my chosen one	בְּחִירִי	Ἰσραήλ ὁ ἐκλεκτός μου,	Israel is my chosen one:
(in whom) delights	רָצְתָהּ	προσεδέξατο αὐτὸν	/has accepted him
my soul.	נַפְשִׁי	ἢ ψυχῆ μου.	/my soul.

The mysterious figure of the Servant of the Lord in the prophecy of Isaiah is open to different individual or collective interpretations, but the Greek text, through the addition of the names “Jacob” and “Israel”, referring to the nation, in poetic parallelism, settled once and for all for the collective interpretation. This decision was clearly based on Jacob-Israel being addressed as “my servant” in the surrounding chapters of Isaiah.

### *Examples of Explication of Metaphors*

The next translation strategy I will look into is change in metaphors or tropes (Chesterman 1997, 105–107). Metaphorical language can of course be translated in the word-for-word mode. This presupposes that the metaphors in question are

as such transferable into the new context of the target language. This does not always seem to be the case. In several cases we can observe that a metaphor in Hebrew has been explained in the Septuagint. For instance:

Isaiah 53:4

אֲכֹן הִלִּינוּ הוּא נִשָּׂא	οὗτος τὰς ἁμαρτίας ἡμῶν φέρει
וּמַכָּאֲבִינוּ סְבָלָם	καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν ὀδυνᾶται
But he has borne our illnesses	He bears <b>our sins</b>
and our pains he has carried.	and is pained for us.

Even this interpretation, which takes “illness” as a metaphor for “sin”, is conditioned by the context (v. 5–6) so that it actually brings nothing new into the text.<sup>12</sup>

A somewhat different case is the divine epithets that call the God of Israel, for instance, “a rock” in the metaphorical sense. The word “rock” was never used in the Greek text.

Psalm 18:3

my Rock	צוּרִי	βοηθός μου	my helper
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Psalm 18:47

my Rock	צוּרִי	ὁ θεός μου	my God
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Instead, the Hebrew metaphor “my Rock” has been repeatedly explicated as “my helper”, more often, however, replaced by the referent “my God”, the choice depending on which other epithets occurred in the close context. One can safely conclude that the metaphor in question did not function any more (Olofsson 1990). At least it did not represent what the Hellenistic Jews in Alexandria would have wanted to say of their God. Obviously, it was a metaphor more at home in the hill-country of Palestine than the lowlands along the Nile valley and the Delta. Even the meaning of the image had been lost to a great extent, its original purport being “protection” and “solidity”. In a way, the renderings “helper” and “God” are on a higher level of abstraction, but the expressivity and poetic quality of the language certainly suffer from the change. Theology no doubt played a part here, too, but it is not easy to point out the definite motivation behind the semantic change. Perhaps it suffices to refer to the religious idiom of Greek-speaking Jews even here.

<sup>12</sup> For a classical description of the Septuagint of Isaiah, see Seeligmann 1948 (for Isa 53:4 esp. 29).

A more complicated example combining different aspects of the discussion so far:

Genesis 49:10

shall not withdraw	לֹא־יִסּוּר	οὐκ ἐκλείψει	shall not fail
<b>sceptre</b> from Judah	שֵׁבֶט מִיְהוּדָה	ἄρχων ἐξ Ἰουδα	<b>ruler</b> from Judah
and <b>ruler's staff</b>	וּמַחְקֵק	καὶ ἡγούμενος	and <b>prince</b>
<b>from between his feet</b>	מִבֵּין רַגְלָיו	ἐκ τῶν μηρῶν αὐτοῦ	<b>from his loins</b>

