ablactata or retributio?

The Meaning of גמל in Psalm 131 (Vg 130): 2b
and Its Influence on the Overall Interpretation of the Psalm

Konrad Kremser

Postdoctoral researcher, École biblique et archéologique française de Jérusalem, East-Jerusalem;
Senior Research Fellow at the Department of Biblical Studies, University of Vienna, Austria.

konrad.kremser@univie.ac.at   GND 1072101017   iD https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8476-0511

ABSTRACT • The meaning of Psalm 131 (Vg 130) changes fundamentally depending on how verse 2 is interpreted. In particular, it is crucial whether the root גמל in v. 2b is understood to mean "weaned" (as in v. 2a), as rendered in the Vulgate-Psalter iuxta Hebraeos, or "retribution," as the traditional Vulgate – following the Septuagint – takes it.

KEYWORDS • Psalm 131 (Vg 130), weaned child, retribution, gml, concept of God

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG • Die Bedeutung von Psalm 131 (Vg 130) verändert sich grundlegend je nachdem, wie Vers 2 verstanden wird. Entscheidend ist dabei insbesondere, ob die Wurzel גמל in V. 2b – wie in V. 2a – im Sinne von „entwöhnt" gedeutet wird, wie es der Vulgata-Psalter iuxta Hebraeos wiedergibt, oder ob sie – wie in der traditionellen Vulgata in Anschluss an die Septuaginta – als „Vergeltung" verstanden wird.

STICHWORTE • Psalm 131 (Vg 130) – entwöhntes Kind – Vergeltung – gml – Gottesbild

Psalm 130 according to the Septuagint counting (and 131 according to the Hebrew counting) is one of the shortest psalms and consists of only three verses. Nevertheless, its reception history reveals highly divergent interpretations based on different versions of the text.[1] With one exception, the differences lie not in the Hebrew consonantal text, but in its interpretation. Two main lines of interpretation can be distinguished. The difference between the two is particularly evident in the different interpretations of the Hebrew root גמל in v. 2b. These two different interpretations are also found in the Latin Psalms. The Vulgate version iuxta Septuagintam reads *retributio* – based on the Greek ἀνταπόδοσις. The version iuxta Hebraicum, on the other hand, translates *ablactata*. In one case, the psalm is about "retribution" – Augustine, for

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[1] Cf. Walter Beyerlin, *Wider die Hybris des Geistes. Studien zum 131. Psalm* (SBS 108). Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart 1982, 17–22.

example, bases his interpretation on this[2] – and in the other case, it is about a "weaned one", usually understood as a weaned child, but in the case of the VgHebr actually the weaned soul. This difference has long presented challenges for commentators, as demonstrated, for example, by the annotated Latin-German Vulgate edition by Valentin Loch and Wilhelm Reischl. While this edition is based on the text of the VgLXX version, the commentary nevertheless points out the completely different meaning of the Hebrew text, especially in v. 2.[3] Yet both interpretations are plausible in their respective contexts. Therefore, it is first necessary to consider this context, namely the entire psalm, but especially the entire verse 2.

V. 2a: שׁוה I or שׁוה II?

The differences in v. 2 between VgLXX and VgHebr already begin in v. 2a: VgLXX constructs a contrast between "feeling humble" and "exalting." VgHebr, on the other hand, has a hendiadyoin, of "not mentioning" and "keeping silent."[4] The reason probably lies in a different reading of the Hebrew consonant text regarding the second verb. First, however, the first verb must be examined. In VgLXX, this is *sentiebam* and appears in the phrase *humiliter sentiebam* ("to feel humbly"),[5] which reflects the Greek neologism ταπεινοφρονέω, which in turn can only be explained as a translation of שׁוה I (not שׁוה II).[6] Symmachus and Theodoret may also have seen שׁוה I here.[7] The situation is different for VgHebr, which can refer to Aquila when it assumes שׁוה II and translates it as *proposui* ("mention").[8] Here, it must be critically noted that VgHebr does not fully grasp the meaning of the Hebrew because (just like Aquila) it overlooks or does not know that שׁוה II + acc. + preposition כ has the very specific meaning "to make something like something." Merely שׁוה II + acc. (without the following preposition כ) would indeed have the meaning assumed by Aquila and Vg[Hebr].[9]

