



**Veltri, Giuseppe**

***Libraries, Translations, and 'Canonic' Texts: The Septuagint, Aquila and Ben Sira in the Jewish and Christian Traditions***

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Pancratius C. Beentjes  
Faculty of Catholic Theology  
Tilburg University, Netherlands

The famous quotation from the book of Qoheleth (12:11–12) both opens and concludes this intriguing monograph by Giuseppe Veltri, who is Professor of Jewish Studies at Halle (Germany) and Director of the Zunz Centre for the Study of European Jewry at Wittenberg (Germany). The author himself seems not to be impressed by this biblical text, since in the past years he has published an impressive number of articles and books relating to Jewish hermeneutics and philosophy. For me, a salient point of the book's *inclusio* would be that Veltri offers the text of that biblical quotation in two quite *different* wordings: “Of making many books there is no end” (1); “Beware of making many books” (229). Maybe unwillingly, the author brings us right into the heart of the matter he likes to discuss.

In the introduction, the author states that, although very interesting results have been achieved in the area of biblical and rabbinic exegesis, theology, and anthropology, the main question of canonization of the Bible and rabbinic literature remains unanswered. He is convinced that, according to both Christian and Jewish sources, canonization is not a product of literary or historical coincidence, for example, the discoveries at Qumran, but a historical process of conscious and effective influence on contemporary theology and the history of ideas.

The main assumption of the present study is that we cannot research the development of the ancient authoritative intervention in the biblical text without taking into consideration those texts and traditions that were once canonical and then lost their “canonicity.” The ascent and decline of books has something to do with the moving forces of community and their leaders and little with polemical attitudes to other “confessions” and “sectarian” teaching.

To elucidate this process, Veltri has chosen the Greek translation of the Torah (the so-called Septuagint), the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible by Aquila, and the book of Ben Sira. It was the change in language that played a key role, maybe even the decisive role, in the process of canonization and decanonization, as the loss of the Greek language in the western church generated the first serious crisis of canonical importance.

In chapter 1, entitled “Libraries and Canon: Ascent and Decline of the Greek Torah,” much attention is devoted to the so-called *Letter of Aristeas*, which, according to Veltri, deals not so much with the translation of the Septuagint but to a high degree emphasizes the importance of the Greek Torah for the Hellenistic Jews now kept in the renowned library of Alexandria as a center eager to obtain a precise and critically excellent Greek manuscript.

The Septuagint lost its authority not only because of the historical disappearance of the Jewish community in Alexandria and the loss of the Greek language in Judaism, but also since rabbinic academies were convinced that *translation* is the mediation of teaching, which cannot be written down and cannot be everlasting.

Much attention is paid to the fact that in early Christian documents up to the fifth century, the Septuagint served as a perfect vehicle to supply Christian intellectuals with a vocabulary and theological doctrines derived largely from the Greek-speaking Diaspora and its creations. At the same time, the Septuagint was a strong link to bind Christianity to Judaism, without dependence on the Hebrew tradition. It was Jerome who supplied Christianity with a new *Veritas Hebraica*, since in the Latin Church Greek was no longer considered the universal language.

Chapter 2 (“Deconstructing History and Traditions: The Written Torah for Ptolemy”) is devoted to an intriguing phenomenon. Rabbinic literature offers two groups of traditions concerned with the Greek Torah: quotations of verses or list of verses, “changed” or “written” for King Ptolemy (Hebrew “Talmai”); and an account about the origins of this writing, mostly followed by a list of “changed” verses. Veltri discusses quite a few of those texts: Gen 1:1; 1:26–27 and 5:1–2; 2:2; 11:7; 18:12; 49:6; Exod 4:20; 12:40; Num 16:15; Deut 4:19 and 17:3. However, only two passages out of the extensive list prove a direct or

