

The Ptolemy and the Hare: Dating an Old Story About the Translation of the Septuagint

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There is a well-known story, found in the Talmud and elsewhere, concerning the ancient Jewish translation of the Bible into Greek, the Septuagint. The story purports to offer us a list of changes allegedly introduced into the pentateuchal text by the seventy (or seventy two) translators sent from Jerusalem to Alexandria in the third century BCE to produce the Greek version for the second Ptolemaic ruler of Egypt.¹ The story includes the following passage:

וכתבו לו את צעירת הרגלים ולא כתבו לו את הארנבת מפני שאשתו של תלמי ארנבת
שמה שלא יאמר שחקו בי היהודים והשילו שם אשתי בתורה
And they wrote “the small-footed”² for him, and they did not write “the hare”
for him, because the wife of Ptolemy was named Hare (scil. *arnevet*); so that
he should not say “The Jews have made fun of me and have put the name of my
wife in the Torah”.³

This is a very odd story. It has been discussed most recently by A. Wasserstein.⁴ He points out that the passage is unique, in two ways. First, it is the only passage in this list, in all its versions, in our sources about which a suggestion is made that points to the reason, or to what was thought to have been the reason, for the reported change; and secondly, it is the only passage in the list that is not

¹ For a list of the sources and for fuller discussion of the items on the list, see G. Veltri, *Eine Tora für den König Talmi, Untersuchungen zum Übersetzungsverständnis in der jüdisch-hellenistischen und rabbinischen Literatur*, Tübingen (Texte und Studien zum Antiken Judentum, 41), 1994; and also, for further material on this as well as for the overall history of the legend of the translation of the Septuagint, see a forthcoming work by A. Wasserstein on the so-called *Letter of Aristeas*.

² The Munich manuscript of Mekhilta de-Rabbi Yishma'el has שְׁעִירַת הַרְגָלִים, with a *sin*, not a *sade*, as the first letter of the adjective. Whatever the origin of this variant may be, it is attractively close to the LXX δασύπους, ‘hairy-footed’.

³ BT Megilla 9a-b.

⁴ A. Wasserstein, ‘On Donkeys, Wine and the Uses of Textual Criticism: Septuagintal Variants in Jewish Palestine’, in *The Jews in the Hellenistic-Roman World. Studies in Memory of Menahem Stern*, eds. I.M. Gafni, A. Oppenheimer, D.R. Schwartz, Jerusalem, 1996, pp. 119*-42*, in Appendix B, pp. 139*-41*.

placed therein in the order of its occurrence in the Bible.⁵ And he adds that these two unique characteristics may tempt us to think of this item as a later addition to the list, more especially as it stands at the end of the list.⁶

The alleged reason for the alleged change made by the translators is, as AW points out, not plausible. In our sources it is suggested that the Ptolemy might have resented the mention of his wife's name in the Greek version of the Hebrew word ארנבה (*arnevet*) in (one or both of) two passages in the Pentateuch (Lev 11:6; Dt 14:7) because of the offensive context in which it appears. In both passages the reference is to animals which are forbidden as food to the Israelites. The Ptolemy in question, Ptolemy II Philadelphus, was married first to a woman called Arsinoe (I), and later on to his own sister, also named Arsinoe (II). The name of these two women does not resemble the Hebrew *arnevet*, far less any Greek equivalent of this (The obvious equivalents, both of them found in the Septuagint, are χοιρογρύλλιος and λαγώς, to which may be added πτώξ and πτάξ). Another strand of the rabbinic tradition (as represented, e.g., in PT Megilla 71d and Lev Rabba XIII, 5), perhaps sensing a difficulty here, has אמם ('*immw*), 'his mother', in place of אשתו ('*istw*), 'his wife': but the name of the mother of Ptolemy II Philadelphus was Berenike. AW comments: 'Neither name is likely to have been the source of what may have been thought of as a phonetic or graphic confusion with ארנבה'. Though, or perhaps because, it is tempting to try to see some slight phonetic and graphic resemblance between the Hebrew word *arnevet* and the Greek names Arsinoe and Berenike, which do have some letters in common with it, it is worth pointing out that any supposed insult here would, of necessity, have lain in the Greek translation of that Hebrew word;

⁵ Both of these statements in fact require a little qualification; for a detailed discussion see the work by A. Wasserstein referred to in n.1.

