Ezekiel 21:25 and Some Ancient Translations

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This note provides an analysis of the ancient translations of Ezek 21:25, concluding that in following the LXX these translations tried to get around the difficulties of the Hebrew text by giving not a literal translation, but an interpretive one.

Ezekiel 21:25 runs as follows:

MT:

֚רִדָּתִּים אֲוֹ בָּלָחֶרֶב תַּבְּצוּרָֽה

Mark out the road for the sword to come to Rabbah of the Ammonites or to Judah and to Jerusalem the fortified.1

LXX (Ezek 21:24–25):

(24) ἐπ’ ἀρχῆς (25) ὀδοῦ διατάξεις τοῦ εἰσελθεῖν ἐπ’ Ραββαθ ὑιῶν Αμμών καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν Ιουδαίαν καὶ ἐπὶ Ιερουσαλήμ ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῆς
(24) By the head (25) of the way draw up for the sword to enter against Rabbath of the sons of Ammon and against Judah and Jerusalem in her midst.2

Why does the LXX translate בְּצוּרָֽה “fortified” as ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῆς “in her midst”?3 Although paraphrasing, the Peshitta seems to be in agreement with the MT:4

Text in Mulder (1985).

3 It should be noted that some manuscripts related to the so-called Lucianic recension bear a reading close to MT: έν Ιερουσαλημ ἐν πολιορκίᾳ, which agrees with the testimony of Theodotion in Origen’s Hexapla, see Ziegler (2006: 183).
4 Text in Mulder (1985).

It is an honor and a pleasure to dedicate this brief note to Pinuccia Caracchi, a friend and colleague for many years.
And prepare a way, that the sword may come to Rabbath of the Ammonites, and to Judah and to Jerusalem, the mighty city.⁵

Targum Jonathan provides too free a rendering to be of any real text-critical value but again it seems to reflect the MT’s use of the adjective “fortified”, although the Targum applies it to the cities in which fugitives from Jerusalem took refuge:

ואם הלך אביון מקיברין ימי אש י THAN ישריה ייהודי יחלקה לעיר

Set a road by which those who slay with the sword might come from Rabbah of the Ammonites, against those of the House of Judah who went out of Jerusalem to dwell in fortified cities.⁶

This is the Hebrew text of the verse as reconstructed by H. Cornill in his critical edition of the book of Ezekiel published in 1886 (Cornill 1886: 306):

دور עיר חזרה לעיר חרב את עיר בחוץ ואית ילבודי יירשלם החנה

Cornill translates the verse as follows:

nach jeder Stadt setzen, dass das Schwert komme nach Rabbath der Kinder Ammons und nach Juda und Jerusalem in seiner Mitte.

Heinrich Cornill⁷ belonged to a generation of Biblical scholars that was not at all afraid of conjectural emedation⁸ and he reworks Ezekiel’s text accordingly. Cornill essentially makes use of retroversion:⁹ The Hebrew text he reconstructs at the end of the verse is a translation into Hebrew (בתוכה) of the LXX’s ἐν μέσῳ στήριξν.¹⁰ A few years after Cornill’s edition, this emendation was accepted in H.C. Toy’s critical edition of Ezekiel: (Toy 1899: 74).

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⁵ Transl. Lamsa (1957: 847).
⁷ On Heinrich Cornill see Rabenau (1957: 367).
⁸ On the art of emending the Biblical text see Martone (2012).
¹⁰ It should be noted that this is not the only emendation in this verse put forward by Cornill. However the correction of MT’s דרך into דרך עיר is beyond the scope of the present paper.
Cornill was not the only scholar who proposed to emend this passage. Some fifty years earlier, another scholar who had no qualms about altering the Biblical text, Ferdinand Hitzig, had proposed to replace the MT’s בְּצוּרָה with בְּקִרְבָּה “womit alle Schwierigkeit gehoben ist” (Hitzig 1847: 147).

After the use of conjectural emendation in Biblical studies went out of fashion, the difference between the MT and the LXX in Ezek 21:25 received little or no attention, since no Schwierigkeit was felt any more.

Be that as it may, it should be noted that this is the only time that the LXX translates בְּצוּרָה in this way: In all other occurrences the passive participial form is translated with terms related to the semantic field of strength.

A lexical solution to the tension between the readings of MT and the LXX has been proposed by Joshua Blau (Blau 1956). In a short and elegant note, Blau interprets מְבֻצֶּרֶת in mNeg. 1:5 as meaning “in der Mitte”. The passage in question runs as follows:

This is H. Danby’s explanatory translation of this difficult passage (Danby 1933: 677):

or if [on the Sabbath] there was quick flesh but [the next day] the quick flesh was gone;;
or if it was four-sided but [the next day] it became round or long; or if it was encompassed but [the next day] it appeared only to the side; or if it was united but [the next day] it was dispersed; or if [the next day] a boil came and entered therein.

