Note on the variant of ‘κρυφη’ in Exodus 11:2a

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Introduction

The LXX differs from the other textual witnesses by having an addition in Exodus 11:2a, namely the adverb ‘κρυφη’ (secretly). Critics are unanimous in seeing this variant as an addition by the Greek translator. Moreover, the dominant view is that of John William Wevers who believes that this Greek adverb makes explicit what is meant in the Hebrew text (Wevers 1990:162). This view is followed by Daniel Gurtner and Bénédicte Lemmelijn (Gurtner 2013:308; Lemmelijn 2009:190–191). According to the latter, the Greek and Hebrew variants are synonymous because the expression ‘דבד נא באזנ (secretly)’ is said to connote the idea of secrecy (Lemmelijn 2009:191). Moreover, in the field of literary criticism, Nina Collins comes to rely on this variant to suggest that the Greek text reflects an ancient tradition of an alternative account of the Exodus, according to which the Hebrews came out of Egypt by a secret escape (Collins 1994:442–444).

The present article intends to draw attention to some elements of evaluation not taken into account by these authors, which seem to weaken the idea that the said choice of the Greek translator is equivalent to the Hebrew source text. These elements are of three kinds; they will form the backbone of this note: (1) the interpretation of the verb ‘שאָל’, (2) the meaning of ‘ ليبي’ and (3) the hypothesis of the translator’s ‘mental text’.

The verb ‘שאָל’: To request or to borrow?

The argument that ‘לייבָד (secretly)’ (‘speak in the ears’) indicates a secret address is based primarily on the context and in particular on the verb ‘שאָל’ (cf. Ex 11:2b) (Coats 1968:450–457; Collins 1994:443; Noth 1962:93). The latter can mean in this context both soliciting a definitive gift and asking for a loan (eds. Botterweck, Ringgren & Fabry 2004:257–258; ed. Brown 1972:356–357; eds. Jenni & Westermann 1997:1283; Koehler & Baumgartner 1998:936–937; Schökel 1990–1992:709). As a loan, this step would be similar to a ruse, as the Hebrews were preparing to leave Egypt definitively. Thus, Moses’ secret communication could be justified as part of a secret escape with deceptive borrowing. However, the context of Exodus 11:1–3 does not contain any clear reference to a secret flight. On the contrary, it is the scenario of an expulsion that is presented and hammered home, especially by the doubling of ‘לייבד’ in absolute infinitive and yiqtol (cf. Ex 11:1e).

Also in the midrashic tradition, we find the idea that this expulsion was not permanent from the point of view of the Egyptians. So, the ruse of a temporary exit for worship (cf. Ex 3:18; 5:1.3.8.17; 7:16; 8:4.21–25; 10:24–26; 12:31) could justify Moses speaking to them secretly (Mekhilta de-Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai 2006:XXI:V, 89–90). However, the emphatic form
The metonymy ‘העם’

What about the expression ‘העם’? Does it indicate a secret communication as Lemmelijn suggests? She may be right that in common modern parlance, speaking in the ear connotes a discreet address. However, this does not seem to hold true in the book of Exodus nor in the entire Hebrew Bible (HB). When one reviews the other 48 occurrences of the expression ‘העם’ in the HB, the LXX does not render it with the adverb ‘קרופ’ or with any other term suggesting a secret communication. There are about 10 occurrences of ‘העם’ in the HB that the LXX does not interpret as a secret address to the people either. Exodus 11:2 is the only occurrence of the adverb ‘קרופ’ in the Greek text of Exodus.

The above demonstrates that the addition of the adverb ‘קרופ’ must be considered as a hermeneutical choice that, most probably, cannot be based on the Hebrew Vorlage. Moreover, the conspicuous absence of such a procedure among the numerous occurrences of ‘העם’ accompanied by a verb of elocution precludes the assumption of an alternative Hebrew semantics on the part of the Greek translator, and even less, a procedure of intralingual translation (Screnock 2017:27, 50–72; Tov 2015:84–86).

