THE ROLE OF AQUILA, SYMMACHUS AND THEODOTION IN MODERN COMMENTARIES ON THE HEBREW BIBLE

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I. The Identity of the Three

In the textual notes of modern philological commentaries on the Hebrew Bible there are sometimes references to Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion (henceforth Aq., Sym., Theod., or ‘the Three’), or to their sigla in Greek, α´, σ´, θ´. Often the introduction to a commentary explains that the major versions of the LXX, Peshiṭta, Targumim, and Vulgate will be cited, and less frequently the significance of these versions for the textual history of the Hebrew book commented upon. Yet it is rare for any commentary to explain the importance of the later Jewish Greek versions.1 In this essay it will be argued that for modern study of the biblical text, the ‘Three’ are valuable witnesses both to the emerging MT between the turn of the Era and 200 CE, and to the meaning as it was understood at a time much closer to that of the biblical writers than our own.

Almost all that we have of the Jewish Greek versions of Aq., Sym., and Theod. depends ultimately on the work of the early third century scholar Origen. Perturbed by the differences between the Church’s LXX and the contemporary Hebrew text used by Jews, Origen had assembled a number of later Greek translations known to him. He set them out synoptically along with the Hebrew text and a transliterated version of the Hebrew, in the multi-columned work known subsequently as the Hexapla.2

Apart from the entire version of the book of Daniel bearing Theod.’s name,3 almost all of the versions of the Three are preserved only in a

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1 The fullest and most accurate account to date remains that of N. Fernández Marcos, The Septuagint in Context. Introduction to the Greek Versions of the Bible (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 109–61.

2 As well as the ‘Three,’ he sometimes included anonymous versions he had found, ‘Quinta,’ ‘Sexta,’ and ‘Septima,’ the ‘fifth,’ ‘sixth,’ and ‘seventh’ versions. The Latin names are derived from Jerome’s use of the Hexaplaric versions: naturally, Origen and Eusebius employed the Greek terms. (The ‘first’ version is the LXX, and the second to fourth the Three.)

3 Theod.’s version of Daniel survived in its entirety because for unknown reasons it replaced the Church’s LXX version of the book.
fragmentary state. The Hexapla perished, probably sometime after its LXX column was translated into Syriac in 616 to become the Syrohexapla version. Most of the remaining material from the Three has been preserved by Christians, often recorded precisely because it differs from LXX at that point. Preservation has been sporadic: more readings of the Three survive for certain books such as Genesis, Isaiah, and Psalms because Christians were especially interested in those. Some LXX manuscripts even have marginal notes recording readings from the Hexapla. Such notes and citations are not confined to Greek sources, but were translated into Latin, Syriac, Armenian, and Georgian. These can be retroverted back into Greek with care, but obviously there is an element of uncertainty involved.

II. Modern Collections and Editions

Collections of Hexaplaric readings were made by scholars from the sixteenth century onwards, up until Frederick Field’s *Origenis Hexaplorum quod supersunt*. Field’s 1875 edition can still be useful. However, it is no longer an adequate tool for biblical textual criticism without updating and considerable supplementation. Field had drawn on the work of his predecessors and made few fresh collations of the material, though he did add material from the Syrohexapla. Furthermore, there have been several important discoveries of new readings since his day, especially from the Cairo Geniza. There is also the Tur ‘Abdin manuscript of the Syro-

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4 Eusebius of Caesarea often cites the Three to demonstrate that the renderings of these supposedly anti-Christian Jewish translators could support a Christian interpretation of Isaiah. Later, Jerome’s commentaries on the prophetic books had a similar aim, though he also used the Three to show that the Hebrew text was superior to the LXX. Thus a large number of surviving readings are associated with passages presenting theological difficulties in antiquity, rather than with places where modern scholars identify a textual crux.

5 In Field’s edition of Hexaplaric fragments, the retroversions appear in smaller Greek type. However, the Göttingen LXX edition translates Syriac readings into Latin, which can be misleading.


8 Francis Crawford Burkitt, *Fragments of the Books of Kings according to the Translation of Aquila* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897) (1 Kgs 20:7–17; 2 Kgs 23:31–27); Charles Taylor, *Hebrew-Greek Cairo Genizah Palimpsests from the Taylor-Schechter Collection including a fragment of the twenty-second Psalm according to Origen’s Hexapla* (Cam-