

## Hebrew Bible/Old Testament

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## Introduction

To some Old Testament scholars, the Septuagint (LXX) presents itself as an unnecessary detour at best and an outright nuisance at worst. In their view, the Hebrew text that is at the centre of their interest is the source from which the Greek version was derived. The Hebrew is primary, the Septuagint secondary. The process of translation created many inaccuracies and approximations in the target text, because perfect translation is impossible, and because the translators could not or would not understand the source text. Moreover, some of the most grievous divergences entered the stream of tradition and continue to interfere with the correct understanding of the Hebrew until today. Of course, someone might decide to study the Septuagint in its own right. Doing so could show how Hellenized Jews interpreted the Scriptures. It might shed light on diaspora Judaism of the Hellenistic age. But it would contribute very little to the understanding of the Hebrew original.

Such an attitude does not sufficiently recognize that the notion of Hebrew original is a scholarly ideal. “The Hebrew” is not something directly accessible to us. The Masoretic Text (MT) on which scholars of the Hebrew Bible expend their best efforts is an artefact of the Middle Ages. The Septuagint goes back to a Hebrew text, but not to the Hebrew text that is in our hands today. Septuagint and Masoretic Text bear independent witness to the “Hebrew original”. In many instances, the MT may be closer to the source than the Septuagint. In other instances, the Septuagint may be more faithful. There may also be cases where both versions diverged each in its own way, thus preserving no direct attestation of the source text. Most of all, it is often very hard to tell which text preserves the earliest version. Mindless preference for one of the witnesses has no rational basis.

The conversation, then, between the Septuagint and the Hebrew Bible is situated at the heart of the exegetical enterprise. A similar case could no doubt be made in connection with the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Qumran Hebrew scrolls, as well as, to a lesser degree, other ancient versions such as the Peshitta, the Targums or the Vulgate. The “textual plurality” of the Old Testament introduces much complexity into the process of reading (Hendel 2007). But the Septuagint, by dint of its age and comprehensiveness, has pride of place. The present section will mostly be limited to the MT and the Septuagint, illustrating the kind of help, and unhelp, that may be expected from reading them in dialogue.

### 1. The use of the Septuagint in textual criticism

Textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible relates to a great number of inputs: the Masoretic Hebrew, parallel passages, the Samaritan Pentateuch, Qumran biblical texts, ancient versions and daughter versions, quotations in ancient writings (Tov 2001). Nevertheless, the MT and the Septuagint are globally the most important sources, and often the only significant ones. Textual criticism is sometimes considered as a lower form of exegesis, a boring operation one needs to get out of the way before one may tackle the more interesting theological questions. When it is done in the right way, however, textual criticism overlaps with exegesis. The text-critical procedure is not usually a mechanical one, but involves much “lateral thinking” and creativity. An example will illustrate this better than a theoretical discussion.

The MT of Prov 21:20 reads: “There is precious treasure and oil (*šemen*) in the abode (*binwê*) of the wise, but a fool swallows it up.” This would seem to be a tolerably elegant maxim contrasting the economy of the wise to the gluttony of the foolish, not unlike the fable of the ant and the grasshopper made famous by Jean de la Fontaine. The only awkwardness is the juxtaposition of the very general “precious treasure” and the more specific “oil”. The LXX reads rather differently in the first half of the verse: “Desirable treasure *will rest* (*ἀναπαύσεται*) *in the mouth* of the wise.” Since the Greek verb *ἀναπαύομαι* at times translates the Hebrew verb *šākēn* “to settle, to dwell”, scholars have explained the Greek reading as reflecting a divergent Hebrew text (Fox 2005, 104-105). Instead of *wšemen* “and oil”, this text had the verbal form *yīškôn* “it will dwell”. The difference between the two readings is minimal in the Hebrew script (Jaeger 1788). “Dwelling” is better than “oil” because it does not produce the awkward juxtaposition of the general and the specific, and because it forms a nice contrast with the “swallowing” in the second part of the verse. But what about the reading “mouth” as opposed to “abode”? Most scholars think that on this point, the Greek text is less correct than the Hebrew: “dwelling” goes with the “abode”, not with the “mouth”. One could reconstruct a primitive version out of the MT and the LXX: “Desirable treasure dwells in the abode of the wise, but a fool swallows it up.” It is to be noted, however, that the reading “mouth” finds an echo in the second part of the verse: the treasure of the wise is in his mouth, but the fool swallows it up. The reading “mouth” could be original, and “dwelling” a facilitating change. The earliest text of the verse would be close to that of Eccl 10:12 “Words spoken by the wise bring them favour, but the lips of fools consume them.” If so, the question at issue in the proverb is not the wisdom of storing up material riches, but the ability to preserve a wise word for its hour.

