CHAPTER ONE

AN OVERVIEW OF THE THEMES OF THIS BOOK

The translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek was one of the major events in the history of the world. Without the translation, Christianity, the religion which inspired the civilisation of the West, could not have developed in the form that we know. In Judaea and Galilee, when Christianity first emerged in the first century CE, most educated people spoke Greek, and the Bible in Hebrew was the preserve of a few.\(^1\) It seems that even the great Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, an older contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth, knew little or no Hebrew and used only Greek.\(^2\) Against a background of the turbulent events of the age, but without a translation of the Bible into Greek, who then could have known that the prophecies in the Scriptures had at last come true?\(^3\) The translation of the Bible thus enabled the early Greek-speaking Jews, the founders of Christianity, to use the Jewish scriptures, in order to establish a new base of their own. In the words of one modern scholar, ‘All Christian claims for

\(^1\) Mishnah, Sot.7.1 reflects the different languages of the Jews by listing the prayers which can can be spoken in languages other than Hebrew, trans. Danby (1933). Similarly the Jerusalem Talmud, Meg.2.1 (73a), trans. Neusner (1987), and j.Sot.7.1 (21b); for further, see de Lange (1976), pp. 56–7.

\(^2\) For the question of Philo’s knowledge of Hebrew, see Weizman (1999), p. 39, n. 29.

\(^3\) Elliott (1880), pp. 850–71; Swete (1900), pp. 381–405, esp. pp. 403–5. ‘In estimating the influence of the LXX. upon the N.T. it must not be forgotten that [in addition to direct quotations] it contains almost innumerable references of a less formal character . . . the careful study of the Gospels and of St Paul is met at every turn by words and phrases which cannot be fully understood without reference to their earlier use in the Greek Old Testament . . . Not the [Hebrew] Old Testament only, but the Alexandrian [= Greek] version of the Old Testament, has left its mark on every part of the New Testament, even in chapters and books where it is not directly cited. It is not too much to say that in its literary form and expression, the New Testament would have been a widely different book had it been written by authors who knew the Old Testament only in the original, or who knew it in a Greek version other than that of the LXX’. The use of the Septuagint in the NT has been systematically catalogued by Hübner (1997), replacing Dittmar (1899–1903). Elliott’s review of Hübner (1998), p. 102, notes that ‘One abiding impression of browsing in this book is how pervasively the richness of LXX imagery and language has permeated the NT, and not only in concentrated areas’.
Christ [in the New Testament] are grounded in verses from the Old
Testament; all Christian claims to be the true Israel are underwrit-
ten by proof texts drawn from the Pentateuch. . . . Cut the history
and the religion of Israel out of the New Testament, and Christianity
vanishes.4

But when was the Bible translated into Greek? Why was it trans-
lated? And who initiated this seminal event? It seems that the process
began when the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, were
translated into Greek in Alexandria, the capital city of Ptolemy II,
also called Ptolemy Philadelphus. According to an ancient report
called the Letter of Aristeas, a proposal for the translation did not come
from the Jews, but was made by the Greek politician and philosopher,
Demetrius of Phalerum, who was employed by Ptolemy II in the
library in Alexandria, and who was seeking to increase the collec-
tion of books. Ptolemy II agreed to his suggestion, provided that the
translation was written in Alexandria. This would fulfil two objec-
tives in one. Not only would Ptolemy add to his books, but schol-
ars who were experts in Hebrew and Greek would be brought into
the city, where the king could tempt them to stay at his court. This
would establish Alexandria and its library as a centre of learning,
which would reflect the glory of Ptolemy II.

But the account in the Letter of Aristeas is thrown into doubt by
many details in the story that are difficult to believe. For example,
there are several suspicious repetitions of the number seventy-two.
Aristeas notes that there were seventy-two translators who were asked
seventy-two questions at a seven-day banquet hosted by the king.
These seventy-two translators then made a translation of the Pentateuch
in seventy-two days. Also described are the huge costs of the trans-
lation, including lavish gifts to the translators and to the Temple in
Jerusalem, and the monetary redemption of over one hundred thou-
sand Jewish slaves, including trained soldiers.5 Can these stories be
true? Would anyone – even Ptolemy II – spend so much on a book?
Would any king free his slaves, including his soldiers, for the sake
of a book? It is interesting to note that the freeing of the slaves is

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4 Rivkin (1996), p. 26. See also for example on the same theme Jellicoe (1974),
p. XIV. The use of the Septuagint in the NT has been systematically catalogued
by Hübner (1997), replacing Dittmar (1899–1903).
5 LetAris.13,19,27.