

## THE SEPTUAGINT VERSION

The first translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, made into popular Greek before the Christian era. This article will treat of:

- I. Its Importance;
  - II. Its Origin:
    - A. According to tradition;
    - B. According to the commonly accepted view;
  - III. Its subsequent history, recensions, manuscripts, and editions;
  - IV. Its critical value; Language.
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### I. HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF THE SEPTUAGINT

The importance of the Septuagint Version is shown by the following considerations:

A. The Septuagint is the most ancient translation of the Old Testament and consequently is invaluable to critics for understanding and correcting the Hebrew text (Massorah), the latter, such as it has come down to us, being the text established by the Massoretes in the sixth century A.D. Many textual corruptions, additions, omissions, or transpositions must have crept into the Hebrew text between the third and second centuries B.C. and the sixth and seventh centuries of our era; the manuscripts therefore which the Seventy had at their disposal, may in places have been better than the Massoretic manuscripts.

B. The Septuagint Version accepted first by the Alexandrian Jews, and afterwards by all the Greek-speaking countries, helped to spread among the Gentiles the idea and the expectation of the Messias, and to introduce into Greek the theological terminology that made it a most suitable instrument for the propagation of the Gospel of Christ.

C. The Jews made use of it long before the Christian Era, and in the time of Christ it was recognised as a legitimate text, and was employed in Palestine even by the rabbis. The Apostles and Evangelists utilised it also and borrowed Old Testament citations from it, especially in regard to the prophecies. The Fathers and the other ecclesiastical writers of the early Church drew upon it, either directly, as in the case of the Greek Fathers, or indirectly, like the Latin Fathers and

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writers and others who employed Latin, Syriac, Ethiopian, Arabic and Gothic versions. It was held in high esteem by all, some even believed it inspired. Consequently, a knowledge of the Septuagint helps to a perfect understanding of these literatures.

D. At the present time, the Septuagint is the official text in the Greek Church, and the ancient Latin Versions used in the western church were made from it; the earliest translation adopted in the Latin Church, the *Vetus Itala*, was directly from the Septuagint: the meanings adopted in it, the Greek names and words employed (such as: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers [*Arithmoi*], Deuteronomy), and finally, the pronunciation given to the Hebrew text, passed very frequently into the *Itala*, and from it, at times, into the Vulgate, which not rarely gives signs of the influence of the *Vetus Itala*; this is especially so in the Psalms, the Vulgate translation being merely the *Vetus Itala* corrected by St. Jerome according to the hexaplar text of the Septuagint.

## II. ORIGIN OF THE SEPTUAGINT

### A. According to Tradition

The Septuagint Version is first mentioned in a letter of Aristeas to his brother Philocrates. Here, in substance, is what we read of the origin of the version. Ptolemy II Philadelphus, King of Egypt (287-47 BC) had recently established a valuable library at Alexandria. He was persuaded by Demetrius of Phalarus, chief librarian, to enrich it with a copy of the sacred books of the Jews. To win the good graces of this people, Ptolemy, by the advice of Aristeas, an officer of the royal guard, an Egyptian by birth and a pagan by religion, emancipated 100,000 slaves in different parts of his kingdom. He then sent delegates, among whom was Aristeas, to Jerusalem, to ask Eleazar, the Jewish high-priest, to provide him with a copy of the Law, and Jews capable of translating it into Greek. The embassy was successful: a richly ornamented copy of the Law was sent to him and seventy-two Israelites, six from each tribe, were deputed to go to Egypt and carry out the wish of the king. They were received with great honor and during seven days astonished everyone by the wisdom they displayed in answering seventy-two questions which they were asked; then they were led into the solitary island of Pharos, where they began their work, translating the Law, helping one another and comparing translations in proportion as they finished them. At the end of seventy-two days, their work was completed, The translation was read in presence of the Jewish priests, princes, and people assembled at Alexandria, who all recognized and praised its perfect conformity with the Hebrew original. The king was greatly pleased with the work and had it placed in the library.

Despite its legendary character, Aristeas' account gained credence; Aristobulus (170-50 B.C.), in a passage preserved by Eusebius, says that "through the efforts of Demetrius of Phalerus a complete translation of the Jewish legislation was executed in the days of Ptolemy"; Aristeas's story is repeated almost verbatim by Flavius Josephus (*Ant. Jud.*, XII, ii) and substantially, with the omission of Aristeas' name, by Philo of Alexandria (*De vita Moysis*, II, vi). the letter and the story were accepted as genuine by many Fathers and ecclesiastical writers till the beginning of the sixteenth century; other details serving to emphasize the extraordinary origin of the version were added to Aristeas's account" The seventy-two interpreters were inspired by God (Tertullian, St. Augustine, the author of the "*Cohortatio ad Graecos*" [Justin?], and others); in translating they did not consult with one another, they had even been shut up in separate cells, either singly, or in pairs, and their translations when compared were found to agree entirely both as to the sense and the expressions employed with the original text and with each other (*Cohortatio ad Graecos*, St.

