

Translation & Survival. The Greek Bible of the Ancient Jewish Diaspora. By Tessa Rajak. Oxford: University Press, 2009. xvi and 380 pages. Cloth.\$140. ISBN 978-0-19-955867-4.

This book is a revised and expanded version of the Grinfeld lectures given at Oxford University in 1995-1996. The author seeks to describe the rationale for and the role of the Septuagint in the Jewish Diaspora between the third century B.C.E. and the second century C.E. Hence she wisely leaves largely untreated the role of the Septuagint in modern textual criticism or the history of early Christianity. Professor Rajak taught for many years at the University of Reading, from which she has now retired.

She begins with an attempt to tease out what is historical in the Letter of Aristeas, which she dates to the second century B.C.E. Her most persuasive finding, based on this document itself and on an imaginary letter by the author Alciphron in the Roman period, is that the role of Ptolemy II in fostering this translation is altogether plausible. A common theme running through her discussion is the paradox of Jews being willing to make this accommodation to Hellenistic culture, but at the same time showing resistance to this culture.

Nowhere is the point more clear than in ch. 4, the longest in the book, where she attempts to understand the unusual kind of Greek employed in the Septuagint. While few would use the term “appalling Septuagint Greek,” as some earlier scholars did, many have pointed out its Semiticisms and implied that one finds Greek solecisms in the text. Philo attributed its characteristics to the fact that it was rendering a source text that was considered sacred. Others, notably Albert Pietersma, have favored an interlinear theory, namely, that the Greek version cannot stand alone because of interference from the source text, and they concluded that the two versions, Hebrew and Greek, must have been intended to be deployed together. Her own

proposal: “that the very character of this special language in itself served from the beginning as a means of self-identifying with a primary ethnic indicator, the language of the patria, and self-distancing from Alexandrian society” (p. 152). Septuagint language, with its mirroring of Hebrew balance, syntactic patterns, and semantic structures reflects a kind of recalcitrance to accede totally to a Hellenizing project. Yet she notes another paradox, that despite the translators’ conservatism, they displayed a highly creative use of Greek. A whole series of Septuagint words has English derivatives, including Diaspora, proselyte, idol, ecclesiastical, devil, hagiography, and holocaust.

Many Septuagint texts offer vigorous criticism and unrestrained mockery of fictional powers-that-be, but they are not written to incite rebellion, Rather, they encourage Jews to adjust to the status quo. They do not imply that the rulers of the earth should be overthrown, but the reserve shown toward these rulers’ pretensions and their claims of divinity is coupled with an endorsement of their position in a hierarchy which has the true God at its summit. The Greek Bible served as an effective manual for life under foreign rule and could assure those living in a country not their own of enduring centrality and vitality.

How did Scripture function in the Diaspora? Rajak identifies the following ways. The written Torah was an iconic object, and Josephus interpreted the Jews’ taking of the Torah from a synagogue in Caesarea as the start of the revolt against Rome. Moses the lawgiver served as the culture hero par excellence of the Hellenistic-Jewish imagination. The Greek Bible was the source of the Greek-Jewish sense of history, a building-block in their identity. The mental furniture of literate Jews was biblical when they expressed themselves in Greek at moments of crisis and drama. Public expression drew on the rich resources of the Greek Bible for phrases and even longer quotations. While the Jerusalem temple was important for Jews in the Diaspora,

Scripture was more important even than temple. The Greek Torah was the chief determinant for Greek-speaking Jews of Jewish practice and observance, and it was also the source of Jewish practical ethics. The Greek Torah or *nomos* may well have served as a source of law, especially in Jewish courts. The epigraphic record is spotty, but no doubt interpreters enjoyed great prominence because of the authority of the text. Torah reading was the focal point of synagogue activity, leading to its prominence and development. Scripture-based prayer was prominent in the diaspora as can be seen in the prayers of Mordecai and Esther in Greek Esther, and in the prayer of Judith, drawing on the memory of her ancestor Simeon in the account of Genesis 34.

Dedication to the Torah of God is one of the best expressions of love for the Divine Name.

While Homer played a major role in Hellenistic education and society, his status could not match the supremacy and ubiquity of Scripture in Jewish life. P. S. Alexander has pointed out the differences of the Bible from Homer that explain the centrality of the Scriptures. The varied uses of genre in the Bible transcend the limitation to poetry and narrative in Homer. Second, law and precept in the Bible constitute a detailed and prescriptive guide to life. Third, the pre-eminent standing of Moses, a figure above criticism, has nothing equivalent in Homer.

A final chapter contests the idea that Jews in the Diaspora completely and suddenly abandoned the Septuagint as it came to prominent use in Christianity. The translation of Aquila has been accommodated to this theory, as well as its accompanying image of a hardening, pedantic, self-contained, inward-looking Judaism. Rajak finds both ideas wanting. All we can safely say is that Aquila was endorsed as one kind of acceptable written translation from Hebrew. Rajak concludes: "For the Greek Bible of the Jews, too, variety rather than standardization (around Aquila or anyone else) were the hallmarks of the period" (p. 305).

Translation was a highroad to cultural maintenance and to self-expression. For Jews to have abandoned their first translation—the Septuagint--would have meant the loss of a large portion of their own past. In fact, Rajak argues that the Septuagint versions of Ecclesiastes and Ruth may be dated to the same period in which the Septuagint was allegedly being abandoned. The Christian “takeover” of the Septuagint was a more untidy and more protracted business than scholars like to think.

Ralph W. Klein

Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago