

Abi T. Ngunga, *Messianism in the Old Greek of Isaiah: An Intertextual Analysis*. FRLANT 245. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013. Pp. 248. € 89.99, cloth.

In this recently published dissertation, Abi T. Ngunga takes up the task of analyzing the Greek version of Isaiah to determine whether and how it embodies the theological tendencies of its translator and his community. Ngunga's focus upon messianism,

or “messianic exegesis,” in the LXX reflects the growing interest in this topic within Septuagint (LXX) studies, as well as its importance to many other aspects of biblical scholarship. Accordingly, this monograph is valuable in that it uniquely undertakes a systematic investigation of messianism within the entire book of LXX-Isaiah, the likes of which had only been a desideratum for any LXX book until this study.

In chapter 1, which also functions as the introduction, the author addresses key issues in the scholarly discussion. Firstly, on a historical level, there is some debate as to whether any substantive messianic theology existed during the period in which the LXX was translated. This discussion is so central to the validity of Ngunga’s work that he devotes an entire chapter to it (chapter 2, see below). Secondly, the concept of “messianism” lacks an accepted scholarly definition, but after a brief survey of viewpoints Ngunga proposes that messianism is “the hope of an individual figure with a substantial mission to launch a new period of redemption” (p. 17). Thirdly, the author reviews prior scholarship concerned with LXX-Isaiah, focusing both upon messianic exegesis and the book as a translated text.

Indeed, this last point is crucial to the task of discerning theological exegesis in the LXX. Since the LXX was translated—by many different individuals at different times and, presumably, in different communities—it is not a uniform document. Rather, each book bears its own distinctive characteristics that must be considered when one claims to identify theological exegesis at the hands of the translator. Differences between the Greek and Hebrew texts that can be explained on linguistic grounds and within the parameters of the translational character of a given book should not be labeled as theologizing. With this in mind, Ngunga states his positions on LXX-Isaiah, namely, that it is the work of a single translator who produced a text in which apparent “free” renderings in fact often attest to “an interpretation lying ‘on a higher level,’” one that includes theological exegesis (p. 27).

Ngunga’s main heuristic device is that of intertextuality. Surveying the history of the term and its various applications both within and outside biblical studies, Ngunga explains how intertextual investigation can shed light upon the hermeneutical process of LXX translators as they dealt with sacred texts with the presupposition of their fundamental unity. Nine texts are selected for their messianic content, and are then examined in light of other passages that share elements such as “titles, functions/activities/roles, themes . . . verbal links, words (lexemes), phrases, clauses or sentences, structure, etc.” (p. 50). Together, these texts establish the overall messianic “tenor” of LXX-Isaiah.

The author also devotes a chapter to messianic expectations in the Diaspora, which (he claims) needs to be reexamined. By tracing the origins of the scholarly assumption that “the Hellenistic-Jewish community in the Diaspora (above all Alexandria) [was] non-messianic,” Ngunga challenges this common position (p. 53). To Ngunga, it is a false dichotomy to separate Palestinian and Alexandrian messianic expectations, as is often done. Rather, scholars should presume differing *kinds* of messianism rather than a total lack thereof in Egypt. Ngunga also addresses Philo’s silence on messianism, noting that absence of evidence does not constitute evidence of absence. Finally, the author also surveys the political, socio-economic, and cultural-religious conditions of opposition that faced Hellenistic Diaspora Jews, which form the right setting for solidification of

messianic hope in any community. This chapter is central to the validity of Ngunga's claims, indeed to any study of theological exegesis in the LXX, and deserves close attention from the scholarly community given Ngunga's call for scholars "to abandon the unhelpful view that points to one Jewish community to the detriment of the other as witnessing to the rise of messianic expectation during the Hellenistic [period]" (p. 73).

Chapter 3 is the longest, as it treats all nine of Ngunga's selected texts: LXX-Isa 7:10-17; 9:1-7 (8:23-9:6); 11:1-10; 16:1-5; 19:16-25; 31:9b-32:8; 42:1-4; 52:13-53:12; and 61:1-3a. Ngunga follows the same procedure for each text selected: (1) examine the context of each passage, (2) analyze the differences between the Greek and Hebrew texts, and (3) assess the messianic content of the Greek by intertextual exploration both in LXX-Isaiah and beyond. This approach changes, however, for LXX-Isa 42:1-4 and 52:13-53:12, whose context is not surveyed since they form a part of the so-called Servant Songs and have thus been treated extensively in other scholars' work.

