ARISTEAS AND SEPTUAGINT ORIGINS:
A REVIEW OF RECENT STUDIES.

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In recent years a great deal of work, much of it very valuable, has
been done on the so-called Letter of Aristeas, both in extensive
studies of the Letter as a whole for its own sake, and in more
restricted investigations of the comparatively few paragraphs that
purport to relate the origin of the Septuagint, and incidentally refer
to pre-Septuagintal translations. Most studies have upheld the com-
mon view that Aristeas' story of LXX origins is part of a work of
propaganda aimed at glorifying the Jews, their Law, their High
Priest, their holy city and country, their temple and scholarly sages;
that the details of the story are more romance than history; and that,
contrary to what the Letter says, the translation of the Law arose
out of the practical needs of Greek-speaking Jews, and not from the
policy of Ptolemy's library 1).

Yet even those who share this view, still disagree as to how many
of the details in the story may be accepted as basically true in them-
selves, and how many are sheer inventions. What is more, there
remains wide disagreement on the still more fundamental question,
as to how some of the relevant sentences and crucial words should
be translated, and how they are to be interpreted within their imme-
diate and wider contexts. It is, therefore, the purpose of this present
article to compare the findings of some of the more recent studies,
to attempt to assess them and to offer a few slender contributions en
passant.

II

There are two passages in Aristeas which have been taken by
some to refer to Greek translations of the Law earlier than the LXX.

1) Exceptions are E. J. BICKERMAN, A. Marx Jubilee Volume, New York, 1950,
pp. 156-7 and B. H. STRICKER, "De brief van Aristeas. De hellenistische codifi-
caties der prachtelicene godsdiensten". Verhandelingen der koninklijke Nederlandse
Akademie van Wetenschappen, afd. Letterkunde, Nieuwe Reeks, Deel LXII, No. 4,
Amsterdam 1956. The latter is answered by R. HANHART, VIT XII (1962), pp.
139-63.
The first (para. 30) says: ὁ τῶν Ἰουδαίων βιβλία σὰν ἔτεροις τιοῦ ἀπολείπει: τυγχάνει γὰρ Ἑβραϊκὸς γράμμασι καὶ φωνῇ λεγό- μενα, ἀμελέστερον δὲ, καὶ οὐ χώς ὅπωρχει, σεσήμανται, καθότι τὸ τῶν εἰδότων προσαναφέροντα: προνοιας γὰρ βασιλικῆς οὐ τέτευχε.

The questions arise (i) what is it that has been somewhat carelessly done, i.e. what does σεσήμανται mean? and (ii) what are the books that are said to have suffered this fate, whatever it is? Are they carelessly transmitted Hebrew texts, or carelessly made Greek translations?

In the end everything will depend on the meaning of σεσήμανται. If it cannot mean “translated”, or even “interpreted”, but only “written”, there is an end of the argument. But if it could mean, at least in some contexts, “interpreted”, or “rendered”, it would not be fair to say as ZUNTZ does 1), that since the first (half of the sentence) states that the Law is couched in Hebrew letters and language, the second cannot contain information about any versions but because of the grammatical structure of the sentence is bound to refer, likewise, to the Hebrew Law. ZUNTZ's contention is only true if σεσήμανται means “written” or “copied out”; in which case the first half of the sentence says that the Law is written in Hebrew, and the second half, still referring to the Hebrew text of the Law, says it has been carelessly written out. But if σεσήμανται could mean anything like “translated”, then, obviously, the second half of the sentence, while still referring to the grammatical subject, “the books of the Law”, would be giving information on the quality of their translation into Greek, and so about the inaccuracy of the Greek versions.

Because of this it is worth while examining a supporting argument, which is frequently brought in by those who argue that the reference is to carelessly made Greek translations. In their estimation carelessly written Hebrew texts are out of the question.

M. HADAS 2), who in his translation (p. 111) renders σεσήμανται: “have been committed to writing”, nevertheless in his commentary says: “The entire sentence seems intentionally ambiguous. The important question for the history of the Greek translation of the Bible, is whether the existing books referred to are carelessly-transmitted Hebrew texts or carelessly-made earlier translations. It seems unnatural for the king to be interested in the state of the Hebrew text . . .”

1) “Aristeas Studies II: Aristeas on the Translation of the Torah”. JSS, April 1959, p. 117. Hereafter references to ZUNTZ are to this article.