

# Towards understanding the Septuagint

**Author:**Johann Cook<sup>1</sup> **Affiliation:**

<sup>1</sup>Department of Ancient Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

**Corresponding author:**

Johann Cook,  
cook@sun.ac.za

**How to cite this article:**

Cook, J., 2020, 'Towards understanding the Septuagint', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 76(4), a6280. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i4.6280>

**Copyright:**

© 2020. The Authors.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

## Introduction

There are signs in Septuagint research that a natural switch is taking place from focusing on the text of the LXX to endeavours to understand the reconstructed or retroverted text (Cook 2018). Put differently, there is a move away from text-critical research to hermeneutics. Primary evidence in this regard is, firstly, the fact that objectively more LXX topics are being researched than before. The proliferation of Septuagintal series includes Septuagint and Cognate Studies under the editorship of Wolfgang Kraus and the publication by Martin Rösel (2018), *Tradition and Innovation: English and German Studies on the Septuagint*, SCS 70 (Atlanta, SBL). One could say that Septuagint studies have grown into an independent field of research. Secondly, more research projects concentrating on hermeneutical interpretations are being registered. One example would be the formulation of a theology of the Septuagint. Thirdly, there has been increasing consideration of the methodology for Septuagintal research. Fourthly, a number of scholars have made significant contributions through their primary research. Emanuel Tov, JL Magnes professor emeritus at the Hebrew University, is an appropriate example.

## A proliferation of Septuagint studies

Research into the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible has been at the centre of Old and New Testament research. However, of late, there has been a proliferation of LXX research in particular. There are several reasons for this positive development. The publication programme of the LXX is advancing steadily. The impact of the Dead Sea Scrolls on the Septuagint and vice versa is also being investigated at various levels.<sup>1</sup> Novel theories as to the origin of the LXX have been formulated, and a number of research projects and international programmes have appeared over the past decade.<sup>2</sup> Basic-to-appropriate interpretation is a suitable methodology. In a recent article, I discussed a number of newly published books on the LXX (Cook 2018). Three of these on the book of Aristeas have also attracted the attention of a number of scholars recently. Other publications include Sylvie Honigman's groundbreaking 2003 monograph entitled *The Septuagint and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria: A Study in the Narrative of the Letter of Aristeas*. In 2015, Benjamin G. Wright III (2015) utilised this material (B. Ar.) in a monograph of over 500 pages. Ekaterina Matusova's book appeared in the same year (Matusova 2015). These books have different aims and intentions. Whilst Honigman focuses to a large extent on Septuagintal origins (Honigman 2003), Wright's commentary does not focus on historical questions concerning Septuagintal origins or the nature of the Alexandrian Jewish community (Wright 2015:6). Rather, Wright addresses what he sees as the most critical issues in Aristeas, to argue for particular ways of reading this book, to illuminate as much as possible and to direct readers to more specialised studies that can take them further into the topic (p. 5). He does deal exclusively with Septuagint origins in a separate publication (Wright 2015:304–326). Matusova, firstly, addresses structural issues such as the composition of the narrative; secondly, the meaning of grammatical terminology in the story of the translation; thirdly, the historical implications of the narrative and, fourthly, religious policies of the Ptolemaic era.

## Outcomes publications

It is possible to compare these three projects in terms of outcomes publications. Scholars involved in all three projects have had success in publishing relevant studies recently. The first is a major publication in the series *Septuaginta Deutsch*.

1.Cf., for instance, the symposium on the Dead Sea Scrolls that took place at the University of Pretoria, 24–25 August 2014. The proceedings have been published in *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72/4. See Cook (2016).

2.One need only glance at the recent *BIOSCS* (34–36) and *JSCS* volumes.

**Note:** Special Collection entitled Septuagint SA, sub-edited by Johann Cook (SUN).

**Read online:**

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

Firstly, it deals with the theology of the Septuagint. Following are the contents of the volume (Verlag 2020):

1. Theology or Not? That's the Question: Is There Such a Thing as a Theology of the Septuagint? – *Ausloos and Bénédicte Lemmelijn*
2. Der einiger Gott und sein Verständnis – *Emanuel Tov*
3. Pentateuch – *Emanuel Tov*
4. Les Prophètes – *Anne-François Leseau*
5. Die Weisheitschriften – *Markus Witte*
6. Historical Books – *Andrés Piquer Otero*
7. Psalmen und Lieder – *Ralph Brucker*
8. Das Gesetz Gottes
  - Pentateuch – *Innocence Himbaza*
  - Prophets
  - Introduction
  - Isaiah
  - Jeremiah
  - Hezekiel
  - Minor Prophets
  - Weisheit – *Frank Uberschaer*
  - Geschichtswerke – *Martin Meiser*
  - Psalter – *Alison Salvesen*. (n.p.)

