CHAPTER TWO

THE DATE OF THE TRANSLATION OF THE PENTATEUCH INTO GREEK

A Summary of This Chapter

Scholars agree that a written translation of the Hebrew Pentateuch into Greek was made in the third century BCE. This period of time can be further refined to the first half of the third century, and eventually brought down to one single date. This is derived from an analysis of eleven different dates for the translation which have been preserved in Greek by the Fathers of the Church. This chapter will convert these dates into standard Julian calendar dates, allowing also for the way that Ptolemy II numbered the regnal years at the beginning of his reign. It will then be seen that the eleven different dates are ‘descended’ from one single date. This is the date which marks the date of the translation of the Pentateuch into Greek. This date corresponds with a description in the Letter of Aristeas of a celebration for the completion of the translation, which was held before Ptolemy II.¹

A further date preserved in Jewish sources corresponds with Aristeas’ description of an earlier celebration which was held before the Jews.²

There are thus two separate dates from two separate traditions, one Jewish and one Greek, which relate to two appropriate and separate events, the ceremony before the Jews and the ceremony before the Greeks. Both these events are described in the Letter of Aristeas, whose evidence must be independent from that of the dates, because Aristeas includes no dates. It is surely beyond the bounds of possibility that each of the events he describes should be individually confirmed by independent, relevant sources, unless each is related to a real event, whose dates were recorded when they occurred. The existence and nature of the two dates thus confirm that two corresponding events described by Aristeas actually took place.

¹ LetAris.312.
² LetAris.308–311.
The final section of this chapter will show how the method used for the analysis of the Church Father dates can also solve other historical problems which were ultimately caused by the way that Ptolemy II numbered the years of his reign.

The Translation Was Made in the Third Century BCE

It is generally agreed that the Pentateuch was the first part of the Bible to be translated into Greek, probably as a unit, in Alexandria, in the third century BCE. This conclusion is based on several observations which include: (1) The overall linguistic unity, and Alexandrian style and language of the Greek Pentateuch.3 (2) The presence of early, third-century Greek.4 (3) Demetrius the Chronographer (not to be confused with Demetrius of Phalerum) used a Greek version of the Bible in the late third century BCE.5 (4) A Greek translation of the Pentateuch lies behind the translation of the ‘Later Prophets’ (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the Twelve) and the Psalms.6 According to the famous prologue of the grandson of Ben Sira, these biblical books were translated into Greek by the time of his arrival in Alexandria in 132 BCE (or up till the death of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes Physcon in 116 BCE).7

The Translation Was Made by 246 BCE

A more specific terminus for the date of the translation emerges from the Letter of Aristeas, probably the source of the majority of reports on the translation from antiquity, although this text does not include any dates.8 Aristeas refers to the king in charge of translation as ‘Ptolemy’. This is the name of all the Egyptian Hellenistic kings, but there are good reasons for assuming that Aristeas refers to Ptolemy II. According to Aristeas, the father of this Ptolemy was ‘Ptolemy

---

6 For Isaiah and the Psalms, see Eissfelt (1965), p. 703; for other late prophetic books, see Jellicoe (1968), p. 67.
7 Caird (1982).
8 For texts and commentaries on the Letter of Aristeas, see Brock, Fritsch and Jellicoe (1973), pp. 44–7; Dogniez (1995), pp. 18–22.