Decisive in this case is that the two nouns meaning ‘sceptre’ or ‘staff’ have been interpreted to mean ‘a person holding a sceptre/ staff’, that is ‘a ruler’. In accordance with this, the Greek text starts with the verb ‘to fail’ meaning to say that there will be a lineage of kings ruling one after the other without end, whereas the Hebrew speaks of the ancestor Judah having a firm grip of the sceptre ‘between his feet’. ‘From between his feet’ is changed to ‘from his loins’ that refers to the descent from the ancestor. The change is rather impressive, but the interpretation actually does not bring anything new into the text. This is exactly what the Hebrew means: it probably hints at the royal house of David that had a promise of eternal rule. The translator has understood the metaphor in the prophecy in poetic form quite correctly.<sup>13</sup> This is an example of recoding, but not reinterpretation, certainly not messianic reinterpretation, because the passage is messianic already in Hebrew.

### Conclusions

The examples that I have given thus far illustrate the kinds of renderings that depart from the wording of the source, involving semantic shifts or changes or adding items, but nevertheless revealing a clear connection with the source text. The interpretative features discussed so far seem to reflect what was explicitly or implicitly the purport of the text – or could be understood as such. Interpretation in this sense, as an expression of the translator’s deeper understanding of the source text, is what renders the study of ancient translation so fascinating. Such good free renderings are like fingerprints of the translator, revealing something of his individual competence and character.

Although the different cases are under one heading in my outline, there are certainly differences in the level of interpretation between the different cases, depending on the strategy chosen and the motivation reflected in the semantic shift. A motivation that springs from the text-external reality, for instance, the religious practise of the community, is something I would regard as a step further or higher. One could also imagine it as a step deeper, but I rather like

<sup>13</sup> Rösel 1998, 61, maintains that the Septuagint here “clearly aims at an eschatological saviour”, for which I do not see any justification.

to think of the interpretative elements as something growing from the basic decoding or building on it.

### Level 3: Interpretation as Adaptation or Reinterpretation

As a group distinct from the previous level of interpretation, I would like to bring up cases of another type, cases in which the adaptation of the source text to a new, for instance, cultural situation or ideological framework is so radical that the information or message of the text is factually changed. It is difficult to find good illustrations for this in the Septuagint, and in that sense this category is somewhat theoretical for me. My impression is that the reverence felt by the first Bible translators towards their source text was too great to allow conscious manipulation of its meaning.

The attitude of most Bible translators seems to have been the intention to convey their understanding of the source text even in cases where in our view changes did happen. The most radical examples that I could think of as conscious alterations are those in which the Hebrew text refers to other gods in plural without a pejorative tone; in such cases the Septuagint introduces the term ‘angel’.

Psalm 97(96):7

Worship him,	הַשְׁתַּחֲוֹוּ לֵוִי	προσκυνήσατε αὐτῷ,	Worship him,
all <b>gods!</b>	כָּל־אֱלֹהִים	πάντες οἱ ἄγγελοι αὐτοῦ	all his <b>angels!</b>

It should not be said too lightheartedly that the Septuagint translators found some expressions of their Hebrew source text unacceptable, wanting to replace them by something else. Replacing ‘gods’ by ‘angels’ might be such a case, though. Another one to be considered is the replacement of the expression ‘to see the face of God’ in connection with a visit to the sanctuary by ‘to appear before (the face of) God’ (e.g. Exodus 34:24, Psalm 42(41):3).

Psalm 42(41):3

and I shall see (MT: appear) <sup>13</sup>	וַאֲרָאָה	καὶ ὀφθήσομαι	and I shall appear
the face of God	פְּנֵי אֱלֹהִים	τῷ προσώπῳ τοῦ θεοῦ	to the face of God

The strategy used was transformation of the verb ‘to see’ into a form ‘to be seen, appear,’ although the syntax of the Hebrew clause, retaining the object ‘face,’ presupposes the meaning ‘to see’. Thus, it cannot be a mere confusion on the level of decoding. This strategy was, however, not developed by the translators; it was

<sup>14</sup> The consonantal text presupposes an active transitive meaning for the verb of which “the face” is an object. The change to the passive “to be seen, appear” is achieved in Hebrew by changing the vocalization.

followed widely in Jewish exegesis, and is actualized even in the vocalization of the MT. But the Septuagint is in fact more consistent with this reinterpretation than the MT: it employed the passive form even in the case of רָאָה ‘to see, to behold’ where this is not possible in Hebrew (e.g. Psalm 17:5, 63:3; Exodus 24:11).

