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The Origins of the Septuagint

The very first translation of the Hebrew Bible was made into Greek, probably as early as the third century BC. This, the so-called Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, is traditionally dated to the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus of Egypt (285-246 BC).

It is commonly called the "Septuagint" version (from the Latin for "seventy") because according to the traditional account of its origin, preserved in the so-called *Letter of Aristeas*, it had seventy-two translators. This letter tells how King Ptolemy II commissioned the royal librarian, Demetrius of Phaleron, to collect by purchase or by copying all the books in the world. He wrote a letter to Eleazar, the high priest at Jerusalem, requesting six elders of each tribe, in total seventy-two men, of exemplary life and learned in the Torah, to translate it into Greek.

On arrival at Alexandria, the translators were greeted by the king and given a sumptuous banquet. They were then closeted in a secluded house on the island of Pharos close to the seashore, where the celebrated 110 m. high lighthouse, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, had just been finished.

According to the *Letter of Aristeas*, the translation, made under the direction of Demetrius, was completed in seventy-two days. When the Alexandrian Jewish community assembled to hear a reading of the new version, the translators and Demetrius received lavish praise, and a curse was pronounced on anyone who should alter the text by addition, transposition or omission. The work was then read to the king who, according to the *Letter of Aristeas*, marveled at the mind of the lawgiver. The translators were then sent back to Jerusalem, endowed with gifts for themselves and the high priest Eleazar.

Later generations embellished the story. Philo of Alexandria, writing in the first century AD, says that each of the seventy-two translators were shut in a separate cell, and miraculously all the texts were said to agree exactly with one another, thus proving that their version was directly inspired by God.

Origins in Retrospect

It is difficult to know how much credence to give to these accounts. There are several known historical inaccuracies in the *Letter of Aristeas*. It is known that on the assumption of his throne, Ptolemy II banished Demetrius of Phaleron. One of those credited as being present at the banquet, a certain Menodemus of Eritria, is known to have died two years before Ptolemy II succeeded to the throne. But even if the stories relating to the origin of the Septuagint are not true, at least not in all the details, it seems likely that Ptolemy II at least instigated a translation

of the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible.

The Significance of the Septuagint

The significance of the Septuagint translation can hardly be overestimated. Following the conquests of Alexander the Great (336-323 BC), Greek became the official language of Egypt, Syria and the eastern end of the Mediterranean Sea. The Septuagint translation made the Hebrew scriptures available both to the Jews who no longer spoke their ancestral language and to the entire Greek-speaking world. The Septuagint was later to become the Bible of the Greek-speaking early Church, and is frequently quoted in the New Testament.

Hints of the Egyptian Origin of the Septuagint

Does the Septuagint translation itself give any hints of its supposed Egyptian origins? In Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14 are given a list of unclean animals and birds, that is, creatures that the Israelites were prohibited from eating. The precise identification of many of the birds in the list of unclean birds remains uncertain. The list is an ornithologist's delight but a translator's nightmare. The detailed identification of the birds need not concern us here. Even the accuracy of the Septuagint's translation here need not concern us either.

In Lev.11:22 we encounter a bird called *yanshuph*. The Septuagint translates this *ibis*, a bird that the Egyptians knew as *hbj*. The Septuagint's translation "ibis" is followed by the Revised Standard Version. *Yanshuph*, however, is rendered as a kind of owl by the majority of English versions.

The Hebrew bird *qa'a* of Lev. 11:18 is rendered "pelican" by some English versions. Here they are following the Septuagint's *pelekan*. However, a number of English translations do not follow the Septuagint, and opt for another type of owl.

Earlier in the chapter is a list of unclean animals. *Arnebet* is clearly the "rabbit" or "hare." Yet in both versions of the list it is not translated by *lagos*, the normal Greek word for "rabbit" or "hare." Lev. 11:6 has the word *choirogryllion* meaning a "young pig," and Dt. 14:7 has a euphemism, *dasyous*, "rough foot." Another Greek translation, that of Aquila, uses *lagos*. The reason for avoiding *lagos* appears to be that Ptolemy II's grandfather was nicknamed "Lagos," apparently because of his large ears!

A more famous and ultimately more significant example concerns the term "Red Sea." In Hebrew it is *yam suph* meaning "reed sea," a term which was used most famously to describe the body of water that the Israelites crossed as they escaped from Egypt. This body of water is often thought to be the lakes or salt water marshes at the northern end of the Gulf of Aqaba. The Septuagint, however, renders it *Erythra thalassa* meaning "Red Sea," and it is this translation that is used by the New Testament in Acts 7:36 and Hebrews 11:39. All English versions apart from the Jerusalem Bible stick with this tradition.