⁶ There are minor textual variants and also certain other variations as between the different accounts in the sources. For full details see the two works referred to in note 1. The textual variants have no bearing on the present discussion; other variations are discussed here insofar as they are of significance. Although there is no overlap between the alleged 'Ptolemaic' changes, which are concerned exclusively with passages in the text of the Pentateuch, and the changes listed in the so-called 'Tiqqunei Sopherim', which range over the whole of the OT text, it is interesting to note an example of apparent contamination: a manuscript in the British Library, Or. 2626 (see G. Margoliouth, *Catalogue of the Hebrew and Samaritan Manuscripts in the British Museum*, part I, London 1899 [repr. 1965], p. 33, no. 62), written in Lisbon in Kislev 5243 = 1482-3, refers to *eighteen* changes made by the translators (i.e., to the *number* of changes usually attributed to the Sopherim), but actually lists only 13 (i.e., the number of changes most commonly attributed to the translators of the Septuagint), and these the ones associated with our legend, with this one among them.

there could have been none in the original Hebrew word *arnevet* itself, in a language and a script not known to the Egyptian ruler.

The founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty in Egypt was Ptolemy I Soter, and he was the son of someone called Lagos. Ptolemy II Philadelphus was his son and successor. There is no etymological connection between the word *λαγώς* ('hare' in Greek) and the name Lagos, so far as is known; but there is a virtually complete phonetic and graphic identity between the two. AW points out that the word '... *λαγώς* might indeed have reminded the reader of the name of the founder of the Lagid dynasty. It is this that is likely to have caused the emergence of a mistaken tradition of alleged avoidance of that word in unpleasant contexts in order not to offend the susceptibilities of the Lagid ruler. Such an imagined fear will have left its confused traces in the rabbinic report'.

If this is so, and I think that it can scarcely be otherwise, we are left with two important questions. How and, more importantly, when might such an "imagined fear" and its associated story have arisen?

The first fact which needs to be stressed at this point is that both the two wives of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, called Arsinoe, and his mother, Berenike, have nothing to do with this story: both from a graphic/phonetic point of view and from that of the meanings which their names might have conveyed to contemporaries, there is nothing to link them with any Greek equivalents of the word *arnevet*, unpleasant contexts or not. Their presence, as persons and as names, in the story is an intrusion which tends to cloud the real facts and issues; and we should see their presence here as representing a change in the story which was the product of a time when the true nature of the original form of the story was not, or was no longer, understood.

Secondly, on one hand AW is clearly right to point out (*ibid.*) that there is no reason to look for zoological-taxonomic consistency or exactness in the translators of the Septuagint (or, for that matter, in the original text of the Bible in Hebrew itself).⁷ On the other hand, however, the original basis for this story should be seen in very simple terms, namely the very close connection between one of the meanings of the Hebrew word *arnevet* and the name of the grandfather of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, Lagos, a name which is so very close in form to the Greek word for 'hare', *λαγώς*.⁸ Whether or not the Greek word was actually used

⁷ Wasserstein (n. 4), pp. 140*f., where he adds that the Septuagint varies the translation of the two Hebrew words *arnevet* and *šafan* in a way that 'suggests a lack of precise zoological-taxonomic knowledge, rather than political prudence or polemical-apologetic intention'.

⁸ Names beginning Lag- are rare in Greek: P.M. Fraser and E. Matthews (eds.), *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names, I, The Aegean Islands, Cyprus, Cyrenaica*, Oxford, 1987, 281, has Lagaronios (from Crete), Lagetas (from Crete and Thasos), and Lagoras (from Crete and Cyrenaica); and *id.*, *id.*, II, *Attica* (ed.

in the Septuagint as a translation-equivalent of the Hebrew word is not here the issue; the issue here is that the Greek word *λαγώς* was the most obvious word available as the rendering in Greek of the Hebrew word *arnevet* on the two occasions when it occurs (in not the most flattering of contexts) in the Pentateuch.

