Isaiah 53:3:
The "novissimum virorum"—
a whole profile in just one verse

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ABSTRACT • This study clarifies the question of the subject described in verse Isa 53:3. The linguistic analysis of the Latin verse of Jerome's Vulgata sacra is brought into dialogue with the other main ancient languages Hebrew and Greek. As a result of these investigations, linguistic phenomena can be established which provide further information for exegesis. Against this background two fundamental questions arise, about the topic of the verse and its implementation in the syntax and semantics of the verse. To this end, the verses in the three languages are contrasted and analysed in relation to the representation of the subject.

KEYWORDS • Is 53:3 – grammatical subject – described subject – linguistic analysis

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG • Die vorliegende Studie klärt die Frage nach dem in Vers Jes 53,3 beschriebenen Subjekt. Die linguistische Analyse des lateinischen Verses aus der Vulgata sacra des Hieronymus wird in einen Dialog mit den anderen großen alten Sprachen Hebräisch und Griechisch gebracht. Als Ergebnis dieser Untersuchungen können sprachliche Phänomene festgestellt werden, die weitere Informationen für die Exegese liefern. Vor diesem Hintergrund stellen sich zwei grundsätzliche Fragen, nach dem Thema des Verses und seiner Umsetzung in der Syntax und Semantik des Verses. Zu diesem Zweck werden die Verse in den drei Sprachen einander gegenübergestellt und in Bezug auf die Darstellung des Subjekts analysiert.

SCHLAGWORTE • Jes 53,3 – grammatisches Subjekt – beschriebenes Subjekt – linguistische Analyse

1 Introduction

This study works with the scientific working method used in the Vulgate Institute. This method is based on contrastive linguistics with the main intra-linguistic aim of linking to language typological properties, but also to possible extra-linguistic aims, which may vary on a case-by-case basis. The object of study extends to the entire language system, or also—and this is what this study is about—to concrete language use on the basis of exemplary individual verses.

The methodological procedure extends to the synchronic linguistic analysis of the Latin of Jerome's Vulgata sacra from the 4th century. This investigation is brought into diachronic dialogue with the other main ancient languages Hebrew and Greek and their cultural systems. As a result of these investigations, linguistic phenomena can be established as commonalities, similarities and differences; which in turn can provide information for exegesis and the historical development of languages. As a basis for assessing various transmissions, new—adapted—present-day transmissions and not least to get further, new impulses from this for exegesis; to make the text, which is itself an interpretation from late antiquity, productive for exegesis in the present day.

On this basis, two fundamental questions arise. Thematically, it must be clarified how the grammatical and descriptive subject are presented in this verse Is 53:3. Furthermore the implementation of the structure of the Hebrew verse and its thematic inclusio must be considered. The verse Isa 53:3 in the middle of the fourth Servant Song (Is 52:13-53:12) can hardly be surpassed in drama in the Hebrew version. Here the situation of a maltreated and afflicted subject is described. A look at Jerome's translation of the ambiguous forms in the nifal stem into the Latin superlative «*novissimum virorum*» raises simultaneously grammatical and semantical questions, which not least determine how this key verse can be interpreted theologically.

2 Textual comparison of the verse Is 53:3

The first step is to take a closer look at the syntax and word choice of Isa 53:3 in the different antique text versions of this verse and thus obtaining a clue to the described subject of this verse.

Is 53:3 in Hebrew

| נִבְזֶה וַחֲדַל אִישִׁים אִישׁ מַכְאֹבוֹת וִידוּעַ חֹלִי וּכְמַסְתֵּר פָּנִים מִמֶּנּוּ נִבְזֶה וְלֹא חֲשַׁבְנֻהוּ׃ | **Passive translation (Schmid/Fieger)** Being despised and rejected [by the] people, [a] man [of] pain and being recognized [by] sickness / grief, and as [a] hiding place of faces from him, being despised and not we have esteemed him. | **Active translation (Schmid / Fieger)** Despising and rejecting [the] people, [a] man [of] pain and knowing sickness/grief, and as [a] hiding of faces from him; and despising and not we have esteemed him. |

