olam he-zeh v'olam ha-ba

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INTRODUCTORY OBSERVATIONS

It may seem odd or perhaps even off-putting to begin an analysis of the Septuagint and eschatology with a series of caveats. Nonetheless, as we shall see, these “warnings” form the necessary prelude to any responsible discussion of this topic. If, as turns out to be the case, there is no single perspective on this fascinating topic, then it is far better for readers to recognize this earlier, rather than later, in the process.\(^1\)

First, it is necessary to remind readers that the Septuagint is for the most part a translation, in fact the first translation of the Bible, in this case the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. There is little reason to doubt that the process that resulted in this Greek text, which can be abbreviated as LXX, began in Alexandria, Egypt, sometime in the first third of the third century B.C.E. It is probable that the translation resulted both from the Alexandrian Jewish community’s rapid loss of fluency in Hebrew and from the reigning monarch’s (Ptolemy II) desire to have a copy of the Jewish law in his ever-expanding Library.\(^2\)

Thus it makes eminently good sense, historically and theologically, that the Five Books of Moses or Pentateuch were the first books tackled by the translators (numbering 72 or 70 according to ancient sources) assembled at Alexandria. There are sufficient similarities between the translations of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible to posit some connection between their translators. On the other hand, there are enough demonstrable differences in translation technique to insist on the relative independence of those responsible for each of the books of the Pentateuch.

As we move to the books beyond the Pentateuch, there are no sure signs of the relative (to say nothing of the absolute) chronology in which they were translated, nor are we even close to certainty about the location(s) in which later translators worked. Thus, it is not entirely surprising that many LXX books appear to be rather literal renderings of the Hebrew being translated [also called Vorlage], while other books almost certainly reflect a far freer, even periphrastic, approach to the Hebrew text. And then there are a considerable number of books that occupy more moderate (or median) places in the continuum that separates (but also joins) literal and free.
It must be immediately acknowledged that our judgment on a given LXX translator’s handling of his Vorlage remains somewhat speculative, inasmuch as we do not know precisely what consonantal Hebrew text (vocalization was a much later development) lay before those rendering the Bible into Greek. Undoubtedly, a consonantal text very much like (in fact, sometimes identical to) the traditional Hebrew or Masoretic Text (MT) underlies much of the LXX. LXX translators, we can readily imagine, typically followed that Hebrew text, but may have consciously changed it for any number of reasons. A consonantal Hebrew text at variance, to a lesser or greater degree, with the MT lay before other LXX translators. Again, there is good reason to posit that they often followed this Hebrew text, while parting company with it on occasion.

Thus, we have to imagine that the collection of individual or group efforts that we designate by the term “Septuagint” was always somewhat uneven in the approach of its translators toward their Hebrew Vorlage. In the absence of any overall effort at editorial standardization or redaction, it would be difficult to imagine that there are a large number of grammatical, lexicographical, or ideological elements that are found throughout the Septuagint or even in most of its books.

What I have been speaking of in the previous paragraphs could more properly be called the Old Greek, that is, the form of the text as it appeared when the translators completed their task. Unfortunately, no autographs (that is, originals) or any book or block of books of the LXX are extent. In the absence of such autographs, it might be hoped that textual criticism would allow for the reconstruction of the original formulations of the LXX translators. Although such a procedure might well work on a limited amount of text, we are far from being able to determine the Old Greek for an extended amount of LXX text.

Even under the best of circumstances, when scribes carefully copied the Old Greek over several centuries, we could expect a plethora of new readings to be introduced by chance or by design. This is simply the result of the fact that scribes, even the most careful scribes, were after all fallible humans.

But more than a few years passed between the creation of the Septuagint and extant manuscripts that contain all (or most) of the books that came to constitute the LXX canon. The Septuagint was probably completed in the late second century B.C.E.; the great uncial codices (Alexandrinus, Sinaiticus, and Vaticanus) that constitute our earliest extant evidence for the LXX as a collection of books date to the third and fourth centuries C.E. During the extended intervening period that separates these two events, the Old Greek of some
books was completely or partially lost, and later revisions were substituted. In other instances, there is good reason to think that conscious efforts on the part of scribes or tradents introduced extensive changes that were perhaps originally intended as commentary on a passage of the LXX, but ultimately took the place of the older Greek.

All of these factors introduce even more heterogeneity to the Septuagint as a collection of varied texts stemming from different time periods and locales. Further, these factors serve to reinforce the observation made above about the difficulty of locating and defining LXX characteristics on what we might call a global basis. It may be possible, for example, to discern a marked interest in eschatology on the part of the translator responsible for LXX Psalms or LXX Isaiah, but it would be sloppy methodology to seek to apply such interest to other books or blocks of material without careful, one might say painstaking, analysis of the work of each translator.

