Rams and Lambs in Psalm 114:4 and 6:
The Septuagint's Translation of X // בֶן Y Parallelisms

Adele Berlin

The LXX and the other Ancient Versions are usually used in the text-critical analysis of the Hebrew MT to reveal a possibly different *Vorlage* from that preserved in the MT. On the other hand, recent years have seen a growing number of comparisons between the LXX and the MT that show that the Greek translation, owing to its own cultural context or theological agenda, may yield a "different" or "new" text even when there is no question of a different Hebrew *Vorlage*. Or, finally, the LXX may be a repository of early biblical interpretation, preserving the understanding of the passage in its own time. My brief examination of a LXX translation that follows falls into none of these categories. I want here to show that in one particular instance a literal translation of a Hebrew idiom into Greek has simply missed the point of the Hebrew. Moreover, the rendering of the LXX has had ongoing, unnoticed influence on modern English translations (probably through the KJV). Its rendering of Psalm 114:4, 6 continues to be reproduced, apparently automatically, in a great many modern English translations and commentaries. This essay is meant to call attention to this unconscious adoption of the LXX rendering, and to probe the parallel construct X // בֶן Y.

The Hebrew of Ps 114:4: הֶהָרִים רָקְדוּ כְאֵילִים גְּבָעוֹת כִּבְנֵי-צֹאן is rendered in the LXX as τὰ ὄρη ἐσκίρτησαν ὡσεὶ κριοὶ καὶ οἱ βουνοὶ ὡς ἀρνία προβάτων, "The mountains skipped like rams, and the hills like lambs of the sheep."[1]

   Let me say at the outset that I find no lambs in the Hebrew of this verse
(or in v. 6), despite their frolicking presence in the vast majority of modern
commentaries and English translations. Apparently once the LXX put these
lambs in, they remained without further scholarly thought. The LXX's
lambs were not born of a different *Vorlage*, but from the LXX's more literal
sense of what the word בן means and how it is to be translated.
Compounding the LXX's translation is its apparently limited awareness of
the workings of the parallel construct X // בן Y. I will examine this
construct (it is quite prevalent) and the meaning of בן from a modern
viewpoint, and contrast the LXX's understanding of verses like Ps 114:4
with my own.

   Among the many types of word-pairs found in parallelisms is the form X
// בן Y. Best known in the form of personal names, PN1 // son of PN2,
this construction goes well beyond the use of personal names, as the
examples below will show.[2] While this formal construction is consistent and
easily recognized, it does not always represent the same underlying
semantic structure. As is typical of parallelism, the same surface structure
does not always indicate the same deep structure. (The converse is also true;
different surface structures may reflect the same deep structure.) The
tension between the surface structure and the deep structure provides
interest and requires careful processing of the relationship of the parallel
terms and of the lines in which they are located. Translating X // בן Y
should not therefore be automatically the same in all cases, but all too often
is it, sometimes misconstruing the meaning of the parallelism.

   From a modern perspective, we can divide the X // בן Y construction into
two groups. In many cases (apparently most cases), X and בן Y refer to the
same entity, labelled with different terms in parallel lines. For instance, 1

---

   [2] See W.G.E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry. A Guide to Its Techniques* (JSOTSup
26; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 133. Watson labels this phenomenon "epithetic
word pairs" and describes it as PN1 // son of PN2. He relates it to the "break-up
of stereotyped phrases."

Kings 12:16: מַה לָּנוּ חֵלֶק בְּדָוִד וְלֹא נַחֲלָה בְּבֶן יִשַׁי , "What portion do we have in David; no share in Jesse's son." David and Jesse's son are the same person. There are many similar examples that do not involve personal names:

Ps 8:5: מָה אֱנוֹשׁ כִּי תִזְכְּרֶנּוּ וּבֶן אָדָם כִּי תִפְקְדֶנּוּ, "What is a human being that you pay mind to him; a person that you attend to him" [LXX: human beings // mortals].