In its present form, the story makes no sense; it is clearly a degenerate form of an original story which did make some sense. The only form of this story which could have made sense is one which referred, not to a wife, not to the mother, but to the grandfather of the king in question, a man whose name carried that same meaning, or at least appeared to do so.

If the original form of this story referred to the ancestor of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, we still need to ask when and in what circles this story came into being. With or without the explanation which the story as we have it provides, this 'change' is obviously of a different sort from the others in the rabbinic list of so-called 'Ptolemaic' changes. Its aim is not homiletical or religious in any sense, while at least the great bulk of the rest of the items can be so interpreted; and this 'change' is explicitly stated to have had apologetic-political objectives, having been made in order to avoid offending the Ptolemy. Such aims call for a specific time and a specific place.

It is clear that the story must in its original form have had meaning and point. The event described in our story calls for an audience that understood Greek, as it is situated in a society using that language, that of Alexandria under the Ptolemies. But more than this seems likely: the story describing the event, as distinct from the event itself, is part of the Jewish culture of another place; its form as a story, the literary (almost exegetical, almost apologetic) purpose which it fulfils, the use in it of explicit examples from the Hebrew text of the Bible, and the citation of those examples in Hebrew, all point to the fact that our story is part of discussions and stories which were current among Jews not (or not only) in Egypt itself but outside that country. Greek is present and understood as part of the story; this effectively excludes Babylonia as the place where the story was invented. Hebrew is also understood, and this probably excludes Egypt. The particular combination of languages involved points to a Palestinian setting for the creation of the story.⁹

M.J. Osborne and S.G. Byrne, Oxford, 1994, 278, has Lagidion (from Athens), Lagis (from Athens but probably borne by a non-Athenian), and Lagiska (from Athens but, again, probably borne by a non-Athenian). Few names, and few occurrences. Statistics are never really conclusive at this level, but they are suggestive.

⁹ For the linguistic situation see Ch. Rabin, 'Hebrew and Aramaic in the First Century', in *The Jewish People in the First Century* (Compendium Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum), volume 2, ed. S. Safrai and M. Stern, Assen/Amsterdam, 1976, 1007-39; G. Mussies, 'Greek in Palestine and the Diaspora', *ibid.*, 1040-64; J.C. Greenfield, 'The languages of Palestine, 200

The word λαγώς does not appear in our Septuagintal tradition for the passages in Lev and Dt, but it does appear later, in Aquila's version of these passages. In Ps 104 (103):18, by contrast, Aquila has the word χοιρογρύλλιος and the Septuagint has variously χοιρογρύλλιος and λαγῶς. If Aquila's usage at Lev 11:6 and Dt 14:7 has a derivative of λαγώς as against the earlier Septuagintal usage of other words in these passages, and if in the Psalms passage both Aquila and the Septuagint appear to be wholly indifferent to the use of λαγώς or other words, may this perhaps point to a period of composition for our story when the Pentateuch had already been translated but Psalms not yet? If so, and since Psalms apparently existed in Greek by the second half of the second century BCE (i.e., 150-100 BCE),¹⁰ this could point to a very early birth date for the story.

If knowledge of Greek is a necessary condition for the story to have point, it is nevertheless not a sufficient one; it is also necessary for the story's audience to have had the fairly specialised genealogical knowledge of the background of the Ptolemies that would make possible creation of the story with a recognisable meaning. This, together with the linguistic aspect of the story, also points to Palestine as the setting, and to a period probably not very long after the end of Ptolemaic rule there: after the end of Ptolemaic rule, because creation of such a story while the Ptolemies were ruling there would have revealed to the Egyptians the apologetic aim of the change described in the story and thus destroyed any point that it might have had. Egyptian, Ptolemaic rule in Palestine, was over by about the beginning of the second century BCE. It is difficult to assume that accurate knowledge of the identity of the founder of a long-lived dynasty (and of the meaning of that ruler's name) could survive the disappearance of that dynasty for very long in the semi-popular memory of that dynasty's former subjects. But that is what, in effect, a late dating of the story's birth requires. On the other hand, a factually quite accurate story points to a relatively early date for the story's birth; and a non-degenerate form of the story has to be, as we have seen, factually quite accurate. All this points to an early date for the creation of the