The cautionary flags thrown down above are admittedly formidable, but they do point in the direction that any serious study of the LXX and eschatology must take. But they are not the only cautionary flags. Recognition that any statement beginning “The LXX says . . .” must be heavily nuanced, if not abandoned outright, is necessary. But how are we to deal with assertions that are limited to a given book or group of books in the Septuagint? In short, what are we looking for?

Typically, in searches such as this (that is, how is eschatology handled by specific LXX translators) greatest importance is attached to readings that veer from the supposed Hebrew Vorlage with which the translator worked. Sometimes, as with quantitative changes (that is, those that involve differences in length between the Hebrew and Greek texts), it is fairly easy to detect differences and perhaps even to explain or account for them. However, in general, qualitative differences (where the number of words is about the same, but the meanings appear to be distinct) are more difficult to determine.

Nonetheless, it would not be appropriate to discount the value of the Greek text where it essentially follows the Hebrew that underlies it. In such instances, we may well envision that the translator’s viewpoint is identical (or nearly so) to the stance presented in his Hebrew Vorlage.

Upon further reflection, almost each of the statements in the two paragraphs just above require further analysis. For example, even if we posit that the LXX translator made use of a Hebrew text that was identical to the consonants of the MT, we have no way of knowing whether he vocalized it in exactly the same way that the Masoretes did. Although differences in vocalization are
often minor and make little or no difference in meaning, that is certainly not always the case.

At some point, we will need to ascertain whether, in our best judgment (and in the judgment of others who have studied the material) a given LXX translator generally followed closely his Hebrew Vorlage or whether he was given to frequent insertions and omissions, such that we cannot know whether a possibly significant passage was due to a Hebrew text different from the MT or is the result of the translator’s own conscious intervention.

Beyond these considerations are two others. First, the LXX is after all a translation and thus not necessarily the optimal medium to express views even (especially?) on topics of current interest. It is clear that those responsible for the LXX had differing views on the best way to render the Hebrew wording into intelligible Greek. Nonetheless, it does seem methodologically sound to assume that the translator followed his text, unless there is some reason to think otherwise. And this would be true, at least in general, whether or not the translator agreed with the text. Therefore, unless we have evidence to the contrary, we cannot make too much of any instance where the Greek translation agrees with its reputed Hebrew Vorlage. Emphatically stated, agreement between texts does not necessarily indicate that the translator agreed with a given sentiment expressed in that text.

The second consideration is especially apt when considering eschatology and related issues. As is well known, the Septuagint, in origin a Jewish document for a Jewish audience, became the Bible (specifically the Old Testament) for Christians. In this guise, Christian theologians routinely mined the text for support of what were to become characteristic beliefs. An eschatological focus was one area that saw particularly rich development in early Christianity. Thus, many LXX passages came to be understood as bearing an eschatological meaning, whether or not such was the intention (or likely to have been the intention) of the Old Greek translators themselves. In short, we must be ever cautious not to read back into the Septuagint meanings that pertain to a chronologically later and religiously different culture.

The afterlife, as a means to reward and punish individuals (or perhaps groups of individuals), is clearly a part, but only a part, of the constellation of beliefs centered on the term “eschatology.” With its focus on the end of time (at least, time as we know and experience it), eschatology has both global, even universal, significance as well as importance in terms of the fate of individuals. Often, but not always related to the end of times is the figure of the Messiah (or, for some Second Temple Jews, messiahs). That is, biblical passages that
highlight the role of the Messiah may be directly relevant to a larger eschatological vision, or they may not be. Much, but not all eschatology envisions a fiery end to our world, brought about by God and his angelic host, often aided by those humans allied with him against the forces of cosmic evil. This is apocalypticism, which, as I see it, adds a sense of urgency to eschatological speculation that might otherwise seem to pertain only to the distant future.

On the one hand, careful delineation of different strands of eschatological and messianic thought is essential in order to plot what can be conceived of as parallel, but nonetheless diverse developments. On the other hand, it is not likely that any individual or likeminded group of individuals delved very deeply into differences of definition or emphasis in their eschatological considerations. That is to say, for the sake of analysis we as observers of an earlier period might well wish to differentiate beliefs that those who maintained them would have held in common. With this in mind, I will discuss below a number of passages that might have been understood as eschatological, whether or not a claim could be made that they relate specifically to the afterlife.

THE PSALTER

We will start with the book of Psalms (or the Psalter) since this has been the starting point for much of the most spirited discussion and analysis in past discussions. Psalm 1, the initial and in many ways introductory composition to the entire collection, begins by contrasting the fate of the righteous with that of the wicked. A fairly literal translation of Psalm 1:5 in the Hebrew text is provided by the New American Standard Bible (NASB): “Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.” Within the context of the Hebrew of this Psalm, this clearly refers to God’s actions, within this world, to separate and reward those who are faithful to him, while punishing those who turn from him. This is a common theme of Wisdom Literature, of which Psalm 1 is an exemplar.

