MARGARET EATON

THE INTRACTABLE SERVANT OF THE SEPTUAGINT: Translating *'ebed*[1]

The author is Assistant Director and Editor of Pacific Theological College Education by Extension, Suva, Fiji.

The absorbing, arduous, delightful task of translating Scripture probably began more than two thousand years ago with the work of a group of unnamed Jewish men based in the Egyptian city of Alexandria. Those of us moderns who labour at the same task do well to remember, and to learn by, their insights. While we have the advantages of modern philology, archeology and linguistics, they (far more nearly than we do) lived *within* the language of the Hebrew Bible. We can only speculate at motives that lay behind their work, but there is one thing of which we can have no doubt: they knew that the primary task of translation is to select expressions in the target language which convey as nearly as possible the same senses as do those of the source language. This they did (for the most part) with a skill and a subtlety which has seldom been equalled and has never been bettered.

These men (I am assuming they were men) were unusually skilled in the Hebrew language, with a profound knowledge of Scripture. They were fluent in Greek. The Jewish community in Alexandria believed them to be fitted for the task. The first group of them, those who translated the Torah, lived, according to the tradition enshrined in the *Letter of Aristeas*, at the time of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-247 BCE). Whether or not we accept the skeleton of *Aristeas'* story, the date it gives for the beginning of the translation cannot be too far wrong. That being so, we have the tangible efforts of devout bilingual Jews, who lived only a few hundred years after the composition of the writings they laboured to translate. They lived also in a culture which, while not the same as that of the classical prophets, still less that of the patriarchs, was closer to those by a wide margin than ours is. We tend to lean heavily on the faults of the Seventy, noting the exaggerated reverence which sometimes caused them to translate pleonastically and remembering the knowledge of scientific philology which we have and they didn't. Thus we lose sight of the huge advantage they *do* have over us, and we underrate their achievement. We have much to learn from them, not only in the area of the translation of specific words, like what follows, but also in deducing as we can from their example principles of translation it behoves us to remember and to emulate.

I wish also to affirm the often-repeated assertion that different people at different times, and perhaps in different places, undertook the LXX translation. Indeed it seems certain that the work was *not* carried out by committee. When more than one person worked on a book, the book was divided into portions and each person was responsible for a single portion.[2] In some cases we have more than one attempt, probably by different people. In spite of this embarrassment of riches, I

1 For this title, I am indebted to the wit of Rev. Donal McIlraith.

2 "We are fortunate that it was individuals who translated the biblical Books into Greek; even when a Book was translated by two men, they each worked on a different portion of the book, the second Septuagint translator beginning where the first left off. So that when the modern scholar studies the Septuagint translation of a book of the Bible, he is studying the work and temperament of one man." Orlinsky, 1975:89-90.

believe that Septuagint study has suffered from overattention to differences in the skill of individual translators, and to their supposed misunderstandings of the source text. In fact, its witness has been consistently undervalued. "So common is the tacit assumption that the LXX is but a handmaid to the study of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the grammar and vocabulary of the New that it has failed to secure its just due...."[1] This article addresses one small aspect of the many valuable insights it offers, and only for reasons of simplicity does it refer to the Seventy as a single unit.

I. The word which I have chosen to concentrate on is *'ebed*. The information which follows was gained by me in the course of a study of word-pairs. All examples selected for that study were analysed using a computer concordance programme and all occurred within ninety-six bytes of another selected Hebrew word, i.e. *'bd/'ebed* + another word with which it is paired[2]. Thus, while the information is gained neither by random selection nor by noting every example in the Hebrew Bible, the rationale behind the selection is *not* one that depends on the Greek translation of the words. Therefore, we can work on the assumption that the selection noted here is a representative cross-section of the whole. I repeat, it does *not* include every example of *'ebed* found in the Hebrew Bible. Thus, we are unable to say for instance whether certain translators favoured one rendering over another, instead of the choice being dictated by context. The information we have available does not allow us to answer those questions; analysis of a different type is required. Unless stated otherwise, in every case the Hebrew of the word under discussion is from the root *'bd*.