From the contents it is clear that the editors tried to deal with the issue of a theology of the LXX as extensively as possible.

The final example entails another outcome on the issue of understanding the LXX.

Secondly, the title is expressive: *Toward a Theology of the Septuagint – Stellenbosch Congress on the Septuagint*, 2018. Johann Cook and Martin Rösel obtained the necessary funding to invite 25 scholars to discuss the issue of a theology of the LXX. Nineteen papers were published in the proceedings. The contents make evident the aims of the congress.

The subject matter is divided into four parts:

- Part 1: Introduction and Questions of Methodology*
- Part 2: Plato and the Septuagint. Methodological Considerations and Models of Interpretation*
- Part 3: Theological Aspects of the Greek Bible 1: Translations*
- Part 4: Theological Aspects of the Greek Bible 2: Greek Literature*

Martin Rösel opened the congress with a paper entitled 'Projektvorstellung: Theologie der Septuaginta – Metodische Grundlegung und Fallstudien'. He was followed by Emanuel Tov on 'The Interaction between Theological and Text-Critical Approaches'. These papers set the course for the conference. Kyle Young and Gideon Kotzé then each presented a paper. The second part of the congress presented only one paper, the controversial contribution by Dafni, who finds evidence of contact between Plato's Politeia and the Theology of the LXX.

In Part 3, individual books are dealt with by the following: Hans Ausloos, Deuteronomy; Dirk Buchner, Leviticus; Louis Jonker, Chronicles; Jessie Rogers, Job, and Johann

Cook, Proverbs. In Part 4, two extra-biblical Greek literary texts were discussed: Johan Thom, the Wisdom of Solomon, and Philip Bosman, the LXX, Philo and Josephus; Pierre Jordaan and Peter Nagel took as their subject the Maccabean books. Wolfgang Kraus and Gert Steyn spoke on the New Testament. One scholar, Ulrich Volp, chose a topic on church history.

## Individual interpretations

Very few scholars, if any, have a research track record equal to that of Professor Emanuel Tov. To be sure, he became the main role player in various fields. When he took over as convenor of the research programme on the Dead Sea Scrolls, the publication schedule took on a new life. Few would disagree that he is the foremost text critic in the world. His often revised editions of *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* have become household tools in many institutions. However, it is his achievements as Septuagintologist that are significant in the current context. His monograph *The Text-Critical Use of the Septuagint in Biblical Research* soon became the basis for sound text-critical methodology. However, in my view his most valuable contribution has been his collections of *Kleine Schriften*. To date, he has collected and in some instances reworked his research. There are four volumes:

1. *The Greek and Hebrew Bible: Collected Essays on the Septuagint* (VTSup 72; Leiden: Brill, 1999)
2. *Hebrew Bible, Greek Bible, and Collected Essays on the Septuagint* (TSAJ 121; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008)
3. *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible, Qumran, Septuagint: Collected Writings, Volume 3* (VTSup 167; Leiden: Brill, 2015)
4. *Textual Developments, Collected Essays, Volume 4* (VTSup 181; Leiden: Brill, 2019).

## The Papers – LXXSA 2020 HTS

J. Cook, The Septuagint as a holy text – The first 'bible' of the early church. US

R. Hobyane, An analysis of the performative nature and power of forensic dialogue in *Susanna*: A speech act contribution. NWU

D.T. Mangum, Euphemism in Biblical Hebrew and the euphemistic 'bless' in the Septuagint of Job'. UFS

P. Nagel, The New Testament κύριος problem and how the Old Testament speeches can help solve it. US

C. Miller-Naudé and J. Naudé, Textual interrelationships involving the Septuagint translations of the precious stones in the breastpiece of the high priest. UFS