This verse is introduced with a striking participle in the nifal stem of the root בזה. It shapes its stylistic and rhetorical structure. It forms a striking inclusio that syntactically and semantically encompasses the subject in the middle section of the verse. The basic meaning of «*despising*»

becomes in the nifal «*to be low, worthless*», «*to be despised*». The durative form of the participle here, together with the nifal stem, connotes an active as well as a passive state of affairs: one can speak of both a *despiser* and a *despised*. In the first case he is the subject and in the second the object of the verse, which in Hebrew remains in this tension because of the middle voice character of the nifal stem. Thus, the introductory participle already makes it clear that both components must be considered in order to understand the verse. We see both variants implemented on the slide, even if as a rule, usually the passive variant is chosen.

The first part of the verse also includes the adjective of the root חדל, the meaning of which is difficult to specify in this verse. If one interprets the form as an original adjective, then it carries the meanings «*coming to an end*» / «*passing away*» or «*leaving*» / «*renouncing*». Thus, there is also an active or passive variant to be interpreted. The inclusio is concluded with the only conjugated verb in the 1st person plural in the Qal Katal. The basic meaning of this verb is «*to reckon, to think*», with the added personal suffix (3 m sg) the meaning «*to take someone for something*» is obvious. Its meaning extends from the main connotation of contempt and the respective second part of the rejection of the subject in the 3rd person singular by the people (at the beginning) and the we-group at the end.

Included in this parenthesis of the rejection of the subject are two statements. First the subject is shown as a man of sorrows and as a knower of his own situation. In this middle section, the sapiential verb *jadah* is found in a central position as a singular Qal participle passive. This rare form suggests the Hebrew translation with the active meaning «*a knower of*» which is more plausible then the more passive «*be recognised by*». The second statement of the middle part is formulated as a comparison and as such remains ambivalent for two reasons: the noun *face* is set in the plural and the preposition *mem* can be interpreted in two ways: Does the subject hide his face or are the faces hidden from him?

Is 53:3 in the Vulgate

	Translation (Schmid/Fieger)
despectum et novissimum virorum virum dolorum et scientem infirmitatem et quasi absconditus vultus eius et despectus unde nec reputavimus eum.	Despised and the last among men, a man of pain and acquainted with infirmity and as it were his face is hidden, and he is despised, whereupon we have not esteemed him.

At first glance Jerome follows the Hebrew verse structure, visible in the introductory participle *despectum*, which is also repeated as an inclusio at the end. The entire first and last verse parts also have an analogous structure, for example the we-group is also included in Jerome's ending.

The structure of the introductory verse section «*despectum et novissimum virorum*» is strikingly close to Hebrew, with reference to the first participle in the nifal with despised. However, Jerome chooses the superlative *novissimum virorum* for the adjective *hadal* with the meaning «*reject*», «lack». Jerome uses this play on words to superlatively emphasize the contrast between the last and the newest of men. This formulation is unique in the Vulgata sacra. At first glance, the

adjective *novus* in the superlative *novissimum* brings in the clear meaning «*new*»; however, it also carries the meaning «*the last*». With the word virorum Jerome also retains the plural of the group of people. Seen in old Gesenius (215) it is evident that in the middle of the 19th century August Klostermann (in SBOT) already pointed out that Jerome formulates here with «*the last of men*» close to Symmachos (gr. «*exoudenomenos kai elachistos andron*» = «*exhausted and the very least of men*»). The meaning of the superlative of «*small*» (the very smallest; seen in Field); i.e. it begins with these two verbs (aner epiponos kai ynostos noso ..., from the Hexapla after Field, 2nd volume) is also to be noted at this point. With this Jerome formulates in a more personalised way than MT. He also stays close to Symmachos in the presentation of the two facts, which are included by the inclusio. What is striking about this is the clear conception of the second image field «*quasi absconditus vultus eius*», «*as if were his face is hidden*», which does not allow any other reading than the personal (3 m Sg) and also does not take up the plural of the Hebrew.