Ps 144:3: ה׳ מָה אָדָם וַתֵּדָעֵהוּ בֶּן אֱנוֹשׁ וַתְּחַשְּׁבֵהוּ, "Lord, what is a person that you acknowledge him; a human being that you consider him." Note that either אנוש or אדם can be preceded by בן, but that בן is always in the second term, as required by this parallel construct [LXX: human beings // mortals].

Ps 80:18: תְּהִי יָדְךָ עַל אִישׁ יְמִינֶךָ עַל בֶּן אָדָם אִמַּצְתָּ לָּךְ, "Let your hand be on the man at your right hand; on the person you have adopted as your own." Clearly the same person is being referred to, not a man and his son [LXX: man // son of man].

Ps 86:16: ". . . פְּנֵה אֵלַי וְחָנֵּנִי תְּנָה עֻזְּךָ לְעַבְדֶּךָ וְהוֹשִׁיעָה לְבֶן אֲמָתֶךָ", Give your strength to your servant; save the son of your handmaid." (Cf. also Ps 116:16 for the same pair.)

Ps 105:6: זֶרַע אַבְרָהָם עַבְדּוֹ בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב בְּחִירָיו, "The seed of Abraham his servant; the sons of Jacob his chosen ones" [LXX: offspring of Abraam, his slaves // sons of Jacob, his chosen ones].

Ps 82:6: אֲנִי אָמַרְתִּי אֱלֹהִים אַתֶּם וּבְנֵי עֶלְיוֹן כֻּלְּכֶם, "I say you are divine beings; sons of the Most High all of you"

Ps 69:9: מוּזָר הָיִיתִי לְאֶחָי וְנָכְרִי לִבְנֵי אִמִּי, "I am a stranger to my brothers; a foreigner to my mother's sons."

In other instances, X and בן Y stand for two separate entities, juxtaposed in the parallelism. The בן Y term is not a synonyn or alternate designation for the X term, but rather a second item, parallel to the first.

An example is Ps 103:7: יוֹדִיעַ דְּרָכָיו לְמֹשֶׁה לִבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עֲלִילוֹתָיו, "He makes known his ways to Moses; his deeds to the children of Israel." Moses and the Israelites are clearly not the same person; rather, one parallels the other. Both together are informed of God's ways and deeds. (The fact that בני ישראל is a set term does not exclude it from the formal construction of X // בן Y. The same is true of בן אדם.)

Similarly, Ps 83:9 גַּם אַשּׁוּר נִלְוָה עִמָּם הָיוּ זְרוֹעַ לִבְנֵי לוֹט סֶלָה, "Assyria too joins forces with them; they give support to the sons of Lot." Assyria, according to this verse, is the power behind the sons of Lot (Ammon and Moab).

Compounding the understanding of this construction is the meaning of the term בן.[3] While בן is at times to be rendered "son, offspring, young," at other times בן is used in a more extended or figurative sense, as a member of a group, a citizen of a locality, or a person having a certain characteristic. The term בן אדם distinguishes an individual from the collective humanity (although it might also be analyzed more literally as a descendent of Adam). It is not necessary to specify the taxonomy of בן in each case, as many of the categories overlap; but it is important for my argument to determine when בן does not literally mean "son, offspring, young." Examples of the non-literal sense of בן are found in the following verses.

Ps 72:4: יִשְׁפֹּט עֲנִיֵּי עָם יוֹשִׁיעַ לִבְנֵי אֶבְיוֹן וִידַכֵּא עוֹשֵׁק, "Let him champion the lowly of the people; deliver the needy" [not "sons of the needy"]. Lowly and needy may be analyzed as one entity or two [LXX: poor // sons of the needy].

Ps 89:23: לֹא יַשִּׁא אוֹיֵב בּוֹ וּבֶן עַוְלָה לֹא יְעַנֶּנּוּ, "No enemy shall oppress him; no vile man [literally "son of vileness"] afflict him." Enemy and vile man may be either one entity or two [LXX: an enemy // a son of lawlessness].