J. Naudé and C. Miller-Naudé, The Septuagint translation as the key to the etymology and identification of precious stones in the Bible. UFS

H. Van Rooy, The use of the Septuagint in Afrikaans Bible translations. NWU

L. Lincoln, An analysis of the use of paradigmatic research: The model of a perfect world according to Targum Qohelet. US

A. Evans, 'Between righteousness and alms' in *Tobit*: What was the author's real intention? UFS

C. De Wet, *The Book of Tobit in early Christianity: Greek and Latin interpretations from the 2nd to the 5th century CE*. UNISA

E. Dafni, *Medea of Euripides and the Old Testament: Cultural critical remarks with special reference to the background of the Septuagint*. UP

N. Allen and P. Jordaan, *Reading LXXJudith 13:1–9 as performance*. NWU

It immediately becomes clear that this special edition has adopted a broad view on the Septuagint. Of the 14 papers, only 6 deal with Septuagintal aspects proper. Of the Deuterocanonical books, Susanna, Tobit and Judith are discussed, and there is a paper on the importance of the LXX in the social history of medicine. One paper concerns the use of the Septuagint in Afrikaans Bible translation. One paper has the New Testament as subject matter. There is also a paper on the Targum of Qohelet. It would, therefore, probably be wise to follow the cue from the primary LXX organisation and refer to Cognate Studies, IOSCS International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies. Be that as it may, LXXSA is not an exclusively Septuagintal organisation.

## Conclusion

It would seem that the study of the Septuagint in South Africa is alive and well. Although LXXSA is not a formally constituted organisation, it is productive. The current special edition is the second one that has appeared in a short period of time. Further evidence is that the presidential speech that I delivered at the opening of the 22nd meeting of the IOSOT held in Stellenbosch on 04 September 2016 concerned the LXX 'Interpreting the Septuagint' (Cook 2017). The Stellenbosch Septuagint Conference took place from 17 to 19 August 2018, and the proceedings appeared in June 2020 as Volume 74 of SCS. Finally, the meeting of LXXSA 2020 will be held despite the coronavirus, which led to the cancellation of two planned meetings that were to be held along with the joint meeting of SA Theological Associations. The first meeting was supposed to have taken place from 30 June to 04 July 2020 at UWC. The second opportunity was planned

for 05–06 September 2020 at the Department of Ancient Studies, University of Stellenbosch. This time slot will now be used to introduce for the first time in South Africa, in the field of ancient studies and theology, an online conference that will be held on these two days. Peter Nagel will guide us in the application of an open-source facility.

## Acknowledgements

The author thankfully acknowledges the financial and other support of the SA National Research Foundation. The views expressed are solely those of the author unless otherwise indicated.

The author gratefully acknowledges the extensive grant for 'Interpreting the Septuagint' that was awarded by the SA National Research Foundation and applied towards IOSOT2016. See Maier et al. (eds.) 2017.

## Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this editorial.

## References

- Ausloos, H. & Lemmelijn, B. (eds.), 2020, *Handbook of the Septuagint*, vol. 5, Random House, München.
- Cook, J., 2016, 'The text-critical and exegetical value of the Dead Sea Scrolls', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 72(4), a3280. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3280>
- Cook, J., 2017, 'Interpreting the Septuagint', in L. Jonker, G. Kotzé & C. Maier (eds.), *Congress volume Stellenbosch 2016*, pp. 1–22, Brill, Leiden.
- Cook, J., 2018, 'Recent developments in Septuagint research', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 74(3), 5002. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v74i3.5002>
- Honigman, S., 2003, *The Septuagint and Homeric scholarship in Alexandria: A study in the narrative of the letter of Aristeas*, Routledge, London.
- Jonker, L., Kotzé, G. & Maier, C., 2017, *Congress volume Stellenbosch 2016*, Brill, Leiden.
- Matusova, M., 2015, *The meaning of the letter of Aristeas: In light of biblical interpretation, and with grammatical tradition, and with reference to its historical context*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen.
- Rösel, M., 2018, *Tradition and innovation: English and German studies on the Septuagint*, SCS 70, SBL, Atlanta, GA.
- Wright, B.G., 2015, *The letter of Aristeas 'Aristeas to Philocrates', or on the Translation of the Law of the Jews*, Commentaries on Early Jewish Literature, De Gruyter, Berlin.