BCE-200 CE', in *Jewish Languages, Theme and Variation*, ed. H.H. Paper, Cambridge, Mass., 1978, 143-54 (with discussion, 155-64); B. Spolsky, 'Jewish multilingualism in the first century: an essay in historical sociolinguistics', in *Readings in the Sociology of Jewish Languages*, ed. J.A. Fishman, Leiden, 1985, 35-50; J. Barr, 'Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek in the Hellenistic Age', in *The Cambridge History of Judaism*, ed. W.D. Davies and L. Finkelstein, II, *The Hellenistic Age*, Cambridge, 1989 (the chapter was actually completed in 1974 — see 114, n.), 79-114; and, most recently, the suggestive study of S. Schwartz, 'Language, power and identity in Ancient Palestine', *Past and Present*, 148, August 1995, 3-47.

¹⁰ H.B. Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, rev. R.R. Ottley, Cambridge, 1914, 25.

story. As has been seen, the choice of words which we find in the Septuagint and in Aquila hints at a period before 150-100 BCE for our story. But this hint can be strengthened by a further consideration.

The argument presented here also has a relation to the legend about the translation retailed by Pseudo-Aristeas.¹¹ That legend is relevant as it establishes (for literary purposes) the link between the translation of the Pentateuch and the Egyptian ruler which is necessary for the story to have any real point. The links which the legend pretends to record between the Septuagint version of the Pentateuch and the Egyptian ruler clearly belong to the realm of romance, despite the views of some scholars, who have been very ready to read the *Letter* as an authentic record of historical events. But that such a story as that discussed here, using the motif of royal interest provided by the *Letter*, for purposes not too far removed from apologetic, should have come into existence is easy to believe; it is hard to see what other purposes it could have served, even as a forgery. Our story, about the way in which the translators rendered the Hebrew word *arnevet*, and about their reasons for doing it as they did, requires the story in Pseudo-Aristeas as a background. Without the link between the translation and the ruler provided by the story in the *Letter of Aristeas*, the story about the word *arnevet* lacks all basis. It needs the link in order to have point. In other words, the invention of this little story must post-date the invention of the story retailed by Ps.-Aristeas in the *Letter*.¹² Bar-Kochva has recently argued very forcefully for a

¹¹ While the rabbinic legend depends on the story retailed in the *Letter of Aristeas*, there is no connection between the list of changes presented by the rabbinic sources and the original form of the legend found in the *Letter*: the *Letter* retails an impressive story; the rabbis invented a miracle. While a very early date for this particular "change" might support an early date for the existence of Leviticus and/or Deuteronomy in Greek, and hence also lend some little support to an early date for the *Letter*, this would not justify us in seeing any connection between the translation and the ruler. See further below.

¹² It could in theory be argued that Ps.-Aristeas did not invent the story of royal interest and patronage which he used in the *Letter*, but borrowed it from an existing Jewish tradition. If this were so, then our story need not depend on the *Letter*, with consequences for the chronological development argued for here too. However, the rabbinic tradition, of which this story comes to form part, offers no conclusive testimony to separate or independent development of the legend. Nor have we any convincing evidence to suggest the existence of a Jewish tradition ante-dating the *Letter*. Herrmann argued for the existence of just such an earlier tradition (see J. Herrmann and F. Baumgärtel, *Beiträge zur Entstehungsgeschichte der Septuagint* (Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten Testament, N.F., Heft 5), Berlin-Stuttgart-Leipzig, 1923), but his argument is ingenious rather than persuasive, and, crucially, lacks material in its support. The reconstruction that he offers is ultimately subjective, and cannot be proven.

new dating of the *Letter of Aristeas*, placing it somewhere between 125 and 113 BCE, with a clear preference for a date closer to 113.¹³ If he is right about the date of that text, then his views have considerable relevance here. If the *Letter* is indeed to be dated around 113 BCE, then the invention of this story must be placed after that date. This accords fully with what has been argued above.

