12-31-1998

How Can the Ancient Greek Translations of the Song of the Suffering Servant

Michael Walther
Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, michaelpwalther@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.csl.edu/stmsp

Part of the Biblical Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholar.csl.edu/stmsp/21

This Seminar Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Concordia Seminary Scholarship at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Sacred Theology Seminar Papers by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.
HOW CAN THE ANCIENT GREEK TRANSLATIONS
OF THE SONG OF THE SUFFERING SERVANT
(ISAIAH 52.13-53.12) HELP US UNDERSTAND
THE MORE DIFFICULT PASSAGES?

A Seminar paper presented to the Faculty
of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis,
Department of Exegetical Theology
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Sacred Theology

By
Michael P. Walther
May 1998
How Can The Ancient Greek Translations of The Song of The Suffering Servant (Isaiah 52.13-53.12) Help Us Understand The More Difficult Passages?

Introduction

The student of Hebrew anxiously anticipates reading the great pericopes of God's word in the original language. However that initial joy may be tempered by the unanticipated difficulties that often accompany these marvelous words breathed by the Holy Spirit. In the modern mother tongue (English in my case) the words of Job, David, or Isaiah sound so obviously meaningful. Yet in Hebrew, especially in some of the most important verses of Scripture, we find that we must work very hard to find the meaning of the verse. Certainly there are large sections of Old Testament Scripture that are easy to understand. Others portions may owe their difficulty to the eloquent style of the human writer. We will, however, never escape the deep and sometimes enigmatic texts that hold some of the most important truths. We come to them again and again and wrestle the truth from them like pearls from a shell.

The ancient Greek Translations of The Song of the Suffering Servant in Isaiah 52.13-53.12 provide an interesting example of the way in which people of the past have struggled with difficult
texts. This particular study draws from the Septuagint (LXX) as well as the later Greek versions produced by Aquila, Theodotion, and Symmachus. Following a brief review of these four important Greek translations, I will examine the important variations and offer my conclusions regarding the meaning of the Song and the task of translation.

The LXX Text of Isaiah

The exact date of the LXX is not known. However, the Pentateuch is thought to have been translated in Alexandria by the middle of the third century B.C.\(^1\) The writer of the prologue to Sirach arrived in Egypt in the 38th year of Euergetes which would be 132 B.C. In this prologue he indicates that "the Law, the Prophets, and the rest of the books" were already translated.\(^2\) As far as the quality of translation is concerned, we must remember Jellicoe's statement: "The LXX presents 'translations' rather than 'a translation.'"\(^3\) Thus, the style varies from book to book being very literal in some places and in other places free. In certain places there is also evidence of a different Hebrew Vorlage.

In particular the Book of Isaiah has been of interest to students of the LXX because of its frequent use by NT writers. Most scholars (Ottley, Ziegler, Seeligmann, Thackeray, and

---

1. The Interpreter's Dictionary Of The Bible, s.v. "Septuagint."


Orlinsky) generally agree that there was only one translator.\(^4\)

Thackeray characterizes the language of Isaiah as good Κοινή.\(^5\)

Wevers remarks that the translation is very free and is a "source book for Jewish exegesis."\(^6\) In some cases, as John Olley says, "it can be seen that [the translator] must have known the meaning of the words in a particular verse, but has altered the syntax or otherwise translated less literally in order to carry on the general tenor of the passage as he interprets it."\(^7\)

As an example, Seligmann cites Isaiah 36-38 which is also preserved in 4 Kings 18-20. Seligmann highlights the difference in styles by comparing the two Greek translations in these sections. He notes that the translator of Isaiah has "a definite tendency to endow his work with a Greek style and turn of phrase."

Here are a few examples:\(^8\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hebrew</th>
<th>Isaiah (LXX)</th>
<th>4 Kings (LXX)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>מֵ יֵ אַ לֵ מֵ אָ לֵ יֵ מֵ</td>
<td>παρὰ τῶν ἄγγέλων</td>
<td>ἐκ χειρὸς τῶν ἄγγέλων</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>שֶׁ לַ בְּ רָ הָ</td>
<td>εἰ βούλεσθε εὐλογηθῆναι</td>
<td>ποιήσατε μετ' ἐμοῦ εὐλογίαν</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>צָ לִ יָ כּ</td>
<td>τάξαι περὶ τοῦ οἶκου σου</td>
<td>&quot;Ευτείλαι τῷ οίκῳ σου</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In each case you will notice that the 4 Kings translation tends to be more literal. This observation will certainly affect our look


\(^6\) IDB, s.v. "Septuagint."

