Why do the ancient texts differ in their translations of אֲמֻצִּים in Zechariah?

Introduction

In Zechariah chapter 6, the word ‘אֲמֻצִּים’ has been translated differently by the ancient translators. The translators of the Vulgate translate ‘אֲמֻצִּים’ as fortes or ‘strong ones’. The translators of the Septuagint, the Syriac Peshitta and the Aramaic Targums differ from the translators of the Vulgate. They translate ‘אֲמֻצִּים’ as ‘dapple-grey (horses)’. In short, one Hebrew word ‘אֲמֻצִּים’ has been translated differently by the ancient translators: some translate it with emphasis on the characteristic of the horse: ‘strong’, while others translate it with emphasis on the colour of the horse: ‘dapple-grey (horses)’. This article argues that there is a different purpose behind these differences; for example, the Latin Vulgate’s translation focuses on the target language or the readers, while the rest of the translations focus on the source language. To examine the purposes of various translations, this research will present four different ancient texts, namely, Vulgate, Peshitta, Targum and LXX. Afterwards, this article will compare these texts and give evaluations on these variants (cf. Chia 2021b for the methodology). As the word ‘אֲמֻצִּים’ appears only twice in the entire Hebrew Bible, Zechariah 6:3 and 6:7, this research will only analyse these two verses.

The problems: Different interpretations

The interpretation of ‘אֲמֻצִּים’ in the ancient translations

In this section, this article presents the readings of Zechariah 6:3 and 6:7 from ancient texts such as the Hebrew (Gelston 2010), the LXX (Thompson 1999), the Vulgate (Weber & Gryson 2006), and the Targum and Peshitta (Gelston 1987) (the comprehensive Aramaic lexicon).

In Zechariah 6:3, the word ‘אֲמֻצִּים’ is translated into the character and the colour of the horse. The Latin Vulgate and the Masoretic text speak of the character of the horse, et in quadriga quarta equi varii fortes and אֲמֻצִּים, respectively. The Latin Vulgate and the Masoretic text vocalise ‘אֲמֻצִּים’ with hataf patah under the aleph ‘אֲמֻצִּים’. The other translations, on the contrary, reveal the colour of the horse. The LXX, Peshitta and Targum vocalise ‘אֲמֻצִּים’ with patah under the aleph ‘אֲמֻצִּים’. Therefore, they speak of the colour of the horse. The LXX has dapple-grey horses: ὐν τῷ ἱρέαν τῷ τετάρτῳ ἦσαν δαμάοι φαρόι. The Peshitta communicates parti-coloured horses: סוסים בְּרֻדִּים אֲמֻצִּים. The Targum pictures shining ash horses: רְבִיעֵיתָא סֻוסָוָון אֲמֻצִּים.
In Zechariah 6:7, the word ‘םלְכוֹת’ is translated in three different ways rather than two (compare Zch 6:3). Again, both the Latin Vulgate and the Masoretic text speak of the character of the horse, *qui autem erant robustissimi exierunt* and *qui autem erant redi*. Respectively. They vocalise ‘םלְכוֹת’ with hafat patah under the aleph ‘םלְכָּו’. The LXX and Targum, on the contrary, keep vocalising ‘םלְכוֹת’ with patah under the aleph ‘םלְכָּו’. Thus, they speak of the colour of the horse. Although the Syriac Peshitta still discusses the colour of the horse, the Peshitta changed ‘םלְכָּו’ from Zechariah 6:3 to ‘םלְכָּו’ in Zechariah 6:7. As a result, the colour ‘red’ appears in the Syriac Peshitta’s translation.