Ps 149:2: יִשְׂמַח יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֹשָׂיו בְּנֵי צִיּוֹן יָגִילוּ בְמַלְכָּם, "Let Israel rejoice in its maker; let the citizens/children of Zion exult in their king." The same entity is referred to in both lines.

Ps 147:9: נוֹתֵן לִבְהֵמָה לַחְמָהּ לִבְנֵי עֹרֵב אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאוּ, "Who gives the beast its food; the ravens what they call for" [LXX: animals // young ravens]. Clearly beast and ravens are different entities. God provides both animals and birds of prey with sustenance. The translation of בְּנֵי עֹרֵב, however, is subject to disagreement. As in the LXX, NJPS renders "raven's brood" and NRSV has "young ravens." On the other hand, Haag[4] discusses בן as denoting membership in a group, and includes בני צאן (Ps 114:4), בני ערב (Ps

---

[3] See H. Haag, "*ben* in the Semitic Languages," *TDOT* 2: 147–153.

[4] H. Haag, "*ben*," 152–153.

147:9), and נשר בני (Prov 30:17) under this rubric. He concludes that these expressions do not mean the offspring of these animals, but rather the sheep species, the raven species, and the vulture species respectively. I agree with this position, for it seems more logical to speak of grass-eating animals and carnivorous ravens rather than grass-eating animals and the offspring of carnivorous ravens. I suppose "what they call for" is understood by those who translate "young ravens" as the young birds calling out for food; but it seems more likely to me that the call is the sound of the adult scavenger ravens, cawing loudly over their meal.

Similar is Prov 30:17: עַיִן תִּלְעַג לְאָב וְתָבוּז לִיקֲּהַת אֵם יִקְּרוּהָ עֹרְבֵי נַחַל וְיֹאכְלוּהָ בְּנֵי נָשֶׁר. I translate the second part of the verse as "The ravens of the brook will gouge it out; the birds of prey will eat it." Compare NRSV: "will be pecked out by the ravens of the valley and eaten by the vultures."[5] Are the ravens and the vultures two separate entities? If so, one is plucking out the eye and another eating it, an unlikely scenario. Better to take raven as belonging to the category or species of vulture/bird of prey. If so, one entity is mentioned in both lines. However, to be fair, the parallelism could be saying that both ravens and vultures will pluck it out and eat it; that is two types of birds of prey, not one bird and its species. In any case, the idea of young birds (cf. NJPS: "young eagles") seems superfluous if not erroneous.

One last general observation. As in other forms of parallelism, a plural may be paralleled by a singular, or vice versa, even when both refer to the same entity.[6] We have already seen this in some of our earlier examples: Ps 89:9; 103:7; 105:6; 147:9. Additional examples are:

Ps 146:3: אַל תִּבְטְחוּ בִנְדִיבִים בְּבֶן אָדָם שֶׁאֵין לוֹ תְשׁוּעָה, "Don't trust in the great ones; in a person who has no power to save." Plural // singular. The implication is that even great men have no power to save. LXX: rulers // mortals. Here, and also in Ps 79:11; 102:21; 105:6; 147:9 the LXX translates

---

[5] On the meaning "vulture" or even "great bird of prey" rather than "eagle" see T. Kronholm, "*nešer*," *TDOT* 10:77–85.

[6] For singular // plural see A. Berlin, *The Dynamics of Biblical Parallelism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 44-50.

both parallel terms in the same number, rather than one in the singular and the other in the plural.

Ps 79:11: תָּבוֹא לְפָנֶיךָ אֶנְקַת אָסִיר כְּגֹדֶל זְרוֹעֲךָ הוֹתֵר בְּנֵי תְמוּתָה, "May the groan of the prisoner reach you; as befits your great strength, release those about to die." Singular // plural. The prisoner is likened to the dead. LXX: prisoners // sons of those put to death.

Ps 102:21: לִשְׁמֹעַ אֶנְקַת אָסִיר לְפַתֵּחַ בְּנֵי תְמוּתָה, "to hear the groan of the prisoner; to loose those about to die." Singular // plural. Same as Ps 79:11.