According to Joachim Schaper, “the Greek, on the other hand, has altered the psalm’s nature as a whole by reinterpreting a single word. The use of anisthmi as an intransitive verb referring to the future state of a group of individuals clearly confers the idea of ‘rising from the dead,’ ‘be resurrected’. . . . The idea of a last judgment is implied in the Greek of Ps 1:5,” which Schaper translates: “Therefore unbelievers will not rise [from death] in judgment nor will sinners [rise] in the counsel of righteous men.” Schaper supports this interpretation with reference to other Jewish literature (e.g., 2 Maccabees) that
also dates to the second century B.C.E., when, he believes, the Greek Psalter was produced.  

It is noteworthy, especially in the view of those who oppose Schaper’s interpretation (here and, as we shall see, in other passages) that he does not cite any other uses of this Greek verb in the Psalter. Focusing on this point, Karen Jobes and Moises Silva observe: “Although Schaper’s interpretation may seem at first attractive, there is evidence to diminish its force. For example, the material in Hatch-Redpath shows the same Greek root translating the same Hebrew root even in contexts where the sense of resurrection is impossible. One such instance is in the Psalter itself at Psalm 93:16. With this in mind, we can characterize Schaper’s interpretation at best as ‘ambiguous.” Given our introductory remarks above, it does not seem that Jobes and Silva have set too high an interpretive bar for efforts such as Schaper’s.

We will now look at a selection of Schaper’s other examples from the first third of the Psalter. The first passage adduced by Schaper is Psalm 16 (15 in the LXX): 9–10. In the Hebrew the text reads (so NASB): “Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices; My flesh also will dwell securely. For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol; Neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay.” Schaper, along with others, suggests that the word translated “my glory” should instead be read “my liver.” This does not entail any change in consonants. Schaper renders the Septuagint for these two verses as: “There my heart was glad//and my tongue gave praise;//also, my flesh will rest upon hope//because you will not abandon my soul to Hades//nor let your righteous see corruption.”

For Schaper, the eschatologically significant differences between the Hebrew and the Greek are two in number: the change from “securely” to “upon hope” and from “pit” (NASB “decay”) to “destruction,” “physical corruption.” As Schaper argues: “These changes indicate the introduction of the notion of physical resurrection (again only of the righteous) into the sacred text. . . . The Hebrew text does not confer this idea. It just stresses that God will not let the righteous die an untimely death.”

In this instance, Schaper’s second point is obscured by the NASB rendering, which here is not literal. For its “Neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay,” the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) has: “or let your faithful one see the Pit.” It is as if the translators of the NASB introduced their later, Christian interpretation of the Hebrew into their translation—never, in my view, a wise decision. But, can we say, with Schaper, that “the Greek version puts forward the promise of personal, physical resurrection.
We have here one of the first, if not the first, instance of this hope. On the basis of the further evidence Schaper uses for support; namely, a midrash on Psalm 16, I cannot follow his argumentation, especially in the absence of any collaborating evidence from elsewhere in Greek Psalms, to say nothing of the corpus of the full Septuagint.

It is Schaper’s judgment that the last three verses of Psalm 22 (21 in the LXX), that is, verses 30–32, provide “an illustration of the traditional Hebrew concept of divine justice with regard to human life and death.” This is an especially difficult passage in the Hebrew, especially in its first verse. NASB (where the verses are numbered 29–31) renders this passage as follows: “All the prosperous of the earth will eat and worship, All those who go down to the dust will bow before Him, Even he who cannot keep his soul alive. Posterity will serve Him; It will be told of the LORD to the coming generation. They will come and will declare His righteousness To a people who will be born, that He has performed it.” Whatever ambiguities reside in the Hebrew, the Greek is, in Schaper’s view, unambiguous. In his translation, it reads: “And the rich (‘fat ones’) of the earth ate and bowed low,//all those going down to earth will fall down before him.// But my soul lives for him//and my seed will serve him://the coming generation will be proclaimed to the Lord,//and they will proclaim his righteousness///to the people which will be born, [all the things] which the Lord did.”

Of the three differences Schaper discerns between the Hebrew and the Greek, only one is of interest in matters eschatological. For the Hebrew NRSV rendered “Even he who cannot keep his soul alive,” LXX has “But my soul lives for him.” In Schaper’s analysis, the Greek reading could be an interpretation of the same Hebrew or one that varied, but only slightly, from this Hebrew. The significance of this is, for Schaper, clear: “my soul lives for him” means “lives for him in eternity,” as is suggested by the use of the future tense in the immediate context. For those who follow Schaper’s eschatologically oriented interpretation of other psalms, this understanding of Psalm 21 (LXX enumeration) surely carries considerably more weight than it does for those who remain skeptical of Schaper’s overall approach to the Psalter.

