J. Ross Wagner

Reading the Sealed Book: Old Greek Isaiah and the Problem of Septuagint Hermeneutics


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Wagner’s monograph has a creative and descriptive title, stemming from OG Isa 29:11. It represents a rather novel development in LXX studies: Septuagint hermeneutics. The book focuses on one translated unit, LXX Isaiah, and more specifically on one chapter, OG Isa 1. It moreover deals with methodological issues and consists of five chapters and an exhaustive bibliography.

In the first chapter, “A Book with Seven Seals: The Problem of Septuagint Hermeneutics,” Wagner addresses methodological issues, starting with the outline of the controversy. Wagner formulates three problem areas: the textual-linguistic character of the LXX/OG translations in relation to target-language models; the nature of the relationship between the LXX/OG translations and their Vorlagen; and the focus of the modern reader’s attention.

It is Wagner’s intention to formulate a theory of translation in order to understand OG Isaiah. In the process he makes use of insights derived from descriptive translation studies (DTS) as formulated by Toury. In this regard he draws extensively on the work by Boyd-Taylor. From this position naturally follows an adherence to the “interlinear” paradigm as formulated by Albert Pietersma. Finally, as part of a viable framework for interpretation, in chapter 2 he incorporates relevant research by Umberto Eco.
Wagner clearly has a multifaceted methodology that is appropriate for analysis of the subject matter. That he is serious about methodological issues is evident from the fact that he opted to classify a number of ancient translations. This is done “[t]o delineate the interrelatedness of function, process and product with respect to a particular translation” (11). He ventures on a journey to search for what he calls “the ‘Typical’ Septuagint Translation” (12). He commences with Aquila. He also follows Boyd-Taylor by identifying interlinear translations as “typical” of the Septuagint (17). A representative number of texts are briefly studied in order to classify OG Isaiah. These include OG Reigns and OG Job. Finally, OG Isaiah is categorized in a discussion of and engagement with past research. The “conflicting models” he refers to are taken from the work of Seeligmann, van der Kooij, and the recent monograph by Troxel. Wagner seems to be sceptical of the Erfüllunginterpretationen put forward by van der Kooij and others.

Chapter 2, “Opening the Sealed Book: Interpreting a Translated Text,” is aimed at further developing applicable methodological principles, which is additional proof of Wagner’s view of the importance of theoretical reflection. In the process he focuses on the reception of the translated text. DTS is helpful in this regard, since it “recognizes that social conventions (‘norms’) concerning the nature and purpose of translation guide not only the translator’s work, but also the reception within the larger target culture of the text she has produced” (37). This is in accordance with Umberto Eco’s work, who argues that language cannot be analyzed apart from its larger sociocultural context.

In formulating the translation technique of the translator, Wagner developed five “rules of thumb”: (1) it is as simple as the evidence warrants; (2) it can plausibly be traced to the translator’s Vorlage; (3) it coheres with strategies the translator employs elsewhere; (4) it finds parallels in other translations within the Septuagint corpus or in other ancient translations of Isaiah; and (5) it remains consistent with norms of target-language acceptability evidenced elsewhere in the translation. Armed with a rather comprehensive methodological orientation, Wagner embarks in the next chapter on the interpretation of OG Isa 1.

What follows in chapter 3 (“‘Give Heed to God’s Law’: Translation and Interpretation in OG Isaiah 1:1–20”), as well as in the next one, is a meticulous analysis of OG Isa 1. Wagner takes the sense divisions of the different manuscripts into account and provides an outline of the chapter. He lays bare the strategic deployment of inferential particles by the translator, as well as his functional application of poetical devices such as parallelism, repetition, chiasmus, and inclusion. It is evident that the translator was schooled in the application of literary devices, with an excellent knowledge of Greek and Hebrew (Aramaic?).
In a verse-by-verse close reading of the Greek text, Wagner establishes the translator’s intention. In Wagner’s words: “we will find that G consistently translates Isaiah’s vision in ways that amplify the theme of divine agency in the judgement and redemption of Israel” (67). Wagner picks up smaller significant differences, such as the employment of the preposition κατά in the phrase “against Judea and against Jerusalem” in 1:1, over against περί “concerning” for the same phrase in 2:1 (69). These deliberate adjustments are interpreted plausibly by Wagner.

