

Did the Ptolemaic Imperial Politics Influence the Language of the Septuagint?

Olga Gienini (CEHAO).

olgagienini@hotmail.com

INTRODUCTION

During the Hellenistic period, the Egyptian Jewish communities were forced to venerate the Ptolemaic rulers as gods with the penalty of martyrdom to those who publicly refused to accept the king as god during the enactment of the imperial cult. It is so narrated in the Second Book of Maccabees where a whole family is tortured and condemned to a cruel death because they want to keep the covenant commitments. In the climax of the story (2 Macc 7:6) a short prayer rises from the lips of one of the martyrs trusting in their future resurrection. The prayer is a quotation of Deut 32:36a, a brief chorus motif that is also repeated in Ps 134:14 LXX) and is the only biblical quotation in the whole book.

The Greek version of the chorus adopts a special vocabulary using a passive form of verb παρακαλέω with divine subject even when other lexical options were available. And even more astonishing is that the same translation is kept in other passages as well (Judg 2:18 and 2 Sam 24:16 // 1 Chr 21:15). This option of the Greek writers would probably sound strange to a Greek audience not familiarized with biblical traditions and it literally translates similar forms of the Hebrew root נָחַם.

When we see these peculiarities some questions arise that must be stated before going on with the analysis. If the meaning of the passive forms of נָחַם with divine subject is uncertain, why then they are usually associated

to some kind of regret in God?; If the verb παρακαλέω is usually associated in the LXX to Hebrew root נָחַם but not always, why the Greek translators kept this association in so difficult passages as those where passive forms with divine subject are present in both languages?; If there are other options in classical literature to express “comfort” or “console” as the verb παρηγορέω why the Greek translators preferred the most unusual sense of παρακαλέω?

I will go by steps before answering the question that gave the title to this paper.

SOME NOTES ON HEBREW ROOT נָחַם

In a recent paper I showed that Hebrew root נָחַם was a cognate form¹ of the Egyptian root *nhh* as they share:

- a) The same trilateral root.
- b) They belong to the same Afroasiatic family of languages along with similar Coptic and Syriac roots.
- c) They share a similar syntactical structure expressed as (*nhh + m + X*) in Egyptian and as (נָחַם + X) in Hebrew.
- d) They have a dual semantic field with the meanings of “to save, restore, comfort” and “to steal, to rob” in the Semitic languages and in the Egyptian languages.
- e) They express similar religious ideas being one of them the belief in “raise from death” as in Syriac and Hebrew. And with its negative meaning the Egyptian *nhh* may also have positive connotations as it may be

applied to someone who is in risk of death and translated as “to be rescued from death” or “to be robbed from death” equivalent “to be saved from death.”

As a result of this cognate relation, the Hebrew root **נחם** implicitly has similar soteriological meanings as the Egyptian *nḥh* but adopts particular nuances in Biblical literature where it is associated to the sense of “comfort” and “console”. These saving characteristics assigned to Hebrew root **נחם** would probably sounded familiar to an audience familiarized with Egyptian and Hebrew languages as were the Jewish scribal circles of Alexandria (Aitken: 2016). In fact this Egyptian form *nḥh* played an important role under Ptolemaic rule as it was part of the coronation titles of Ptolemaic kings and queens when they were named and honored as saviors using the Egyptian *nḥh* and the Greek as “Σωτήρ”.²

Ptolomeo IX	<i>p3 nṯr nty nḥm</i>	Θεός Σωτήρ
-------------	-----------------------	------------

So at a first glance, the expected Greek translation of **נחם** in biblical texts would be the verb Σώσει but it is not the case even once in the whole Bible. Instead was preferred παρακαλέω for primary translating **נחם** even when the meaning of comfort and console was unusual for this Greek verb. So we may wonder if the Jewish scribal circles assigned the soteriological meanings of the Egyptian *nḥh* to the passive forms of παρακαλέω with divine subject (Deut 32:36 and their parallels; Judg 2:18 and 2 Sam 24:16 and others) usually translated as some kind of regret in God.