The sensitivity of the first biblical translators is well illustrated in this one word. The root has a primary meaning associated with servitude, and appears in the classic deuteronomistic phrase "the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of *'abadim*."[3] The verb carries connotations of toil[4], and frequently of forced labour, but not always. Indeed, the nuances drawn out by the Greek translation are subtle and fascinating. We will look into those further as this paper progresses. The nouns (for there are several of which this is the root) are capable of the primary meaning of "toil", plus further dimensions that are not necessarily co-extensive with those found in the verb.

It seems likely that the way into the primary meaning of this root lies in the sociology of the Ancient Near East, a context that it holds more or less in common with other subsistence economies, especially those that have grown up in climatically marginal places. In order to be economically viable, people collect in groups larger than the nuclear family. This household is headed by a male leader "father", who is often the physical father or grandfather of the majority of the younger members. He exerts absolute, or near absolute, authority. Within this context, those who labour, *'bd*, are also those who are young and who are dependent.[5] Thus the noun *'ebed* means not only one who works but also one who is under authority and, by extension, a youth. So much is well known.

1 Jellicoe, 1968:342.
2 The corpus of word-pairs was deemed to be those found in *Ras Shamra Parallels*, vols 1, 2, and 3.
3 Ex 20.2 and about 120 times elsewhere. Unless otherwise stated, the translation is NRSV.
4 Gen 3.17.
5 The ANE context (at least in recorded history) leaves women entirely out of the equation. They remain forever those who labour *and* are dependent.

II. Fewer people appreciate how the Seventy conveyed the dominant meaning of the context in which each use of the word is found. Beginning with examples of the verb, I shall move on quickly to the *nouns* which translate *'ebed*. The *verb 'bd*, however, is translated into Greek in three different ways. They are:

1) *douleuō* meaning "to serve" as in Is 14.3

when the Lord has given you rest from your pain and turmoil and the hard *douleias* with which you were made to serve [*edouleusas*]...

2) *latreuō* meaning "to worship" as in Ex 12.31

Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, *latreusate* the Lord, as you said...

3) *ergazomai* meaning "to till" as in Prov 28.19

Anyone who tills [*ergazomenos*] the land will have plenty of bread.

III. Now, the nouns. They too do not necessarily follow the principle of stereotypical translation, that enunciated by Emmanuel Tov and representing one of the very few examples yet discovered of a principle of translation to which the Seventy adhered with reasonable consistency. This principle states that

> [m]any translators rendered all occurrences of a given Hebrew word, element (e.g. preposition), root or construction as far as possible by the same Greek equivalent, often disregarding the effect of this type of translation upon its quality. Although this system of consistent representation, usually called stereotyping, needs to be studied in greater detail, it is probably true to say that from the outset a tendency towards stereotyping was the rule rather than the exception. The system of stereotyping was an integral part of the translation technique and it originated from a certain approach to the OT, *viz.* that the words of the Bible should be rendered consistently in order to remain as faithful as possible to the source language. This type of translation created a consistent representation of whole Hebrew word-groups (roots) with Greek words also belonging to one word-group.[1]

Be that as it may, for the examples we have observed of this root, both noun and verb, stereotyping is used only under certain circumstances, for example, those cases where the LXX used *doulos* and *douleuō* for the translation.

III A. *'Ebed* is usually translated by any of four separate Greek nouns. If stereotypical translation were pursued, the Greek should most often be *doulos*. Where the reference is to an individual as the "servant" of God, it most often is *doulos*. When God spoke to the child Samuel, Eli instructed him to reply "Speak, Lord, for your *'ebed* is listening" (1 Sam 3.9). The LXX selects *doulos*. In the same way, the prophets in general are called the *douloi* of God (Ezra 9.11).