Psalm 46 (45 in the LXX) provides the next example within Schaper’s listing of psalms with a noticeable eschatological reworking on the part of the Greek translator. In the Hebrew text of this psalm, v. 9 reads (again, as rendered in the NASB, where it is v. 8): “Come, behold the works of the LORD, Who has wrought desolations in the earth.” At this point, the LXX has (in Schaper’s translation): “Come, see the works of the Lord//which he has set upon the earth as portents.” As understood by Schaper, “the change from
‘devastation’ [NASB: ‘desolations’] to ‘portents’ obviously expresses the need to adjust the text to reflect a modified concept of the inception of the messianic age. . . . The shift probably also served to alter the idea itself, to make it more ‘humane.’ The stress was no longer laid on the destruction wrought by God but rather on the hope (for the coming of the Messiah?) itself.” There is certainly reason for even an impartial observer to doubt whether this LXX reading is in fact “an interpretative translation” of the sort Schaper extrapolates. Even if it is, there is no clear connection between this reading and the others Schaper develops in his section on eschatology.8

The situation in Psalm 48 (LXX 47) is quite interesting. The last verse of this Psalm, as rendered in NASB, (where it is verse 14) reads: “For such is God, Our God forever and ever; He will guide us until death.” For the Septuagint, Schaper translates: “Because this is God, our God, in all eternity and forever and ever, he himself will shepherd us forever.” As Schaper sees it, the Greek equivalent for Hebrew “guide” is exact. However, the Hebrew expression “until death” has led in the Septuagint to “a theologically tendentious interpretation. . . . The Hebrew text . . . simply alludes to an inner-wordly guidance given to the righteous. . . . The Hebrew of Ps 48 does not confer any ideas about personal eschatology.” The Greek expression eis tous aiwnon (variants of this are found three times in the preceding line), which Schaper renders “forever,” is in his analysis a term that has been “democratized,” such that “it could be employed to lay out the prospects of personal salvation. The flock tended by the eternal shepherd could now hope to participate in his eternity.” This is, at first glance, a more impressive example than some of the others Schaper adduced. However, given the fact that a similar form shows up three (other) times in this verse, we cannot overlook the seemingly simpler explanation of textual corruption at the stage of translation and/or transmission.9

The very next composition, Psalm 49 (LXX 48), is more complex and provides Schaper with the context for one of his more lengthy analyses.10 Verse 12 (v. 11 in the NASB) reads as following: “Their inner thought is, that their houses are forever, And their dwelling places to all generations; They have called their lands after their own names.” This difficult text is often emended at its beginning, such that the Hebrew word for “grave” or “graves” appears rather than “inner thought.” Such a change, which would involve the rearrangement of two of the consonants, is by no means impossible, but it is sharply rejected by Schaper. Thus, he argues, the LXX of this verse is another “theological innovation” on the part of the translators: “And their graves are their houses forever,//their dwellings for many generations [=forever].” This
“theological exegesis,” in Schaper’s words, “serves to stress the eternal death of the wicked . . . over against the eternal salvation of the righteous. . . . [In other words,] there will be neither judgment nor resurrection for the wicked.”

From Schaper’s perspective this interpretation is strengthened by the LXX rendering at v. 15 (v. 16 in the LXX), where a notoriously difficult Hebrew text is rendered in Greek as: “They put [them] into Hades like sheep. Death tends them://and the righteous will rule over them in the morning,// and their help will wither away from their glory [once they are] in Hades.” This Greek is similar, in Schaper’s view, to what is implied in the Hebrew text, “but it further stresses an already prominent feature, i.e. the existence of the wicked in Hades. Whereas the Hebrew text tells us that their ‘form will vanish,’ the Greek claims that there will be no ‘help’ for them in the nether world.” As is so often the case with the passages Schaper chooses to highlight, there are both textual and interpretative difficulties in this psalm. This makes it difficult to offer complete support for the positions in favor of which Schaper makes his definitive claims.

Another “striking instance of reinterpretation” occurs in Psalm 56 (LXX 55), according to Schaper. The NASB renders this difficult verse (v. 8 in the NASB; v. 9 in the LXX) as: “Thou hast taken account of my wanderings; Put my tears in Thy bottle; Are they not in Thy book?” Schaper would exclude the last line of this verse (“Are they not in Thy book?”) as a likely gloss. How then are we to deal with what is apparently the Greek rendering of the first two lines of this verse: “I have told you my life,//[and] you have put my tears before yourself, just like in your promise”?

