CHAPTER 10

THE SEPTUAGINT SCROLLS

The lessons gained from 4QJer in the previous chapter and the vindication of the OG as a faithful translation of its Hebrew source for that book suggest that an inquiry into any further lessons the Greek scrolls may provide might offer useful results. This chapter seeks to demonstrate that the scrolls have greatly enhanced our understanding of the Septuagint, and that the Septuagint has significantly enhanced our understanding of the scrolls.

The Septuagint (Greek numeral ό = 70; Latin Septuaginta or LXX; Ξ in BHS/ BHQ) is the collection of ancient Greek texts transmitted through the centuries, based on original translations of the sacred Hebrew books plus several additional compositions originally in Greek. The translations were made by a number of different Jewish translators over the course of the third, second, and perhaps early first centuries B.C.E. Some later, systematically revised versions for certain books or sections have been substituted for the originals, making the collection even more diverse.

The origin of the term can be traced to the legendary Letter of Aristeas, which narrates that seventy-two (or according to some traditions, seventy) scholars translated into Greek the five scrolls of the books of Moses brought from Jerusalem at the request of Ptolemy Philadelphus (285–247 B.C.E.). Rather quickly the tradition grew to embrace the translations of all the books of the Hebrew Bible, as well as translations of some Hebrew books excluded from the rabbinic Bible, and even certain sacred Jewish books originally composed in Greek. Thus, an excessively strict use of the term (since it has not been so used in the last 1800 years) denotes only the Pentateuch, whereas the broad and common use denotes the entire Greek version of the Jewish Scriptures, without regard to textual character, including the deuterocanonical or apocryphal books.

Thus, regarding terminology, the “Septuagint” generally refers to the Jewish Scriptures in Greek without specifying the precise form. More precisely, “the Old Greek” (OG) is used specifically to denote the original Greek translation, as opposed to later developments, revisions, or recensions. This can be either ideal or practical: ideally, it is the original Greek “text as it left the hand of the translator”; but practically, since the original is usually not preserved purely, it is the earliest Greek form recoverable through the surviving evidence. The Hebrew Vorlage used for the translation is sometimes close to the tradition inherited in the MT, sometimes quite different. Ξ or Ξed usually refers to the text presented in a critical edition, whereas Ξ*, or “more original Greek,” is sometimes used to distinguish a reading which a scholar thinks is more likely to have been

original than the reading presented as \( \psi \). The terms for the various recensions will be discussed below.

The illumination between the scrolls and the LXX is reciprocal and multifaceted. On the one hand, several Greek scrolls were discovered in various caves, providing some of the earliest extant LXX manuscripts (alongside the second-century B.C.E. John Rylands papyrus of Deuteronomy), approximately four centuries earlier than our oldest surviving LXX codices, such as Vaticanus (fourth century C.E.), Alexandrinus and Sinaiticus (fifth century). Among other things, these scrolls thus confirm that the OG is pre-Christian, dating from at least the second century B.C.E.

On the other hand, certain Hebrew scrolls, at variance with the MT, proved to exhibit text forms similar to the Hebrew Vorlage from which the LXX had been translated. Moreover, it frequently happens that, though a particular scroll may not have been the exact form of Hebrew text from which the LXX was in the main translated, it may display individual readings that have influenced readings in the LXX text. In turn, the LXX, now generally exonerated and shown to be basically a faithful translation of one ancient Hebrew text form of each book, sometimes earlier than or superior to the MT, may be used to reconstruct the text of lacunae in the fragmentary scrolls.²

I. ANALYSIS OF THE SEPTUAGINT SCROLLS

Eight highly fragmentary manuscripts of the LXX, plus two LXX-like manuscripts, were among the texts found in Qumran Caves 4 and 7 and at Nahal Ḥever.

4QLXXLev* (4Q119; Rahlfs 801)³

Scraps from a Leviticus manuscript on leather dating from “the late second or the first century B.C.E.” were found in Cave 4.⁴ The handful of fragments can be pieced together to form a mostly vertical strip preserving the full height of a column containing Lev 26:2-16; about a third of the width of the column is preserved. The text is generally close to the manuscript tradition of LXX Leviticus, but it presents fifteen variants from the text presented in the Göttingen Greek critical edition. In general, this scroll appears to be a reasonably literal and quite faithful translation of a Hebrew Vorlage from which the text preserved in the MT varied only slightly, whereas the later LXX manuscript tradition shows occasional revision toward the MT tradition.

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³ The classic catalogue of Septuagintal manuscripts is Alfred Rahlfs and Detlef Fraenkel, Verzeichnis der griechischen Handschriften des Alten Testaments (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004). For an updated version on the IOSCS website, see http://septuaginta-unternehmen.adw-goe.de/.

⁴ Patrick W. Skehan quickly provided a preliminary publication of this manuscript in “The Qumran Manuscripts and Textual Criticism,” in Volume du congrès, Strasbourg 1956 (VTSup 4; Leiden: Brill, 1957), 148-60, esp. 157-60. The full publication of this and the other Cave 4 Greek manuscripts is in DJD 9:161-97, 219-42. The dates for the individual scrolls given in quotation marks are either from Peter J. Parsons’ palaeographic descriptions in the General Introduction (DJD 9:7-13) or from the Introductions to the individual scrolls.