2 SAM 24

In order to enlighten the supposed negative connotations of these passive forms, I will first present two parallel stories related to the Afroasiatic form *nḥh*. They are the biblical account about the punishment deserved by King

David apparently related to a census he ordered (2 Sam 24) and the Egyptian tale known as *The Destruction of Mankind*.



Fig. 1. Goddess Sekmet – Hathor. Drawing by Ernst Brückelmann, Brüngen-Born/BAI

Both tales have several points in common but I will focus only on those important for our subject. In both stories, the divinity becomes aware that human beings are plotting against them and decide to annihilate his people sending a divine destructor. After the massacre begun, they suddenly decide to stop it because of their piety on the suffering of their people when they hear their wailings so they order the destructor to stop its work and become a friendly figure.

In the Egyptian story, the punishment comes from the hand of an emissary enacted by the dual goddess Sekhmet – Hathor, who is at the same time a fierce lion and a tender mother. We may see some images of this dual goddess showing both aspects carved in a limestone amulet (fig. 1).³

The Egyptian account tells us that when the goddess begins slaughtering, she is named Sekhmet and when she stops the massacre, she is named Hathor. This tale may also explain why one of the names given to the goddess Hathor is “She, who saves the robbed (*nḥht w’y*)” with the Egyptian form *nḥh* in its soteriological meaning.

In the biblical story both actions are subdued to YHWH, the God of Israel, showing his absolute power over his emissaries and on his people's destiny. In 2 Sam 24:16 the text explicitly assigns the destructive power to the hand of God and when God decides to stop the killing the text describes the action with a passive form of Hebrew root **נָחַם** and a similar form of the παρακαλέω in the Greek version. This singular choice of the Greek translators show that they know and confirm the saving aspects laid on the Hebrew **נָחַם** and also shows how they confer a similar positive status to the Greek passive form of παρακαλέω.

This verse is recognized by many scholars as a late addition as if it is suppressed the whole theology of the text changes radically and turns to a previous retributive logic of sin and punishment. In contrary, the insertion of v.26 shows how God save even when no repentance is present in a similar way that the Egyptian god Ra does.

Something similar happens in the account of Judges 2 when God watches the idolatry of his people and decides to punish them with the fierce of his hand and then suddenly decides to stop the massacre when hearing his wailings (Judg 2:11-19).

This "theodicy of mercy" is found in other contexts where passive forms of **נָחַם** and παρακαλέω are present so probably these ideas are related to postexilic elaborations about divine justice and were introduced by the Jewish Alexandrine communities when debating with their Egyptian hosts about divine Law and retribution. Instead of showing only the punitive side of the Law the biblical writers incorporated his merciful aspect similar to that of the Egyptian gods adopting the latent soteriological meaning of Hebrew **נָחַם** and expanding the semantic field of the Greek παρακαλέω.

DEUT 32

But the Jewish circles went a step further in their theological developments and introduced this Theodicy of Mercy at the central core of the Canticle of Moses which chorus motif we introduced earlier. And why it was introduced there? The reason is that the main role of this canticle was to be God's covenantal testimony *against* Israel.

In fact, the Book of Deuteronomy explicitly assigns to the Song of Moses the function of covenantal testimony (Deut 31:19-21) and this role explains why it was placed at the side of the Ark of the Covenant (Deut 31:26) and read cyclically during Sukkot. This testimonial function is also present in the Qumramic scrolls (1Q4 Deuta; 4Q29 Deutb; 4Q30 Deutc) where the Song is recognized as a testimony against Israel.

The theological core of the Song is resumed in the chorus motif we introduced earlier where the covenantal promises are briefly set forth: that God will judge his people and bring comfort on his servants. The biblical writers choose again passive forms of **נָחַם** and παρακαλέω when describing God's merciful acts that will be triggered when he sees his servants almost dead. And again, no regret is needed for God's saving deeds.

