

The Problem of Proper Nouns in the Septuagint

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ABSTRACT

The Lexham English Septuagint, published by Logos Bible Software in November 2012, is a new translation of the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, plus deuterocanonical/apocryphal books) into English.

One longstanding issue with Septuagint translations into English are the names of people, places, and people groups. English translations tend to transliterate most of the Greek names, ending up making it difficult to track participants and places.

Tracking names in the Old Testament is difficult enough; mentally mapping from Greek transliterations to the more common Hebrew transliterations found in modern translations of the Hebrew Bible makes it even tougher. *The Lexham English Septuagint*, however, has a unique data-based approach to solving this problem that uses names familiar to most readers, yet preserves the transliterated forms where necessary.

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INTRODUCTION

The *Lexham English Bible* (LEB; NT released in 2009, updated in 2010; OT released in 2012) is a new translation of the Bible published by Logos Bible Software.

The LEB had its genesis with interlinear editions of the Greek New Testament (first NA27, then migrated to *The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition* (SBLGNT)) and the Hebrew Bible (first the Andersen-Forbes Analyzed Text, then migrated to the *Lexham Hebrew Bible* (LHB)). These interlinear editions had the rudimentary components of an English translation embedded within them. The LEB used that information as the starting point for a new translation, and was edited from that starting point into a full-fledged translation of the Bible.

Upon completion of the *Lexham Greek-English Interlinear Septuagint* (in 2009), the LEB NT, based on the *Lexham Greek-English Interlinear New Testament*, had already been completed. It made sense to consider an English edition of the Septuagint. But at the time, it was too big of a project to undertake.

In mid-2011, after refining the idea and the process of creating a translation from an interlinear, it made sense to reconsider an English translation of the Septuagint. In 2012, after completion of the initial edition of the LEB OT, it made sense to pursue.

When we began to pursue the translation in earnest, we ran into some problems. But first, some background on translations of the Septuagint.

THE SEPTUAGINT

What is today known as “The Septuagint” (LXX) is a witness to the earliest translation of the Jewish scriptures from Hebrew into Greek. It is immensely helpful for Biblical scholars, as it provides a sort of snapshot of the Hebrew text from well before the era of many of our earliest available manuscripts.

But it is also valuable because, as many a preacher has likely said, it was “the Bible of the Apostle Paul.” Paul and the other NT authors were steeped in these writings, and many of the places where they quote the Jewish scriptures in the New Testament are very much like we find them in available Septuagint manuscripts. Because of this, the Septuagint is valuable to simply read.

Reading the Septuagint, however, has not been an easy thing to do in English for many years. Until the 21st century, there were really only two English translations of the Septuagint available. One by Charles Thomson (who was secretary of the Continental Congress — true story) from the early 1800s, and one by Sir Lancelot Charles Lee Brenton, from the mid 1800s. Both are exceptional works, but both are also products of their era: as difficult to read today as many other productions in English from the early/mid 1800s.

In the 21st century, however, another option became available: *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*, with the abbreviation NETS, published in 2009. Further, two Greek-English lexicons of the Septuagint were published.

These are all excellent works. However, if the target of these works is the English reader with little to no knowledge of Greek, the methodology of the recent works as regards proper nouns is problematic.

THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATING NAMES

This is really a problem of translating a translation.

The Septuagint, obviously, uses Greek. For everything. This means when it translates names of places and people from Hebrew, it translates them into Greek equivalents. Because the audience is Greek. This makes perfect sense for an audience capable with Greek.

However, when translating the Greek of the Septuagint into English, one has to determine how to render these names in English. And this is harder than you might think because there are so many names, and so many minor players and minor locations.

The NETS edition of the Septuagint describes its practice for translating names as follows:

Names have been treated in essentially two ways: (1) as *translations* of Hebrew (or Aramaic), i.e., names in general use in the Hellenistic world apart from the LXX, and (2) as *transcriptions* of Hebrew (or Aramaic), i.e., names produced *de novo* from the source language. The former have been given their standard equivalent in English (e.g. Egypt and Syria) while the latter appear in English transcription (e.g. Dauid and Salomon).²

This is problematic because in the majority of instances, transliteration of the Hebrew is not equivalent with transliteration of the Greek. That is, the name representing a single entity will end up with different transliterations depending on the source language. One text's "Iesous, son of Naue" is another text's "Joshua, son of Nun."