\(^7\) Olley, Righteousness in The Septuagint, 9.

at Isaiah 53. The translator may be "smoothing" out the Hebrew text or offering a new insight gained from his closer association with the original documents and knowledge of other Hebrew text(s).

The Greek Revisions

When the Christian church spread throughout the Greek speaking Roman Empire, it quickly adopted the LXX. C.F.D. Moule has described this as "one of the most remarkable take-over bids in history." However, this so-called "take over" did not occur without controversy. One crucial debate centered on the rendering of הָלָל by παρθένος in Isaiah 7.14. The Jews contended that υἱόν would have been a better translation. Thus they began to react against the Christian use of the LXX and worked to integrate Jewish exegesis in the LXX.

Emmanuel Tov identifies three groups of revisions: Proto-Hexaplaric, the Hexapla, and Post-Hexaplaric. The Hexapla is the six column edition of the Hebrew Bible and its Greek versions completed in the middle of the third century A.D. by Origen. The third and fourth columns of the Hexapla contain revisions by Aquila and Symmachus. Both of these translations agree frequently with a revision known as Kaige-Theodotion. This latter revision came to light with the discovery of a Greek scroll of the Minor Prophets at Nahal Hever in 1953. Its editor Barthelemy noticed

---

9 C.F.D. Moule as quoted by Jellicoe, The Septuagint, 75.
10 Swete, An Introduction, 30.
that the Hebrew word מְּלֹא is always translated with καὶ γε ('at least').\textsuperscript{12} It is called the kaige-Theodotion revision because in antiquity it was ascribed to Theodotion, who allegedly lived at the end of the second century. Barthelemy determined the terminus ad quem of this revision to be A.D. 50. However the revision could be dated even earlier. The kaige-Theodotion revision consistently translates Hebrew words with certain Greek words even when the meaning doesn’t fit.\textsuperscript{13}

Aquila’s revision is based upon kaige-Theodotion. He prepared his revision around A.D. 125. Aquila followed the teaching of Rabbi Akiva which held that every letter of the Bible is meaningful. For this reason he even translated the direct object marker ἦν with οὐ. Aquila often relied on etymology and made an effort to avoid “Christian” translations of key terms. For example he translated πριν (χριστός) with ηλειμμενος.\textsuperscript{14}

Symmachus’ biographical details are debated. Epiphanius says he was a Samaritan who had become a Jewish proselyte. Eusebius and Jerome thought he was an Ebionite. He was familiar with rabbinic literature. His revision is usually dated at the end of the second century A.D.\textsuperscript{15} Symmachus was very precise, and yet he often translated freely in an attempt to capture the sense of a word or verse. The καὶ γε-Theodotion revision and those of Aquila,
and Symmachus are referred to both in ancient and modern sources as the "Three" (οἱ τρῖς).\textsuperscript{16}

The fifth column of the Hexapla contained what is commonly called the LXX. Origen carefully compared this translation to the Hebrew Bible noting omissions and additions. This column was published by Eusebius and Pamphilius.\textsuperscript{17}

The revision of Lucian (d. A.D. 312) is the most important post-Hexaplaric revision. Scholars are divided regarding its origin and nature, and for this reason I will exclude it from the scope of this particular study.

Isaiah 52.13–53.12

Dr. Harry Orlinsky has described the fifty third chapter of Isaiah as "the most controversially treated of all chapters of the Hebrew Bible."\textsuperscript{18} The dominant Jewish interpretation contends that the Servant described here represents the nation of Israel in all her tribulations. Certainly for the Christian reader these verses are the "golden passional of the Old Testament evangelist" as Polycarp once wrote. "It looks as if they had been written beneath the cross upon Golgotha, and were illuminated by the heavenly brightness of the full שָׂם לִי מְפֹרָשֵׂת" wrote Franz Delitzsch.\textsuperscript{19}

It does not fall within the scope of this paper to delineate the

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid, 182
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 185
\textsuperscript{18} Harry M. Orlinsky, ed., The Fifty Third Chapter of Isaiah According To The Jewish Intepreters (New York: KTAV, 1969), 2.
interpretation of the personal Servant of the LORD who suffered vicariously for our sins. This is my understanding of the text, and I will proceed to study the nuances of the LXX translation based on this interpretational framework. The Suffering Servant is the image I believe Isaiah presents. This Servant has a unique relationship with the Lord. Whereas other servants such as Daniel served the Lord and endured persecution, none of them can be called “the righteous One.” Daniel says, “We have sinned, and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from Thy precepts and from Thy judgements” (Daniel 9.5). My desire is to sharpen that image by studying the translation options presented by the Hebrew text and suggested by the ancient Greek translations.