Ngunga's exegetical approach is thorough, offering findings from previous scholars and frequently modifying their views or departing from them in some way. Although he exercises caution when making claims about messianism in general, staying close to clearer instances of apparently intentional differences in the Greek, he tends to use strong terms for his findings. On many occasions, Ngunga states that his conclusion is "beyond reasonable doubt" (pp. 73, 95, 124, 127, 141, 142, 144, 163, 172, 190, 205, 212), or uses other strong expressions like "undeniable" (p. 97). While taking these statements charitably, one might also hope for greater reserve given that Ngunga's historical-theological assumption, however well defended, is set squarely against the majority opinion. Still, many excellent points are made in each treatment of the texts at hand, and Ngunga's work deserves attention from both LXX and Second Temple scholars alike.

Without attempting to discuss his treatment of every text, some interaction will be offered here particularly on LXX-Isa 7:10-17, which for Ngunga lays the intertextual foundation for messianic expectation throughout the book based upon the royal and upright character attributed to the *παιδίον*. The differences in the Greek translation that lead to this conclusion are (1) the future aspect of the verbs in v. 14, (2) the apparent addition of the phrase *ἀγαθὸν ἢ κακόν* in v. 16, and (3) the "additional" conjunctions *καί* (v. 16) and *ἀλλά* (v. 17). Significantly, many commentators on the Hebrew text see a textual and thematic break at v. 17. For Ngunga, however, the "additional" Greek conjunctions connect vv. 10-17 to vv. 18-25, and so encourage readers to see them as a single textual unit, one that connects Davidic content with a coming restoration after immanent disaster. This apparent textual connection between units in the Greek provides Ngunga "solid ground for viewing a significant messianic reading" in vv. 10-17 (p. 80).

As attractive as this reading is, however, Ngunga's argument seems thin, especially because he offers no further defense than stating that *καί* would "likely" have been read paratactically as "so," and to point out that *ἀλλά* can be emphatic rather than disjunctive (p. 79). In favor of the latter, Ngunga merely says that "the context of the statement made (in v. 17) is likely to favour" the emphatic sense, but he fails to discuss that context (p. 79, emphasis added). Since this interpretation is essential to seeing v. 17 as a link between the two sections, and the basis of his messianic reading, one might hope for a more

comprehensive defense. In any case, it is risky to lean so heavily upon conjunctions, which are notoriously difficult to pin down both text-critically and exegetically.

Another point that seems tenuous is Ngunga's discussion of LXX-Isa 41:1-4. For Ngunga, the text "on the surface" portrays the Servant collectively, yet its amplified "interconnections" in the Greek with other messianic texts bespeak an individual, even Davidic royal figure (p. 175). While one can appreciate Ngunga's effort to read intertextually in the synchronic, reader-oriented sense from the perspective of Hellenistic Judaism (cf. pp. 48-49), one might question whether it is safe to assume that we can discern a translator's *intended* synchronic (i.e., reader-oriented) intertextual impulse, especially if this is at odds with the translated text "as it stands." It may become difficult to distinguish the task of discerning intertextuality *in the text*—or even conjecturing a reception-historical reading as Ngunga does here—from presuming, or even reading it *ourselves*.

These points of critique are not intended to be condemnatory, but rather probing, given the complexities of this type of inquiry. Overall, Ngunga's work is valuable for its many contributions. Aside from his astute challenge of the scholarly consensus upon the historical-theological development of messianism in the Diaspora, Ngunga also has significantly contributed to the application of intertextuality as a method. In so doing, he has opened the door to similarly comprehensive studies in the future. Moreover, LXX and Second Temple scholars alike will benefit from his research and conclusions in terms of Jewish hermeneutical practices as well as the extent of messianic exegesis in the Greek scriptures.

WILLIAM A. ROSS

*Westminster Theological Seminary*