Most important, for Schaper, is the question of which “promise” is being alluded to in this interpretative Greek rendering. For Schaper, as for some other researchers, it is to Isaiah 25:8 that this allusion draws us. Within “the description of the great eschatological banquet drawing together the nations in Jerusalem it is announced that God ‘has wiped away the tears from every cheek’” (so the New Jerusalem Bible). Schaper also constructs the argument that the Greek word for “promise” used here, epaggelia, was intended “to mean the holy scriptures of Judaism qua embodiment of God’s promise to Israel.” The use of such technical terminology serves, to use a colloquial expression, to seal the deal. Here, as elsewhere, I would prefer a far more cautious evaluation of LXX Psalms that stresses possibility, rather than likelihood or even certainty.

Psalm 59 (LXX 58) provides the next example for Schaper. The key verses, 12–13 in the Hebrew and 13–14 in the LXX, are translated in this way by NASB: “On account of the sin of their mouth and the words of their
lips, Let them even be caught in their pride, And on account of curses and lies which they utter. Destroy them in wrath, destroy them, that they may be no more; That men may know that God rules in Jacob, To the ends of the earth.” For this, LXX has, in Schaper’s rendering: “With regard to the sin of their mouth, to the word of their lips,//let them be taken in their pride.//And because of their curses and their lies, acts of judgement will be pronounced// on the day of consummation, and they will be no more.//And they will know that God rules over Jacob, until the ends of the earth.”

The key lexical item here is the Greek term *sunteleiai*. In general, this term refers to “destruction” in any number of possible contexts. In this instance, so Schaper submits, it is to be understood specifically as “an apocalyptical *terminus technicus*.” Schaper cites passages from LXX Daniel in support of his rendering “consummation” or “final judgement.” Schaper also references the New Testament’s frequent resort to “this particular usage . . . in many of its copious references to the last judgment.” We cannot but wonder if this later, Christian understanding of the term has influenced Schaper’s analysis of its signification in this LXX passage.12

The last of Schaper’s eschatologically significant passages from LXX Psalms derives from Psalm 73 (LXX 72). In his view, this psalm is a counterpart to Psalm 1: “Whereas in the former we find the idea that only the righteous will rise from the dead, the latter demonstrates another aspect of this fundamental belief, i.e. the concept that the wicked will forever be confined to the nether world.” The key verse here is v. 4 in the Hebrew (v. 5 in the LXX), rendered in NASB as: “For there are no pains in their death; And their body is fat.” For this verse in the Hebrew, Schaper prefers a different interpretation, as embodied in the RSV: “For they have no pangs; their bodies are sound and sleek.”

In any case, so Schaper, the LXX translator understood the Hebrew in a way that comes closer to the literal translation of the NASB. So, “they [i.e., the sinners] will see no return from death//nor find steadfastness in their affliction.” Schaper also offers an alternative rendering for the decidedly difficult second part of this verse in the Septuagint, “and there is steadfastness in their scourge (i.e. their punishment is perpetual).”13 Whichever approach of Schaper finds favor, it definitely supports his overall picture, pieced together from the LXX Psalms passages he discusses, of eternal damnation, ceaseless punishment, and misery as the postmortem fate of the wicked. For them, there will be no resurrection and no reward.

I hope this presentation of Schaper’s analysis of eschatologically significant LXX renderings in Psalms has been both fair to him and clear to readers.
It is possible to make a similar presentation of his discussion of passages where an enhanced sense of messianism has reputedly been introduced by the translator of LXX Psalms. However, it seems as if it would be more productive at this point to look at some of the reviews that Schaper’s book garnered. In this instance, we are especially interested in reviewers’ judgments as to the soundness (or lack thereof) in Schaper’s methodology, for it is appropriate, as I see it, to be doubtful that unsound methodology will produce sound results.

Melvin K. H. Peters is critical of Schaper’s lack of concern with “the history of the transmission of the Greek text on the one hand . . . [and] of the immediate context of a passage in question on the other. . . . Rather, he is more interested in tracing connections (echoes) in other parts of the Greek Bible, the Talmud, the Apocrypha, or Pseudepigrapha. For those enamored by that sort of midrash-like ‘eclecticism,’ this monograph will prove quite engaging; for those accustomed to more thoroughgoing, context-sensitive interpretive techniques, it will be disappointing.” His summary judgment, to which I am sympathetic if not entirely in agreement with, is as follows: “Some may be convinced that a collection of weak examples makes a strong case, or that similarity indicates dependence, but such views are not everywhere held and certainly not in this quarter.”