The transliteration approach taken by the NETS team is not uncommon. It was also used in *The Lexham Greek-English Interlinear Septuagint*, published by Logos Bible Software. Regarding the inclusion of proper nouns in their lexicon to the Septuagint, Lust, Eynikel, and Hauspie note, "Proper names are included only when they are a transliteration of Hebrew words that are common nouns."³ Muraoka, in his Septuagint lexicon, does not mention proper nouns in his front matter⁴ and only seems to include the most common proper nouns (e.g., Μωϋσῆς, Moses) in the lexicon proper. Generally, outside only the most common or obvious, English readers are fairly much left to their own devices to determine which LXX names match up with the Hebrew names they are familiar with.

An example will help establish the conceptual problem. Here is an excerpt from Genesis 10, the table of nations. The left column is an English translation of the Hebrew (LEB); the right column is an English translation of the LXX (NETS) that follows a similar translation strategy (transliterating names from the source language, which for NETS is Greek).

LEB	NETS
10 These <i>are</i> the generations of the sons of Noah—	10 Now these are the generations of Noe's sons,

² Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright, eds., *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (Oxford University Press, USA, 2007), xviii.

³ Johan Lust, Erik Eynikel, and Katrin Hauspie, *Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (rev. blg.; Hendrickson Pub, 2008).

⁴ T. Muraoka, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the Septuagint* (Peeters, 2010), vii-xvii.

<p>Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Children were born to them after the flood.</p> <p>² The sons of Japheth: Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras.</p> <p>³ And the sons of Gomer: Ashkenaz, Riphath, and Togarmah. ⁴ And the sons of Javan: Elishah, Tarshish, Kittim, and Dodanim.</p>	<p>Sem, Cham, Iapheth, and sons were born to them after the flood.</p> <p>2 The sons of Iapheth: Gamer and Magog and Madai and Iouan and Elisa and Thobel and Mosoch and Thiras.</p> <p>3 And the sons of Gamer: Aschanaz and Riphath and Thorgama. 4 And the sons of Ioyan: Elisa and Tharsis, Kitians, Rhodians.</p>
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The difference here is that that left column (LEB) translates (transliterates) the Hebrew, and the right column (NETS) translates (transliterates) the Greek. This creates dissonance, with differences like the following:

- Noah → Noe
- Shem → Sem
- Ham → Cham
- Japheth → Iapheth

Another example is a simple one: The genealogy of Jacob/Israel in 1 Chronicles 2. In the first two verses, the names of the 12 sons of Jacob (Israel) are listed.

LEB	NETS
<p>2 These <i>are</i> the sons of Israel: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, ²Dan, Joseph, Benjamin, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher.</p>	<p>2 These are the names of Israel's sons: Rouben, Symeon, Leui, Iouda, Issachar, Zaboulon, ²Dan, Ioseph, Beniamin, Nephthali, Gad, Aser.</p>

While most can be made out knowing the English equivalent and some Greek, mentally tracking these sorts of things across large swathes of text is difficult.

- Reuben → Rouben
- Simeon → Symeon
- Levi → Leui
- Judah → Iouda
- Issachar → Issachar
- Zebulun → Zaboulon
- Dan → Dan
- Joseph → Ioseph
- Benjamin → Beniamin

- Naphtali → Nephthali
- Gad → Gad
- Asher → Aser

Both translations take the same basic strategy, which is roughly to transliterate of the original language (Hebrew or Greek) into English. This ends up with other artifacts that make recognition of even common names difficult for those who are well acquainted with the existing, common translations from the Hebrew text:

- Moses → Moyses⁵
- Isaac → Isaak
- Jacob → Iakob
- Jeremiah → Ieremias
- Ezekiel → Iezekiel
- Solomon → Salomon

While transliterating the original language name is sound as a translation strategy, the Greekification of names makes it difficult for readers with only the knowledge of English to recognize the names they already know from the Hebrew translation of the same material.

Taking the Reader into Account

When translating, one should understand the reader targeted by the translation. For *The Lexham English Septuagint*, the target reader is the person who either does not know Greek, or does not know it very well, and who wants to allow the Septuagint to play a part in their study. This reader has likely heard that most of the writers of the Greek New Testament, by and large, used the Septuagint as their Bible. When the New Testament quotes the Old, or when reading something in the Old Testament calls to mind something in the New, then the Septuagint is a good source to examine.

So this target reader, outside of the most obvious cases, would probably not be able to conceptually map the names found in a translation from the Hebrew with the names found in a translation from the Greek.

This is a problem for reading and for general comprehension of the Septuagint. If the familiar actors and locations are no longer familiar to the target reader, then a different strategy should be pursued.

The Size and Scope of the Problem

The ramifications of a different strategy are huge. A conservative estimate of instances of person and place names in the Septuagint would be around 25,000.⁶ Transliterating these in place is the easiest and least complex method⁷ and probably why it is the most common as well.