Isaiah 52.13 δούλος or παῖς

The very opening verse of the song offers a subtle but interesting distinction in the LXX with the translation of ἐνεπαρκόῦν by παῖς instead of δούλος. Both Aquila and Symmachus chose δούλος. Perhaps our familiarity with Paul’s description of Jesus in Philippians 2.7 could create the expectation of δούλος, however in Acts 3.13 Peter speaks of Jesus as God’s τῶν παίδων. The LXX usage of the two terms is quite even (παῖς παιδίων παιδάρων 340 xs/ δούλος δουλεία δουλεύων 327 xs). In Genesis – Judges παῖς refers to freer servants of the king, whereas δούλος refers to slavery proper. However beyond

20 Young, Studies in Isaiah, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), 129.
21 Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. παῖς.
the Hexateuch this distinction begins to fade. Both ἴτα and δοῦλος are used of individuals and as collective references to Israel in the Book of Isaiah. Yet ἴτα carries the connotation of descendend and of youth.

Isaiah 52.15 Θαυμάσονται / ῥαντίσει / ἀποβαλεῖ Marvel, sprinkle, fling away

Behold, He will sprinkle many nations ( כי יִהְיֶה נִיָּה רְבִּים). Our difficulty in understanding this phrase is supported by the ancient Greek versions. They also struggled with it. Both Aquila and Theodotion opt for the literal translation ῥαντίσει "to sprinkle." The interpretation would follow that the Servant who appeared to be in need of purification actually becomes the one who purifies the nations with the sprinkling of his own blood. However Delitzsch shows that this is not the way ἀναίμα is used. He suggests that it interjects a thought that doesn't flow well with the context. Instead he probes further into the meaning of this word and shows that it can also mean "to spirt." He then applies it in the sense that the people are enlived or electrified by the sudden change which the Servant undergoes. J.D.W. Watts also suggests that ἀναίμα may be a hapax legomena from an identical root

---

22 Ibid, 674
23 Liddell and Scott, Greek - English Lexicon, s.v. ἴτα.
25 Delitzsch, 308.
related to Arabic naza which means "startle" or "cause to leap." Both of these would correspond well with θαυμάσονται of the LXX. Symmachus' ἀποβάλει He will fling away. Perhaps he was trying to capture both the idea of purifying as well as the disturbance of the nations which is mentioned in the context of the verse.

Isaiah 53.4 ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν

In this fourth verse Isaiah says, Surely He will bear our sicknesses: ἀράκεν ἡλιγναὶ ἡμῶν. The LXX translates ἡλιγναὶ with ἀμαρτίας. This is interesting because ἡλιγναὶ never signifies sins in the Hebrew. Were they reading another text, or were they interpreting? Either way this translation strongly supports the vicarious nature of the suffering of the Servant. Matthew provides a literal Greek translation (8.17) with Αὐτός τάς ἀσθενείας ἡμῶν ἔλαβεν. Peter also gives the same idea with ὃς τάς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν αὐτός ἀνήψεν (1 Peter 2.24). Seeligmann believes that Matthew is either quoting from another source, or he is referring back to the Hebrew text directly.27 Certainly verse five He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities, influenced the Greek translators. It could be that both sins and the consequences of sin are meant.

Isaiah 53.4 πόνοι / ἀφημένοι / μεμαστιγωμένοι

27 Seeligmann, 29.
This verse betrays an interpretation popular among the rabbis. Isaiah continues, *We considered Him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted*. The key word in Hebrew is לְעָנָה (qal passive participle) to touch, or to beat. The LXX translates with πόνος (noun dative singular) work or toil as well as stress, trouble, suffering. Jerome has the reading ἀφημένον (participle of ἀφῄμω) to touch for Aquila. This closely follows the Hebrew. Eusebius as the reading τετραματισμένον for Aquila. But Symmachus is also similar with εν ἀφη ὑπ'ανα being 'in' or 'under' the touch. Each of these idioms can be construed with the sickness of leprosy. A similar Hebrew phrase is found in 2 Kings 15.5 LORD struck (touched) the king and he was a leper. Aquila also uses the word ἄπω in Genesis 12 and 17 and Exodus 11 to refer to leprosy or infection. Young cites evidence that among the Jews there was a tradition that the Messiah would be a leper. However he suggests that it is going too far to insist on this interpretation. 