During David's sojourn with the Philistines, he identified himself as the *doulos* of Achish (1 Sam 28.2), even though Achish later described David as *doulos* of Saul (1 Sam 29.3) as had Saul himself earlier (1 Sam 22.8). Now, in the ancient world it was possible legally to be the *doulos* of more than one person, but when

1 Tov, 1984:67-68.

the masters are enemies, it is easy to understand why David resorted to feigning bouts of insanity (1 Sam 21.13).[1] It appears that David was originally simply a member of Saul's household, though when he acquired a household of his own and troops (1 Sam 27.2-3), he was certainly something more nearly approaching a vassal. His additional status as son-in-law confirms that. For the same reason (that they were vassals) the Israelite people are described as *douloi* when they were under the Persian domination of Judah (Ezra 9.9).

In another context, *'ebed* is even more specific and takes on far more distinct overtones of servitude. Egypt is "the house of slavery" *oikos douleias* (Ex 13.3, 14 and many times elsewhere). The status to which Solomon reduced the Canaanites still living in Israel involved forced labour (1 Kgs 9.20-22 || 2 Chr 8.7-9)[2], as had that of the Israelites in Egypt. And the Kings || Chronicles passage indeed makes a clear distinction between indigenous Canaanites who did forced labour, and the Israelites who were Solomon's "soldiers,...his *'abad*, his commanders, his captains, and the commanders of his chariotry and cavalry." (1 Kgs 9.22)[3]

III B. What then were they? That also becomes clear from a careful reading of the LXX. Those who were officials within a king's or an important personage's household were his *paides*. Thus Abimelech's "servants" to whom he conveyed what he learned from God in his dream (Gen 20.8) were his *paides*, as was Abraham's "servant" to whom he entrusted the all-important task of finding a wife for his son (Gen 24.2). These may or may not have been physical relatives of Abimelech and Abraham, like those mentioned in Gen 14.14-5, who were at least "born in his house". The Greek emphasises this fact by rendering *'ebed* in the next verse as *oikogenoi*. Where Joseph's brothers wished to claim his kindness by emphasising that they were his servants (Gen 42.13), the LXX uses *pais*.

> We, your *paides,* are twelve brothers, the sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan...

The translation is the same in Ex 20.10 in the commandment to do no work on the Sabbath.

> But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your *pais* or your *paidiske*....

III C. A word cognate with *oikogenos*, *oikeios*, is the third word used by the Seventy to translate *'ebed*. It is used less than *doulos* and *pais*, and seems in Gen 27.37 and Ex 32.13 almost an alternative to *pais:*

> Isaac answered Esau, "I have already made him your lord, and I have given him all his brothers as *oiketas*...."

and

> Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your *oiketon*, how you swore to them....

---

1 Jesus apparently thought the situation intolerable, *especially* where the masters are enemies. See Mt 6.24 || Lk 16.13. Allowance must be made for the possibility that Q's memory is of a proverb; but, as they are notoriously difficult to identify, the question must remain open. If we *are* dealing with a proverb here, that reinforces the popular perception of how invidious the position was.

2 See also Josh 17.13.

3 Alas, missing in the LXX; || 2 Chr 8.9 "But of the people of Israel Solomon made no *'abadim* for his work; they were soldiers, and his officers, the commanders of his chariotry and cavalry," "*kai ek tōn huiōn Israel ouk edōken Saolōmōn eis paidas tę basileią autou hoti idou andres polemistai kai archontes, kai hoi dunatoi kai archontes harmatōn kai hippeōn.*" LXX

IV. Members of the royal household then are *paides*, such as those who transferred Josiah's body from Megiddo to Jerusalem (2 Kgs 23.30) or the ones who staged the palace coup that brought Amaziah to power (2 Chr 25.3). Returning to David for a moment, even though we saw that he described himself as the *doulos* of Saul, we now see that in his latter days in Saul's household he occupied the position we would wish to call *pais*. Close examination of contexts in which he is called *doulos* rather than *pais* reveals the subtlety of the LXX translation. 1 Sam 22.6-19, the painful story in which Ahimelech vouches for David and is killed for his honesty, brings this point out. In vv 6-7, where Saul is sitting under the tamarisk tree at Gibeah, his courtiers are (as we expect) *paides*. But the tone of the scene changes and Saul's latent paranoia emerges.

