The LXX Translation of Esther

A Paraphrastic Translation of MT or a Free Translation of a Rewritten Version?

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It can be said that the Septuagint version of Esther (Esth-LXX) has been the stepchild of LXX research over the past half century. While several monographs, some of them book-length, have been devoted to the ‘other’ Greek version, invariably named ‘Lucianic’,¹ ‘A’, ‘alpha’ Text, or AT,² little attention has been paid to the main Greek version. To the best of my knowledge, the text-critical value of this translation has not been studied in depth.³ The present paper is limited to brief

¹ This version is contained in manuscripts that in other books contain the ‘Lucianic’ revision, but has little to do with that tradition, see R. Hanhart, Esther, Septuaginta, Vetus Testamentum graecum etc., VIII, 3, Göttingen 1983², 87–95.
remarks on Esth-LXX as a rewritten version of MT, while a major study is still needed.

An evaluation of the differences between Esth-LXX and MT poses many challenges. The LXX is very free and sometimes paraphrastic; it also contains six large narrative expansions (the so-called Additions A–F) that are traditionally considered to be independent units. However, the use of the term ‘Additions’ gives a false impression of their nature and may lead to wrong conclusions. They are better described as Expansions A–F, adding more than 50% to the amount of words in the Greek book.

A correct understanding of Esth-LXX is relevant to the textual and literary analysis of the book. In as far as a consensus exists regarding the textual value of the Greek version of Esther, it is negative. This view is challenged in the present study. We suggest that (1) Esth-LXX is a free translation of its source text, as is shown by an analysis of its translation technique, and (2) that it sometimes paraphrases its Hebrew source. We add a new dimension to the analysis when asserting (3) that some paraphrases were triggered by the translator’s misunderstanding of the Hebrew. We will attempt to establish that (4) Esth-LXX reflects some Hebrew variants in small details, and that (5) Expansions A, C, D, and F were translated from a Hebrew source. This assumption is accompanied by the suggestion of (6) unity of the Greek translation of the canonical text and the expansions. We next turn to the central issues, arguing that (7) Esth-LXX reflects a rewritten version of a composition similar to MT. Finally, we describe (8) the characteristic features of the

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4 Due to the uncertainty pertaining to the Vorlage of the LXX, calculations of the size are little more than exercises. According to the calculations of C.V. Dorothy, The Books of Esther: Structure, Genre, and Textual Integrity (JSOTSup 187), Sheffield 1997, 16 the LXX added 77%, the AT text 45%, and Josephus 32%.

5 This judgment was probably best formulated by Clines: ‘Almost everyone agrees, however, that no matter how free the Septuagint translator has been, it is essentially the Masoretic Hebrew text that was his Vorlage’ (Clines, Esther Scroll, 69). A similar view had been expressed earlier by Th. Nöldeke, in: T.K. Cheyne & J.S. Black (eds), Encyclopaedia Biblica, s.v. ‘Esther’, New York 1902, II.1406: ‘The tendency, so common at the present day, to overestimate the importance of the LXX for purposes of textual criticism is nowhere more to be deprecated than in the Book of Esther. It may be doubted whether even in a single passage of the book the Greek manuscripts enable us to emend the Hebrew text’. In recent years, this view was defended at length by H. Kahana, Esther, Juxtaposition of the Septuagint Translation with the Hebrew Text, Leuven/ etc. 2005, 441–62.

6 The possibility that the LXX reflects a different book has been mentioned in the past. Four studies refer much to the LXX: L. Day, Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther, Sheffield 1995; Dorothy, The Books of Esther; R. Kossmann, Die