Isaiah 53.8 οὖν γενεὰν αὐτοῦ τίς διηγήσεται

The Hebrew phrase וְנָתַן בָּרוֹרִים מִי יִשְׁחַזֵּת and His generation who will consider has spawned a number of different translations. Young, for example, has, *From prison and from judgment he was taken, and among his generation, who takes thought that he was cut off from*
the land of the living. . .

He renders the Hebrew מָצָא to be a preposition with or among. All the ancient Greek translators understood the מָצָא to be the sign of the accusative (even Aquila) with τὴν γενεὰν αὐτοῦ τῆς διηγησεται. But what does it mean to declare his generation? This might be an expansion of the thought expressed by מָצָא who will consider, give thought to. In the Qal מָצָא can also mean “to talk about.” In this sense the Greek translators might be suggesting the further step of confessing or believing in the Servant. Aquila translates withἐξομιλήσει to live with, have intercourse with.

Isaiah 53.8 ἐἰς θάνατον / πλήγη αὐτοῖς / ἤψατο αὐτῶν

Confusion continues in the latter part of this verse as the translators struggle with the Hebrew phrase מִן לְךָ מְעָר מְעָר מְעָר from (or for) the transgression of my people a plague was to him. Aquila and Theodotian translate ἀπὸ ἁθεσίας λαοῦ μου ἤψατο αὐτῶν because of the faithlessness of my people it touched them. Symmachus: διὰ τὴν ἀδικίαν τοῦ λαοῦ μου πλήγη αὐτοῖς because of the unrighteousness of my people (there was) a plague to them. The LXX translates ἀπὸ τῶν ἁνομίων τοῦ λαοῦ μου ἅχθη ἐἰς θάνατον because of the lawlessness of my people he was led to death. It appears that the LXX translators might have been confused with the last Hebrew word in this phrase.

29 Young, 350
The LXX may have taken it to be an abbreviation for למות to death.

Isaiah 53.9 ὅτι ἀνομίαν οὐκ ἔποιησεν

The LXX offers some insight in verse nine. The Hebrew phrase is על ולא רantzמ עשה since no violence he did. The LXX suggests a causitive interpretation for על with ὅτι because. It also interprets עָשָׂה with ἀνομία lawlessness. Peter follows along this same vein with ἁμαρτία (1 Peter 2.22). In each instance the LXX and NT offer the correct interpretation, although they do omit the particular kind of lawlessness or sin suggested by the Hebrew text.

Isaiah 53.10

This is probably the most difficult verse of the entire song. There is some obvious confusion regarding the first phrase of this verse רָדַת תַּפֹּן דָּפָא חוֹלִיל and the LORD was pleased to crush him (with) sickness. The LXX reads καὶ κύριος βούλεται καθαρίσαι αὐτὸν τῆς πληγῆς and the Lord desired to cleanse him of the plague. The idea of cleansing may derive from לַכֵּן in Aramaic, where it is equivalent to the Hebrew חָכָה to be clear or pure. Orlinsky continues: “It is no uncommon occurrence for LXX to interpret a Hebrew word in accordance with the signification borne by a word externally resembling it in the Aramaic dialect spoken at the time when the translation was made.” Orlinsky and Seligmann provide some
interesting examples of this. Aquila follows more literally with καὶ κύριος ἔβουλήθη ἐπιτρήψαι αὐτοῦ τὸ ἄρρωστήμα and the Lord was pleased to crush (ἐπιτρήψω) him with sickness. But Symmachus translates κύριος ἠθελήσει ἀλοήσαι αὐτόν ἐν τῷ τραυματίσμῳ the Lord wished to smite (ἀλοώ) him in his wounding. The LXX avoids the idea that ἡμῖν exercised his punishment upon his own Servant. Both Aquila and Symmachus bring the translation closer to the Hebrew.

The next phrase creates great difficulty for the reader and translator. יָשָׁהוּ כָּל לֵוָו If you place his soul as an offering. Here the verb יָשָׁהוּ is translated as the second person masculine.

The verb יָשָׁהוּ can also be translated as the third person feminine: if his soul put a guilt-offering. Thus Delitzsch translates if His soul would pay a trespass-offering.

The translations vary:

- If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, (NASB)
- and though the LORD makes his life a guilt offering, (NIV)
- After He has sacrificed Himself for guilt, (Beck)
- when he makes himself an offering for sin, (RSV)
- Wenn er sein Leben zum Schuldopfer gegeben hat (Luther)
- si posuerit pro peccato animam suam (Vulgate).