In an article centering on LXX 49:15 (see above for Schaper’s interpretation), but ranging far beyond this particular passage, Staffan Olofsson makes numerous observations about Schaper’s methodology, not many of them positive in tone. While acknowledging that an LXX “translator [was] influenced by the interpretation prevalent in his lifetime and by his cultural and religious environment,” Olofsson rejects the idea that this entitles a modern scholar “to suggest from differences between the meaning of the MT and the Greek translation and the use of certain Greek terms in Jewish interpretations of the Hebrew Bible that the translator is engaged in theological exegesis.” He quotes with approval Albert Pietersma’s observation, in a review of Schaper, that it is “not acceptable methodologically, that one (or several) instances be given special treatment and be elevated to a higher level of interpretation . . . in distinction from the more mundane text-criticism.”

In outlining his own approach, Olofsson forthrightly states: “My methodological proposals do not presuppose that the theological convictions of the Septuagint translator . . . have not affected his translation in any way. They only suggest that in order to make that proposition probable one has first to take a look at more obvious possibilities of interpretation, since theological exegesis is not the primary aim of [the] translator [of LXX Psalms].”
succinctly, “the burden of proof is thus on the scholar who suggests that an interpretation of the [Greek] translator of the Hebrew text is at variance with the translation of the same or a similar Hebrew text in a modern translation is based on the theological Tendenz of the [Greek] translator.” The upshot of this criticism is, if I may put it this way, that Schaper has put the cart before the horse, the presupposition before the evidence, the conclusion before the hard work of textual criticism. Overall, if not at each particular point, I am in agreement with this assessment.

In one of his numerous articles on the LXX, Pietersma invites us to consider this issue from a larger perspective, even as we remain focused on the Greek Psalter. Here Pietersma constructs “a continuum for the field of Septuagint hermeneutics with minimalism at the one extreme and maximalism at the other.” At the farthest reaches of the realm of the “minimalist,” “the translator [is seen and understands himself or herself] as a mere medium (a conduit) of the source text. Such a translator, prototypically, does not add to nor subtract from the text being transmitted, nor are alterations made to it.” A “maximalist” understanding, with which Pietersma identifies Schaper, effectively elevates the Greek translator “to the status of an author, whose work becomes a substitute or replacement for the source text.” And, Pietersma adds, “Schaper is evidently not speaking of exegetical potential inadvertently created by the Greek translator, but about actual exegesis, consciously breathed into his text in the process of translating his source.”

This distinction, between actual and potential, is of utmost importance, as Pietersma effectively displays later in this same article through his analysis of several examples, also from LXX Psalms, on the part of Martin Rösel. After carefully examining these examples, he concludes: “All of [this] is not to say that the phrase in question cannot possibly be read in the way that Rösel seeks to read it. That the church Fathers often read [the Greek terms under investigation] as having to do with eschatological revelation is certainly true. . . . What I would suggest, however, is that here we are no longer in the domain of the original Septuagint, but at a certain stage in its reception history.” I yield to none in my almost unquenchable interest in the reception history of the Bible; however, I hope that I keep that interest separate from a focused concern on the meaning that a given word or passage held in its initial context. As I have observed at several points earlier in this article, it is not so clear that Schaper has consciously acknowledged these different stages and maintained the requisite distance between them.
This is not quite, however, the last word on eschatology in the LXX Psalter. In his monograph on the “translational technique” in LXX Psalter 3–41 for Hebrew verbs and participles, John Sailhamer subjects Psalm 37 to an extended study. He determines that “the LXX translator was guided in his choice of equivalents by a social and religious interpretation of the psalm. The interest . . . is eschatological. This interest, the expectation of the coming age, had a significant impact on the choice of tenses in the LXX psalm. . . . In this area there was a measure of freedom to translate according to the understanding of the psalm by the translator, and thus the religious concerns of the translator show through.” Thus, it would be inappropriate to discount a heightened emphasis in eschatology in LXX Psalms simply by raising red flags at possible methodological shortcomings on the part of an individual scholar, in this case Schaper. The Greek Psalter undoubtedly merits further research.

THE BOOK OF JOB

Given the extensive length of the Psalter and its varied subject matter, we are not surprised that it has been the focus of numerous hypotheses, such as those related to eschatology and messianism. Another biblical book to which we might imagine researchers would turn is Job. It is an extraordinarily difficult book in almost all respects: its language, its structure, its probable (or possible) meanings. The Greek version of the book of Job is shorter than the traditional Hebrew or Masoretic text and exhibits a number of renderings that are demonstrably not literal.

In an article in the mid-1950s, Donald Gard discussed what he viewed as major components of the concept of the future life as constructed by the LXX translator of this book. He listed his examples in three categories: “one in which the future life is stated as a fact in G, one in which an afterlife is implied in G, and one in which the Greek translator describes conditions in the future life.”