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Irenaeus, St. Clement of Alexandria). St. Jerome rejected the story of the cells as fabulous and untrue ("Praef. in Pentateuchum"; "Adv. Rufinum", II, xxv). likewise the alleged inspiration of the Septuagint. Finally the seventy two interpreters translated, not only the five books of the Pentateuch, but the entire Hebrew Old Testament. The authenticity of the letter, called in question first by Louis Vivès (1492-1540), professor at Louvain (Ad S. August. Civ. Dei, XVIII, xlii), then by Jos. Scaliger (d. 1609), and especially by H. Hody (d. 1705) and Dupin (d. 1719) is now universally denied.

### *Criticism*

(1) The letter of Aristeas is certainly apocryphal. The writer, who calls himself Aristeas and says he is a Greek and a pagan, shows by his whole work that he is a pious, zealous Jew: he recognizes the God of the Jews as the one true God; he declares that God is the author of the Mosaic law; he is an enthusiastic admirer of the Temple of Jerusalem, the Jewish land and people, and its holy laws and learned men.

(2) The account as given in the letter must be regarded as fabulous and legendary, at least in several parts. Some of the details, such as the official intervention of the king and the high priest, the number of the seventy-two translators, the seventy-two questions they had to answer, the seventy-two days they took for their work, are clearly arbitrary assertions; it is difficult, moreover, to admit that the Alexandrian Jews adopted for their public worship a translation of the Law, made at the request of a pagan king; lastly, the very language of the Septuagint Version betrays in places a rather imperfect knowledge both of Hebrew and of the topography of Palestine, and corresponds more closely with the vulgar idiom of Alexandria. Yet it is not certain that everything contained in the letter is legendary, and scholars ask if there is not a historic foundation underneath the legendary details. Indeed it is likely -- as appears from the peculiar character of the language, as well as from what we know of the origin and history of the version -- that the Pentateuch was translated at Alexandria. It seems true also that it dates from the time of Ptolemy Philadelphus, and therefore from the middle of the third century B.C. For if, as is commonly believed, Aristeas's letter was written about 200 B.C., fifty years after the death of Philadelphus, and with a view to increase the authority of the Greek version of the Law, would it have been accepted so easily and spread broadcast, if it had been fictitious, and if the time of the composition did not correspond with the reality? Moreover, it is possible that Ptolemy had

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something to do with the preparation or publishing of the translation, though how and why cannot be determined now. Was it for the purpose of enriching his library as Pseudo-Aristeas states? This is possible, but is not proven, while, as will be shown below, we can very well account for the origin of the version independently of the king.

(3) The few details which during the course of ages have been added to Aristeas's account cannot be accepted; such are the story of the cells (St. Jerome explicitly rejects this); the inspiration of the translators, an opinion certainly based on the legend of the cells; the number of the translators, seventy-two (see below); the assertion that all the Hebrew books were translated at the same time. Aristeas speaks of the translation of the law (*nomos*), of the legislation (*nomothesia*), of the books of the legislator; now these expressions especially the last two, certainly mean the Pentateuch, exclusive of the other Old Testament books: and St. Jerome (Comment. in Mich.) says: "Josephus writes, and the Hebrews inform us, that only the five books of Moses were translated by them (seventy-two), and given to King Ptolemy." Besides, the versions of the various books of the Old Testament differ so much in vocabulary, style, form, and character, sometimes free and sometimes extremely literal, that they could not be the work of the same translators. Nevertheless, in spite of these divergencies the name of the Septuagint Version is universally given to the entire collection of the Old Testament books in the Greek Bible adopted by the Eastern Church.

