CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE LETTER OF ARISTEAS AND THE RECEPTION HISTORY OF THE SEPTUAGINT

My argument in this paper originated in two separate places: conversations about the methodological foundation for the New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS) and the proposed NETS Commentary Series, which will complement the NETS translations (Society of Biblical Literature Commentary on the Septuagint [SBLCS]), and some preliminary thinking about the Letter of Aristeas on which I am beginning to write a commentary. As I see it, the essential problem is this: many scholars, either explicitly or implicitly, no matter what they say about the historical and/or propagandistic value of the work, accept the basic notion promulgated by Pseudo-Aristeas that the LXX was originally intended to serve as an independent and self-standing replacement for the Hebrew text rendered by it. As we will see, at almost every point Pseudo-Aristeas argues that the translators (as commissioned by their Ptolemaic patron) produced an exemplary work of Greek philosophy and literature, highly acceptable (to use the language of translation theorist, G. Toury) in its target culture, and that the Jewish community of Alexandria adopted the LXX as its sacred scriptures.

Yet, as scholars pursue a solution to the major problems connected with the LXX and its origins, we must place one basic fact at the center of the stage—the LXX is a translation, not a work originally composed in Greek. This realization matters, and matters a great deal. C. Boyd-Taylor aptly articulates why.

Quite simply, a translated text never represents a straightforward instance of performance in the target language. Translations deviate from the conventions governing well-formed texts and this fact has both linguistic and

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1 I extend thanks to S. Fraade for his kind invitation to present an early version of this paper at Yale University. The questions and conversation there caused me to make a number of significant revisions to the argument. I am also grateful to A. Pietersma and C. Boyd-Taylor, who read an earlier version of the paper and who, as always, pushed me on a number of important points.

2 By “Septuagint,” I mean the Pentateuch, most likely translated in the third century BCE in Alexandria.
socio-cultural implications. The practices of reading brought to bear on a translation, the expectations of its readership, the uses to which it is put, will vary systematically from those proper to non-translational texts.³

That is, the LXX was intended to occupy a specific sociocultural niche for the Jews of Alexandria, and its textual expression, social location, uses and transmission are all conditioned by the fact that it is a translated text. What seems necessary, then, as a means of approaching the problem I have in mind, and what we scholars of the LXX rarely seem to employ, is a theory of translation that will provide an adequate explanatory framework for addressing the central questions we ask about this important translation.⁴

The importance of seeing the LXX as a translation and the concurrent need for some theoretical framework in which to discuss it was nowhere more obvious than in the beginning stages of the NETS project. The editors and the committee charged with creating the policies for translating the LXX into English had to reckon constantly with the fact that we were translating a translation, and one that had a close relationship to its Semitic parent text at that. One theoretical approach to the enterprise of translation that has proved very productive for the way that we look at the Septuagint is the work of the Israeli translation theorist, G. Toury, as set out most recently in his book, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (DTS).⁵ Fundamentally, Toury argues that

the position and function of translations (as entities) and of translating (as a kind of activity) in a prospective target culture, the form a translation would have (and hence the relationships which would tie it to its original), and the strategies resorted to during its generation do not constitute a series of unconnected facts.⁶

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⁵ G. Toury, *Descriptive Translation Studies and Beyond* (Benjamins Translation Library 4; Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1995).

⁶ Ibid., 24.