The interpretation of ‘םלְכוֹת’ in Zechariah 6:3 and 6:7 in Biblia Hebraica Quinta

An anonymous reviewer of *Verbum et Ecclesia* shares critical apparatus notes of Zechariah 6:3 and 6:7 in Biblia Hebraica Quinta (BHQ) to capture the difficulty of the word ‘םלְכוֹת’ through different translations. The apparatus notes of Zechariah 6:3 argue that ‘םלְכוֹת’ means ‘strong’, while the LXX and Targum mistakenly assumed that ‘םלְכָּו’ refers to the colour of the horse. Both the LXX and Targum continue to choose the colour’s translation in Zechariah 6:7. The Syriac translation, however, omits ‘םלְכוֹת’ in Zechariah 6:3 but translates it as ‘red’ in Zechariah 6:7. The apparatus notes opine that this omission in Zechariah 6:3 might be accidental, or it was felt to be unintelligible in this context. The ‘red’ translation in Zechariah 6:7 might be triggered by the difficult reading in the Hebrew text, and the Syriac chooses the fourth colour from Zechariah 6:2–3 (Gelston 2010:126).

The interpretation of ‘םלְכוֹת’ in Zechariah 6:3 and 6:7 in Hebrew lexica

The difficulty of the meaning ‘םלְכוֹת’ is also revealed in Hebrew lexica, as they propose two different meanings. The following lexica were used: Brown-Driver-Briggs (BDB), the Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament (HALOT), the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT), Holladay and the Dictionary of Classical Hebrew.

A pure consonantal text of ‘םלְכוֹת’ raises problems both in ancient translations and modern Hebrew lexicons, because it could be either ‘םלְכָּו’ or ‘םלְכָּו’. The difference is on the first vocal: hafat patah (translation: strong) and patah (translation: skewbald). Brown-Driver-Briggs, for example, has hafat patah of ‘םלְכוֹת’. Thus, the translation is ‘strong’ as an adjective masculine plural absolute from the word ‘םלְכָּו’ for both Zechariah 6:3 and Zechariah 6:7 (BDB 1996). The *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koechler, Walter & Richardson 2000), on the contrary, translates from patah of ‘םלְכָּו’. This word is derived from an adjective masculine plural absolute from the word ‘םלְכָּו’. The *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (2000) mentions that this word appears only once in the Hebrew Bible. Therefore, the colour of the fourth chariot is reflected in their translation as ‘skewbald’ (fresh-coloured). Holladay (1972) also has a colour description in its translation. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Botterweck & Helmer 1974) and the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* volume 1 (1994) are aware of the difficulty of the word ‘םלְכוֹת’. Although they translate ‘םלְכוֹת’ as ‘skewbald’ and ‘dapple-grey’, they recognise that the very same word could have a different meaning, namely ‘strong’.

In summary, the word ‘םלְכוֹת’ seems to have two meanings. The first meaning focuses on ‘strength’. This translation is attested by BDB only. The second meaning focuses on the colour of the fourth chariot, thus ‘skewbald’ and ‘dapple-grey’. The *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Holladay, TWOT and the *Dictionary of Classical Hebrew* support this second meaning.

Analysis of the word ‘םלְכוֹת’

From the word ‘םלְכוֹת’

The word ‘םלְכוֹת’ appears right before the word ‘םשֵׁם’ in 6:3 and four Hebrew words before ‘םשֵׁם’ in 6:6. This word appears four times in the Bible (Gn 31:10; 31:12; Zch 6:3; 6:6). It is always translated as ‘spotted’ or ‘marked’. In Genesis 31:10 and 31:12, three ancient texts – the Hebrew Bible, Latin Vulgate and Syriac Peshitta – are rather ambiguous about the colour of the flocks. Those ancient texts only describe the characteristic of the flocks’ appearance, such as spotted, speckled and variegated (highly decorated). The Targum Jonathan describes the colour of the flocks, which is white. The LXX, on the contrary, is obviously communicating the colour of the sprinkled (spotted): the pale grey colour of ash. In summary, Genesis 31:10 and 31:12 reveal that the Targum Jonathan and the LXX’s translations connect ‘םלְכוֹת’ with colour, while the Peshitta and the Vulgate remain unclear.