A further question that arises in this connection is, clearly, how long after 113 BCE should the invention of this story be placed? The story needs time to degenerate and acquire the form in which it has survived, with the reference to the wife (or the mother) of the Ptolemy replacing that to the founder of the dynasty. This may well indicate that the invention of the story should be assigned to a period close to the date of the writing of Ps.-Aristeas: this would allow plenty of time for the degeneration to occur before the story, in its new form, came to be included in the list of so-called 'Ptolemaic changes' at some stage in the period 70-132 CE, and it would also concord fairly well with a *terminus ante quem* of 150-100 BCE if indeed the story antedates the Greek version of Psalms. If this is correct, then we may with justice conclude that the one change in the list of 'Ptolemaic changes' which unlike all the others has an apologetic-political aim, may in fact turn out to be also the oldest (and indeed the only datable) item on that list. As has been seen, this is so only in part because we have no solid basis for dating the genesis of the other items on the list. While we know that those items which were on what may be termed the original, core form of the list must have been in existence when that core was formed, and while we know that that must have been roughly between 70 and 132 CE, we have no way of knowing by how much their genesis may have preceded the composition of that list. In this case alone, it may be suggested, do we actually have good grounds to accept a specific period for the invention of our story; and we have good reason also to accept a period which is fairly early.

This is not merely an interesting conclusion; it is striking as well, because of the character of the story itself. If such a context for the story is acceptable, and correct, then we have arrived at a very interesting, and perhaps usable, result. All the other items on the list found in the rabbinic sources, whether they are thought of as original, core items on that list, or as later additions or changes to the list, can be explained one way or another as functioning within the religious-theological context provided by ancient Judaism. In some cases it is possible that we should see that context as linked with its surrounding non-Jewish context and as reacting to it. But in all these cases, of whatever type, the nature of

On the evidence that we have, our story needs the structure provided by the *Letter* and found nowhere else.

¹³ See B. Bar-Kochva, *Pseudo-Hecataeus On the Jews. Legitimizing the Jewish Diaspora*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1996, esp. Appendix B: The Dating of Pseudo-Aristeas, 271-88, and 299-302.

that link or of that reaction is religious. In this case alone do we have a story and an item which have no relationship at all to such a context. The entire content, shape and concern of this story have to do with a purely external element, the relationship of the Jews, as a people, on a political level, with the Egyptian ruler. It is this that helps us to date the story; and it is this that makes an early date for the story appear acceptable.

An early date for the invention of the story concords, as has been seen, with the need for the story, as a coherent construction, to refer, not to a wife or to the mother of a Ptolemy, but to the grandfather of the Ptolemy associated with the Septuagint. The association with the Ptolemy calls for a date after the composition of the *Letter of Aristeas*. And a date for the invention of this story not long after the composition of the *Letter* concords with another need, that for the story to have time to degenerate and to lose a feature which was vital to its creation, but was no longer necessary for its continued existence: this is the true identity of the person involved, the grandfather of the Ptolemy. Once the story was in existence, within a purely Jewish context, the real identity of the Ptolemy's grandfather as a character in the story was no longer necessary; once knowledge of Greek had disappeared, or was no longer so widespread, among Jews all that was necessary for the story to appear to have some point was the presence of someone connected with the Ptolemy; no particular, specific person was necessary. All that was needed was a person whose presence might provide a plausible-sounding excuse for a Ptolemy's anger. In such a new context, a woman perhaps appeared most suitable.

Nothing said here conflicts with the suggestion that this story, about the word for 'hare', may be a later addition to the core talmudic list of alleged 'Ptolemaic' changes: quite the contrary, as old material, in circulation in its original or in its degenerate form, with a meaning altered or lost or simply no longer understood by those among whom it circulated, it was very likely that it should become attached to just such newer, and different, material long after its origin and its purpose had become irrelevant and been forgotten. It was, after all, a story about the pentateuchal text and about the family in whose time as rulers of Egypt it had been rendered into Greek. If what is argued here is correct, and we have to see this story as a free-floating item of literary material in the period when the list of so-called 'Ptolemaic changes' came into being, then there are further implications. These include support for the view that the list of such changes in fact represents simply the bringing together of a number of such otherwise free-floating literary-religious elements in the world of late first-early second century Judaism as part of the process of creation of the miraculous element in the revised rabbinic version of the story originally found in the *Letter of Aristeas*. Such a conclusion is not without its own significance. While we may with justice view this particular item as somehow different and separate from the other items on the list of changes in its original form, or possibly as being a

later addition to it, its inclusion in the original list or its subsequent addition to it indicates something of the means by which that list will have come into being.¹⁴

