

Elizabeth H. P. Backfish, *Hebrew Wordplay and Septuagint Translation Technique in the Fourth Book of the Psalter*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 682, Texts and Versions of the Hebrew Bible, London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2019. ISBN 9780567687104. Hardback, pp. xiii + 186. \$108.00.

- [1] The book under review is a revised version of Elizabeth H. P. Backfish's PhD dissertation completed at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. The author's aim is to facilitate understanding the Septuagint translators' approach to and handling of Hebrew wordplay. It fills a gap in scholarship, because thus far quite a number of the selected examples have not been identified and discussed in previous research. Consequently, Backfish's contribution provides a more appropriate treatment of the poetry of Pss 90–106 (LXX 91–107).
- [2] According to Backfish, the LXX translators were unable to translate adequately all seventy-four wordplays she detects in the fourth book of the Psalter. In fact, in her reading, less than a third were rendered appropriately in Greek. The wordplays Backfish identifies are semantic and phonetic ones. Due to the differences of Hebrew and Greek, most of them had to be transformed and altered. While examining these passages, the author underlines the translators' creative and skilled work instead of simply taking over often too hastily utilized explanations, such as arguing that the differences resulted from another Hebrew *Vorlage* or from scribal inconsistencies and errors.
- [3] Chapter 1 is dedicated to a history of previous research and to unfolding the author's own method ("Introduction," 1–49). Here, Backfish offers a discussion of different definitions of wordplay, which ends in her own definition: "For this project, wordplay will be defined as a literary device based on the exploitation of phonetic similarity and/or semantic ambiguity that has a structural or rhetorical function" (33). Then she categorizes wordplays into the following groups: *paronomastic* (alliteration, assonance, rhyme, metaphony, parasonancy, root play/root letter, and transposition), *polysemantic* (double entendre, implicit paronomasia, and punning repetition), and *others* (proper names, aetiological, visual, associative/syntax, intralinguistic, and interlinguistic), conveniently depicted by a table (37). Eventually, Backfish presents her own methodical approach and offers criteria for identifying wordplays. It immediately becomes evident that she does not exactly establish a fixed list of criteria that have to be followed slavishly. But she attributes specific criteria individually to special cases of potential wordplays, above all in cases of paronomasia (43–44). Consequently, she accumulates seventy-four wordplays in the fourth book of the Hebrew Psalter that she distinguishes from each other by grades (1 = sure/strong, 2 = moderate, and 3 = weak). The LXX has only thirty-two wordplays, of which twenty-four are renderings of the Hebrew and eight are independent Greek ones, as shown in a table (47).
- [4] Chapter 2 is about Hebrew wordplays in Pss 90–106 ("Writing the Right Words: Wordplay within Book IV of the Hebrew Psalter," 50–114). Backfish applies appropriate sets of criteria to each wordplay, comments on their purpose and effect, and points out their importance. She is honest when an example is not really convincing or, at least, weak. Interestingly, she does not automatically identify rhymes as wordplays because they could have been the simply the result of conjugation. In particular, the tables near the end of the chapter summarize her findings first with a coarse identification of wordplays as paronomasia and polysemy and then with a more refined system of technical terms for rhetorical and stylistic devices (106–12).
- [5] In chapter 3 Backfish moves on to wordplays in the LXX ("LXX Translation of Wordplay in Book IV of the Psalms: Writing the Right Words from Left to Right," 115–61). It might

sound banal to say that “either the translator rendered the wordplay in some way or he did not” (117), but it is important to note, since the choice to use wordplay or not depends in part on a translator’s language skills and competence. The chapter is arranged like the previous one. Every case of a potential wordplay is analyzed, discussed, and given a verdict, before Backfish pours her findings into refined tables (152–61). Here, the “rating in confidence in the LXX wordplay translation” table (158–61) reveals again the author’s methodically sound and honest analyses (again between 1 = strong and 3 = weak).

- [6] As the final major part of the book, chapter 4 might appear somewhat redundant (“Conclusions,” 162–71), since the contributions that Backfish’s meticulous studies offer to different fields of research are mainly repeated and are slightly self-evident. However, for the swift reader, they offer a treat, because she highlights her contribution to wordplay studies, Hebrew exegesis, LXX studies, communication theory, and the theological interpretation of psalms. For the last, she lists example cases from the texts she has discussed previously. Whether the interpretation of individual psalms are only individual observations or should really be taken as theological tendencies is a challenge for scholars working on wordplay in the future.
- [7] The book comes with a rather comprehensive bibliography, indices of references and names, acknowledgments, and a lists of tables at its beginning.
- [8] As already delineated above, Backfish successfully and carefully points out that the LXX translators rendered Hebrew wordplay wherever possible. That means that, if it was difficult or impossible that the Greek could represent a Hebrew wordplay exactly, a wordplay was either avoided or formed differently according to the possibilities the Greek language offers. Backfish’s studies are very welcome, and they definitely fill a gap in the scholarship on translation technique from Hebrew to the Greek in the LXX. The volume also attracts attention to phonetic and semantic phenomena in the Hebrew and Greek Psalms of the fourth book of the Psalter. Thus, it is this book future studies on wordplay in the Psalter and also in other biblical texts will have to take into account.

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