> "None of you...discloses to me that my son has stirred up my *doulon* against me...." (v 8)

David, Saul is saying, is not like you— he is an inferior being, a slave who is bound to me, not by ties of love or even kinship, but as one who owes forced labour. This slave is rebelling against me in league with my own son.

Betrayed by Doeg, Ahimelech speaks out fearlessly and denies the implications of Saul's words.

> "Who among all your *douloi* [he curls his lip in disdain as he quotes Saul's word back to him] is so faithful as David? He is the king's son-in-law, and is quick to do your bidding, and is honored in your house [i.e. he, if anyone, deserves the title *pais*]" (v 14).

Ahimelech then pleads for himself and his house, who are Saul's true *douloi*. Saul, however, is implacable and orders the death of Ahimelech and his fellow priests for aiding David. The *paides*, significantly, refuse to carry out Saul's orders and it is left to Doeg who will stop at nothing (vv 18-19).

V. Let us now bring to bear the fruits of our research upon one of the most famous of all "servant" passages: the curse on Ham in Gen 9.20-27. In each of the references to Noah's *children*,[1] the sons are named in this order: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. It leaves the impression that the boys were born in the same order, Shem being the eldest and Japheth the youngest. Even in the two places where *descendants* of Noah are listed (Gen 10 and 1 Chr 1.4-23), the generations are listed with those of Ham *between* those of Japheth and Shem. Whether Japheth or Shem was the eldest, Ham seems to have been neither. And yet in reference to the outrage perpetrated upon Noah by Ham, Gen 9.24 states:

> When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his *youngest* son had done to him

followed by the curse. The curse is rendered in modern translations by something like

> Cursed be Canaan;
> lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers.

The term translated "slave" is of course *'ebed*; indeed "lowest of slaves" is *'ebed 'abadim* "slave of slaves". What would we expect the LXX to be? *Doulos tōn doulōn*? No, indeed. The awareness of the Seventy was far beyond such a mechanical translation. The words are

1 Gen 5.32, 6.10, 7.13, 9.18, 10.1; 1 Chr 1.4.

epikataratos Chanaan pais oiketes estai tois adelphois autou.

Modern editions of LXX place a raised full-stop (the equivalent of a semi-colon) between *Chanaan* and *pais*, so that Noah's curse comes out something like

curses on that boy Canaan; may he be dependent on his brothers!

And *that* raises the question of whether Ham was being relegated to servitude as such or simply to the status of youngest son, a position that carried a certain amount of service with it. Ignoring the later punctuation, the LXX Greek *could* be translated "child of the household" (i.e. dependent child)[1]. On this interpretation, Ham would not keep his place as second son, but be relegated to last place. This interpretation is confirmed by the LXX of the latter part of vv 26-27:

... *kai estai Chanaan pais autou.*

and

... *kai genethētō Chanaan pais autōn.*

The expectation that a younger brother would serve (as David did for his elder brothers, 1 Sam 17.12-40, and especially v 28) was not a quality adhering to the person as such, but rather to his status which of course could change. The situation is similar to that of a European royal family in recent centuries. The younger brother of a late king might serve as regent during the minority of that king's son, but should the young king die without issue, the old king's younger brother would succeed to the throne. His status as "servant" remained only as long as there was someone else ahead of him to inherit. This interpretation suggests that the LXX (and perhaps the MT as well) is a great deal more ambiguous than modern translations[2] would suggest.

But, someone may say, that cannot be. Ham is actually described as the youngest son in *v 24*, before the curse was uttered. As it happens, that too is in doubt, for the Hebrew *qatan* means both "youthful" and "insignificant"—perhaps "least"?

However, even if one insists on the traditional translation of *qatan*, I believe that v 24 *still* supports my interpretation of the curse. I suggest that *qatan* here is an example of the figure of syntax called *prolepsis* in which "an adjective is...applied to a noun to denote the *result* of the action expressed by the verb."[3] Vergil used *prolepsis* in

submersas obrue puppes
overwhelm the sunken ships.

"Observe that *submersas* gives the *result* of the action denoted by *obrue*, and is not [strictly] applicable to *puppes* until that action is performed".[4] Likewise, in the passage from Genesis, the adjective "youngest, least" applies to Ham only *after* the action of cursing has been performed. The *result* of that action was brought forward, as it was in Vergil, for emphasis.

