CHAPTER 15

INSIGHTS INTO THE SEPTUAGINT

THE FINAL SECTION of the previous chapter treating the variant edition of Genesis 5 and 11 in the Samaritan Pentateuch showed that the Septuagint also has a yet different edition of those chapters. Based on the numerous variant editions brought to light by the Hebrew scrolls, this chapter will examine instances in which the Septuagint strongly suggests that it, and quite likely its no-longer-preserved Hebrew Vorlage, presents a variant edition from that in the MT.

I. THE OLD GREEK OF ISAIAH

For perspective on LXX editions, the distinction between variant editions and individual variants, and the realization that they operate separately from each other, will prove useful. For this purpose an analysis of the wide variety of different types of LXX correct and incorrect renderings observed in comparison with the Great Isaiah Scroll will hopefully aid clearer understanding of the translation techniques and editions in the LXX.

Chapter 10 showed a variety of Hebrew readings in the scrolls, some correct, some incorrect, documenting plausible sources for variants in the LXX against the MT. Cumulatively, they demonstrate the general fidelity of the translators to their Hebrew source text. Study of the Greek translation of Isaiah in light of 1QIsa does not reveal a variant edition from the scroll or MT, but it has provided a rich array of instances which illuminate the correctness of some individual variants and the causes behind other readings that are problematic.¹

The original Greek translator has been both unjustly maligned as a careless translator and excessively credited with visionary imagination. His work was seen as careless by those who compared the translation against the presumed “original text” of the MT and found it unsatisfactory, and it was seen as visionary by others who saw it “actualizing” the ancient prophecies to apply them to events at the time of the translator. But the Hebrew text he translated was not identical to the MT, and the examples of alleged “actualizing exegesis” do not withstand critical scrutiny.

The oft-repeated but mostly overemphasized truism that every translation is an interpretation requires differentiation, especially in light of claims regarding “actualizing exegesis” made about the OG translator of Isaiah. Of course, translators must interpret what they think the source text means; and they must decide on the most appropriate manner of expressing that message so that it is meaningful in the target language. Moreover, translators can provide a translation that is faithful, whether it be a literal

¹ See DJD 32, 2:119–93, some examples of which are reprinted here.
translation, that is, noticeably more faithful to the source text, or a free translation, that is, noticeably more faithful to meaning and style for the target audience; both can be “faithful” translations.

But there is an essential difference between what can be termed “simple interpretation” or faithful translation, and “intentional re-interpretation” or actualizing exegesis. “Simple interpretation” (whether literal or free) is the innocent attempt to render into Greek the meaning of the Hebrew parent text as it is understood by the translator. Thus the translator thinks that the Hebrew text means X, and he produces a faithful rendering of X in his Greek translation, even if the Hebrew is incorrect or if certain terms or expressions are adapted to the culture or understanding of the target audience. By “intentional re-interpretation,” in contrast, is meant that, although the translator thinks that the Hebrew text means X, nonetheless he produces a rendering Y which he knows differs from the Hebrew; he does so because he wants to make a new point, to make the prophecy relevant to the community’s current situation. Although the OG translator of Isaiah tends toward the free, attempting to make the original comprehensible to his Greek community, he does not engage in actualizing exegesis.

Listed below are ten characteristics for help in understanding the OG translation and its procedures. In assessing the original translation it must be remembered that the original Greek has been lost or disturbed or changed at numerous points during the long history of the transmission of the Greek text; such problems should not be attributed to the translator. The Vorlage of the OG was similar to, but not identical to either lQIsa or the MT. That Vorlage did, however, look generally like 1QIsa: a handwritten scroll in a script mostly clear and legible, but at points damaged, faded, or difficult to decipher. We should envision such a manuscript, not the neat and printed BHS.

Many Hebrew biblical manuscripts from Qumran show Hebrew forms which differ from the MT but which had served as the basis for the OG translation; this is also the case in 1QIsa with the OG of Isaiah. Sometimes it is clear that the OG correctly renders ambiguous or no-longer extant forms, or even misreads or misunderstands forms; but in these cases, though the intended Hebrew is not represented in the Greek, nonetheless the translator was attempting to translate faithfully what he believed he saw in the Hebrew Vorlage.

Again, since verse-division was not marked in antiquity, both Hebrew and Greek manuscripts occasionally show different understandings of where the division of the text should be. Moreover, when the Hebrew poetic style uses parallelism or is simply repetitious, the OG often presents only a single expression to represent a pair in the Hebrew, but with no loss of meaning.

Finally, the translator uses understandable equivalents for idiomatic Hebrew expressions and replaces older place names with contemporary ones; the same meaning is conveyed, however, with no sign of “actualizing exegesis.” That is, the translator, while understanding the text to mean one thing, does not knowingly present a different meaning in order to show that Isaiah’s ancient prophecies are being fulfilled in the present; he is simply using equivalents that were understandable to his contemporary community.

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2 For contemporary names but no “actualizing” see, e.g., Gen 25:20 יִשְׂרָאֵל MT SP = τοῦ Σώρου LXX.