Textual disquisitions of this kind do not necessarily lead to incontrovertible conclusions, but they almost always enrich the exegetical process by drawing attention to various aspects of the Hebrew text. If it is to be meaningful, the work should be based upon close study of the Greek text itself, not on the critical apparatus of BHS or BHQ.

In the example inspected above, the evolution of the text is to be attributed to material factors such as the similarity of Hebrew letters and the difficulty of interpreting metaphorical speech. In other cases, comparison between the MT and the LXX will indicate that the text has been altered for ideological reasons. This can happen on both sides, roughly according to the same principles. Intentional changes out of reverence for God, his word, his representatives and so on, have left their mark in the MT as well as in the LXX. An interesting case of intentional correction is the Deuteronomic formula on the unique place of worship. In the MT, this formula is always, 22 times, expressed in the future tense: “the place the LORD *will choose* (*yibḥar*).” The passages look forward to the time when Jerusalem will be selected as the place where the Temple is built. But the Samaritan Pentateuch systematically has the past tense: “the place the LORD *has chosen*.” In this version, the texts look back to what is commanded in Deut 11:29 and 27:12, the establishment of a cultic centre near Shechem (Schorch 2011). The Samaritan variant, if mentioned at all, is often explained as a tendentious change on the part of the Samaritans, bent on favouring their sanctuary on Mount Gerizim. As Adrian Schenker was able to establish, however, the past tense is probably to be read in all 22 passages in the Septuagint as well (Schenker 2010). This inclines the balance the other way. To all appearances, the Samaritans have faithfully transmitted the old and genuine form of the formula, while the MT resulted from an intentional change (Schorch 2011). Beyond its intrinsic value, the example is interesting because it shows that working with the LXX may involve more than just the text edited by Rahlfs or Wevers. All editions of the Greek Deuteronomy print the future tense in accord with the MT. Schenker arrived at his hypothesis on the basis of variants attested in the Greek, Coptic and Latin traditions, some of which were not even included in Wevers’ critical apparatus. Sometimes it is necessary to carry out textual criticism of the version before it can be used in textual criticism of the Hebrew.

## 2. The Septuagint and the history of redaction of the Hebrew Bible

The example of the centralization formula shows that textual variants do not always occur in isolation. Someone at one time went right through the Book of Deuteronomy and changed all 22 attestations of the formula. In cases like this, it is legitimate to speak of divergent editions

of a biblical book. Over the last forty years or so, scholars have discovered that ancient editions of biblical books may diverge to a disconcerting extent. The classic example is the Book of Jeremiah. It was always known that the earliest Greek version of Jeremiah was shorter than the MT by about one eighth. An occasional scholar even argued that the Old Greek reflected a Hebrew source text that was probably older than the MT (Movers 1837). But it was not until the discovery of the Qumran Scrolls, with among them a fragmentary Jeremiah manuscript attesting a Hebrew text very close to that of the LXX, that the idea of a primitive short text came to be accepted by a majority (Janzen 1973). Many specialists accept nowadays that the pluses of the MT in Jeremiah reflect for the most part later elaborations and updates of an earlier text (reviews of recent literature in Bogaert 1997, 430-432; Stipp 2008). On this view, the two texts of Jeremiah, MT and LXX, provide empirical evidence for the kind of rewriting critical scholars have suspected in many other parts of the Hebrew Bible (Tov 1985).

And Jeremiah is not an exception. In the post-Qumran period, many other books have been revealed to present a similar textual picture. The most notorious instances are Exodus, Joshua, Samuel, Kings, Ezekiel and Daniel (Tov 2001). In all these books, the Septuagint has large-scale divergences from the MT that cannot simply be explained by the vicissitudes of scribal transmission. In all these books, too, there are good reasons to think that the divergences in the Septuagint reflect a different Hebrew edition. Which “edition” is the oldest one has not for the most part been determined unequivocally, although a strong case has been made for the priority of the LXX version of several of them.

A random example of a large-scale divergence is the concluding chapter on Solomon’s sins in 1 Kgs 11. When one compares the MT and the LXX, one finds very nearly the same textual material, presented in a rather different arrangement. A look at three verses will suffice to illustrate:

1 Kgs 11:6-8	
MT	LXX
6 And Solomon did evil	—
in the sight of the LORD,	—
and went not fully after the LORD,	—
as did David his father.	—
7 Then did Solomon build an high place	Then did Solomon build an high place
for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab,	for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab,
in the hill that is before Jerusalem,	—
and for Molech,	And for Milkom,
the abomination of the children of Ammon.	the abomination of the children of Ammon,
—	And for Astarte,
—	the abomination of the Sidonians
8 And likewise did he	And likewise did he
for all his strange wives,	for all his strange wives,
which burnt incense	<i>he</i> burnt incense
and sacrificed unto their gods.	and sacrificed unto their gods.
—	6 And Solomon did evil
—	in the sight of the LORD,
—	and went not fully after the LORD,
—	as did David his father.

