WHY A PROLOGUE? BEN SIRA’S GRANDSON AND HIS GREEK TRANSLATION*

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Translation was an art fairly commonly practiced in antiquity. The evidence for translation in various Near Eastern social contexts from the Hellenistic period onward is widespread, especially throughout the Roman period. What is lacking are extended reflections on the nature of translation and how to do it, in other words any translation theory. One Latin author, Cicero, makes numerous comments on his own translations from Greek to Latin, and a number of studies of the development of translation theory in the West regard him as the first translation theorist. But Cicero is the prominent exception, not the rule for ancient translations. Most ancient translations, the Septuagint being the best example, provide no explicit information on who the translators were and what their approach to the enterprise was. That is left for modern scholars to debate. Thus, even a modest statement ruminating on translation, like that contained in the translator’s Prologue to the Greek of the Wisdom of Ben Sira, has the potential of providing important insights into how ancient translators worked and is most welcome.

The reading that I give in this paper to the prologue to the translation of the Wisdom of Ben Sira originates in a longer study that applies some insights from the modern field of “Translation Studies” to the relationship between translation, source text and anticipated readership in Cicero, Ben Sira and the Septuagint.¹ Essentially, in that study I examined the extent to which a translator’s expectation

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* I am delighted to contribute an article on Ben Sira to a volume honoring Emanuel Tov, a teacher and friend for close to twenty-five years, who was one of the readers of my dissertation, written on Ben Sira. I met Emanuel in my first year of graduate school, and he has had a profound influence on my education and career for which I am grateful.

that his audience knew and could consult the source text affected the kind of translation he produced. In Cicero’s case, for example, his presumption that his readers would be able to read the Greek originals allowed him to make creative use of his Greek source for his own rhetorical purposes in Latin. Thus, the abilities of Cicero’s audience allowed him to make what might be called, at one end of the spectrum, “free” translations, and at the other, works that could even be called brand new literary creations.

Although the translation of the Wisdom of Ben Sira, produced somewhere shortly after the death of Ptolemy VII Euergetes II in 117 B.C.E. by a translator claiming to be the author’s grandson (he calls the author ὁ πάππος μου Ἰησοῦς, “my grandfather Jesus”), does not achieve anything like Cicero’s literary heights, its prologue is so important because it sheds valuable light on three important aspects of this translation. First, the grandson makes some remarks about his reasons for making the translation and the audience for whom he intended it. Second, he reflects briefly on the process of translation, although, as we shall see, his reflections may not make matters as clear as we might like. Third, the fact that the grandson writes fairly elegant koine Greek in the prologue and resorts to an often wooden Greek translationese for the actual translation reveals something of his translation ability and/or his expectations of what constitutes translation.

Unfortunately, however, most commentators on Sirach do not usually look to the prologue for what it says about ancient translation activity. They, of course, take account of the evidence it provides for the date of the Hebrew of the book, and they note the implications of the grandson’s reference to “the Law, the Prophets and the others that followed them” for understanding the development of the biblical canon. They also usually note the grandson’s apologia about the relationship between the Hebrew original and his Greek translation, especially as it bears on the possibility of recovering the original Hebrew of the book in those places where it is not extant.

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2 See the argument in Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella, The Wisdom of Ben Sira (Anchor Bible 39; New York: Doubleday, 1987), 8–9. The argument for Ben Sira’s early second century floruit is founded on the date of the grandson’s migration to Egypt in the “thirty-eighth year of Euergetes” (about 132 B.C.E.), Ben Sira’s description of the high priest Simon in chapter 50, usually thought to be Simon II, and the complete absence of any awareness of the events in Jerusalem during the reign of Antiochus IV.