[2] Franco Gori (ed.), *Sancti Augustini Opera. Enarrationes in Psalmos 101–150*. Vol. III, *Enarrationes in Psalmos 119–133* (CSEL 95.3). Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Wien 2001, 265–290; Konrad Kremser, *Augustins Auslegung des Psalms 131 (130) im Horizont neuzeitlicher Bibelwissenschaft* (SBS 234). Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk, Stuttgart 2015, 51–52, hier 56.

[3] Valtentin Loch, Valentin – Wilhelm Reischl (trans.), *Die heiligen Schriften des alten und neuen Testaments nach der Vulgata*,. Vol. II/1, *Paralipomenon – Psalmen*. Georg Joseph Manz, Regensburg ²1869, 527–528.

[4] Andreas Beriger et al. (eds.), *Vulgata Deutsch.* Vol. 3*: Psalmi – Proverbia – Ecclesiastes – Canticum canticorum – Sapientia – Iesus Sirach*. W. de Gruyter, Berlin 2018, 695.

[5] Beriger et al. (eds.), *Vulgata Deutsch*. Vol. 3, 694.

[6] Michaela Bauks, Ps 130 [131], in: Martin Kar*r*er – Wolfgang Kraus (eds.), *Septuaginta Deutsch. Erläuterungen und Kommentare zum griechischen Alten Testament*. Vol. II. Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart 2011, 1850.

[7] For this and all further references to the Greek versions of Symmachus, Theodoret or Aquila, cf. Frederick Field, *Origenis Hexaplorum quae supersunt … fragmenta*. Vol. II, *Jobus – Malachias. Auctarium et indices*. Clarendon Press, Oxford 1875, 287.

[8] Beriger et al. (eds.), *Vulgata Deutsch.* Vol. 3, 695.

[9] Bernard P. Robinson, Form and Meaning in Psalm 131, *Biblica* 79.2 (1998) 180–197, here 184–185; Wilhelm Gesenius, "II. שׁוה", in: *Wilhelm Gesenius' Hebräisches und aramäisches Handwörterbuch*. 16. Aufl., Vogel, Leipzig 1915, 813.

V. 2a: דמם I, דמם II, or רום?

The second verb in v. 2 is rendered by Vg Hebr as *silere feci*. This is the translation of the Hebrew root דמם, which is also found in the Masoretic text, and which the translator Jerome, following Aquila, interpreted here as דמם II. Vg LXX, on the other hand, translates the Greek ὑψόω as *exaltavi*. This cannot be a translation of דמם (neither I nor II) but can plausibly be explained as a translation of the Hebrew רום. It therefore appears that the translators of the LXX did not read דּוֹמַמְתִּי, as in the Masoretic text, but rather רוֹמַמְתִּי.[10] The root רום already appears in verse 1a and is rendered as μετεωρίζω, while ὑψόω appears in verse 1a as a translation of גבה. This may seem confusing, but it remains that the Hebrew "vorlage" of the LXX probably used the root רום twice, which the LXX imitates by using ὑψόω twice. This explains the contrast at the beginning of v. 2, which the Vg LXX adopts and which prepares the introduction of the concept of retribution in verse 2b.[11] For the sake of completeness, it should be noted that Symmachus goes his own way and reads דמם I.[12]

Since the Vg LXX, just like the LXX itself, sees a contrast between the first two verbs of v. 2, only the second verb can refer to the following accusative *animam meam*. The situation is different with Vg^Hebr, which now has not only Aquila but also Symmachus on its side: It relates both verbs to "my soul."