For Gard, the prime example for category 1 (the future life is stated as a fact) is found in the Greek rendering of Job 14:14 (according to the verse numbering in the Hebrew). In Gard’s translation, the Hebrew reads, “If a man die, will he live (again)?//All the days of my service I wait,//Until my relief should come.” For this, the LXX has (again, in the rendering of Gard): “For if a man dies, he will live,//Having completed the days of his life; //I will abide
until I be born again.” “In other words,” concludes Gard, “the Hebrew text merely raises the question concerning life after death, while G states it as a fact with the further assertion of a new existence for Job.”

In introducing examples from category 2, Gard writes: “It is the Greek translator’s theology of the future life which governs his treatment of passages in the Hebrew in such a way as to imply a future life.” As his first example in this category, he cites Job 4:20b in the MT, where “Eliphaz stresses the ephemeral existence of human kings” with these words (as translated by Gard): “Without anyone’s heeding they perish forever.” By not providing a translation for the Hebrew word for “forever,” “the rendering by the [Greek] translator does not exclude future life”: “Because they were not able to help themselves, they perished” (in Gard’s translation).

Gard begins his discussion of examples in category 3 by asserting: “Since the translator does accept a life after death, it should not be surprising to note that he also indicates conditions in the afterlife.” The Greek rendering of the difficult Hebrew at 6:10, especially in its third line, “suggests a reason for Job’s joy at the prospect of death—he has a claim to vindication in afterlife.” Thus, the LXX reads (in Gard’s translation): “So may my city be a grave, //Upon which, upon whose walls I used to leap, I will //not spare (i.e., refrain from, forbear); //For I have not falsified the holy words of my God.” “The kind of punishment which the Greek translator sees for the wicked in the future life is seen,” for example, in his rendering of MT 40:13: “Hide (them) in the earth outside together; //But fill their faces with dishonor.”

Gard clearly set out his overall conclusions: “For the book of Job, the writer [Gard] concludes that differences between [the MT] and [LXX] in passages relating the afterlife are not due to a completely different Vorlage. The differences are due rather to a tendency on the part of the Greek translator to introduce a theological point of view.” Not surprisingly, Gard’s methodology and conclusions have not stood unchallenged. In his criticism of a different but similarly situated book, Harry M. Orlinsky states forthrightly: the true nature of both the Hebrew and the Greek texts of Job “would be clear to anyone who would allow the Jewish translator and the author of the Hebrew text to speak for themselves where their texts are not obscure.” Orlinsky is surely not alone in judging that Gard is among those who have carried on a one-sided dialogue rather than an interactive discussion with the texts of Job. Nonetheless, we cannot exclude the possibility or even the probability that an enhanced interest in the afterlife does show up, if only very rarely, in LXX Job.
THE BOOK OF ISAIAH

The next examples are taken from the book of Isaiah. As is well known, it is this book that provided New Testament authors with their richest source of “scriptural” quotations and citations. Many factors led to this frequent use on their part, among them a number of passages that they read as predictive of the coming of Jesus and of the life, including the afterlife, that this momentous event (or, better, series of events) brought forth. However, as we saw earlier, especially in connection with the Psalter, we must try, even if we cannot always succeed, to distinguish the initial meaning of a Greek text from the way(s) it was later received.

Rodrigo de Sousa published an important monograph on eschatology and messianism in the Greek Isaiah chapters 1–12. The first passage that he subjects to extended analysis is LXX Isaiah 2:2–4. This well-known passage, which in the Hebrew begins with “in the days to come” and concludes with the nations “never again know war,” is obviously set in an eschatological context. Does the LXX rendering add to, subtract from, or simply maintain the contours of this context? The same question arises with reference to Isaiah 4:2–6, which in the Hebrew commences with a significant phrase, “in that day.”

De Sousa concludes:

A measure of contextual awareness would inform translational decisions in these sections. . . . It was noted that several of the eschatological ideas identifiable in the rendering are in common with other LXX texts, in both Isaiah and the larger LXX corpus. . . . It was also observed that . . . linguistic and co-textual considerations often impeded the identification of a particular “eschatological” rendering of a passage. . . . In this regard, I point to the fact that all the echoes of eschatological traditions supposedly identifiable can find some explanation in the translator’s rendering of the Vorlage.

In other words, the translator of Greek Isaiah was not engaged in the rewriting of some admittedly difficult Hebrew phrases, but instead sought to understand the text as best he could and to convey this understanding to his audience. Such nuanced conclusions lack the pyrotechnics of some others’ pronouncements, but at the same time they inspire more confidence on the part of those seeking to determine the stance of a given LXX translator.

