AN EAR FOR AN EYE—LAY LITERACY AND THE SEPTUAGINT

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For those who attended the Specialists’ Symposium on the Septuagint in Leuven in December 2006 there was the distinct pleasure of hearing a paper by Raija Sollamo on the subject of translation technique, a topic on which she is rightly regarded as one of the leading authorities. In the second part of the paper, which treated translation technique as a research method in Septuagint Studies, Professor Sollamo described a methodology focused on the classification of selected linguistic features of the Greek corpus, both in their relation to the Hebrew source texts, on the one hand, and to other products of the target language, on the other. It struck me at the time that this sort of two-pronged linguistic investigation might be complemented by a socio-literary focus—an enquiry into the connection between the verbal makeup of a translation and its function within the community that produced it.

Within Septuagint Studies there has been an understandable hesitancy to discuss the issue of function, or more simply, how the translations were used. There is, after all, very little to go on; the relevant evidence is primarily internal. Yet in this respect translation technique is not the mute witness it is often taken to be. On the contrary, our study of how the Greek translators went about their task may have much to tell us about its nature and purpose. At the very least, it can serve as a much-needed control in theories of Septuagint origins, rendering certain hypotheses more or less probable as the case may be. To deny this much would be to assert that translation technique transcends time, place and the circumstances of the translator, a claim I think few would want to make.

We may speak then of a nexus between form and function. In the present study, I shall illustrate one way in which this nexus might figure in the study of the Septuagint. I begin by outlining a functionalist perspective on translation, i.e., one that views translation technique as a goal directed behavior and attempts to understand it in relation to a specific social and cultural background. Here I draw not only on the pioneering work of James S. Holmes and Gideon Toury in translation
theory, but also upon the recent application of functionalist ideas within the field itself, with special reference to the New English Translation of the Septuagint (NETS). Having laid out the theoretical groundwork, I then revisit a long-standing source of perplexity within the field, namely, the Tabernacle Account of the Greek Exodus, and ask whether by adopting a functionalist perspective we might, if not solve the problem, then at least move forward our discussion of it.1

Descriptive Translation Studies

In a seminal paper delivered to the Third International Congress of Applied Linguistics, J. S. Holmes outlined an academic discipline that would address the complex of problems clustered round the phenomenon of translating and translations.2 In his map of the discipline, Holmes divided translation studies into pure and applied fields. Pure studies were then sub-classified as either theoretical or descriptive. The study of the Septuagint obviously falls within Holmes’s descriptive branch, which, following Holmes, is generally referred to as Descriptive Translation Studies (DTS). Within DTS, Holmes identified three distinct foci for research: 1) the processes through which such texts are derived from originals (Process); 2) their textual linguistic makeup, i.e., the product of translation (Product); and 3) their relative location within the cultures that produce them (Function). Here then was a convenient way of inter-relating the various scholarly practices that can be brought to bear on translated texts.

It is clear that the three foci delineated by Holmes are closely interrelated. Within Septuagint Studies, the Helsinki school in particular

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1 The problem of the Tabernacle Account centres on the Greek text of Exodus 35–40, which, crudely stated, is shorter in places than its counterpart in MT and exhibits a distinct ordering of the material. William Robertson Smith (The Old Testament in the Jewish Church: A Course of Lectures on Biblical Criticism [London: Black, 1895], 124–25) observed that “extraordinary variations occur in the Greek, some verses being omitted altogether, while others are transposed and knocked about with a freedom very unlike the usual manner of the translators of the Pentateuch.” There is a sizeable literature on this text. For a succinct review see Alain Le Boulluec, and Pierre Sandevoir, L’Exode (Vol. 2 of La Bible d’Alexandrie; Paris: Cerf, 1989), 61–67; see also the recent monograph by Martha Lynn Wade, Consistency of Translation Techniques in the Tabernacle Accounts of Exodus in the Old Greek (SBLSCS 49; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003).