V. 2a: Is the verse understood as a Hebrew elliptical oath formula (which omits the implied self-cursing)?

When assessing the translations of v. 2, it is also important to consider whether the elliptical oath formula is recognized and taken into account. This can be cautiously affirmed for Aquila and VgHebr, but clearly denied for LXX, Symmachus, and VgLXX. The introduction with אִם־לֹא suggests a self-curse at the end of Verse 2a, which, however, is not explicitly stated. The actual purpose of the elliptical oath formula is to reinforce what is said.[13] Aquila and Vg^Hebr translate the introductory אִם־לֹא literally and not as a positive assurance, like modern translations.[14] They imitate the Hebrew style, which makes it possible to assume that they were familiar with and understood the elliptical oath formula. Verse 2b appears to clarify the attitude affirmed in v. 2a. LXX, Symmachus, and Vg^LXX are different: The introduction of "retribution" in v. 2b explicitly expresses a self-curse. Together with the literal translation of אִם־לֹא there is now an oath with a

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[10]   Bauks, "Psalm 130", 1850.

[11]   Robinson, Psalm 131, 185.

[12]   That is a serious option, as שוה I and דמם I are "semantically parallel". [Sæbø, Magnus. "שָׁוָה šāwâ; *שָׁוֶה šāweh", TDOT 14 (2004), 522–527, here 524.]

[13]   Cf. Fohrer, Georg. "אם", HAWAT (⁴2021), 23; Gesenius, Wilhelm. "אם", Gesenius (¹⁶1915), 45–46. Beat Weber notes that a four-line negative statement in v. 1 and a four-line positive statement in v. 2 are contrasted, cf. Weber, Beat. *Werkbuch Psalmen 2. Die Psalmen 73 bis 150*, W. Kohlhammer, Stuttgart ²2016, 313.

[14]   See below, the section on the Nova Vulgata.

conditional self-curse. Either the Hebrew formula was not understood, or it was intended to be smoothed out for translation. Thus, v. 2b is not an exemplification of v. 2a, but rather its continuation and completion. Together with the contrast between "feeling humble" and "exalting the soul," LXX and Vg[LXX] move toward a more moralizing understanding of the psalm.[15]

V. 2: The interpretation of גמל

In v. 2 the root גמל appears twice in Hebrew, both times with the preposition כ. The Masoretic text vocalizes it the first time without an article, the second time with an article, which indicates that in the second case it is the same, now familiar גמל. Aquila and the Vg[Hebr] also interpret it generally this way. The LXX, Symmachus and the Vg[LXX] take a different view: they see the first and second גמל as designating fundamentally different things. The Masoretic text shows through its vocalization גָּמֻל that it interprets גמל as the passive participle of the verb גָּמַל in *scriptio defectiva*. The corresponding noun is גְּמוּל / גְּמֻל. The verb means "to complete," but also "to bring to maturity." Specifically with reference to an infant, it means "to wean." Other meanings are "to accomplish" and "to do something (good or bad) to someone." This gives rise to the meaning "reward" and "retaliate." The noun can accordingly mean "accomplishment," "favour," and also "retribution."[16] Aquila and the Vg[Hebr] agree on the meaning "weaned" in v. 2a and 2b. The LXX, Symmachus, and the Vg[LXX] assume different meanings for v. 2a and 2b. While they read "weaned [child]" in v. 2a, they understand it in v. 2b as "retribution."[17]

V 2b: The interpretation of עלי

The different interpretations of v. 2 in Vg[LXX] and Vg[Hebr] also include the different understanding of the particle עלי, which occurs twice in v. 2b. The Masoretic text takes the first עלי as a preposition to אִמּוֹ: "upon his mother," but the second as a preposition with an enclitic personal pronoun: "upon me." Aquila and Vg[Hebr] follow this interpretation, but not the LXX and VgLXX.[18] They read a simple preposition twice and relate the second to the following נַפְשִׁי. The LXX translates

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[15] Robinson, Psalm 131, 183–184.