In the framework of absolute monotheism the mention of a pantheon of gods worshipping the God of Israel was naturally a problem. And seeing God was another one, since this God was no longer represented by a statue in the sanctuary. The nature of the change is clearly theological.

A further example having to do with the political reality in the time of translation is the replacement of the word ‘king’ in the Greek Pentateuch by ‘ruler’, when referring to the ‘king’ of the Jewish nation (e.g. Deuteronomy 17:14, 15; 33:5). The reason might be that the only kings that the Jews in Alexandria had were those of the Ptolemaic dynasty. That these were not referred to became clear when the word ‘king’ was avoided.

#### Level 4: Interpretation as an Emergency Solution

A further level of interpretation to be distinguished from the others is the one that can be called emergency solution. To my mind, many of the cases that are discussed as theological (re)interpretation in Septuagint research belong to this category.<sup>15</sup> My example is:

Isaiah 9:5			
And was called	וַיִּקְרָא	καὶ καλεῖται	And is called
(MT: he called)			
his name:	שְׁמוֹ	τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ	his name:
Wonderful <b>Counselor</b> ,	פֶּלֵא יוֹעֵץ	μεγάλῃς βουλήσ	/of great <b>counsel</b>
<b>Mighty God</b> ,	אֱלֹהֵי גִבּוֹר	ἄγγελος	the <b>Angel</b> ;
<b>Eternal Father</b> ,	אָבִי עֶד	ἐγὼ γὰρ ἄξω εἰρήμην ἐπὶ	for I will bring <b>peace</b> upon
<b>Prince</b>	שָׂר	τοὺς ἄρχοντας	the <b>rulers</b> ,
of <b>Peace</b> .	שְׁלוֹם	εἰρήμην καὶ ὑγίαιαν αὐτῷ	<b>peace</b> and <b>health</b> to him.

The Hebrew text contains four throne names of the Messiah that the translator obviously did not understand. The interpretation of the difficult passage is built around a few items that have been analyzed in an incorrect way (marked in the text): the Greek genitive ‘of great counsel’ is impossible on the basis of the Hebrew<sup>16</sup>; ‘I will bring’ is based on a false analysis of the Hebrew ‘Father’<sup>17</sup>; ‘Eternal’ is taken

<sup>15</sup> Similarly Joosten 1998, 62–85.

<sup>16</sup> Hebrew cannot express a genitive preceding its main word.

<sup>17</sup> Compare אָבִי עֶד ‘I will bring’ to אָבִי ‘father’ *status constructus*.

as a preposition<sup>18</sup>; ‘Prince’ is turned to the plural ‘rulers’. We also have one case of ‘Angel’ corresponding to ‘Mighty God’ and a threefold translation of ‘peace’. The syntactic structure of the Greek text is based on mere guessing. The translator simply panicked and looked for an “emergency exit.”

The result can be characterized as rewriting of the source text. It can hardly be regarded as an interpretation of the passage. Instead, it is an expression of what could be expected to appear in this context or in this biblical book. The erroneous analyses induce me to believe that it is not a question of a conscious decision not to call the Messiah by the honorific names. In cases like this, the difficulty of the source and the ignorance of the translator give way to contemporary theological or ideological convictions. ‘Peace to the rulers’ of all nations must have been a concern of the Hellenistic Jews – an idea to be supported even today.