⁵ If one uses the SBL scheme, this is “Mouses,” which is a problem, especially one is searching for instances of rodents in an English translation of the Septuagint.

A further option is to determine common names, or most important names, and only translate those in such a way that the Septuagint translation matches with translations from the Hebrew. However this raises other problems. Sometimes the well-known names are not common at all (e.g. Balaam) and sometimes common names are not popularly known. This strategy requires the development of a translation vocabulary (or lexicon) and strict adherence to the lexicon by all contributors. This is problematic because one can really only arrive at such a lexicon after working through the whole text.

The other option is to *translate* every name instead of *transliterate* it. This strategy is the most onerous, because it requires the translators and editors to know that the proper English representation of what would be transliterated as “Iesous, son of Naue” should really be “Joshua, son of Nun” but also to know that Gen 10:2, “Iouan” should really be “Javan.” It requires an essentially complete lexicon of names to properly handle these names across the whole corpus of the Septuagint.

For the target reader of *The Lexham English Septuagint*, this last option is the best. It provides the familiar names to the English reader who has no facility with the original languages.

But this option, while best for the target reader, also has a potential problem: there may be readers more informed in the original languages who find value in knowing of differences between names in the Hebrew and Greek editions of the same material.

USING DATA TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM

The underlying problem is that there are two sources, one Hebrew and one Greek, and these are reflected in different English translations. There is no direct way to compensate for unfamiliar names, to retrieve the English equivalents as translated from the Hebrew, when necessary.

Upon further reflection, this is a data problem. And it is a problem that has a solution.

Reverse Interlinears to the Rescue!

In Logos Bible Software, one of the core features of our packages are reverse interlinears. These are datasets that align a translation text, as the top line, with its underlying original language source, along with other morphological/linguistic data associated with the original language text. An example would be the *Lexham English Bible*, which in the New Testament is aligned to *The Greek New Testament: SBL Edition* and the Old Testament to the *Lexham Hebrew Bible* (alignment forthcoming). The below example is from Mark 4:1:

⁶ A search of the *Lexham English Septuagint* footnotes for “Gk,” which indicates the form of a name in the text is different than a straight transliteration of the Greek, locates over 23,500 instances. As many of the most common names (e.g. Adam, Abram) do match, they would not show up in such a search, hence a conservative estimate of 25,000. It could be as high as 30,000.

⁷ This is the primary reason why *The Lexham Greek-English Interlinear Septuagint* pursued this strategy.

The Parable of the Sower

4 And again he began to teach beside the sea ,^a and a very large crowd was gathered
Καὶ πάλιν₂ → ἤρξατο₃ → διδάσκειν₄ παρὰ₅ τὴν₆ θάλασσαν₇ καὶ₈ πλειστος₁₃ ← ὅχλος₁₂ → συνάγεται₉
to him , so that he got into a boat *and** sat on the sea , and the whole
πρὸς₁₀ αὐτὸν₁₁ ὥστε₁₄ ← αὐτὸν₁₅ ἐμβάντα₁₈ εἰς₁₆ → πλοιον₁₇ πλειστος₁₃ καὶ₂₃ δὲ₂₅ πάς₂₄
crowd was at the sea on the land.² And he began to teach ^b them many things in
ὅχλος₂₆ ἦσαν₃₃ πρὸς₂₇ τὴν₂₈ θάλασσαν₂₉ ἐπὶ₃₀ τῆς₃₁ γῆς₃₂ καὶ₁ → → → διδάσκειν₂ αὐτοὺς₃ πολλά₆ ← ἐν₄

Mark 4:1–2, LEB with SBLGNT Reverse Interlinear

Logos also has a reverse interlinear that aligns the Hebrew Bible with the portions of the Septuagint that translate it. Below is an example of this from Genesis 10:1-4.

Genesis 10:1–4, LXX (Rahlfs) with LHB Reverse Interlinear

With data like this, it is possible to take two steps—one from the Greek of the LXX to the Hebrew it translates, and one from the Hebrew Bible to its English translation—to build a preliminary lexicon to align names as they occur, instance by instance, between Greek, Hebrew, and English. Once this lexicon is built, for any instance in the Septuagint, it can be checked to see if it aligns with Hebrew, and further with and English translation.

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```

Names from Genesis 10:1

From this data, a list of preferred English names was built. But this only covered names that existed in the Hebrew Bible. Names in deuterocanonical/apocryphal books needed an alternate dataset. Thankfully, a reverse interlinear of the NRSV Deuterocanonical/Apocryphal books and the Septuagint was available. A list of translations used by the NRSV, which largely unifies naming across the Hebrew Bible and the deuterocanon, was thus available for consultation as well.