Appendix: the Limping Pharaoh

There is another story, in a variety of Jewish sources, which also refers to an Egyptian ruler. Like the story about Lagos, this story too looks at the ruler's name in the context of a Jewish text. This time, however, it is not a Ptolemy, but a Pharaoh, who is involved, and the circumstances are a little different. The Pharaoh in question is Nec(h)o, who ruled c. 609-593 BCE. He is mentioned a number of times in the Bible, in II Kings 23-24, in II Chron 35, and in Jer 22, because he played an important part in the decline of the kingdom of Judah. His involvement in affairs in Palestine led to his association with the legends surrounding the throne of Solomon.

Among the many decorations on this wondrous structure were various animals perched on the steps leading up to the seat itself. As the ruler mounted these steps, the animals moved and made various sounds appropriate to their several species. According to various midrashic sources, the Pharaoh Necho had this throne in his possession for a time. As was to be expected, he tried to mount the steps and place himself on the seat. However, he was not properly acquainted with the elaborate mechanisms involved, and the result was that, as he mounted the steps, the machinery malfunctioned, and he was injured in the side by the lions which formed part of the decoration. Thereafter he limped. His name, Necho, is explained by a variety of sources, Jewish and also Christian, as meaning "lame", from the Hebrew נכה רגלים (*nekhe raglayim*), and as reflecting this event.¹⁵

¹⁴ I am grateful to Dr Shlomo Naeh and to Professor Hannah Cotton for reading drafts of this article and for making valuable comments. They are not, of course, responsible for my conclusions.

¹⁵ See Peshitta and Targum on II Kings 23:29; cf. also Pesikta de-Rab Kahana, ed. S. Buber, Lyck, 1860, Piska 27, folio 168a (from L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Philadelphia, 1909-38, VI, 297, n. 71); and (from Ginzberg VI, 378, n. 123) Megilla 3a; Mo'ed Katan 28b; Targum Zech 12:11, and II Chron 35:20, Peshitta on 2 Kings 23:29, Aphraates, 471 (top). See also Beate Ego, *Targum Scheni zu Ester, Übersetzung, Kommentar und theologische Deutung*, Tübingen (Texte und Studien zum antiken Judentum, 54), 1996, 166-8 (I owe this reference to Dr Maren Niehoff). For Aphraates, and his understanding of the name Necho in this sense, see his Homily 21, in O. von Gebhardt and A. Harnack, *Texte und Untersuchungen zur Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur*, III. Band,

Here the circumstances are very different from those in the case of Lagos: here we are dealing with a man mentioned in the Bible itself; the name is actually there in the text, and it is not its absence, or the possibility of its insertion, that needs explanation; it is the Bible, rather than the, or a, translation, where the name calls for explanation; the explanation offered in this case is fanciful, whereas in the former case the relationship between the name of the ruler, Lagos, and the name of the animal to which it is linked is perhaps slightly less than fanciful. And lastly, in the present case the attempt is to offer an explanation of a foreign name based on a Hebrew word and its meaning; in the former case the attempt was to explain the absence of a Greek word from a Greek text because of its (supposed) identity with a foreign (culturally Greek) name. In the case of the word *arnevet* the potential for confusion and for corruption of the story was clearly present from the start; in the case of the Pharaoh Necho, by contrast, precisely because of the Hebrew character of the explanation, despite its fanciful character from a scientific, linguistic point of view, the potential for such corruption was never there, and the story retained its character, and its form, essentially unchanged, and was even able to carry itself over from the Jewish tradition into the Christian.

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Leipzig, 1888, 342 and n. 4, and Aphraate le Sage Persan, *Les Exposés*, trans. M.-J. Pierre, Paris (Sources Chrétiennes, no. 359), 2 vols., 1988-89, 830.