In this particular case I regard it as practically certain that the source text of the translator did not differ from the Hebrew text we know. There are, however, numerous cases where such profound divergences stem from a different source. The Hebrew text was still in a state of relative fluidity and reinterpretation and rewriting took place in Hebrew, too. The dilemma is how to tell the difference between divergences caused by the translator and those based on a different source. The following example demonstrates this difficulty:

Exodus 33:13			
And now if	וְעַתָּה אֶסְכֵּן	εἰ οὖν	If then
I have found favour	מִצָּאתִי חֵן	εὕρηκα χάριν	I have found favour
in your eyes,	בְּעֵינֶיךָ	ἐναντίου σου,	in your sight,
reveal to me	הוֹדֵעֵנִי נָא	ἐμφάνισόν μοι	reveal to me
your way(s),	אֶת־דְּרָכֶךָ	σεαυτόν·	yourself:
and I will know you,	וְאֶדְעֶךָ	γνωστῶς εἶδῶ σε,	I would clearly know you,
so that	לְמַעַן	ὅπως ἂν	so that
I may find	אֶמְצֵא	ὡ ἐύρηκῶς	I would be like one
favour in your eyes.	חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ	χάριν ἐναντίου σου.	who has found favour in your sight.

In this prayer, Moses is concerned about the task given to him by God to lead the tribes of Israel through the desert. According to the MT, he asks God to reveal to him his way(s), but according to the Septuagint he is not contented with less than seeing God himself. The question is: Is this a case of theological interpretation? Should we think that the translator considered ‘revealing the way’ in this context to mean ‘revelation of God himself’? On the other hand, it has been suggested that

18 ‘Until, towards’ עַד; ‘eternity’ עַדְּ.

the Septuagint translators were more reserved in referring to God than the Hebrew text, avoiding expressions that were too straightforward.<sup>19</sup> Our example represents the opposite – if it is interpretation. The fact that the Greek pronoun ‘yourself’ has no obvious Hebrew equivalent renders the case somewhat difficult. Taking a closer look at the context, we notice, however, that the Greek αὐτός ‘self’ is used twice in the following vv. 14–15 to render the Hebrew פָּנִים ‘face’, which appears to be a circumlocution for the presence of God. In analogy, ‘yourself’ in v.13 could very well be a rendering of פָּנֶיךָ ‘your face’. Actually, ‘reveal to me your face’ makes perfectly good sense in the context, whereas commentaries have great difficulty trying to explain the meaning of ‘your way(s)’ here. It seems to me that the wording of the Septuagint is best explainable by a difference in the Hebrew source text (Aejmelaeus 2006b, 27–29). In this case, if there is anything deserving the name “reinterpretation”, it is to be found in the MT.<sup>20</sup>

It is not a matter of principle for me that more radical changes should not be attributed to the translator. But my experience is that deliberate rewriting against the obvious meaning of the Hebrew is extremely rare in the Septuagint. A decision to assume another Hebrew source, on the other hand, involves a text-critical discussion of all the evidence, in which consideration of the internal criteria is of essential importance. The task of a textual critic is like that of a Sherlock Holmes, interpreting signs and clues and traces and reading out of them deeper truths about what has happened. Exactly this – what has happened? – I find the most crucial question in textual criticism as well as translation studies. It is important to discern the direction of change and to perceive the reasons or motives behind it. This is the kind of methodology that Carlo Ginzburg characterizes as the conjectural or evidential paradigm, a fully legitimate but often forgotten paradigm in the humanities. Just as a primitive hunter interprets the traces of an animal or Sherlock Holmes those of a criminal, a textual scholar advances from small signs on the surface of the text to a deeper understanding of its problems with the help of his/her instinct, insight, and intuition (Ginzburg 1989, 96–125). And still it is not a question of mere guessing. To be accepted, the solution suggested by intuition must be borne out by all the details of the case. It is here as important as ever to adhere to the old rule that the simplest adequate explanation should be given precedence over more complicated ones. A deliberate change of the meaning by the translator out of an ideological motivation seems to me in many cases to be the more complicated explanation.