[16] Cf. Gesenius, "גמל", Gesenius, 144. The root also appears in a place name, בֵּית גָּמוּל (Jer 48:23), as well as in several personal names: גָּמוּל (1 Chr 24:17), גְּמַלִּי (Num. 13:12), גַּמְלִיאֵל (Num 1:10; 2:10; 7:54,59; 10:23), Gmlyhw (epigraphic), see Hans Rechenmacher, "גָּמוּל", in: H. Rechemacher et al., *Datenbank 'Althebräische Personennamen' (DAHPN)*. München 2024, https://doi.org/10.24344/bht-dahpn, ID b423, Version 241; idem, "גְּמַלִּי", in: *DAHPN*, ID b418, Version 241; idem, "גַּמְלִיאֵל", in: *DAHPN*, ID b419, Version 241; idem, "Gmlyhw", in *DAHPN*, ID e181, Version 241; Willem A. VanGemeren, Psalm 131:2 – *kegamul*: The Problems of Meaning and Metaphor, *Hebrew Studies* 23 (1982) 51–57, at 51–53.

[17] Patrick Boylan, Patrick, *The Psalms: A Study of the Vulgate Psalter in the Light of the Hebrew Text*. M. H. Gill & Son, Dublin 1924, 318; Robinson, Psalm 131, 190–191.

[18] Nor does Symmachus, who leaves the second preposition untranslated.

עַלַי both times with ἐπὶ + acc. VgLXX, however, does not follow this. It first has *super*, then *in*: "over his mother [...] for my soul."[19]

V. 2b: Is there a participle construction?

In translating v. 2b, VgHebr takes a unique approach, interpreting it as a participle construction: *ablactata* is an apposition to *anima mea*. While *ablactatus* in v. 2a stands alone and refers to a weaned one, i.e. a weaned child, *ablactata* in v. 2b is a description of the soul: The soul itself is weaned. Here, Jerome exceeds the scope of interpretation of the Hebrew text; his interpretation is based on Latin, not Hebrew grammar. First, the syntax he assumes is hardly conceivable in Hebrew, and secondly, גָּמֻל is masculine, whereas נֶפֶשׁ is feminine.[20] Therefore, it cannot be an apposition. What Jerome gains from his translation is a stronger spiritualization of the text: an external comparison becomes an internal quality of the soul.

Nova Vulgata (NVg)

Finally, we should look at the Nova Vulgata, which inconsistently combines various traditions. In v. 1 and v. 3, it follows VgLXX more closely than VgHebr, except for the superscription, where it has its own, new translation. V. 2a begins with *vere*. The elliptical oath formula is translated (according to its meaning, not its wording) as a positive affirmation.[21] The two verbs at the beginning of v. 2a are interpreted as שׁוה I and דמם II, a combination not found in the translations discussed above. The mother's lap is newly introduced. Thus, the location of the weaned child is specified without textual basis.[22] גמל is taken as *ablactatus* both times. The insertion of a comparative particle in v. 2b is unproblematic, since such a particle is often omitted but implied in Hebrew. However, the NVg takes a completely new approach to the textual interpretation of v. 2 when it draws a parallel between the weaned child on its mother's lap and the soul within oneself. In fact, there are a few similar passages that make it plausible to understand עָלַי נַפְשִׁי as "my soul within me." Thus, the NVg's approach is unusual, but not impossible.[23]

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[19] Cf. Beriger et al. (eds), *Vulgata Deutsch.* Vol. 3, 694. Instead of *super* + acc., also + abl. is attested; instead of *in* + abl., also + acc. is attested, cf. *Biblia sacra iuxta latinam vulgatam versionem. Liber Psalmorum*. Vatican Polyglot Press, Rome 1953, 273; Boylan, *Psalms*, 318.

[20] That is clear even from the consonant text alone.

[21] Georg Fohrer, "אָם", in: Hebräisches und aramäisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament. 4. Aufl. W. de Gruyter, Berlin 2021, 23; Gesenius, "אָם", 45–46.