But where did the term "Red Sea" come from? It may be significant that the Hebrew term Edom means "red," and the Edomites occupied the area south of Israel towards the Gulf of Aqaba. This sea may have been popularly known as the Edomite or Red Sea. Another explanation is that it was named "red" from the predominant color of the Edomite and Arabian mountains which border the Gulf of Aqaba.

Distinctive Features of the Septuagint Translation

A number of the special distinctive features of the Septuagint should be pointed out. In Proverbs 6:8b, after the Hebrew proverb of the ant, the Septuagint adds a Greek proverb of the bee. "*Or go to the bee and learn how diligent she is, and how earnestly she is engaged in her work; whose labors kings and private men use for health, and she is desired and respected by all, though weak in body she is advanced by honoring wisdom.*"

The original Septuagint translation of Daniel was thought to be too much of a paraphrase. It was replaced by another translation whose origins would seem to lie in Asia Minor, that ascribed to Theodotion at the end of the second century AD. Indeed, only one manuscript of the Septuagint of Daniel has survived - a tenth-century manuscript from the Chigi collection in the Vatican.

In the long passage in Daniel 11 about the kings of the north and the kings of the south, the original Septuagint of Daniel consistently translates the term "king of the south" by "king of Egypt." The version of Theodotion, which largely superseded it, has "king of the south" throughout.

More significantly, the four letters YHWH that form the personal name of God in the Hebrew Text are rendered *ho Kyrios* throughout the Septuagint. This is the usage, traditionally rendered "the LORD" in English versions, which is adopted by writers of the New Testament and is still by far the most common nomenclature for the divine name.

There are numerous examples where the writers of the New Testament follow the Septuagint translation rather than the Hebrew text. Four examples will suffice:

- 1) For Genesis 47:31, where the Hebrew text says "*Israel worshipped as he leaned on top of his bed,*" it is rendered "*on top of his staff*" in the Septuagint and Hebrews 11:21.
- 2) Where the Hebrew text of Ps.8:5 has "*You made him a little lower than God and crowned him with glory and honor,*" the Septuagint and Hebrews 2:7 have "*You made him a little lower than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor.*"
- 3) In Ps.16:10, where the Hebrew text has "*Because you will not abandon me to Sheol, nor let your Holy One see the pit,*" the Septuagint and Acts 2:27 have "*Because you will not abandon me to Hades, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.*"
- 4) "*Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced*" in Ps. 40:6 becomes "*Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me*" in the Septuagint and Hebrews 10:5. Here the Septuagint translators are explaining the metaphor, not just in terms of the ear, but in terms of the whole body of the LORD's servant listening and obeying the LORD's command.

Limitations of the Septuagint

The Orthodox Church argues that the Septuagint is more accurate than the Hebrew Bible and should be used in Bible translation. However, it is good to be aware of some of the Septuagint's limitations.

The Septuagint of Job is about a sixth shorter than the traditional Hebrew text of the Bible known as the Masoretic Text. The missing portions were supplied from the Greek version of Theodotion. The Septuagint of Jeremiah is about an eighth shorter than the Masoretic Text, repeated passages are cut out and the order is changed. Furthermore, the Septuagint often

preserves different numbers, e.g. the ages of some of the patriarchs in Genesis are given variously, thus:

Reference	Person's age	Masoretic Text	Septuagint
5:3	Adam's age at birth of Seth	130	230
5:6	Seth's age at birth of Enosh	105	205
5:28	Lamech's age at birth of Noah	182	188
5:31	Age of Lamech	777	753

So, perhaps for all the plaudits the Septuagint supposedly received from Ptolemy II, it should come as no great surprise that the Septuagint did not receive a universally favorable reception among the Jews: "*That day was as ominous for Israel as the day on which the golden calf was made since the Law could not be accurately translated*" (*Mesechet Sopherim* [Tractate for Scribes] 1.7).

Ultimate Significance of the Septuagint

It was the adoption of the Septuagint by the early Church that was the biggest factor in its eventual abandonment by the Jews. The Septuagint's use of *parthenos*, meaning "virgin" in Isaiah 7:14 to describe the mother of the promised son Immanuel, was used by Matthew 1:23 as evidence for Yeshua's virgin birth.

Like any translation the Septuagint has its limitations, but it was the first translation of any part of the Hebrew Bible into another language, so its place in world history is assured. Furthermore, its use as the version of the Old Testament most frequently used by the writers of the New Testament only serves to further enhance its significance.

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