Because the LXX did not have our modern understanding of בן as a member of a group or species, it invariably translated בן Y literally as "son /offspring / young of Y." When Y is an animal, בן Y is the animal's young or offspring. As a result, in Ps 114:4: הֶהָרִים רָקְדוּ כְאֵילִים גְּבָעוֹת כִּבְנֵי-צֹאן, LXX renders בני צאן as ἀρνία προβάτων, "lambs of the sheep." The meaning of the verse is then "The mountains skipped like rams and the hills like lambs of the sheep."[7] According to this translation, the mountains are compared to one type of sheep-rams, that is adult males and the hills are compared to another type, sheep-children, or lambs. The second parallel term is construed as a different entity from the first term. Most translations, starting with the Vulgate, follow the LXX. KJV puts a nice spin on it: "The mountains skipped like rams, [and] the little hills like lambs." The idea seems to be that the large (mountains are like rams) is paralleled by the small (little hills are like lambs). KJV also achieves a balance in the sound or rhythm by adding "little" to "hills," making both "mountains" and "little hills" multisyllabic and "rams" and "lambs" monosyllabic. The KJV, of course, is known for its esthetic English usage, and this is a good example.

A quick survey of standard modern English translations of בני צאן in our verses yields the following:

> RSV: lambs
> NRSV: lambs
> NIV: lambs
> NEB: young sheep

---

[7] A. Pietersma, *Psalms*, 115.

REB: lambs of the flock
NJPS: sheep
JPS (1917): young sheep.[8]

The exception in this list is NJPS.

Most commentaries see no problem in the phrase and don't even bother to comment on it. Individual commentators who translate it reproduce the "rams // lambs" rendering. Only Amos Hakham, as far as I have been able to find, comments on it, explaining that צאן is a collective and that בן צאן refers to an individual sheep within the collective "sheep"; בני צאן means many individual sheep. Hakham agrees, therefore, with NJPS in seeing the parallel as rams // (many individual) sheep.[9] This can be analyzed as a part // its whole. It is close to the meaning suggested by Haag[10], "rams // members of the sheep species." I find these explanations more plausible that rams // lambs.

What image is being conveyed? If one sees lambs in this picture, one interprets the image as mountains frolicking or skipping as sheep do on the slopes. This image, in somewhat of a non *sequitur*, is then generally understood to mean that the mountains and hills quake at God's presence.[11] I see a different image, stronger and more focussed, of adult male sheep only. The mountains are rearing up as rams rear up and butt each other to establish territory and mating choices. This describes the (re)formation of the mountains, parallel to the submission of the waters in the preceding line

---

[8] This translation was largely based on the British Revised Version, a revision of the KJV.

[9] A. Hakham, *Sefer Tehilim* (Da'at Mikra; Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1980); English Translation: *The Bible. Psalms with the Jerusalem Commentary* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 2003). I quote the translation in p. 163. The English translator of Hakham, however, missed the point, and translates the biblical text as "the hills like lambs"; that shows how deeply embedded this translation is.

[10] H. Haag, "*ben,*" 152.

[11] H.J. Kraus, *Psalms* (trans. H.C. Oswald; 2 vols.; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989), 2:375. For my interpretation of this psalm see A. Berlin. "The Message of Psalm 114" in *Birkat Shalom: Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature, and Postbiblical Judaism presented to Shalom M. Paul on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (ed. C. Cohen et al.; 2 vols.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 1:345-361.

("the sea saw and fled"). Creation is being described here, not nature's frightened reaction to a theophany. Compare Ps 104:7–8: "They [the waters] fled at Your blast; rushed away at the sound of Your thunder—mountains rising, valleys sinking—to the place You established for them" (NJPS). Psalm 114 likens the Exodus and its aftermath to the re-creation of the world. There are no lambs in this picture.