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Names from Judith 1:1

This data was the start, not the end of the process. There are still some problems, notably:

- What happens when the Greek does not neatly align with the Hebrew?
- What happens when the Greek aligns with the Hebrew, but the Hebrew does not neatly align with the English? One example: Sometimes, what is literally “the sons of Israel” in Greek is mapped through to English editions as “the Israelites.”
- How can both the English (from Hebrew) and the Greek name(s) be preserved, in the case one finds knowledge of the Greek name useful?

The Value of Data and Code

Not yet sure how big the problem really was, and needing more examples to evaluate, we wrote code to generate draft translations of the Septuagint based on Logos’ existing *Lexham Greek-English Interlinear of the Septuagint*. Where we could use the reverse interlinear data to get an English translation based on the Hebrew, we did it. Our breakdown was as follows:

1. If we can retrieve an English name for this instance from Greek, back to Hebrew, back to English, use it.
2. If we cannot retrieve a name, do we know the Greek lemma from the built up lexicon? If so, use it.
3. If we cannot retrieve a mapping, and do not know the lemma otherwise, transliterate⁸ the Greek, and use that for the name.

In all cases, the names were marked for review in the MSWord documents we generated.

We found that this was a sound approach, overall. But again, we were concerned about losing reference to the Greek form of the name. So we decided to add a footnote with the Greek form of the name if the following rule was in effect:

- If the Greek transliteration, minus macrons, does not equal the form from translations of the Hebrew, then a footnote with the Greek transliteration is required. If they match, no footnote is required.

This addresses the basic concerns about the importance of the Greek forms of names, but keeps the more readable forms of names primary in the text.

The Value of a Human Editor

Even with the high-quality reverse interlinear data fueling the solution, with over 25,000 tokens in play, some errors will occur. The translation, initially based on interlinear data, needed significant editorial effort anyway. There were overall consistency issues, word order issues, and other issues that required human eyes and minds to notice, review and correct.

⁸ According to the scheme given in the *SBL Handbook of Style*, §5.3, p. 29, though we removed macrons (e.g. ω = ὁ rendered as “o”) for simplicity.

So rather than perfect the machine, we ran the machine as-is and began the process of editing the resultant translation into serviceable, readable English.

The editing process consisted of multiple phases. First, we had editors review content generated from the interlinear dataset, with Hebrew-based names inserted where appropriate. The goal was to edit the supplied text into a readable yet relatively literal translation of the underlying Greek. Here is what Gen 10:1–5 looks like in the *Lexham Greek-English Interlinear Septuagint*:

Here is a sample of Genesis 10:1–6 as was generated by that process, with notes. Square [brackets] indicate text that the original interlinear editor considered to be “supplied”. Curly {braces} indicate an idiom of some sort.

10.1 These now [are] the generations of the sons of Noah:⁹ Shem,¹⁰ Ham,¹¹ Japheth;¹² and sons were born to them after the flood.

2 The sons of Japheth [were]¹³ Gomer¹⁴ and Magog and Madai and Javan¹⁵ and Elishah¹⁶ and Tubal¹⁷ and Meshech¹⁸ and Tiras.¹⁹ **3** And the sons of Gomer [were]²⁰ Ashkenaz²¹ and Riphath

⁹Gk. *Nōe*

¹⁰Gk. *Sēm*

¹¹Gk. *Cham*

¹²Gk. *Iapheth*

¹³Gk. *Iapheth*

¹⁴Gk. *Gamer*

¹⁵Gk. *Iōuan*

¹⁶Gk. *Elisa*

¹⁷Gk. *Thobel*

¹⁸Gk. *Mosoch*

¹⁹Gk. *Thiras*

²⁰Gk. *Gamer*

²¹Gk. *Aschanaz*

and Thorgama. **4** And the sons of Javan [were]²² Elishah²³ and Tarshish,²⁴ Kittims,²⁵ Rodanims.²⁶
27 5 From these were separated the islands of the nations on their land, each according to [their] language in their tribes and in their nations.

While the gist of the translation is correct, there are some issues:

- word order²⁸
- confusion in referents
- confusion in supplied text
- presence and extent of quotations and dialogue
- appropriateness of footnotes from the interlinear

These sorts of things are clear in the Greek text which the interlinear translation was paired with. But when the translation is divorced from the Greek text, issues such as these bubble to the surface.