Thus, in this case מְבֻצֶּרֶת means a rash that is surrounded (“encompassed”) by healthy flesh, and this is the general meaning given to the root בִּצֵּר in M. Jastrow’s classic dictionary of Talmudic language, with a reference to the passage discussed here:

11 On Ferdinand Hitzig (1807-1875) see Villiger (1999).
12 Other proposals in Barthélemy (1992: 175). Barthélemy’s attribution of the emendation of בְּצוּרָה to Cappel’s Notae Criticae is mistaken.
15 See Muraoka (2010:166). The case of Zech. 11:2 deserves a separate study.
16 See also Neusner (1998 ad loc.) who translates “encompassed” too: a further proof of the enduring usefulness of Danby’s translation of the Mishnah.
Neg I, 5 מְבוּצֶרֶת an eruption surrounded with sound flesh (Jastrow 1950: 185).

The same meaning is given for other occurrences, too, such as jPes 56a:

גֶּן יְרוּשָׁלָם קֹודֶשׁ מ' יְרָשָׁה ר' בָּרוֹנֵי שָׁם ר' יְרוּשָׁלָם חוֹל.

The roofs of Jerusalem are sanctified. Rebbi Jeremiah, Rebbi Miasha, Rebbi Samuel bar Rav Isaac in the name of Rav: The roofs of Jerusalem are profane. But did we not state, “From the wing and inside it is like inside; from the wing and outside it is like outside”? Explain it that the Mishnah speaks about a roof surrounded by buildings forming a courtyard.

In this context too, it is clear that the verbal form means “to surround”. The question being debated is whether the roofs of Jerusalem are to be considered profane so as to decide within what limits it is lawful to offer sacrifices. In the discussion a mishnaic passage is reported and interpreted as referring to a roof “surrounded” (מבוצרת) by buildings. Thus, it would seem that the meaning of the root in mishnaic Hebrew is not so different from its meaning in biblical Hebrew: “fortified, surrounded”, stemming from the basic meaning “inaccessible, unassailable”, as a participial form of the root בּוּר. This brings us back to where we started: Why does the LXX translate the MT’s בְּצוּרָֽה (“fortified”) by ἐν μέσῳ αὐτῆς (“in her midst”)? To obtain a possible solution we should take into consideration the fact that the MT of Ezek 21:25 is a rather difficult text, although most modern translations do not mention any problems. A literal translation would run more or less as follows:

Mark out the road for the sword to come to Rabbah of the Ammonites and to Judah in Jerusalem fortified.

In this connection it is interesting to note that the version most faithful to the MT seems to be the Vulgata of Jerome, who had no problem with translating literally the phrase ad Iudam in Hierusalem.

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viam pones ut veniat gladius ad Rabbath filiorum Ammon et ad Iudam in Hierusalem munitissimam

It is possible that the LXX translators felt the same difficulty we feel today and tried to overcome it. In other words, as a working hypothesis we might assume that the translator had as his, or less likely her, Vorlage the same text as the MT and opted for a free translation to avoid the infelicities of the Hebrew text, aggravated by the omission of the article in the participial form. The LXX's free translation of בצרה as “in her midst” remains faithful to the basic meaning of the Hebrew participle, which can mean “surrounded” as well as “fortified”. At the same time, by specifying that Jerusalem is “in the midst” of Judah the LXX overcomes the awkwardness of the Hebrew text according to which Judah is in Jerusalem. Indeed, such an interpretive translation might have been influenced by Ezek 5:5, where Jerusalem is defined as set “in the midst” (ἐν μέσω) of the nations:

τάδε λέγει κύριος αὐτή ή Ιερουσαλημ ἐν μέσω τῶν ἑθνῶν τέθεικα αὐτήν καὶ τὰς κύκλῳ αὐτῆς χώρας
Thus says Lord, This is Jerusalem; in the middle of the nations I have placed her and the regions around her.

In sum, if this reasoning is correct, the LXX would have tried to get around the difficulties of the Hebrew text by giving not a literal translation, but an interpretive one, thus opening the road for the other ancient translations, such as the Peshitta and the Targum, which, as we have seen, also choose to present a paraphrasing, or free rendering of the MT.

References


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23 See also Eichrodt (1970: 297). According to Zimmerli (1969: 482) the Hebrew phrase aims to draw a contrast between the capital of Judah and the great city of the Ammonites, remarking that Jerusalem is “unzugängliche”, although at the expense of clarity (and of grammar).
25 It may be added that Origen’s Hexapla reflects this situation: Α. περιοχης. Σ. εν πολιορχια. Θ. ωχυρωμενη, as also reported in the Syrohexapla: See Fields (1875 2: 824). On Origen’s Hexapla suffice it to mention here Salvesen (1998).


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