VI. Enough has been said to show that the LXX is able, through a sensitive choice of words, to draw out implications inherent in the Hebrew. As a test case,

1 Another possible translation is "household servant".
2 Influenced perhaps by the Vulgate *servus servorum*.
3 Harkness, 1883:241.
4 *Ibid.*

let us look at Lev 25.39-55, where all the words we have examined are used, but not always in quite the way we might expect.

Lev 25.39-55

39 If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve you in the slavery of a (household) slave [*ou douleusei soi douleian oiketou*, a pleonastic translation].

40 They shall remain with you as hired labourers [*skr*]. They shall be *ergatai* with you until the year of jubilee. [As we saw earlier, when *'bd* is translated by *ergazomai*, it means "to work", as in "to till" the land. Possibly the implication here is that hired labourers were there to work the land, not to perform other sorts of tasks. Certainly by the first century CE, hired servants who tended sheep were considered unreliable. See Jn 10.12-13.[1]] ...

42 For they are my *oiketai*, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt. [Just what one would expect, given the interchangeability of *pais* and *oiketēs* that we saw above in section III C.] ...

44 As for your *pais* and female slaves, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire *doulon* and female slaves. [If, as it appears, *pais* and *doulon* have the same referent, the translator of this part of Leviticus makes no distinction between the two words in spite of the distinction that has emerged in the story of Ahimelech and elsewhere.] ...

46 These you may treat as your *katochimoi*, but as for your fellow Israelites, none shall rule over the other with harshness. [Another word altogether.] ...

50 ...the time they were with the owner shall be rated as the time of the hired labourer [*skr*]. ...

53 As a labourer [*skr*] hired by the year...

55 For to me the people of Israel are *oiketai*, they are my *paides*, whom I brought out from the land of Egypt.

Based on what we have seen, we could offer an alternative translation of the last verse that goes something like this:

> For to me the people of Israel are those born in my household. They are my dependents, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt.

The distinction drawn in this passage from Leviticus, between those who serve because they are within the patriarchal clan and those who do so because they are bound by financial or political obligations, is frequently clarified by the way in which the Seventy chose translations.

VII. However, the reverse is also true. The translation adopted by the Seventy sometimes *masks* nuances by forcing a choice between two Greek words when one Hebrew word carries dual implications.

For instance, *'Ebed Yahweh* "the Servant of Yahweh" in Second Isaiah is translated consistently as *pais tou theou*, which confirms the impression that *that* servant is emphatically a member of Yahweh's household. The implications of *pais* include the commitment and obligations of the patriarchal clan to its dependents. *Doulos*, on the other hand, conveys a sense of the unremitting toil and a measure of the alienation felt by one who spends his life for another. This richness is conveyed by the Hebrew with overlapping meanings in a single word, but is lost

1 See also Jeremias, 1969:305.

when those meanings are split if they are translated by two different Greek words. Thus, *'Ebed Yahweh* confirms emphatically the familial relationship which exists between the "Suffering Servant" of Second Isaiah and his God. At the same time it nuances Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross, which articulated his sense of being abandoned. *Pais tou theou* fails to convey all that *'ebed Yahweh* does; *oiketēs, while affirming the Servant's inherent status, fails likewise to carry a sense of the basically alienated life of the doulos*, the stranger whose livelihood is dependent on a whim.

So too does Saul's characterisation of David as his *'ebed* confirm David's status while describing Saul's sense of loss, even while it emphasises David's disillusionment and his risk-taking on Saul's behalf. The use of *doulos* in that context suffers from the same limitations, though reversed, that *pais* did in the previous example. Yet those very limitations are exploited brilliantly by the LXX in the story of Ahimelech in 1 Sam 22.6-19.

VIII. Finally, to draw attention once more to the complexity of this issue, I will mention another Hebrew noun *na'ar* which carries the same double denotation of both "servant" and "child" that *'ebed* does.