In Zechariah 6:3 and 6:7, the Targum and the LXX consistently translate the ‘םלְכוֹת’ with colour, just as in Genesis 31:10, 12: the shining (dazzling) with the ash horses and the variegated ones with the dapple-grey horses, respectively. The Latin Vulgate and the Syriac Peshitta, on the contrary, have different translations, while their translations are ambiguous in Genesis 31:10, 12. The Latin Vulgate has ‘the strongest ones’, while the translation of Peshitta ‘םלְכוה’ has no counterpart to the Hebrew text at all: ‘the red ones’.

From geographical study

Nogalski (2011:877) argues that geography plays important role in these verses. Because of the geography of Palestine, all of Israel’s enemies came against her from the north or south. Towards the east of Israel and Judah are the Arabian deserts. On the western side is the Mediterranean Sea. The appellation of north and south is related to geography. Old Testament prophetic texts display an ongoing tradition of the threat from the north. The north is the place from which attacks come from Assyria and Babylon (Is 14:31; Jr 1:14–15; 3:18; 6:1, 22; 10:22; 15:12; 16:15; 23:8; 25:9; 31:8; 46:20; 24; Ezk 26:7; 38:6; 39:2; Zph 2:13). Jeremiah 50–41, however, denotes that the phrase ‘the land of the north’ can also refer to the ascendant or ascending ancient Near Eastern power of the day, because there it refers to those who punish Babylon (50:9; cf. 50:3; Boda 2016:259–269).
The identity of the land of the south is ambiguous. Daniel 11 juxtaposes the kings of the south and the north, referring there to the post-Alexander Hellenistic kingdoms of the Ptolemies in Egypt (south) and the Seleucids in Syria (North). Another possibility is Edom, because it is often associated with the ‘south’ (Jos 15:1; Jr 40:20; Ob 8–9) and gives the significance of Edom elsewhere in the Book of the Twelve as an enemy of God’s people (Am 9:12; Ob 1:1; Mi 1:4). While Babylon is the dominant nation linked to the destruction of the former kingdom of Judah and to the tradition of retribution for this destruction, Edom also is regularly associated with this disaster and retribution associated with it (Ps 137:7; Is 34:5, 6; 63:1–6; Jr 49:7–22; Lm 4:21; Ezk 25:12–14; 35:15; Ob; Mi 1:2–5; cf. Ps 83; Am 1:9; Ezk 21:1–5 [20:45; 49]. Boda (2016:259–269) argues that Teman regularly features in prophecies of retributions (Jer 49:7, 30; Ezk 30:26; 25:13; Am 1:12; Ob 9). In this way, then, the two major nations linked to the destruction of Judah would be punished. One interpretation is that this suspected nation is probably Egypt (Is 43:6). Pettersson states that Egypt was an implacable and long-term enemy of the people of God, and Egypt also was the place to which some from Judah fled after the destruction of Jerusalem (Jr 44; Pettersson 2015:178).

As Baldwin (1972) offers a helpful summary of the passage’s main emphasis:

[So far as the prophet’s message is concerned the only group of importance is that which goes to the north, where the struggle for world domination had for centuries been concentrated. Egypt was still an important power, hence the mention of the south also, but to the wet there was nothing important going on to warrant special mention. From a stylistic point of view the prophet gains by leaving the other two directions vague. It is enough to know that the Lord is triumphant over the dominant world powers. The lesser are included with the greater. (p. 197)

Another interpretation is that the land of the south is merely used as a balance to the land of the north to indicate the universal scope of Yahweh’s rule, and although the land of the north represents an allusion to Babylon and Assyria, the land of the south has no specific nation in mind (Boda 2016:259–269). In short, it was from the north and the south that the traditional enemies came into their land. It is these directions in which the horses and chariots go out.

All the ancient texts concur that both the black and white chariots go to the north – Assyria and Babel – to execute God’s judgement, and the spotted chariots go to the south. The black horses and their chariot head north to assault Assyria and Babylon. Following the black horses, the white horses also head in a northerly direction. Note that no chariot travels to the east. Two reasons can be supplied why no chariot heads to the east. Firstly, east of Israel and Judah are the Arabian deserts. Secondly, the Temple faced the east because the Old Testament figuratively viewed the east as the direction from which the Lord would approach when he comes to establish his kingdom. One may then surmise that Zechariah understands that the Lord will come from an eastward direction (Klein 2008:512).

