REFLECTIONS ON THE ‘INTERLINEAR PARADIGM’ IN SEPTUAGINTAL STUDIES*

JAN JOOSTEN

Septuagint scholars have been much exercised by the need to set the object of their investigations in a wider context. What was the original function of the Septuagint? What were the needs that called forth its creation? Several hypotheses have been proposed in answer to these questions. In recent years, a new ‘paradigm’ of Septuagintal origins has spread like wildfire, particularly in North America, but also, to some extent, in Europe and elsewhere. The intention of the present paper is to take stock, to evaluate some of the main foundations of this new hypothesis, and to weigh it against earlier approaches.

HYPOTHESES OF SEPTUAGINTAL ORIGINS

There is no dearth of global views on the Greek version, attempting to retrace its original background in the host culture. At least four distinct ‘paradigms’ have been developed to account for the emergence of the Greek version or part of it.1

The earliest explanation of the Septuagint’s raison d’être is, of course, that of the Letter of Aristeas, which remained uncontested from antiquity until the renaissance. The translation of the Torah is attributed here to the initiative of the Ptolemaic King who commissioned a Greek version of the Jewish law in order to give it a place in his library. In recent times, several Septuagint scholars in effect returned to this view.2 They point to the historical interest of early Hellenistic

* It is at once an honour and a pleasure to dedicate this article to Raija Sollamo whose dedication, professionalism and good humour have always been an example to me.

1 See the recent review by Gilles Dorival, “La traduction de la Torah en grec,” in La Bible des Septante: Le Pentateuque d’Alexandrie: Texte grec et traduction (ouvrage collectif sous la direction de Cécile Dogniez et Marguerite Harl; Paris: Cerf, 2001), 31–41. Dorival does not discuss the interlinear paradigm, even although he includes in his bibliography the study of Arie van der Kooij referred to below in note 9.

2 See, e.g., Aryeh Kasher, The Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt: The Struggle for Equal Rights (TSAJ 7; Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1985), 5–6; Nina Collins, The Library in Alexandria and the Bible in Greek (VTSup 82; Leiden: Brill, 2000); Sylvie
rulers in things Barbarian: what Berossus did for Babylonian history, and Manetho for Egypt, would not the Jews of Alexandria have been tempted, or perhaps invited, to do this too for their own ancestral history? The picture presented in the Letter of Aristeas could indeed be roughly accurate and the conservation of the Septuagint in the royal library a historical fact.

Others have held on to the notion of official endorsement for the Septuagint, but with a twist. The main motivation for translating the Torah was not to satisfy the curiosity of the Greeks, but to provide the Jewish community of Egypt with a code of law. Just as the local Egyptian population appears to have been judged on the basis of Greek translations of an Egyptian law book, so the Jews would have been judged on the basis of the Greek Torah.3

Since the sixteenth century, however, most biblical scholars have estimated that the Letter of Aristeas is not a sure guide with regard to the historical circumstances attending the creation of the Septuagint. The idea of royal initiative or sponsorship may represent later propaganda, designed to aggrandize the glory of the version. Instead, scholars adopted the view that the version came to being in a liturgical setting, in a broad sense. When Egyptian Jews had forgotten their Hebrew, a Greek version of the Scriptures became necessary, for reading in the assemblies and for study in the schools.4

The three hypotheses presented thus far are very different and cannot all be right. Nevertheless, they share one central postulate, to wit, that the Septuagint was from the beginning a freestanding text, meant to be read on its own. In recent years, this postulate has been questioned. A small, but growing, group of scholars has started to propose a fourth hypothesis. The Septuagint did not originate as a freestanding, independent text, but as a kind of ‘interlinear’ crib intended to assist

---


4 See, e.g., Sebastian P. Brock, “The Phenomenon of the Septuagint,” OsSt 17 (1972): 11–36. According to Hadas-Lebel, this hypothesis is embraced by a (silent) majority of scholars, see Mireille Hadas-Lebel, “Qui utilisait la LXX dans le monde juif ?” in La Bible des Septante, 42–49, in particular 42.