Na'ar seems to be weighted on the side of "child" or at least "young person" —"youngster"?—rather than "servant", as the fairly consistent LXX translation *neōteros* suggests. See Judg 8.20; 2 Chr 13.7; Ps 37.25, 119.9, 148.12; Is 30.40; Jer 1.6-7.[1]

> But consider 1 Kgs 3.7, Solomon's prayer at his accession:
>
> And now, O Lord my God, you have made your *'ebed (doulon)* king in the place of my father David, although I am only a *na'ar (paidarion)*....[2]

And yet—there is always an "and yet"—that *na'ar* can be translated by "servant" is shown in Ecc 10.16-17, which reads[3]

> Alas for you, O land, when your king is a *servant*
> and your princes feast in the morning!
> Happy are you, O land, when your king is a nobleman,
> and your princes feast at the proper time.

The NRSV translation is intended of course to point up the parallel with "nobleman", but earlier translations such as RSV, KJV, Good News, and even the Living Bible, have consistently used "youth" or "child" here. Knox has "young blood", Moffatt "mere boy", and both JB and NJB have "lad". LXX does not here acknowledge the double sense of *na'ar* but translates it as we saw above. My personal preference is for Moffatt's translation as I believe it carries the double denotation, while retaining the dominant meaning of youth. "Youngster", I think, would do the same thing.

The insight that *na'ar* carries at least connotations of "servant" is confirmed by Hos 11.1, which reads:

> When Israel was a *na'ar*, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.

What is the association that Israel felt most strongly with Egypt? Surely it was that of servitude. The constant repetition of the classic sentence "I am the Lord your

1 In Judg 8.20 and Jer 1.6-7, *na'ar* is used twice. In Judges (both A and B), it is translated once by *paidarion* and once by *neōteros*. In Jeremiah, it is translated by *neōteros* both times.

2 *Doulos* is used throughout this passage (vv 6-9) to translate *'ebed*.

3 The alternative translation *child* is still found in a footnote.

God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery." has made that connection one of the givens of the Old Testament. The choice of *na'ar* in the passage from Hosea confirms all that, but overlays it with the higher perception of Israel's "childhood" in Egypt, for *na'ar* even more than *'ebed* emphasises youthfulness. And just in case someone has still missed the point, the Hebrew hammers it home by beginning the sentence with *na'ar* and ending it with *ben*.

LXX interprets this passage rather differently, making the dependent clause causal rather than temporal, and attaching it to the previous sentence. Thus the LXX translates as

> ..., for Israel was an infant (*nēpios*, not *neōteros*) and I loved him, and out of Egypt I have called his *tekna*.

IX. All this century translators of the Bible have been inundated by newly discovered material that may (or may not) shed light upon our endeavours. The Septuagint, to which the Church has *always* had access, is an extremely fertile and insightful source for us. We neglect its wisdom at our peril.

Bibliography

Eaton, Margaret R., *Word-Pairs & Continuity in Translation in the Ancient Near East*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand 1994.

Fisher, Loren R., ed, *Ras Shamra Parallels,* vol 1, Analecta Orientalia 49, Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum 1972.

_____, *Ras Shamra Parallels,* vol 2, Analecta Orientalia 50, Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum 1975.

Harkness, Albert, *A Latin Grammar for Schools and Colleges*, rev ed, New York, NY: D. Appleton and Co. 1883.

Jellicoe, Sidney, *The Septuagint and Modern Study*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1968.

Jeremias, Joachim, *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, London: SCM Press 1969.

Orlinsky, Harry M., "The Septuagint as Holy Writ and the Philosophy of the Translators", *HUCA* 46 (1975) 89-114.

Rummel, Stan, ed, *Ras Shamra Parallels*, vol 3, Analecta Orientalia 51, Rome: Pontificum Institutum Biblicum 1981.

Tov, Emmanuel, "Did the Septuagint Translators Always Understand their Hebrew Text?" in *De Septuaginta: Studies in Honour of John William Wevers on his Sixty-fifth Birthday*, Albert Pietersma and Claude Cox, eds, Mississauga, Ontario, Canada: Benben Publications 1984.