From ancient texts

Although TWOT supports the reading of the LXX and the Targum because the first three chariots are given colours and it seems incongruous to call the last pair ‘strong’ (Klein 2008:512), we cannot just claim that the Latin Vulgate’s translation and the Peshitta text in Zechariah 6:7 are erroneous.

As this research has listed, the LXX, Syriac Peshitta and Targumic Aramaic consistently keep the depiction of the fourth chariot both in appearance and colour. Those translations see that the black ones were seen to issue forth to the north land, while the white ones came behind them and the dapple-grey came to the south (Diodorus & Hill 2006:112). Although the Aramaic Targum, Septuagint and Syriac Peshitta reveal the colour of the fourth chariot in Zechariah 6:7, the translations of Targum and LXX consistently use the colour of ‘the shining (dazzling) ones’ and ‘the variegated ones’ in Zechariah 6:3 and 6:7, respectively. Although their consistency in these translations raises a problem (what happens to the red horses in Zechariah 6:2?), they seem to be content in omitting בַּעֲשׂוֹן, just as in the Hebrew text. Briefly, translators of both the Targum and LXX are looking for consistency in the given colour for these horses – just as in the Hebrew text – without seeking any further explanation.

The Syriac Peshitta translates the Hebrew word בַּעֲשׂוֹן as ‘the parti-coloured ones’ in Zechariah 6:3. In Zechariah 6:7, however, the Peshitta translates בַּעֲשׂוֹן as ‘the red ones’ instead of ‘the parti-coloured ones’. The Peshitta’s translation is nowhere near to either the LXX and the Targum translations of ‘the shining (dazzling) or the variegated’ or the Vulgate’s translation of ‘the strongest ones’. The word ‘the red ones’ or בַּעֲשׂוֹן also has no counterpart to the Hebrew text at all in Zechariah 6:7. It seems that the vorlage of ‘the red ones’ or בַּעֲשׂוֹן is בַּעֲשׂוֹן. The Hebrew word בַּעֲשׂוֹן, however, appears in Zechariah 6:2. Therefore, it is obvious that the translation of ‘the red ones’ in 6:7 reveals the purpose of the Syriac Peshitta’s translator, which is to match or to be consistent with the text of Zechariah 6:2. The other ancient texts above faithfully follow the Hebrew text in ignoring the information of the red horses in verse 7. The red horses appear in 6:2, but there is no further information in 6:7. This missing information about the red horses could raise unresolved question(s) to the readers. The translator of Peshitta, therefore, is driven to explain the destination and activity of every chariot by including the missing red ones which went and patrolled the Earth (6:7). The red horses went and patrolled the Earth (6:2 cf. 6:7). The black horses headed to the north (6:2 cf. 6:6). The white horses followed the black ones to the north (6:3 cf. 6:6). The dappled horses went to the south (6:3 cf. 6:6).

The last ancient text to analyse is the Latin Vulgate. This text follows the Hebrew Bible, the Targum and the LXX in respect to omit the red horses in 6:7. Also, the Vulgate consistently uses the word ‘strong’ for both 6:3 and 6:7. The difference, however, is that verse 3 uses a normal adjective ‘fortes’, whereas verse 7 employs the superlative form in the verse 7
context of the text’s purpose (cf. Didymus & Hill 2006:112). The Latin Vulgate is the only ancient manuscript that employs the word ‘strong’ (6:3). This uniqueness continues to verse 7, when the Latin Vulgate uses the superlative form that is not even attested in Hebrew text. This research conveys that the Latin Vulgate is probably eager to encourage the people of God amid their unpleasant situation (theological implication). The Vulgate is driven by a psychological and theological purpose (cf. the translation of Aquila and Theodotion in Origen Hexapla in Field & Origen 2005).

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