Each editor²⁹ was tasked with the revision of the translation in accordance with basic established guidelines. Editors also added pericope/section headings. From here, the text was further reviewed by the general editor,³⁰ and then supplied to Logos Bible Software's internal copyediting team.³¹ The issues noted by the copyedit team were then again reviewed by the general editor, the result of which was the final copy, ready for publication.

Here is the same text, Genesis 10:1–5, from the *Lexham English Septuagint*, after the entire process was complete:

10 These now *are* the generations of the sons of Noah:^a Shem,^b Ham,^c Japheth;^d and sons were born to them after the flood.

² The sons of Japheth^e *were* Gomer^f and Magog and Madai and Javan^g and Elishah^h and Tubalⁱ and Meshech^j and Tiras.^k ³ And the sons of Gomer^l *were* Ashkenaz^m and Riphath and Thorgama.⁴ And the

²²Gk. *Iōuan*

²³Gk. *Elisa*

²⁴Gk. *Tharsis*

²⁵Gk. *Kitioi*

²⁶There was a confusion of *ατ* and *τ*. The LXX Rhodes is more likely associated with the Greeks (*Ιωναν*) than the unknown Dodanims, and so may be original.

²⁷Gk. *Rhodioi*, ESV, KJV, NASB, NKJV have “Dodanim”

²⁸Mostly compensated for with word number tokens from the interlinear.

²⁹Translation editors were Rick Brannan, Ken Penner, Israel Loken, Michael Aubrey, and Isaiah Hoogendyk.

³⁰Rick Brannan was the general editor.

³¹The copyediting team at Logos reviews everything written internally by our Publications department, as well as other material destined for publication, like the *Lexham English Septuagint*. They are phenomenal.

^aGk. *Nōe*

^bGk. *Sēm*

^cGk. *Cham*

^dGk. *Iapheth*

^eGk. *Iapheth*

^fGk. *Gamer*

^gGk. *Iōuan*

sons of Javanⁿ were Elishah^o and Tarshish,^p Kittim,^q Rodanim.^{rs} ⁵ From these were separated the islands of the nations on their land, each according to *their* language in their tribes and in their nations.³²

For comparison purposes, here is Genesis 10:1–4 in the LES (right column) paired with the LEB and the NETS.

LEB	NETS	LES
<p>10 These are the generations of the sons of Noah—Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Children were born to them after the flood.</p> <p>²The sons of Japheth: Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras.</p> <p>³ And the sons of Gomer: Ashkenaz, Riphath, and Togarmah.</p> <p>⁴ And the sons of Javan: Elishah, Tarshish, Kittim, and Dodanim.</p>	<p>10 Now these are the generations of Noe's sons, Sem, Cham, Iapheth, and sons were born to them after the flood.</p> <p>² The sons of Iapheth: Gamer and Magog and Madai and Iouan and Elisa and Thobel and Mosoch and Thiras.</p> <p>³ And the sons of Gamer: Aschanaz and Riphath and Thorgama.</p> <p>⁴ And the sons of Ioyan: Elisa and Tharsis, Kitians, Rhodians.</p>	<p>10 These now are the generations of the sons of Noah: Shem, Ham, Japheth; and sons were born to them after the flood.</p> <p>²The sons of Japheth were Gomer and Magog and Madai and Javan and Elishah and Tubal and Meshech and Tiras.</p> <p>³ And the sons of Gomer were Ashkenaz and Riphath and Thorgama.</p> <p>⁴ And the sons of Javan were Elishah and Tarshish, Kittim, Rodanim.</p>

CONCLUSION

One of the goals of the *Lexham English Septuagint* was to produce an English translation of the Septuagint that was relatively literal and readable. One problem we encountered with readability was the incomprehensibility, for the English reader, of the translations of proper nouns based on transliterations from the Greek.

^h Gk. *Elisa*

ⁱ Gk. *Thobel*

^j Gk. *Mosoch*

^k Gk. *Thiras*

^l Gk. *Gamer*

^m Gk. *Aschanaz*

ⁿ Gk. *Iouan*

^o Gk. *Elisa*

^p Gk. *Tharsis*

^q Gk. *Kitioi*

^r Gk. *Rhodioi*

^s Rhodanim is more likely associated with the Greeks than the unknown Dodanim, and so may be original.

³² Rick Brannan et al., eds., *The Lexham English Septuagint* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2012), Ge 10:1–5.

To address this, we used a data-based approach to, where appropriate, incorporate familiar names based on Hebrew transliterations instead of using unfamiliar names based on Greek transliterations. To preserve the information in the Greek names, we included footnotes with Greek transliterations, so readers are aware of differences where they occur.

The result, we trust, is a readable, literal, and comprehensible English translation of the Septuagint.

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