All these translations, except for the NIV, understand soul to be the subject of the verb יָשָׁהוּ in one way or another. But this makes for a difficult translation! Should we be surprised? Here is the

---

31 Delitzsch, Isaiah, 329.
vicarious satisfaction—a concept that is challenging for any human being to comprehend! What did the Greek translators do?

The LXX reads εάν δώσεις περὶ ἁμαρτιας if you give (a sacrifice) concerning sins. Here the verb is translated as the second person. The subject is the second person singular you. Why the second person? Probably because the original LXX translator found this to be the smoothest wording. The other translators didn’t try to work with the third person option. They also followed the LXX.

The word for guilt-offering is also left out. This מזא originally means an offense or trespass. It then also includes the figure of the trespass offering. Why did the ancient Greek translators omit this important word? Perhaps it is meant to be understood. Perhaps they did not comprehend the implications of the text regarding the vicarious atonement. The New Testament leaves us no doubt with δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ λύτρον ἀντὶ πολλῶν (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). Surely λύτρον price of release, ransom presupposes the guilt-offering mentioned here.

The Hebrew continues with יראי נא לא יראי he will see seed he will increase days. However the LXX reads ἡ ψυχὴ ὑμῶν δοθήσεται σπέρμα μακρόβιου your soul shall see a long-lived seed. Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion all have ἡ ψυχὴ αὐτοῦ. The ψυχὴ used here in this phrase is taken from the previous phrase. It seems unusual that the translators would confuse this feminine subject with the masculine verb יראי.
The latter part of verse ten and the beginning of verse eleven are woven together by the ancient Greek translations. The Hebrew הָעַרְרִי וְהוּא הָבְרִה יִעֲלָה: מַעְמַלְמָלָם וְרָאוּת and the desire of the LORD in his hand will have success. From the labor of his soul he will see... In the LXX this becomes καὶ βούλεται κύριος ἀφελεῖν ἀπὸ τοῦ πόνου τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτοῦ The Lord desires to take away from the labour of his soul. Aquila and Theodotian both insert ἐν χειρὶ by the hand after κύριος. We might conclude that something has been muddled here in this last part of the song if it were not for the following observation.

Isaiah 53.11 ὁ δεῖξαι αὐτῷ φῶς

The Masoretic Text reads יְהוּדָּה יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁש יְשַׁ
ten, θεύεται: καὶ κύριος θεύεται καθαρίσαι αὐτὸν τῆς πληγῆς· ἐὰν δώτε περὶ ἀμαρτίας, ἡ ψυχὴ ὑμῶν θεύεται σπέρμα μακρόβιον· καὶ θεύεται κύριος ἀφελεῖν ἀπὸ τοῦ πόνου τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτοῦ, δείξει αὐτῷ φῶς καὶ πλάσαι τῇ συνέει, δικαιώσαι δίκαιον εὖ δουλεύοντα πολλοῖς, καὶ τὰς ἀμαρτίας αὐτῶν αὐτὸς ἀνοίσει. Trans. And the Lord desired to purify him from his plague; if you give [an offering] for sin, your soul shall see a long-lived seed. The Lord also desired to take away from the labour of his soul, to show him light and form [him] with understanding, to justify the just who serves many well; and their sins he will bear.

As I noted above, the Hebrew text leaves a strong break between verses ten and eleven. And the desire of the Lord in his hand will have success. From the labor of his soul... In the Hebrew text the focus shifts in verse twelve from the desire of the Lord to the action of the Servant himself: From the distress of His soul He will see. He will be filled with His knowledge. My righteous Servant will justify many, and He will bear their iniquities. Why the Greek translators blended the thoughts of verses eleven and twelve together is difficult to determine. Again the could have been working with a different Vorlage. But the consequence is revealed dramatically in the the translation of the key phrase My righteous Servant will justify many. The Greek translations lose the significance of this phrase by saying that the Lord justifies the just. Seligmann points out that the key to understanding the
Greek translation here is the emphasis on ἡμῖν. As noted above the word is added to the Greek text as well as the Qumran text. Thus the Hebrew text was translated with an emphasis on the “light” and “understanding” which the Servant received from God. Such a translation is probably an indication of popular Alexandrian Jewish theology.

Conclusions

This study of the ancient Greek versions of Isaiah 52.13-53.12 has been a microcosm of Septuagint studies in general. It provides at least four important insights.