A similar phrase appears in Ps 29:6: וַיַּרְקִידֵם כְּמוֹ עֵגֶל לְבָנוֹן וְשִׂרְיֹן כְּמוֹ בֶן רְאֵמִים. In the Hebrew, this verse has several problems, namely how to explain the mem in וַיַּרְקִידֵם (as a plural direct object or as an enclitic), and where to divide the parallelism ("He makes them skip like a calf // Lebanon and Sirion like a young wild ox" or "He makes Lebanon skip like a calf // Sirion like a young wild ox."); and the LXX is even more problematic.[12] These issues do not concern me here. My interest is עגל // בן ראמים. Because the first term, calf, is the young of an animal, it seems natural to translate בֶן רְאֵמִים as "young wild ox," as most English translations do. The LXX, which is problematic in its own right for other reasons, renders "calf // a young of unicorns."[13] The question is: are two animals mentioned or only one; is the calf the same as the young wild ox, or is the calf understood to be the young of domesticated cattle. It seems likely to me that most translators intend the second option: a calf and a young ox. However, I construe this parallelism in the same way as I construe בני צאן // אילים in Ps 114:4—as an animal and its species, as does Haag.[14] Ps 29:6 is describing the movement of a calf of the wild ox species—one animal, not two — עגל בן

---

[12] See the articles by S.E. Loewenstamm, "The Historical Background to the Septuagint Translation of Psalm 29:5-6," in id., *From Babylon to Canaan; Studies in the Bible and Its Oriental Background* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1992), 280-291, and id., "*wayyarqidem kᵉmo ʿegäl*," in ibid., 292-296. See also A. Schenker, "Gewollt dunkle Wiedergaben in LXX? Am Beispiel von Ps 28(29),6," *Biblica* 75, 4 (1994): 546–555 and most standard commentaries on Psalms.

[13] "Unicorn" is a common LXX rendering for ראם. See H.P. Müller, "*rᵉʾēm*," *TDOT* 13:247 and G. Dorival, "Septante et texte massorétique; le cas des Psaumes" in *Congress Volume, Basel 2001* (ed. A. Lemaire; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 142-143. The Vulgate has *filius rinocerotis,* "son of a rhinosaurus."

[14] H. Haag, "*ben,*" 152.

ראמים, analogous to עגל בן בקר in Lev 9:2. The wild ox image is typically used in the Bible for its strong and destructive horns (Ps 22:21; 92:11), but a wild ox calf would not be a good choice for demonstrating strong horns. Job 39:9–12 provides a better clue to the image in Ps 29:6; Job describes the wild ox as untameable, not capable of being domesticated. The calf of the wild ox would be even less trainable, presumably even more erratic and difficult to control than an adult wild ox. I propose that Ps 29:6, like the Job passage, is picturing a wildly moving animal, not capable of being restrained. God makes the Lebanon and the Sirion move like a wild ox calf.

Ps 114:4 and Ps 29:6 are generally treated together. Indeed, they invoke the same verb of movement, רקד, and ascribe this movement as being natural to animals. But the images are not identical. Psalm 114's image of creation pictures the rising up of mountains, along with the draining away of waters. Psalm 29 contains a violent theophany image that pictures the breaking of the cedars of Lebanon (the strongest, most massive trees) and the convulsing of the wilderness of Kadesh. In this context, the comparison of Lebanon and Sirion to the uncontrolable movement of a wild ox calf fits nicely. The mountains in these two psalms are not doing the same things; indeed, Psalm 114 speaks of the re-formation of the mountains in general while Psalm 29 specifically focusses on the highest, most massive mountains, Lebanon and Sirion (the northern parallel to the wilderness of Kadesh in the south). God's appearance in Psalm 29 is like an earthquake and/or a tornado—it rocks the ground, shakes the highest mountains, breaks the cedars, strips the forests, and generally upsets the natural world.