According to Wagner, the translator basically sticks to the word order of the Hebrew (73). However, his choice of lexical equivalences is significant. Another characteristic of this chapter is the application of inter- and intratextual readings. Wagner convincingly demonstrates the intertextual influence of Isa 63–64 on this chapter, especially on 1:2. As to be expected, the translator also takes into account the Pentateuch. Wagner finds traces of the Song of Moses and of texts that were influenced by Deuteronomistic theology in the Hebrew (82).

Wagner argues with a nuanced understanding of the issues. He engages carefully with the other ancient versions. With regard to 1:6, the Peshitta and Vulgate are added to the argument (90; see also the argumentation on 206). Wagner also makes incidental remarks on a number of issues. In his discussion of verse 10 (102) he refers to the book of Isaiah as being translated “perhaps a century after the Greek Pentateuch.” In the discussion of verses 12–13, he refers to the translation technique as follows: “G’s translation resists easy categorization as either ‘literal’ or ‘free’” (113).

The author’s argumentation on the ἡμέραν μεγάλην in verse 13d is another example of his careful approach (113f). Whereas Seeligmann readily accepts that it refers to Yom Kippur, Wagner is more cautious. He refers to the publication by Ben Ezra on 1 En. 10:6 and to 1 En. 10, as well as to 4Q265, and he suggests tacitly that in Egyptian Judaism OG Isa 1:13 could have been understood as a reference to Yom Kippur (121). In the final analysis, he accepts the suggestion on the basis of Isa 58:3.

Chapter 4, “The Purification of Zion: Translation and Interpretation in OG Isaiah 1:21–31,” contains the same nuanced interpretations as the previous one. Wagner shows how the translator tacitly modifies the Hebrew in order to target the leadership of Jerusalem. Again the author engages with existing research (van der Louw 153) in the formulation of his own point of view. He also demonstrates how the translator applied sound balance, alliteration, and parallelism to strengthen his message (162, 168–69).

His appendices are lucid and helpful. The schema of persons and verbs on page 197 helps to determine the distinctive profile of the translator. The excursus concerning verbs in
OG Isa 1–5 (205–6) is also functional. The disappearance of the *waw consecutive* from Mishnaic Hebrew (207) is relevant to his discussion. Finally, Wagner demonstrates how the translator employs intertextuality “in order to highlight the programmatic role Isaiah’s opening vision plays in the book as a whole” (226). The same applies to verses 1–7 of chapter 1 in LXX Proverbs.

In chapter 5, “Characterizing Old Greek Isaiah 1,” Wagner characterizes OG Isaiah in terms of: (1) its constitutive character in terms of linguistic acceptability: according to Wagner, G generally produces grammatically well-formed phrases and clauses; (2) its textual acceptability: the translator produces a cohesive and coherent text; (3) its literary acceptability: orality and the rhetorical character are accounted for, as well as poetic devices and intertextuality; and (4) its prospective function: the prospective location for OG Isaiah, according to Wagner, is the Hellenistic synagogue of the second century BCE in Alexandria.

Wagner’s final word is that Isaiah has a Greek accent (235). Throughout the book he demonstrates “that the Greek translator interprets Isaiah for his audience, by elucidating its language, modulating its discourse and contextualizing its message.” The translator explicates without using larger additions, as is done in LXX Proverbs. It seems to be in line with Targum Onqelos, over against the Palestinian Targumim. The examples provided by Wagner are convincing. The only problem is that the conclusions have too narrow a basis, one chapter. His reservations regarding the *Erfüllunginterpretationen* must thus be put on hold for the time being, until further research has been conducted on this issue.

Wagner’s book presents novel approaches to the issue of the hermeneutics of ancient texts. The methodological principles put forward by the author are complicated and multifaceted. One thing is sure: this book will force Septuagint scholars to rethink their methodological positions. Finally, it must be concluded that the author has successfully opened one of the seals of Isaiah chapter 1!