When mankind had become corrupted in the period preceding the flood, God said: 'My spirit shall not abide in man for ever, for he is flesh; his days shall be a hundred and twenty years' (Gen. 6:3). Ancient interpreters, both Jews and Christians, did not agree about the interpretation of these words. It would seem fitting to discuss the various views of this limitation of mankind's lifespan to 120 years on the occasion of the celebration of our esteemed colleague Albert van der Heide's sixtieth birthday, since he has now achieved half this span.

Our earliest evidence for the interpretation of this text is to be found in the Septuagint (LXX). The Greek translation of the Pentateuch was completed somewhere in the first half of the third century BCE. This early Bible translation renders the verse as follows: 'My spirit will certainly not remain in these people because they are flesh, but their days will be 120 years.' Instead of the generic 'adam' of the MT, the LXX has 'these people' and therefore 'their days'. By adding the demonstrative 'these' (toutois), the translator makes clear that he takes God's threat to apply only to the evildoers of Noah's days. This interpretation most probably owes its origin to the fact that many individuals who inhabited the earth after the time of the flood are recorded as having lived longer than 120 years. In Gen. 7:6, Noah is said to have been 600 years when the flood began, and in Gen. 9:29 he dies after a life of 950 years. Moreover, his son Shem dies at 600, and others exceeded the 120 years as well (see Gen. 11:11, 13, 15, 17, 19, 21, etc.). Also Abraham, Isaac and Jacob exceeded the lifespan of 120 years. In Deut. 34:7, however, Moses dies at the age of 120 years and that number is probably to be viewed in the light of Gen. 6:3: Moses, the ideal man, is granted the maximum lifespan that is possible for a human being after God's decree in Gen. 6:3. But the LXX translator had to solve a difficulty that arose from the Hebrew text as it

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1 See M. Harl c.a., La Genèse, La Bible d'Alexandrie, vol. 1 (Paris 1986) 125-126.

stands, so he could not take it at face value. In his view, ‘God was talking only about a particular group of humans, the generation of the flood’. Because they are so wicked, God will destroy this antediluvial generation at an early age (relatively early, that is, for those days). For our translator, ‘God’s words did not announce a fundamental change in human longevity’. As Kugel has pointed out, the same interpretation is also found in another early document, the Genesis Pesher of Qumran, where we read that in the four hundred and eighty-eighth year of Noah’s life God said: ‘My spirit will not reside in man for ever. Their days shall be fixed at 120 years until the time of the flood’ (4Q252, col. 1, 2-3). Since Noah was 600 (480+120) years when the flood began, it is clear that the 120 years are here the time until the flood. Also Jubilees 5:8 (‘their days …’) implies the same interpretation.

We now make a big chronological jump in order to take a look at the only other Jewish Bible translations from (late) antiquity we have, the Targums. Let us begin with Neofiti 1, on which we now have the fine commentary by Bernard Grossfeld. Our text is rendered by the meturgeman as follows: ‘None of the generations yet to arise will be judged according to the order of the judgment of the generation of the flood. Behold, the order of the judgment of the generation of the flood has been sealed before him: to be destroyed and blotted out from the midst of the world. Behold, I have put my spirit in the sons of man because they are flesh and their deeds are evil. Behold, I have given the span of 120 years (in the hope that) perhaps they might do repentance,’

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1 In the Vulgate Jerome keeps strictly to the wording of the Hebrew text, in spite of what he writes in his *Quaestiones Hebraicae in Genesis 6:3*, quoted below in the text. The Jewish Bible translator Symmachus seems to have followed the LXX here.
6 For the dating of the Targums to the Torah see U. Gießner, *Einleitung in die Targume zum Pentateuch* (Tübingen 1995) passim.