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19 See for instance the discussion of Exodus 24:10 by Rösel 1998, esp. 59.

20 Interpretative changes that occurred in copies of the source text certainly must be taken into account. They could be labelled “Level 0”.



### Level 5: Interpretation on the Level of Reception

The activity of interpreting is not reserved to translators, not even in a discussion of interpretation by the translator. Texts continuously invite their readers to new interpretations and this also happens with Bible translations. I would like to conclude my discussion of the levels of interpretation with another well-known example from the book of Isaiah, illustrating interpretation on the level of the reception of the translated text:

Isaiah 7:14			
Behold, a <b>young woman</b>	הִנֵּה הָעַלְמָה	ἰδοὺ ἡ παρθένος	Behold, a <b>virgin/young lady</b>
is pregnant	הָרָה	ἐν γαστρὶ ἔξει	will be pregnant
			(= have in the womb)
and bears a son.	וַיֵּלֶד בֵּן	καὶ τέξεται υἱόν	and bear a son.

My interpretation of this case is that the translator chose the noun normally interpreted as ‘virgin’ in order to give expression to his understanding that the happy family event would take place in the royal palace, meaning to say that the mother of the child was a ‘young lady’. The word in question *παρθένος* was not used in a strictly technical sense only, which can be exemplified by other cases in and outside the Septuagint.<sup>21</sup> Later on, Christian theologians found in this text a prophecy of the virgin birth of Jesus (Matt 1:22–23), thus introducing a radical reinterpretation that the Jewish translator hardly could have dreamed of. This example of interpretative reception was only possible in the new situation created by early Christianity and it shows a departure from Jewish traditions as well as influence from new cultural contacts.

Words have different dimensions, and meanings change in the course of history. Historical semantics, the study of the changing meanings, is certainly an aspect to be taken into account in the interpretation of both target texts and their sources. Consider, for instance, the fairly consistent use of the Greek word *ψυχή*, ‘soul, spirit, mind’ as a rendering of the Hebrew *נֶפֶשׁ* that is often maintained to refer to something quite different, ‘a living being’ in a holistic sense. I find it problematic if the Septuagint is said to introduce totally new ideas or concepts into the text by use of words such as *ψυχή*. It certainly looks that way, if the Hebrew word is interpreted in its ancient or original or almost etymological sense. But the change in thinking more probably started much earlier before the translation was made. A word like the Hebrew *נֶפֶשׁ* was probably open to influence from the Hellenistic world and came closer to the Greek *ψυχή* as a more dualistic view of life eventually gained ground also among the Jews. It has been a sin of exegetes, in particular, to look mainly

21 Cf. Gen 24:43 (the same equivalence), 24:14, 16, 55; 34:3 (for *נַעֲרָה*), 24:16 (for *בְּתוּלָה*).

for the original meanings of words.<sup>22</sup> It is however important to consider language as undergoing constant change. The Greek concept, chosen by the translator or in many cases by the Jewish community before the translation, was likely not used to change the meaning of the source text, but more probably because the readers of the Hebrew text had started to understand it in a way which they could best give expression to by use of this particular concept.

In a way, we who do research on ancient translations are also part of the reception history of these texts. We interpret the translations and we interpret their source texts. What we have to say about the translators to a great extent depends on our interpretations of the two texts. A scholar who wishes to find ideological reinterpretation in the translation is tempted to take a *maximalist* view, reading into it ideas that are strictly speaking not necessarily there. If the source text on the other hand is interpreted almost in its etymological sense, it is clear that the interpretative activity of the translator appears to be much more radical than it was in reality. A more reliable way of proceeding would be to take a *minimalist* view on the translation, to read and interpret only what can be seen in the text and to try to look upon the source text with the eyes of the translator, to try to understand how he read it and what it meant to him and his contemporaries. Tracing the trail of the translator is the only way to achieve reliable results.

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<sup>22</sup> See for instance the critique by Barr 1961.

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