How can we understand such a variant then, knowing that the LXX in Exodus is distinguished by its free and faithful character (Aejmelaeus 1987:63, 65, 77, 1992:389; Lemmelijn 2007:1–32, 2009:126)? John Screnock proposes a third way of explaining between isomorphism and translation technique, namely the translator’s mental text. Screnock argues that the physical Vorlage is not the only text influencing the lessons of the new manuscript. At an intermediate level in the translation process, there exists a version of the Hebrew text in the mind of the translator, whether he is aware of it or not (Screnock 2017:76). The existence of this virtual and mental text is supported by what we know today about scribal practice. The text to be copied was first read aloud and retained in memory for a short time before being written down in a new manuscript (Screnock 2017:80).

While it is hardly possible to assign this variant to a former Hebrew Vorlage, this hypothesis prevents us from attaching it to a secret flight tradition that has become very uncertain today. Marc Venneven has indeed shown the motif of the secret flight that appears clearly in Exodus 14:5a and there does not have enough evidence to constitute an independent tradition (Current Tendencies:42; Dijkstra 1991; Exodus Expulsion:45–58; Lemmelijn 1996:451; Vervenne 1988:402–440, 1994:96–97). Strictly speaking, unlike Exodus 14:5a, the addition of ‘קרופ’ in Exodus 11:2 does not indicate a secret flight but a secret communication concerning the solicitation of goods. This is so, all the more because the preceding verse (cf. Ex 11:1) strongly emphasises the framework of the expulsion. Therefore, the hypothesis of a harmonisation with Exodus 14:5a does not refer to listening. Thus, the ear is the organ of listening and never serves as a metaphor for secret communication.

The addition ‘קרופ’ has also been seen as a vestige of an ancient account of a secret flight not with gifts but with borrowings. Nevertheless, this hypothesis of the dual traditions of expulsion and flight is widely questioned today, as shown by the studies of, for example, Marc Vervenne and Meindert Dijkstra (Current Tendencies:42; Dijkstra 1991; Exodus Expulsion:45–58; Lemmelijn 1996:451; Vervenne 1988:402–440, 1994:96–97, 1996a:42, 1996b:45–88).

In addition, Collins goes that far so as to see a paronomasia in ‘העם’, through which the Egyptians were fooled by language (Collins 1994:443–444). Such an argument seems speculative. Indeed, the verb ‘העם’ is used here by Yahweh to address the Hebrews and not the Egyptians. Moreover, the text indicates nowhere that the Israelites used this verb when soliciting goods from the Egyptians, let alone that they did so in the Hebrew language. The LXX itself does not translate ‘העם’ into a clear-cut choice for the meaning of the loan. This verb is, sometimes, rendered by ‘אשא’ (cf. Ex 3:22; 11:2; 12:35), sometimes by ‘קרא’. And the primary meaning of ‘קרא’ is not ‘to lend’, but ‘to put to the use of’, ‘to yield’ (cf. Ex 11:3; 12:35) (Bailly 1935:2148–2150; Liddell & Scott 1993:509), ‘to speak to the people’s attention’, or ‘to speak to the people’s knowledge’, as it is attested by all the occurrences, even beyond the Pentateuch, where this meaning is unequivocal (cf. Jos 20:4, Jdg 7:3; 9:2.3; 17:2, 1 Sm 8:21; 11:4; 18:23, 2 Sm 3:19, 2 Ki 18:26; 19:28, Neh 13:1, Pr 23:9, Is 36:31, etc.).

A mental text of the translator

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Moreover, Gerhard Liedke shows that when the noun ‘אשא’ designates a part of the body (the ear) in the HB, it usually...
In conclusion, the addition of ‘κρυφη’ by the LXX is not consistent with its Hebrew source text, because the phrase ‘ננקאיות פה’ functions as a metonymy simply designating the recipient of the address and not its secret nature. Moreover, this choice does not reflect an ancient tradition of a secret escape narrative through deceptive borrowing. There is almost no literary evidence for the existence of such an exodus tradition.

We suggest that various rough edges of the narrative, including the strange passage in Exodus 14:5a, have constituted a mental account of a secret escape from Egypt in the translator’s mind, and it is this idea that would have shaped this addition. This hypothesis is consistent with the proposition that a variant can emanate from a mental text of the translator, differing from the physical Hebrew text without originating from an alternative literary tradition.

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