A Further Consideration of the Purpose of the Second Column of the Hexapla

In my article, ‘The purpose of the second column of the Hexapla’ (J.T.S. N.S. vii (1956), pp. 79–87), it was argued that the column of Origen’s Hexapla containing the Old Testament in the Hebrew language transliterated into the Greek alphabet was not designed for the use of readers unacquainted with the Hebrew script, but was intended to serve as a guide to vocalizing the text in Hebrew characters in the first column. That, I maintained, was probably the intention, not only of Origen, but also of any Jewish predecessors that he may have had. The view that such transliterations were used by Jews before the time of Origen is possible, although it has never been successfully proved, and some arguments in its favour were examined and rejected in my article, ‘Were Greek transliterations of the Hebrew Old Testament used by Jews before the time of Origen?’ (J.T.S. N.S. xxi (1970), pp. 17–31); an additional note on the same question is to be found at the end of the present article.

In his very useful guide to the study of the Old Testament in Greek, The Septuagint and Modern Study (Oxford, 1968), Professor S. Jellicoe offers on pp. 110–11 a discussion of the purpose of the second column of the Hexapla. He finds my theory unconvincing, and defends the view that the transliteration of the Hebrew text in Greek characters was intended for use in Palestinian synagogues by Jews who could not understand Hebrew and yet wished to read the scriptures in the sacred language. The purpose of the present article is to examine the arguments advanced by Professor Jellicoe, to discuss some important issues raised by him, and to consider whether his theory is preferable to mine or, at least, a satisfactory alternative.

Before Professor Jellicoe’s theory is examined, it should be noted that his argument on pp. 110–11 is based on his acceptance on p. 71 of the claim by J. Blau, Zur Einleitung in die Heilige Schrift (Budapest, 1894), pp. 68 ff., 80–3, to have proved that Greek transliterations of the Hebrew Old Testament were used by Jews; and the use of transliterations discussed by Blau does not include their use as aids to vocalizing a text written in Hebrew characters. If, however, the refutation of Blau’s arguments offered on pp. 22–4 of my 1970 article is cogent, then the fundamental assumption underlying Professor Jellicoe’s theory must be abandoned. That does not of itself prove that Professor Jellicoe’s view of the purpose of the second column is wrong, but it means that it lacks
the foundation on which he believed that he could build. Without that foundation, it is possible that Professor Jellicoe might not regard his own arguments as sufficient to prove his point, and might be willing to reconsider his theory.

The first question to be discussed is whether, in synagogues of Greek-speaking Jews in Palestine, the reading of biblical lessons in the Hebrew language was obligatory. It is important for Professor Jellicoe to maintain that the use of Hebrew was obligatory, and that the reading of a Greek translation alone was not permitted, because such a view is the essential presupposition of his attempt to counter arguments advanced on pp. 80–1 of my 1956 article. In opposing the theory that Greek transliterations of the Hebrew Old Testament were used by Jews who could not read the Hebrew script, I had maintained that the inadequacy of the Greek alphabet to represent all the Hebrew sounds is such that the ‘reading of a transliterated text by a Jew who knew only Greek would . . . have led to the production of sounds which bore little relation to Hebrew’. I then said that it ‘is unlikely that devotion to the sacred tongue was of such a character that it led to the paradoxical result that a debased pronunciation was used which was nonsense to those proficient in Hebrew no less than those who knew only Greek. If, however, synagogues had no members who knew any Hebrew it is doubtful whether they would still have troubled to read the scriptures in anything but translation.’ Professor Jellicoe seeks to counter the argument by suggesting that, if anyone who understood Hebrew was present, he would have read the lesson—presumably from a text in Hebrew characters—and that transliterations would have been used only if no one there could understand Hebrew; they would then have served the purpose of ensuring that the sacred language was used for the reading of the scriptures. As Professor Jellicoe puts it,

Transliterated texts were at best a substitute for the reading of the Hebrew at first hand. It would seem to have been the case, at least in the synagogues of Palestine where these transcriptions were apparently current, that the reading of the Scriptures in the Hebrew tongue was obligatory: hence the necessity for a transcribed text in Greek characters should no one acquainted with Hebrew be in attendance.

The argument depends on the assumption that the use of Hebrew was obligatory in reading lessons in Palestinian synagogues, even when no one present