[22] This addition is very unfortunate. First, *in sinu* could also mean the mother's womb, which would not make any sense here; second, the child could also sit on the mother's neck or shoulders, cf. Kremser, *Augustins Auslegung*, 81; Gottfried Quell, Struktur und Sinn des Psalms 131, in: Fritz Maass (ed.), *Das ferne und nahe Wort. FS Leonhard Rost* (BZAW 105). W. de Gruyter, Berlin 1967, 173–185, at 178.

[23] Cf. Job 30:16; Ps 42[41]:6, 7, 12; Jon 2:8; Robinson, Psalm 131, 188–189.

Two completely different receptions of the Psalm

The two completely different interpretations of גמל in v. 2b have led to completely different receptions of the psalm. Based on the VgLXX version "retribution", Augustine gives the psalm an antiheretic interpretation: the weaned child is a symbol of heretics who are cut off from the milk of their nurturing mother, the church, and whose souls are struck by God's retribution.[24] Modern interpretations, however, which, like the VgHebr version, are based on the Hebrew text or, specifically, the Masoretic text, go in a completely different direction. Erich Zenger's commentary can serve as an example: "The psalm translates the relationship child–mother to the relationship human being – God. In this translation (that is, metaphorizing) the mother, as the literary-fictional speaker of the psalm, takes the role of the child and counts on it that she will receive from God, as her mother, the 'stilling' of her hunger for life that she herself has given the child."[25] How the psalm's image of the mother should be understood has been, and continues to be, controversially debated, particularly in feminist exegesis.[26] In any case, in the tradition based on the Masoretic text, reading גמל as "weaned" both times, as in VgHebr and NVg, it is far more possible to hear a female voice[27], or to interpret it against the background of a mother-child relationship[28] than in the version based on the LXX, including VgLXX, which significantly reduces the importance of the mother-child relationship and thus also of the mother herself, and instead introduces the topic of "retaliation".

[24] Kremser, *Augustins Auslegung*, 51–52, 56. A positive interpretation of the Latin *retributio* in the sense of "reward" is not impossible. Braulio of Zaragoza (following the Mozarabic version *retribues*) seems to lean in this direction, cf. Claude W. Barlow (ed.), *Iberian Fathers*. Vol. II: *Braulio of Saragossa, Fructuosus of Braga* (FaCh 63). The Catholic University of America Press, Washington 1969, Letter 44, 99–112, at 109; Quentin F. Wesselschmidt (ed.), Psalms 51–150 (ACCS OT 8). InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, Ill. 2007, 364.

[25] Erich Zenger, Psalm 131, in: Frank-Lothar Hossfeld – Erich Zenger, *Psalms*. Vol. III: *A Commentary on Psalms 101–150*. Trans. Linda M. Maloney (Hermeneia). Fortress Press, Minneapolis, Min. 2011, 443–453, at 452.

[26] Ulrike Bail, Die Psalmen, in: Luise Schottroff – Marie-Theres Wacker (eds.), *Kompendium Feministische Bibelauslegung*. Chr. Kaiser/Gütersloher Verlagshaus, Gütersloh ²1999, 180–191, at 189.

[27] Marianne Grohmann, The Imagery of the 'Weaned Child' in Psalm 131, in: Erich Zenger(ed.), *The Composition of the Book of Psalms* (BETL 238). Uitgeverij Peeters, Leuven 2010, 513–522, at 521–522.

[28] Shirley S. Ho, An Object-Relations Analysis of Psalm 131, JSOT 49.1 (2024) 93–108, at 101–103; Erich Zenger, 'Wie das Kind bei mir…'. Das weibliche Gottesbild von Ps 131, in: Ilona Riedel-Spangenberger – Erich Zenger (eds.), *'Gott bin ich, kein Mann'. Beiträge zur Hermeneutik der biblischen Gottesrede. FS Helene Schüngel-Straumann*, Schöningh, Paderborn 2006, 177–195.