

BOOK REVIEW

A New English Translation of the Septuagint, edited by Albert Pietersma and Benjamin G. Wright. Oxford: Oxford University press, 2007, 1027 pp. Reviewed by Simcha Rosenberg.

The Talmud (TB *Megillah* 9a-b) recounts how King Ptolemy II (285-246 BCE) gathered seventy-two Jewish elders to translate the Torah into Greek, thus creating the earliest translation of (and commentary on) the Torah. While the Septuagint (LXX) that we have today seems to be at variance with the version of the Talmud (only two of the fifteen unusual translations noted in the Talmud are found in the LXX) and, over time the LXX was abandoned by Jews in favor of the Aramaic Targumim, it is still a very important work – showing how Jews in the ancient world interpreted the Bible and providing evidence for the existence of possible textual variants in the Hebrew original. For those of us who are not able to read the Greek original, a translation is essential.

The last time the LXX was translated into English was in 1851, when Sir Lancelot Charles Lee Brenton published an edition based on a single manuscript, with no introductory notes and without the extra-canonical books. This new English translation, which remedies those faults, now provides a great service to the scholarly audience for whom the book is intended. The New English Translation (NETS) includes brief but thorough introductory notes to each book translated, focusing on the history of the Greek text of each one and the particular translation issues involved. Books that have two distinct Greek translations (such as Judges, Esther, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon) have both versions translated side by side. The editors aim for a very literal translation of the LXX, which they conceptualize as "a Greek interlinear translation of a Hebrew original within a Hebrew-Greek diglot" whose purpose was "bringing the Greek reader to the Hebrew original rather than bringing the Hebrew original to the Greek reader" (p. xiv). Even with this literal approach, the text is generally elegant and not awkward.

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However, this is not actually a new translation made directly from the Greek original. Rather, it is based on the English translation of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), with changes made when it is at variance with the LXX. As such, this work is rightly described as a "modified NRSV" (p. xv). This is justified in the Introduction, based on "practical and economic" considerations (p. xv), and the editors state that this decision "has not been allowed to interfere with faithfulness to the Greek text" (p. xvi). Even so, anyone expecting a truly "new English translation" will be disappointed. Jewish readers familiar with the excellent English translation of the *JPS Tanakh* may rightly wonder if, once the decision to base this work on a pre-existing English translation was made, the NRSV was in fact the best choice for a base English text.

There are unusual choices of translation here and there, such as "divine wind" for the Hebrew *ru'ah elohim* and the Greek *pneuma theou*, generally rendered as "spirit of God," but perhaps such things are to be expected in a literal translation.

All in all, despite the above criticisms, this is a wonderful book, the best and most complete translation of the LXX currently available for English readers.



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