indirect knowledge of Septuagint traditions: Exod 24:9–10; Lev 11:6. The rabbis' proper concern appears to be the interpretation of the already established text of the Torah, if this text falls into the hands of people not aware of the Jewish hermeneutical method in approaching Scripture. The *Greek* version of the Torah is therefore interpreted as a particular text for a particular person, King Ptolemy, who needed an abridged or altered version in which the difficulties or the mysteries of a verse are unmistakably explained by a clear change in the corresponding Hebrew verse. At least until Origen's Hexapla, Jewish-Hellenistic and Christian literature was firmly convinced that the Greek Torah was nothing but a sister of the Hebrew text, because the translation was done by Jewish sages under the guidance of divine intelligence. In the rabbinic mind, however, the Septuagint is a unique example of a technique that the rabbis use for alternative but authoritative explanations of the biblical text. The rabbinic expression "the Torah for King Talmi/Ptolemy" is used as a midrashic expedient to introduce another exegetical opinion on the text of the Torah. There is little or no trace of the historical Septuagint.

Chapter 3 ("Deconstructing Translations: The Canonical Substitution Aquila/Onkelos") deals with the attitude of rabbinic academies and Christian writers toward translation. Palestinian rabbinic Judaism transmits some stories about Aquila describing him as a skilled *meturgeman* who was able to interpret Hebrew texts and words into the beautiful Greek language. With the help of an impressive number of passages, Veltri demonstrates how Babylonian rabbinic teachers ascribe to the Aramaic translation of Onkelos almost everything that Palestinian sources had said about Aquila; both originate from Sinai, as oral Torah. According to Veltri, there is no doubt that Onkelos is nothing but a canonical substitute of Aquila in Babylonian Judaism. The predominance of the Aramaic language determined a change in canon or in canonical elements.

The final chapter deals with "[De]canonization in the Making: The Wisdom of Jesus Ben Sira." In rabbinic literature, the book of Ben Sira was initially quoted as "biblical" text ("as it has been written"), then as recommended reading (but not very important), and was finally considered an "external" book (to be enumerated among the *sefarim hisonim*). Veltri brings to the fore that there must have been, in fact, two major reasons why the book of Ben Sira at the end was not accepted as a canonical and authoritative document. The first argument is that Jesus Ben Sira did not publish his work under a pseudonym; moreover, he presents his book as a written work with an explicit claim to transmit wisdom, yet without, however, transmitting it according to the authority of those who first said it. His work and activity were thus not viewed as exemplary or valid for generations, since he was as authoritative as the rabbis.

The second reason not to include the book of Ben Sira in the corpus of Hebrew canonical texts has to do with the Greek prologue of Ben Sira's grandson (not his "nephew" [152]).

Just as was the case with respect of the Greek Torah, the grandson's prologue emphasizes that a translation can be only *one way* of transmitting tradition; however, it cannot substitute for the original. Veltri advances even the possibility that the grandson only wrote the prologue and should not be considered the translator of Ben Sira's text into Greek. I think Ben Wright's view on this question is more plausible ("Access to the Source: Cicero, Ben Sira, the Septuagint and their Audience," *JSJ* 34 [2003]: 1–27, esp. 11–20).

An extensive bibliography (231–60), and three indices (references; ancient and medieval names; subjects) conclude this monograph, which offers a good overview of and insight into what might have been a, or even the, major argumentation not to lend canonical status to the Greek Torah and Aquila's translation, as well as to Ben Sira's wisdom book. First and foremost, it was the moving forces of the community and their leaders within Judaism that are responsible for such decisions, not the polemical attitudes to Christianity and sects. In fact, Veltri's book offers an intriguing history of deconstruction and decanonization of biblical translations and will get the discussion going.

Finally, it is a pity that the book has a lot of imperfections and errors, which leaves a somewhat careless impression. In the contents (viii), the index of references to the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha is missing, but does really exist (265). Names have been misspelled more than once (e.g., "Epifanis of Salami"; "Solomon"—either referring to the Jerusalem king, to his book of Wisdom, or to the talmudic scholar Schechter—is consequently spelled "Salomon"). Tal Ilan's book *Integrating Women into Second Temple History* is referred to as "Interpreting Women" (204, 248)!