Parallelism is an eminently translatable feature, even when the poetry of the target language (Greek, in the case of the LXX) does not employ it in its own native poetry.[15] The LXX translated parallelisms because they were found in the original Hebrew. But it did not always understand them as we do today. A recent monograph suggests that in some cases the LXX of Proverbs wrote in a more parallelistic style that its Hebrew original, while

---

[15] See R. ApRoberts, "Old Testament Poetry: The Translatable Structure," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 92 (1977): 987–1004.

in other cases it is less parallelistic.[16] Our small sample of X // בן Y parallelisms suggests that, in this form at least, due to its literal rendering of בן, the LXX tended to highlight the difference between parallel terms rather than their similarity. For unrelated reasons, it also tended to make the grammatical number of parallel terms equivalent even when they were not in the Hebrew.

There are several possibilities to explain the LXX's small divergences from the Hebrew in the aforegoing examples of parallelisms: Greek stylistic or lexical preferences, a different understanding of the workings of parallelism, or the influence of later parallelistic poetry, as found in the Apocrypha and the Qumran scrolls. There is no suggestion of a different Hebrew *Vorlage* in our examples, nor is this a matter of a different "theology" espoused by the LXX or an intentionally different interpretation. Nevertheless, the LXX rendering of Ps 114:4 launched an interpretation that, while not an accurate representation of the Hebrew, is difficult to eradicate from the many later translations that adopted it. Its prevalence in so many modern English translations is, I would guess, not a sign that modern translators have intentionally adopted a LXX reading over a reading in the MT, but rather the continuing influence of the KJV, which had absorbed some LXX renderings. The KJV claims to be based on the MT, not on the Versions, but this claim is more of a scholarly-pious apologia and not to be taken too literally.[17] The modern perpetuation of this reading is due to an

[16] See G. Tauberschmidt, *Secondary Parallelism: A Study of Translation Technique in LXX Proverbs* (Atlanta/Leiden: Society of Biblical Literature/Brill, 2004). For a critical review see M.V. Fox, "Review of Gerhard Tauberschmidt, Secondary Parallelism: A Study of Translation Technique in LXX Proverbs," *Review of Biblical Literature* (2004), http://www.bookreviews.org.

[17] The Introduction to the 1611 KJV includes this statement about the translators:

"If you ask what they had before them, truly it was the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, the Greek of the New… These tongues…we set before us to translate, being the tongues wherein God was pleased to speak to his Church by his Prophets and Apostles… Neither did we think much to consult the translators or commentators, Chaldee, Hebrew, Syrian, Greek, or Latin; no, nor the Spanish, French, Italian, or Dutch." (quoted in F.F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*, [3rd ed.; Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2002], 102). The KJV translators present themselves

uncritical automatic repetition of an earlier English rendering by the many translators who have forgotten that בן has a range of meanings in Hebrew and similar Semitic languages, and that a literal translation of בן may not always work in non-Semitic languages.[18]

_____

as both knowledgeable and pious, doing pristine work from the original source, unsullied by earlier attempts or opinions. They even fault the Septuagint translators for, as the legend goes, having worked too hastily, finishing their translation in only 72 days.

Emanuel Tov, in his interesting article on "The Textual Basis of Modern Translations of the Hebrew Bible: The Argument Against Eclecticism." (*Textus* 20 [2000]: 209) makes the plea to return "to the principles of the first biblical translations that were based on the MT, such as the KJV." Indeed, such were the *principles* of the KJV, but not necessarily its actual practice.

[18] The Targum, therefore, is able to reproduce the Hebrew phrase in the Aramaic בנין דעאן without falling into the "son of/young" trap. The recent English translation of the Targum, however, like the translation of Hakham (see note 9), rendered בנין דעאן as "lambs" (D.M. Stec, *The Targum of Psalms*, *The Aramaic Bible* [Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2004], 206).

Additional works consulted are A. Aejmelaeus, "Characterizing Criteria for the Characterization of the Septuagint Translators; Experimenting on the Greek Psalter," in *The Old Greek Psalter; Studies in Honour of Albert Pietersma* (eds. R.J.V. Hiebert, C.E. Cox and P.J. Gentry; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 54-73; J.L. Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry. Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981).