Although the accounts are substantially similar, there are many differences of detail. Verse 6 comes as a conclusion in the LXX, but stands somewhat uncomfortably in a penultimate position in the MT. The LXX includes a reference to Astarte, the goddess of the Sidonians, which is lacking in MT. For its part, the MT notes the location of the high places built by Solomon (the information is found also in 2 Kgs 23:13, and was perhaps imported from there), which is lacking in the LXX. It is very hard to decide which textual form is the older one. Perhaps it is preferable in this case to say that both MT and LXX derive from an earlier base text that has not been preserved. Some individual readings can nevertheless be identified as old and genuine. In the present passage, the LXX text according to which Solomon himself burnt incense and sacrificed to his wives' gods probably reflects the older reading, which was corrected in the MT tradition out of respect for the figure of the King (Joosten forthcoming).

In spite of important progress over the last thirty years or so, much work remains to be done in this domain. The potential contribution of the LXX to the redaction history of the Hebrew Bible is considerable, but it can only be exploited if both subfields are seriously taken into account. As it is, LXX scholars are usually uninterested in redaction history, and few redaction critics are proficient in LXX studies. Recent work on Jeremiah by Hermann-Josef Stipp, showing how a textual comparison between the Hebrew and the Greek opens up a new perspective on the origin and history of the biblical book, is encouraging (Stipp 2010). It is also far too rare.

### 3. The Septuagint and the history of reception of the Hebrew Bible

The Septuagint not only represents a lost Hebrew text of the biblical books, it is also, like any translation, an interpretation. This aspect of the Septuagint has recently attracted more attention than used to be the case. The onset of the post-modern period, with its emphasis on radical subjectivity, has shattered any illusion biblical scholars may have had that what they were looking for was the “correct” interpretation of the texts. In the post-modern paradigm, the correct interpretation, of the Bible as of any literary text, does not exist. Readers participate in the elaboration of meaning, their response to the text is an integral part of its meaning. Therefore, every reading has its own moment of truth. Radical subjectivity can be a lonely place, however. There is little point in finding oneself with one’s own uniquely true reading of a text. Scholars have therefore explored the notion of inter-subjectivity: other interpretations, particularly if they come from other cultures or epochs, are studied within their own setting and appreciated as much as possible for what they are, in all their strangeness. The Septuagint holds much promise in this regard: it represents one of the oldest readings of the biblical books, it comes from a milieu far removed from the one in which the texts came into being, and it proposes interpretations that are often rather different from the intuitions of a modern-day reader.

A prime manifestation of the interest in the Septuagint as an interpretation is the spate of recent translations of it into modern languages. In the nineteen eighties, a group of French scholars started to produce the *La Bible d’Alexandrie* series, which offers a translation of the Septuagint with copious notes and an introduction. English and German translations of the Septuagint duly followed, each with its own format, and similar efforts are underway in Italian, Spanish, Hebrew and no doubt other languages. All these translations insist, to different degrees, on the interpretational aspect of the Septuagint. The Greek version is not considered as a means to get access to a lost Hebrew source text, but as a source text in its own right. A large part of the notes in *La Bible d’Alexandrie* is taken up with patristic exegesis, based on the Greek version.

The interpretational nature of the Septuagint varies greatly over the different books. Globally, however, three types of interpretation can helpfully be distinguished. The first type is spontaneous interpretation. Translators know that they cannot transfer the “pure” meaning of the source text into the target language. There will always be a measure of explanation. In many places, this explanation did not require much thinking: all that was needed was to match the potentialities of the source text to adequate actualities in the target language. The Hebrew word *roš* “head” required a different Greek equivalent when it referred to the “head”, i.e. the

top, of mountains or hills. The example may seem trifling. But the process of spontaneous translation may also account for some more striking renderings. Exod 22:27 is usually taken to mean: “You shall not revile God”. The Septuagint, however, translates it: “You shall not revile the gods”. The verse has often been quoted, no doubt rightly, as an example of the Septuagint’s more positive attitude to the pagan world (see e.g. Philo, *Quaestiones in Exodum* on Exod 22:27; Marcus 1953, 40-42). Yet on the word level, the rendering simply reflects one possibility of the Hebrew source text: the word *’elohîm* can mean either “God” or “gods”, according to the context. The translator had to decide between these two basic possibilities.

