Textual and Translation Issues in Greek Exodus

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Introduction and Overview

Sometime in the third or fourth decade of the third century BCE, somewhere in or around Alexandria, Egypt, one or more individuals working closely together prepared the first translation of the Hebrew text of the book of Exodus. This translation ultimately became known as the Septuagint (or LXX) version of Exodus; as such, it exercised tremendous influence upon the thinking and practice of Greek-speaking Jews and later of Christians.

I take it as a given that the translator or translators of the book of Exodus were active during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus. In this respect, the narrative contained in the Letter of Aristeas is correct.1

In two other areas, the Letter fails, in my view, the test of historical veracity. In the first instance, the Letter is incomplete. Although there is no reason to doubt its contention that the Egyptian monarch played a pivotal role in the translation (not only of Exodus, but also of the other four books of the Pentateuch), there is also—in my reconstruction of the events surrounding the origins of the Septuagint—ample room for the role of the emerging Jewish community of Alexandria. That each entity, the Egyptian ruler and the Jewish community, had its own distinct reasons for the translation in no way precludes their collaboration on this project.

In the second instance, the Letter collapses, for whatever reason, the process of translating through its insistence that one committee, working as a whole and in sub-groups, is responsible for the Greek version of the entire Pentateuch through a carefully planned and royally supported seventy-two day retreat on the island of Pharos. Modern research, while amassing considerable evidence to demonstrate that the five books of the Greek Pentateuch do indeed share a number of traits, nonetheless has uncovered sufficient distinctive characteristics of each book to assign it to a different translator (or close-knit group of translators).2

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For the most part, this essay deals with the Ten Commandments as rendered in the Septuagint. After providing an English translation of the LXX (from NETS) of Exod 20:1–17 and the Hebrew (from NJPS) of Exod 20:1–14, I will raise ten questions relating to this version. Briefly stated, the questions are as follows:

1. How does this LXX rendering of the Ten Commandments compare with the translation of the rest of the book of Exodus?
2. How does this LXX rendering of the Ten Commandments compare with the MT (Masoretic or traditional Hebrew) of these verses?
3. How does this rendering of the Ten Commandments compare with the MT and the LXX of Deut 5:6–21, which contains a similar (but not identical) account of the commandments and their contents?
4. Can we determine the relative chronology of LXX Exod 20 in comparison with the Greek translation of the other books of the Pentateuch?
5. What can we say about the Hebrew Vorlage that the LXX translator of Exod 20 had before him (or before them)? How do our perceptions in this regard aid us in sharpening our understanding of how the Greek translator worked in this chapter?
6. What role have the Ten Commandments played in “Jewish” tradition?
7. What role have the Ten Commandments played in “Christian” tradition?
8. What evidence does the LXX version of Exod 20 present about the ordering of the commandments?
9. What evidence does the LXX version of Exod 20 present about the meaning of the verb “to covet”?
10. Does the LXX version of Exod 20 provide evidence to support the special sanctity or importance of the Ten Commandments?

As readers will undoubtedly observe, the answers to some of these questions will likely be considerably more straightforward than the answers to others. In order to provide what I consider satisfying and satisfactory responses, I will on occasion have recourse to speculation.

I am well aware that for many scholars, “speculation” is in and of itself a negative term, such that the assessment of an argument as “speculative” imputes disapproval if not outright dismissal of any point covered by this judgment. Clearly, I am not among such individuals. Since I rarely, if ever,