


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

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Received: 26 Jan. 2022

Accepted: 28 Feb. 2022

Published: 25 Apr. 2022

How to cite this articleOtabela, C.A., 2022, ‘Note on the variant of ‘κρυφη’ in Exodus 11:2a’, *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 78(1), a7388. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v78i1.7388>**Copyright:**© 2022. The Author.
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The spoliation of the Egyptians is an exodus theme whose interpretation is difficult and often controversial. The great cleavage lies between the thesis of a secret and dishonest action and that of an operation of definitive donations within the framework of the expulsion. The addition of the adverb ‘κρυφη’ in the Septuagint has been used to support the exit from Egypt by a secret escape with fraudulently borrowed objects. This article re-evaluates this variant by showing the limits of the status that several critics hastily attributed to it. It, therefore, appears that the choice of the Greek translator corresponds to its own interpretation that does not agree with the source text from which it derives.

Contribution: This article contributes to illustrate the overlap between the transmission of the text, its composition and its reception. We also discover how semantic analysis can be decisive in the evaluation of variants in the Septuagint.

Keywords: Exodus 11:2a; textual criticism; despoling Egypt; exodus; secret escape; expulsion from Egypt; translators’ mental text.

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 ‘דבר נא באזני העם’ 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 ‘שאל’, (2) the meaning of ‘דבר נא באזני העם’ and (3) the hypothesis of the translator’s ‘mental text’.

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

The argument that ‘דבר נא באזני העם’ (‘speak in the ears’) indicates a secret address is based primarily on the context and in particular on the verb ‘שאל’ (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 ‘גרש’ 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 Yoḥai 2006:XXI:V, 89–90). However, the emphatic form

Note: Special Collection: Septuagint and Textual Studies, sub-edited by Johann Cook (Stellenbosch University).

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‘כשלהו כלה גרש יגרש’ (Ex 11:1) and the fact that the temporary permission is no longer mentioned suggest a definitive expulsion.

The addition ‘κρυφή’ 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 ‘שאל’, through which the Egyptians were fooled by language (Collins 1994:443–444). Such an argument seems speculative. Indeed, the verb ‘שאל’ 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 ‘שאל’ into a clear-cut choice for the meaning of the loan. This verb is, sometimes, rendered by ‘αταω’ (cf. Ex 3:22; 11:2; 12:35), sometimes by ‘χραω’. And the primary meaning of ‘χραω’ is not ‘to lend’, but ‘to put to the use of’, ‘to yield’ (cf. Ex 11:3; 12:36) (Bailly 1935:2148–2150; Liddell & Scott 1996:2001–2002; Muraoka 2009:735). Therefore, one cannot deduce from such an insurmountable ambivalence of ‘שאל’ the idea of a borrowing operation in order to argue that the addition of ‘κρυφή’ is consistent with the Hebrew Vorlage.

The metonymy ‘באזני העם’

What about the expression ‘באזני 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 ‘באזני העם’ in the HB, the LXX does not render it with the adverb ‘κρυφή’ or with any other term suggesting a secret communication. There are about 10 occurrences of ‘באזני 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 ‘κρυφή’ in the Greek text of Exodus. In the other books of the HB, including Genesis 31:26, where the LXX rearranges elements of Genesis 31:27 (Wevers 1993:509), ‘κρυφή’ never corresponds to the phrase ‘באזני העם’ but always translates a specific Hebrew term belonging to the semantic field of secrecy in this case, ‘בסתר’ or ‘בסתרי’; (cf. Dt 28:57, Is 29:15; 45:19; 48:16), ‘בלאט’ (cf. Jdg 4:21; Rt 3:7) and ‘בחרמה’ (Jdg 9:31). Thus, only on other occasions, when ‘αλαησον’ and ‘κρυφή’ are associated, namely Isaiah 45:19 and 48:16, the LXX translates the verb ‘דבר’ accompanied by ‘בסתרי’ (‘in secret’).

Moreover, Gerhard Liedke shows that when the noun ‘אז’ designates a part of the body (the ear) in the HB, it usually

refers to listening. Thus, the ear is the organ of listening and never serves as a metaphor for secret communication. Furthermore, Liedke points out that the association of ‘באזני העם’ with elocutionary verbs such as ‘דבר’ in *piel*, as in Exodus 11:2, has the function of introducing the recipient(s) of the message (Liedke 1997:71).

Thus, if this view is correct, ‘דבר נא באזני העם’ is, in fact, a metonymy with a conative function, not meaning ‘to speak secretly’ to the people, but simply ‘to speak to the people’, or ‘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 36:11, etc.).

A mental text of the translator

The above demonstrates that the addition of the adverb ‘κρυφή’ 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 ‘באזני 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 (Aejmelaus 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 Vervenne 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 ‘κρυφή’ 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

seem relevant to us. This view is consistent with a detailed study by Emmanuel Tov on the textual harmonisation in Exodus 1–24. He concludes that the harmonising changes and pluses were made in the Hebrew text from which the Greek translation was made and not by the translator (Tov 2019:140–155). As there is no evidence of such a plus in any Hebrew text, one cannot postulate a harmonising addition. Actually, the paradigm of the ‘mental text of translator’ makes it possible to base this variant on the memory and hermeneutics of the translator. The latter would have consisted in understanding the exodus from Egypt and in particular, the theme of despoliation as a secret operation, marked by cunning and deception, without presupposing any dependence on a distinctive textual or literary tradition.

In this respect, one may refer to Joel Allen, who has achieved a philological survey of the despoliation of Egypt observing that the controversy over accusations of misleading borrowing against ancient Hebrews goes back no further than the Hellenistic period in Alexandria. Allen, therefore, suggests that the LXX could be the starting point of this controversy because of its translation. One can legitimately assume that if this polemic was known to the translator, he would not have taken the risk of such a translation. In contrast, it would rather be the addition of the adverb ‘κρυφή’ associated with the translation of ‘אשׁוּׁ’ by ‘χραώ’, which might have contributed to the emergence or to the amplification of this controversy (Allen 2008:26–28, 137–146; see also *The Babylonian Talmud* 91a; Langston 2006:116–117; Radday 1976:1–2).

As for the Greek translator himself, he has been certainly influenced by the late gloss of Exodus 14:5a, which aimed at introducing the pursuit narrative with an allusion to a secret flight like the pursuit narrative involving Jacob and Laban (cf. Gn 31:22) (*Current Tendencies*:42; Dijkstra 1991; *Exodus Expulsion*:45–58; Lemmelijn 1996:451; Vervenne 1988:402–440, 1994:96–97). An exhaustive redactional critical study along the lines of M. Vervenne’s findings might shed more light on this.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the addition of ‘κρυφή’ by the LXX is not consistent with its Hebrew source text, because the phrase ‘דבר נא באזני’ 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.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author’s contributions

C.A.O. is the sole author of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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