The second type is deliberate exegesis. In some passages, the translator manifestly could not or would not give a straightforward rendering of the source text. Deliberate interpretation is found often in theological passages. Thus the daring use of “rock” in reference to God in Deut 32:4, 15, 18, 30, 31, 37 is rendered throughout as θεός “God”. This most probably does not reflect a different source text (but see Peters 2012). Nor is it due to the fact that the Hebrew word was unknown to the translator, for in Deut 32:13 he translates it correctly as πέτρα “rock”. Rather, the translator did not feel at ease with the Hebrew metaphor, or feared it might be misunderstood by his readers. He knowingly and willingly diverged from his usual practice of adhering to the plain meaning of Hebrew words and wrote something that was not in the source text.

Deliberate interpretation can be subtle, as when an active verbal form is changed into a passive:

Deut 8:2

MT The Lord... was testing you “to know what was in your heart”

LXX The Lord... was testing you “to let it be known what was in your heart”

Or it can be obvious, as in the case of “converse translations”:

Job 35:13

MT Surely, God does not hear an empty cry, nor does the Almighty regard it.

LXX For the Lord does not wish to see wrongs, for he, the Almighty, *is one that views* (those who perform lawless acts)

In either case, what characterizes deliberate interpretation is that the Greek is not a straightforward rendering of the Hebrew. Both Deut 8:2 and Job 35:13 show unwillingness on the part of the translator to render a text that could be interpreted to mean that God is not omniscient (Joosten 2012).

Many deliberate interpretations may reflect the initiative of the translator, but at least some may have been handed to him by tradition. Thus, the Hebrew text of Isa 1:12 most probably meant: “When you come *to see my face* (in the Temple)...” In the Septuagint this is rendered: “When you come *to appear before me*...” A similar change also underlies the Masoretic vowels (and hence most modern translations) and other ancient translations like the Targum and the Vulgate (but not the Peshitta). The same change from “to see (God)” to “to appear before (God)” also affects other passages (Geiger 1928, 337–340; Chavel 2012). All this seems to indicate the existence of an ancient exegetical tradition, teaching that wherever Scripture seems to speak about “seeing God”, in fact “being seen by God” is meant. Although the Septuagint contains the earliest attestations of this tradition, the wide distribution it enjoys indicates that the Greek translators did not initiate this change.

Alongside spontaneous and deliberate interpretation, a third category needs to be recognized, namely, accidental exegesis. Rather often, the Greek text diverges significantly from its Hebrew source text because of different types of mishaps: Hebrew letters were misread, or grouped together in fanciful ways, or vocalized in a way that is incompatible with the grammar, roots were misinterpreted, or syntax wrongly analysed. Accidental exegesis is like spontaneous translation in that the translator produced the rendering more or less straightforwardly from his understanding of the Hebrew. In most cases, one may submit, the translator thought he was producing a faithful rendering of the Hebrew. Accidental exegesis is like deliberate exegesis in that the resultant Greek diverges markedly from the source text. A famous example is the translation of Gen 2:4-5 in a way that suggests a creation in two stages, a heavenly one, and an earthly one: “... God made the heaven and the earth and all verdure of the field *before it came to be upon the earth*, and all herbage of the field *before it sprang up*...” The Greek text lends itself to a Platonicizing harmonization of the two creation stories. But it most probably came to being because the translator was unfamiliar with the Hebrew syntax of the passage, which, although entirely regular, is found only in “early biblical Hebrew” and seems to have died out in the later period.

To Old Testament exegetes, the Septuagint may often be a bit disconcerting. Accidental interpretations lead to widely divergent readings that do not seem to contribute anything to the exegetical enterprise. Patient study can nevertheless lead to the identification of snippets of information that do enrich the reading of the passage.



#### 4 Concluding remarks

In a recent publication, a German Old Testament scholar criticized the recent rise of interest in the Septuagint because, in his view, it might distract attention from the Hebrew text (Crüsemann 2011). As our reflections show, he has half a point. Study of the Septuagint will indeed have the effect of deflecting attention from the received Hebrew text. Study of the Septuagint may lead one to realize that the text of the Old Testament is uncertain, and that in many key passages different readings are possible; it may show that books of the Old Testament had a long redaction history, and that the Masoretic text is not necessarily the oldest form available; it attests the plurality of interpretations from a very early date. There is no reason to be uncomfortable with any of these implications, however. The plurality—textual, redactional, exegetical—introduced by the Septuagint is to be viewed as an enrichment, not a threat.

#### Suggested reading

A fresh look at the history of the biblical text with reflections on how the Hebrew and Greek traditions may be read conjointly in an enriching way is proposed in Julio Treballe Barrera's book, *The Jewish Bible and the Christian Bible. An Introduction to the History of the Bible* (Brill/Eerdmans, 1998).

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