### **B. Origin according to the commonly accepted view.**

As to the Pentateuch the following view seems plausible, and is now commonly accepted in its broad lines: The Jews in the last two centuries B.C. were so numerous in Egypt, especially at Alexandria, that at a certain time they formed two-fifths of the entire population. Little by little most of them ceased to use and even forgot the Hebrew language in great part, and there was a danger of their forgetting the Law. Consequently it became customary to interpret in Greek the Law which was read in the synagogues, and it was quite natural that, after a time, some men zealous for the Law should have undertaken to compile a Greek Translation of the Pentateuch. This happened about the middle of the third century B.C. As to the other Hebrew books -- the prophetic and historical -- it was natural that the Alexandrian Jews, making use of the translated Pentateuch in their liturgical reunions, should desire to read the remaining books also and hence should gradually have translated all of them into Greek, which had become their maternal

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language; this would be so much the more likely as their knowledge of Hebrew was diminishing daily. It is not possible to determine accurately the precise time or the occasions on which these different translations were made; but it is certain that the Law, the Prophets, and at least part of the other books, that is, the hagiographies, existed in Greek before the year 130 B.C., as appears from the prologue of Ecclesiasticus, which does not date later than that year. It is difficult also to say where the various translations were made, the data being so scanty. Judging by the Egyptian words and expressions occurring in the version, most of the books must have been translated in Egypt and most likely in Alexandria; Esther however was translated in Jerusalem (XI, i).

Who were the translators and how many? Is there any foundation for their number, seventy or seventy-two, as given in the legendary account (Brassac-Vigouroux, n. 105)? It seems impossible to decide definitely; the Talmudists tell us that the Pentateuch was translated by five interpreters (Sopherim, c.i.). History gives us no details; but an examination of the text shows that in general that the authors were not Palestinian Jews called to Egypt; and differences of terminology, method, etc. prove clearly that the translators were not the same for the different books. It is impossible also to say whether the work was carried out officially or was merely a private undertaking, as seems to have been the case with Ecclesiasticus; but the different books when translated were soon put together -- the author of Ecclesiasticus knew the collection -- and were received as official by the Greek-speaking Jews.

### III. SUBSEQUENT HISTORY

#### Recensions

The Greek version, known as the Septuagint, welcomed by the Alexandrian Jews, spread quickly throughout the countries in which Greek was spoken; it was utilized by different writers, and supplanted the original text in liturgical services. Philo of Alexandria used it in his writings and looked on the translators as inspired Prophets; it was finally received even by the Jews of Palestine, and was employed notably by Josephus, the Palestinian Jewish historian. We know also that the writers of the New Testament made use of it, borrowing from it most of their citations; it became the Old Testament of the Church and was so highly esteemed by the early Christians that several writers and Fathers declared it to be inspired. The Christians had recourse to it constantly in their controversies with the Jews, who soon recognized its imperfections, and finally rejected it in favour of the Hebrew text or of more literal translations (Aquila, Theodotion).

#### Critical corrections of Origen, Lucian, and Hesychius

On account of its diffusion alone the hellenizing Jews and early Christians, copies of the Septuagint were multiplied; and as might be expected, many changes, deliberate as well as involuntary, crept in. The necessity of restoring the text as far as possible to its pristine purity was felt. The following is a brief account of the attempted corrections:

A. Origen reproduced the Septuagint text in the fifth column of his Hexapla; marking with obeli the texts that occurred in the Septuagint without being in the original; adding according to Theodotion's version, and distinguishing with asterisks and metobeli the texts of the original which were not in the Septuagint; adopting from the variants of the Greek Version the texts which were closest to the Hebrew; and, finally, transposing the text where the order of the Septuagint did not correspond with the Hebrew order. His recension, copied by Pamphilus and Eusebius, is called the hexaplar, to distinguish it from the version previously employed and which is called the common, vulgate, *koine*, or ante-hexaplar. It was adopted in Palestine.

B. St. Lucien, priest of Antioch and martyr, in the beginning of the fourth century, published an edition corrected in accordance with the Hebrew; this retained the name of *koine*, vulgate edition, and is sometimes called *Loukianos*, after its author. In the time of St. Jerome it was in use at Constantinople and Antioch. C. Finally, Hesychius, an Egyptian bishop, published about the same time, a new recension, employed chiefly in Egypt.

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### Manuscripts

The three most celebrated manuscripts of the Septuagint known are the Vatican, "Codex Vaticanus" (fourth century); the Alexandrian, "Codex Alexandrinus" (fifth century), now in the British Museum, London; and that of Sinai, "Codex Sinaiticus" (fourth century), found by Tischendorf in the convent of St. Catherine, on Mount Sinai, in 1844 and 1849, now part at Leipzig and in part in St. Petersburg; they are all written in uncials.

