CHAPTER FIVE

WHO WANTED A TRANSLATION OF THE PENTATEUCH IN GREEK?

Who wanted a translation of the Pentateuch in Greek? This question may seem superfluous in view of the many references in this book to the Letter of Aristeas, which notes that Demetrius of Phalerum advised Ptolemy II to commission a translation of the Hebrew Pentateuch to Greek.¹ According to Aristeas, Ptolemy accepted this suggestion, not only to increase his library, but also, if Aristeas can again be believed, in order to win great renown and attract scholars to his court.² This means that the initiative for a translation came from the Greeks. This explanation was accepted and repeated in the seventy or so accounts of the history of the translation written in ancient times.³

But the last two hundred or so years a new theory emerged, in which the account in Aristeas plays little part. This arose mainly from the work of the Oxford Regius Professor of Greek, Humphrey Hody, who rejected the historicity of Aristeas in his book Contra Historiam LXX Interpretem Aristeae nomine inscriptuam Dissertatio, published in 1684.⁴ As a result of this work, many scholars now assert that the translation arose from the needs of the Jews, and has little to do with a request from the Greeks. It is claimed that a large majority of Jews of Egypt could not understand Hebrew, and therefore requested a written translation of the Bible in Greek, particularly for liturgical use.⁵ The apparent involvement of Ptolemy II has been

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¹ For a list of texts and studies on Aristeas, see Brock et al. (1973), pp. 44–7; Dogniez (1955), pp. 18–22.
² LetAris.39 μεγάλην δόξαν, 318,321.
³ The accounts are listed by Collins, N. (1992), pp. 479–84.
⁴ It seems that the earliest challenges to Aristeas were made by Luis Vives, on St Augustine’s, Dei Civitate Dei, pp. xviii, 42 (1522), and Joseph Scalinger, ‘Animadversiones in Chronological Eusebii’, para. 1734, in Thesaurus Temporum Eusebii Pamphili (Leyden, 1606).
⁵ Many scholars have rejected the account of Aristeas, e.g., Harvey (1857), p. 112; Swete (1900), p. 20; Kahle (1959), p. 209, whose argument is based on Hody and the fact that ‘the Jewish Communities in Egypt . . . no longer understood
explained in several ways. For example, Aristeas may be partly correct when he claims that Ptolemy wanted to increase his collection of books. Or else Ptolemy may feature as a symbol of Hellenistic approval for the literature of the Jews.\(^6\) Or perhaps Ptolemy needed to know the laws of the Jewish subjects that he ruled.\(^7\) Whatever the case, this theory asserts that the translation had little to do with the demands of the Greeks, but was made to satisfy the needs of the Jews.

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\(^7\) Modrzejewski (1955), pp. 104–11.