The Psalter — both Hebrew and Greek — is a religious document which can be expected to give to the attentive reader insights into the religious life, ideas and attitudes of those who were its original users. One of the most central and constant characteristics observed in the attitude of the Hebrew prayers to God is trust, confidence in God. Very seldom do the petitioners of the Psalter mention believing in God, instead, they assure again and again their full confidence in the help coming from the God of Israel. In these assurances Hermann Gunkel saw one of the “Beweggründe göttlichen Einschreitens”,¹ i.e. motivations for divine intervention, reasons offered to God for reacting to the prayer.

Looking for corresponding expressions in the Greek Psalter, we hardly find any emphasis on confidence, at least not in vocabulary that we are used to understanding this way. Instead, there is an extraordinarily large number of occurrences of the Greek verb ἐλπίζω, normally translated as “to hope, to expect,” and just a few occurrences of πιστεύω “to trust, to rely on.”

What could be the reasons for this shift of emphasis? What does this usage tell about the translator of the Psalter or the purpose of this translation? Is it a question of vocabulary usage or theological interpretation?

TRANSLATION EQUIVALENCES IN THE PSALTER

In Hebrew, there are two verbs that mainly appear in the mentioned expressions of confidence: (1) מָסָר (HAL “to feel secure, to trust, to be confident”) and (2) מָשק (HAL “to take refuge”). The main equivalent for both of these in the Greek Psalter² is ἐλπίζω, with 37 occur-

¹ Hermann Gunkel and Joachim Begrich, Einleitung in die Psalmen (Göttingen, 1933) 231–39.
² For the sake of simplicity, I give my lists of references to the Psalms according to the Hebrew chapter numbering, except in cases where there is also a differ-
It is obvious that the Greek translator handled these verbs as full synonyms, employing also πεποιθέναι which is much commoner outside the Psalter for both verbs: 7 times for ἀπέλαπον 6 and 4 times for ἀπελαπών. Characteristic of this notion is the combination of the two renderings in Ps 118(117):8-9. The translator decided not to emphasize the opposition between ἀπέλαπον and ἀπελαπών, but instead between relying on God and relying on people.

Ps 118(117):8-9

μόνον ἐλπίζω καθὼς πνεύμα ζωής
μόνον ἐλπίζω καθὼς πνεύμα ζωής

ἀγαθὸν πεποιθέναι ἐπὶ κύριον ἢ πεποιθέναι ἐπὶ ἀνθρώπων.
ἀγαθὸν ἐλπίζειν ἐπὶ κύριον ἢ ἐλπίζειν ἐπὶ ἀρχόντας.

This is, however, not the whole story. There are all together 73 instances of the verb ἐλπίζειν, and 7 of ἀπελαπῶν in the Greek Psalter. In three cases we find ἐλπίζειν rendering different rare and fairly difficult words, such as הִלָלָל Po 22(21):9, הֵנֶד Ps 91(90):14, and מְבָר ה ב. Ps 145(144):15.

But the Hebrew verb most consistently rendered by ἐλπίζειν (or the compound) in the Psalter is לָנָה (pl./hip.) which is normally connected with the meaning “to wait” (HAL): out of the 19 occurrences 13 reveal ἐλπίζειν, and 6 ἀπελαπῶν (one of these in the transitive sense). 8

ence in the verse numbering. The Septuagint text used is that of Septuaginta, Vetus Testamentum Graecum Auctoritate Academiae Scientiarum Gottingensis editum.

3 Ps 52:9.


5 Ps 5:12; 7:2; 16:1; 17:7; 18:3; 18:31; 25:20; 31:2; 31:20; 34:9; 34:23; 36:8; 37:40; 57:2 2; 64:11; 71:1; 91:4; 118:9; 141:8; 144:2.

6 Ps 25:2; 49:7; 115:8; 118:8; 125:1; 135:18; 146:3.

7 Ps 2:12; 11:1; 57:2 1; 118:8.

8 ἀπελαπῶν Ps 119:43, 74, 81, 114, 147; 119:49 has the transitive meaning “make to hope.” The equivalence is not quite so rare as suggested by Martin Rösel, Übersetzung als Vollendung der Auslegung: Studien zur Genesis-Septuaginta, BZAW 223 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994) 120. Frank Auster-