The "Codex Vaticanus" is the purest of the three; it generally gives the more ancient text, while the "Codex Alexandrinus" borrows much from the hexaplar text and is changed according to the Massoretic text (The "Codex Vaticanus" is referred to by the letter B; the "Codex Alexandrinus" by the letter A, and the "Codex Sinaiticus" by the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet *Aleph* or by S). The Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris possesses also an important palimpsest manuscript of the Septuagint, the "Codex Ephraemirescriptus" (designated by the letter C), and two manuscripts of less value (64 and 114), in cursives, one belonging to the tenth or eleventh century and the other to the thirteenth (Bacuez and Vigouroux, 12th ed., n. 109).

### Printed Editions

All the printed editions of the Septuagint are derived from the three recensions mentioned above.

- The *editio princeps* is the Complutensian or that of Alcalá. It was from Origen's hexaplar text; printed in 1514-18, it was not published till it appeared in the Polyglot of Cardinal Ximenes in 1520.
- The Aldine edition (begun by Aldus Manucius) appeared at Venice in 1518. The text is purer than that of the Complutensian edition, and is closer to Codex B. The editor says he collated ancient manuscripts but does not specify them. It has been reprinted several times.
- The most important edition is the Roman or Sixtine, which reproduces the "Codex Vaticanus" almost exclusively. It was published under the direction of Cardinal Caraffa, with the help of various savants, in 1586, by the authority of Sixtus V, to assist the revisers who were preparing the Latin Vulgate edition ordered by the Council of Trent. It



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has become the *textus receptus* of the Greek Old Testament and has had many new editions, such as that of Holmes and Pearsons (Oxford, 1798-1827), the seven editions of Tischendorf, which appeared at Leipzig between 1850 and 1887, the last two, published after the death of the author and revised by Nestle, the four editions of Swete (Cambridge, 1887-95, 1901, 1909), etc.

- Grabe's edition was published at Oxford, from 1707 to 1720, and reproduced, but imperfectly, the "Codex Alexandrinus" of London. For partial editions, see Vigouroux, "Dict. de la Bible", 1643 sqq.

## IV. CRITICAL VALUE AND LANGUAGE

### Critical Value

The Septuagint Version, while giving exactly as to the form and substance the true sense of the Sacred Books, differs nevertheless considerably from our present Hebrew text. These discrepancies, however, are not of great importance and are only matters of interpretation. They may be thus classified: Some result from the translators having had at their disposal Hebrew recensions differing from those which were known to the Massoretes; sometimes the texts varied, at others the texts were identical, but they were read in different order. Other discrepancies are due to the translators personally; not to speak of the influence exerted on their work by their methods of interpretation, the inherent difficulties of the work, their greater or less knowledge of Greek and Hebrew, they now and then translated differently from the Massoretes, because they read the texts differently; that was natural, for, Hebrew being written in square characters, and certain consonants being very similar in form, it was easy to confound them occasionally and so give an erroneous translation; moreover, their Hebrew text being written without any spacing between the various words, they could easily make a mistake in the separation of the words; finally, as the Hebrew text at their disposal contained no vowels, they might supply different vowels from those used later by the Massoretes. Again, we must not think that we have at present the Greek text exactly as it was written by the translators; the frequent transcriptions during the early centuries, as well as the corrections and editions of Origen, Lucian, and Hesychius impaired the purity of the text: voluntarily or involuntarily the copyists allowed many textual corruptions, transpositions, additions, and omissions to creep into the primitive text of the Septuagint. In particular we may note the addition of parallel passages, explanatory notes, or double translations caused by marginal notes. On this consult Dict. de la Bible, *art. cit.*, and Swete, "An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek".

### Language

Everyone admits that the Septuagint Version was made in popular Greek, the *koine dislektos*. But is the Greek of the Old Testament a special idiom? Many authorities assert that it is, though they disagree as to its real character. The "Dict. de la Bible", s.v. *Grec biblique*, asserts that it was "the hebraicizing Greek spoken by the Jewish community at Alexandria", the popular Greek of Alexandria "with a very large admixture of Hebraicisms". The same dictionary, s.v. *Septante*, mentions the more recent opinion of Deissmann that the Greek of the Septuagint is merely the

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ordinary vernacular Greek, the pure *koine* of the time. Deissmann bases his theory on the perfect resemblance of the language of the Septuagint and that of the papyri and the inscriptions of the same age; he believes that the syntactical peculiarities of the Septuagint, which at first sight seem to favour the theory of a special language, a hebraicizing Greek, are sufficiently explained by the fact that the Septuagint is a Greek translation of Hebrew books.

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