Let us conclude this section by looking at LXX 7:14–16, a passage that often forms a centerpiece in discussions of eschatology and messianism.
In de Sousa’s rendering of the Greek, the LXX reads: “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign://See, the virgin will be pregnant and bear a son,// and you will call his name Immanuel.///He will eat butter and honey,/// Before his either knowing or preferring evil// he will choose the good. For before the boy knows good or evil,//he refuses evil in order to choose the good;//and the land will be deserted//that you fear//because of its two kings.”

In spite of its later use, de Sousa maintains “that the rendering of LXX Isa 7:14–16 does not give sufficiently strong evidence of a conscious, systematic messianic reading of the passage. . . . The choice of parthenon does not seem to have any special significance. . . . The important points to note are that the translator of LXX Isa 7:16 understood the promised child of Isa 7 as having a proper name . . . and that he sought to safeguard his extraordinary moral character. In so doing, he inserted elements that belonged to wider streams of Jewish thought.” In reaching these conclusions, de Sousa is in basic agreement with Johan Lust, who writes: “Our reading . . . does not deny that the LXX facilitates a Christological-Messianic interpretation, especially with respect to its choice of words, in particular the use of the term parthenon ‘virgin’ and the future tense of the verbal expression ‘she shall become pregnant.’ On the other hand, it would seem that such a messianic accentuation was not intended by the translator.”

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

It would be possible to draw further examples from passages here or there in other books of the Greek Bible. However, at this point such an approach, which would necessarily ignore larger contextual issues within the book or books selected, does not exemplify the careful methodology that was presented at the beginning of this paper and promoted in the following sections.

For some readers, the results of my analysis will be disappointing and largely negative. We cannot, for example, make any general statement about the Septuagint’s stance toward major eschatological issues. Or, put another way, we simply cannot assert that the LXX translators consciously and deliberately changed their Hebrew Vorlage to reflect a heightened interest in the afterlife, even if that heightened interest was a growing influence within their Jewish community.

These “negative” judgments result from the make-up of the Septuagint as we now have it; namely, it is a heterogeneous collection of texts from different centuries, different cultural and religious milieus, different translators making use of diverse techniques to present the Hebrew to their Greek-speaking
audience. While at the lexical level, there were some efforts to standardize the Greek representation of key Hebrew terms across the Septuagint, we can detect no such efforts in the realm of theology or ideology.

In the face of claims to the contrary, that is, claims that certain books of the LXX Bible do indeed reflect efforts by their translators to introduce eschatological concepts that go beyond the Hebrew Vorlage, only careful analysis, often word-by-word analysis, can determine the validity (or lack of validity) of such viewpoints. Most important with respect to methodology, the hard work of textual criticism must precede any claim of theological exegesis on the part of any translator of the Septuagint. It is, then, the responsibility of those who claim to detect such theological exegesis to prove their point. Setting the bar this high, which is an impediment to facile reasoning, is essential if we indeed seek to determine, to the best of our ability, what the translators themselves intended. And, as noted above, this is decidedly not the same thing as how these texts were interpreted later in very different religious and cultural contexts.

Beyond these considerations, we should remember this important observation: “In fact, it is not clear that the LXX translators would have viewed their task as compatible with giving expression to their (own) views of the afterlife. Other types of works, including (speculatively) commentaries and midrashim on the LXX, would have provided more likely vehicles for the presentation and reflection of their authors’ views on eschatology.”39 We don’t have ancient commentaries on the LXX composed by the translators themselves. But we do have many documents from the Jewish communities of the last centuries B.C.E. and first centuries C.E. It is to these that scholars turn to determine what Jews of this period were thinking about the afterlife and the postmortem vindication of the righteous and punishment of the evil. And that is as it should be.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT


NOTES

1. See also, for example, the preliminary remarks in Alison Salvesen, “Messianism in Ancient Bible Translations in Greek and Latin,” in Redemption and Resistance: Festschrift
2. For details on the topics mentioned in this and the following paragraphs, see Leonard Greenspoon, “The Septuagint,” in *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009), 5.170–77.


6. Ibid., 50.

7. Ibid., 50–52.

8. Ibid., 52–53.

9. Ibid., 53–57.

10. Ibid., 57–62.


12. Ibid., 65–68.

13. Ibid., 68–72.


16. Ibid., 144.

17. Ibid., 144–45.

18. Ibid., 145.


20. Ibid., 36.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 41–42.

24. Ibid., 149–50, 173.
26. Ibid., 137–38, followed by other examples from category 1.
27. Ibid., 139.
28. Ibid., 139–40.
29. Ibid., 140.
30. Ibid., 141–42.
31. Ibid., 142–43.
32. Ibid., 143.
35. Ibid., 68.
36. Ibid., 70–71.
37. Ibid., 101–2.