Is 53:3 in the Septuagint (LXX)

ἀλλὰ τὸ εἶδος αὐτοῦ **ἄτιμον** ἐκλεῖπον παρὰ πάντας ἀνθρώπους, ἄνθρωπος ἐν πληγῇ ὢν καὶ εἰδὼς φέρειν μαλακίαν, ὅτι ἀπέστραπται τὸ πρόσωπον αὐτοῦ, **ἠτιμάσθη** καὶ οὐκ ἐλογίσθη.

But his appearance was **unhonoured**, failing beyond all men, being a man in plague, and knowing to bear sickness; because it was turned away his face; he was **dishonoured** and not esteemed.

This verse shows some special features: There is an inclusio with *timae* with an adjective at the begining and a verb at the end of the verse, both with the meaning of honour. The vers is ending with the two aorists *ekimastae* und *elogistae*, which are in form and content close to the first formulation in Hebrew: *nifsae* and *wahadal*. Further on this formulation closely transports the semantic content of the disregard, shown at the end of the Hebrew verse. It shows the same structure with *we lo* and *ouk* and an analogous verb for the lack of appreciation, only the eplicit mentioning of the We-Group falls away in the LXX; which testifies the close knowledge of the greek authors of the hebrew text.

Right at the beginning of the verse the LXX adds «*to eidos autou*» in a structure otherwise similar to the Hebrew. With that it indicates to the appearance of a single male subject. He is not honoured and he falls behind all other men. This concept of *eidos* (form, appearance or picture) is not found in the hebrew verse. This initial statement in the LXX is in tension with the final part of the verse, which describes a male subject via a passive formulation. Specific is the wording around the turning away of the face in the middle of the verse «*for his face was turned away*». A justification and a clear process on the subject in the 3rd person masculine singular. In the LXX here the word «*prosopon*» is set with its broad range of meaning from face up to the concept of person. Thus the connotations around the hellenistic concept of person come into play here.

3 Conclusion

When asked about the grammatical subject the MT shows a group of people at the end of the verse in the only conjugated verb. The Vulgate, on the other hand, speaks of a single subject with *novissimum virorum* and the LXX speaks about the image and the person in the 3rd person masculine singular, which is presumably meant impersonal. With regard to the subject described, the following can be stated. In the MT a generalising statement of a we group about someone or something is found. The Vulgate describes a specific person as a *very last*, *newest* individual and the LXX focusses on a concrete image of man: the personification of failure and dishonour.

In direct comparison, the three verses have a great deal in common in their stylistic-rhetorical structure and also in the thematic image fields. Semantically, however, they differ considerably. These differences can be identified in the contrastive juxtaposition: The MT introduces a group of people at the end of the verse in the only conjugated verb of the verse, which retroactively shapes the verse. This group sees everything, what happens in this verse or even more is part of it. With this verse, the LXX poses questions about the image and the person in the 3rd person masculine singular which presumably remains impersonal. The Vulgate focuses on a subject with *novissimum virorum*, which is circumscribed by this hapax legomena.

This can be used to answer the initial basic question about «*Which individual is represented here?*» In the MT there is the generalising opinion of a we group about someone or something that is rejected and despised by them. The Vulgate speaks of a specific person. With *novissimum virorum* it refers to a «*very last*», «*newest*» individual in the community. The LXX captures with *prosopon* a concrete image of man: the personification of failure and dishonour/loss of face in society.

All three verses show independent formulations in the middle section, each interpreting the verse in its own way. The image field of the face (panim – vultus – prosopon) is used, but each with its own statement: The MT uses *panim* as a broad plural term (both: m/f) for what the we-group sees. This open interpretation is further supported by the *ish* in the preceding verse section, which can also be interpreted impersonally, and also by the comparative form in which the *panim* have their say. In contrast to this are the corresponding Greek and Latin verse parts: Jerome chooses a hypothetical formulation *as if* and he speaks of a veiled, covered personalised face. The most striking version is in the LXX with the introductory substantiating preposition *oti* and a verb in the 3rd person singular perfect passive (*apestraptai*—from the verb apostrefo)—the face is turned away from another subject.