The study of the Septuagint offers to the Bible student and interpreter a better understanding of the Hebrew text. The LXX is capable of distorting the meaning of the Hebrew text for example by relying on the Aramaic equivalents which were in use at the time of the translation (as noted in verse ten). Yet the LXX is also capable of sharpening our understanding of the text by using a word which narrows the field of meaning suggested by the context. I think that the use of παις for ζωή instead of δούλος in 52.13 is one such example. παις carries the idea of youth as well as a familial relationship. Any translation is capable of doing this because all translations function as interpretations of the text.

The study of the Septuagint also helps us understand rabbinical exegesis of the Old Testament. This follows logically from the interpretational quality of all translations. In the case

---

33 Seeligmann, 108.
of the Suffering Servant, the Greek translators handling of the
word ἀσθένεια shows the rabbinic idea that the Messiah would be a leper.
The LXX especially provides insight into the understanding of the
OT prior to the time of the New Testament. Earlier in the paper I
pointed out that most scholars agree that the LXX Isaiah comes
from the hand of one translator. What does this say about the
second century B.C. view of the unity of Isaiah? In many cases it
is possible to detect a difference between the rabbinic
understanding of the OT before Christ as opposed the rabbinic
understanding of the OT after Christ. In this particular section
the LXX does not appear to favor a “collective” interpretation of
the Suffering Servant. Nor does it exclude but in fact supports
the understanding that the Suffering Servant suffered vicariously
for sin. Recall the translation of ἁμαρτία in
53.4. Within the limited range of sources for early rabbinic
theology, the LXX provides a rich storehouse of information.

Dr. Jan de Waard impresses upon us that “It is impossible to
undertake translation of the Old Testament today... without
taking account of the Septuagint and its various daughter
translations.” Translation is an immense task. Particularly in
the difficult sections of the Bible it is helpful to study the
efforts of others, especially the ancients. They also struggled
with literal and free translating techniques. In Isaiah 53.10-11
the Greek versions smooth out the text to make it flow. The
literalists (which I tend to be) can object to this method since
it may distort the meaning. On the other hand even the literalist

---

34 De Waard, 312.
must realize that a translation is meant to be read and understood quickly. Otherwise we might as well read the original. Staffan Olofsson points out that the literal and free translation styles are used together by the same translator, even in the same passage. This points to the tension that all translators have and from which the ancient Greek translators were not exempt.  

Far and above the most important reason for the study of the LXX is the benefit it provides for our understanding of the New Testament. The τῶν παιδῶν ιερου Ἰησοῦν of Acts 3.13 comes to life when considered in conjunction with Isaiah 52.13 ἰδοὺ συνήσει ὁ παῖς μου. When Matthew quotes Isaiah Αὐτὸς τὰς ἀσθενείας ἤμων ἔλαβεν καὶ τὰς νόσους ἔβαστασεν the casual reader would completely miss the spiritual implications connected to this passage by the rabbis when they translated with ἀμαρτία instead of ἀσθενεία. The LXX provides the Hebraic overtones which are often intended by the Greek words of the NT writers. In this sense the LXX is one of the greatest gifts of God because it provides the linguistic framework for the revealing of God’s will in the NT. We should not be surprised that the Church Fathers held the LXX in such high esteem.

Finally I will try to respond to the question which was posed in the title for this paper: “How can the ancient Greek translations of the Song of the Suffering Servant help us understand the more difficult passages?” To say that the LXX is the key to understanding these difficult passages is going too far. I found that the ancient Greek translators struggled with

---

the Hebrew texts just as I have--often without dramatic beneficial results. What I did find, however, is that the LXX and particularly the later Greek versions provide the modern student with important translation options. Very often a difficult text can only be presented according to its possible translations. Finally the translator is forced to choose an option and to make it readable. But it is an art to do so without damaging the meaning of the text. The Greek versions again offer different approaches. I found it most interesting that though we are divided by two millennia the present task of translating and interpreting the ancient texts has not changed. I have grown in my appreciation of their scholarship. Additionally my engagement in this task of understanding the mind of God through the Hebrew Bible along with the Greek translators causes me to realize even more the Spirit-given miracle of the NT. Amidst all this struggle for understanding and enlightenment comes the Man with the words of eternal life. It is no wonder that the people who sat at Jesus' feet were astonished at His teaching (Matthew 7.28). Now it is our task to take this revelation of Christ sharpened by the ancient linguistic tools and present Him boldly and faithfully to the world. God bless us to this end.
Bibliography