The Greek writers are aware of the centrality of this Song as they repeat it separately in Odes 2 and the Samaritan tradition also gave it a central role in its liturgy (Memar Marqah IV). So when the Septuagint quotes and translates the chorus motif in 2 Macc 7:6 and assign it a counter-testimony function by using the *Hapax* ἀντιμαρτυρούσης they are alluding to the Song and asking God to accomplish the covenantal promises he made to Moses.

SELF-CENSORSHIP

Now we return to the last question: If there are other options in classical literature to express “comfort” or “console” why the Greek translators preferred the most unusual sense of παρακαλέω?

As we have seen, the passive forms of נָחַם and παρακαλέω are associated to the covenantal promises, and more specifically to the soteriological aspects of these promises, i.e. to the covenantal blessings.

Beside the fact that the Greek concept of *Soteria* has only earthly connotations (Kung-Jim 2017), the adoption of a similar terminology would have meant to equate, at least in the texts, YHWH's deeds to that of the pharaohs and therefore to recognize that the Egyptian gods and kings had the power to save his people as the God of Israel had; a very uncomfortable situation for the Greek translators circles resident in Egypt.

So they found a solution by the way of self-censorship using tricky words. They developed a rather cryptic terminology by expanding the semantic field of the verb παρακαλέω assigning to it the soteriological categories of the Afroasiatic form *n-ḥ-h*.

This terminology was a linguistic strategy that would have a double purpose. For the Egyptian hosts and authorities, it would sound rather elegant as the sense of comfort was already included in the semantic field of παρακαλέω and the nuances of that verb didn't equate the effective saving power assigned to their gods' *soteres*. Instead, when the Jewish audience heard this terminology, it would immediately call their attention so they became aware of the nexus with the Hebrew נָחַם and all the biblical implications it carried on.

They also extended this terminology to other passive forms of the Greek παρακαλέω when they were related to the covenantal promises. One example is the term παράκλησις, a *theologumena* translated as the Consolation of Israel that includes all the eschatological expectations of fulfillment of the covenantal promises as God's future judgment and the resultant curses and blessings. And extended these soteriological aspects to other passive forms as λόγους παρακλητικούς in Za 1:13 LXX applied to the words of comfort spoken by the Angel of God when he announced the future salvation of Jerusalem, or to the terms παρακλήτορες/παράκλητοι in Jb 16:2 when alluding to the saving functions of the two covenantal testimonies afore mentioned (Dt 32).

This linguistic strategy was developed regarding the vulnerable situation of the Jewish communities' resident in Egypt during the Hellenistic period when they were forced to participate in the imperial Ptolemaic cult and venerate their kings and queens as saviors.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

AITKEN, J. 2016. “The Septuagint and Egyptian translation methods.” *XV Congress of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies*. Munich, 269- 293.

JOOSTEN, J. 2010. “The Aramaic Background of the Seventy: Language, Culture and History”. *Bulletin of the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies* 43, 53-72

SALES, J. 2005. *Ideologia e propaganda real no Egípto ptolomaico (305-30 a.C.)*. Fundacao Calouste Gulbenkian – Fundacao para a Ciencia e a Tecnologia, Coimbra.

SUK, T. and JIM, F. 2017. “‘Salvation’ (Soteria) and Ancient Mystery Cults”, *Archiv fur Religionsgeschichte* 18-19,255-282.

<https://doi.org/10.1515/arege-2016-0014>

VIEWEGERTA, D. and HÄSER, J. 2007. "Tall Zira'a. Five Thousand Years of Palestinian History on a Single-Settlement Mound". *Near Eastern Archaeology* 70,147- 167.

NOTES

¹ "Why Does God Not Repent But Comforts and Restore"

https://www.academia.edu/75467469/Why_Does_God_Not_Repent_But_Comforts_and_Restore

² Sales (368). Also Ptolomeo XII (281) and Ptolomeo XV (373).

³ Viewegerta and Häser, 162.