

A brief essay on the Septuagint and its relationship with Hellenistic Judaism and Christianity

Christianity is at once rooted in, but fundamentally unlike, Judaism. After all, Jesus was not simply a Jew, he was a rabbi<sup>1</sup> (a teacher of *Torah*). But despite (or perhaps on account) of his erudition of scripture, he was radical: according to Christians, he performed miracles, obviated the (traditional valuation of) the dietary laws, practice of circumcision and Sabbath, and, last but not least, was the Messiah. These fundamental changes in belief and praxis, the radical departure of Christianity from Judaism has resulted in what may be seen as a ‘great divide’ between the two religions, culturally, linguistically and theologically. Some examples include the Jewish self-identification as the chosen ones, while Christianity sees itself as a ‘universal’ religion; while the Jews see no theological importance in the Gospels, Christians cherish them above all other texts; Jews have traditionally seen Hebrew as a sempiternal<sup>2</sup>, “holy tongue”<sup>3</sup> yet the history of Christianity has been one of constant linguistic<sup>4</sup> and semantic<sup>5</sup> change.

Thus, in light of these opposing beliefs and linguistic divisions, it is perhaps surprising that, once upon a time, Christians and Jews used the exact same text of the Bible! This text is the Septuagint, a 3rd-century BCE, Hebrew-to-Greek translation of the Old Testament along with a series of other books. Since the Septuagint was born before the time of Christ, it was used by (Hellenistic) Jews, then adopted by Greek-

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 9:5 “καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς ὁ Πέτρος λέγει τῷ Ἰησοῦ Ῥαββεί, καλὸν ἐστὶν ἡμᾶς ὧδε εἶναι”, “and Peter, having answered, said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here”

<sup>2</sup> Major Jewish commentaries and stories assert that Hebrew (and its alphabet) existed before the creation of the universe

<sup>3</sup> “holy tongue” (*leshon hakodesh*) has been the traditional appellation for Hebrew. This is seen, for example, in the title of Professor Grafton’s book on Isaac Casaubon, which is a quote from Casaubon himself: “I have always loved the Holy Tongue”.

<sup>4</sup> For example, translations by Jerome, Luther and the 47 scholars of the Church of England into Latin, German and English, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> For example, the change in meaning of words such as *kurios*, *basilike*, *pneuma*.

speaking early Christians and continues to be used today by the Eastern Orthodox Church. But before one goes on to its history, what does ‘Septuagint’ mean?

‘Septuagint’, “from the Latin for *seventy*, is the traditional name of the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures commonly held to be the Bible of the Hellenistic Jews.”<sup>6</sup> Since looking up one word or term often entails looking up three others, it is now necessary to define the terms “Hellenistic Judaism” and, in its historical context, the ‘Bible’:

According to Sundberg, Hellenistic Judaism refers to the “Judaism that was deeply influenced by the spread of Hellenistic culture, initiated by Alexander the Great in the 4th BCE” and, according to Josephus, continued by the *diadochoi*<sup>7</sup>. Most historians agree that this period began in the 4th century BCE and last six hundred years. Although Jews and Greeks had been in contact before then<sup>8</sup>, Alexander’s colonization, extending south and east of Macedonia into Africa and Asia, intensified the Jews’ exposure to Hellenism, both culturally and linguistically. In fact, by the 3rd century BCE, Jews around Egypt, Alexandria and the Eastern Mediterranean had forgotten Hebrew and Aramaic and thus “Koine Greek had become the mother tongue”<sup>9</sup>. This linguistic shift has given rise to loan words now vital to Judaism, such as *synagogue* (συναγωγή, assembly).

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<sup>6</sup> The Canon Debate, ed. Lee Martin McDonald, p.68

<sup>7</sup> Josephus, *Contra Apionem*, 1.213

<sup>8</sup> For example, in *Contra Apionem*, 1.176-183, Josephus quotes a conversation between Aristotle and a Jew from *De Somno*, a lost work by one Clearchus of Soli.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Lohse, *The New Testament Environment* (1976), p. 128.

Now that the historical, geographic and cultural context of Hellenistic Judaism has been very briefly established, the next question which arises regarding the origin of the Septuagint is, in the context of Hellenistic Judaism, to what collection of texts did the term ‘Bible’ actually refer. After all, with the emergence of the New Testament, a multitude of ‘apocryphal’ texts and at least five attempts at canonization by different Christian groups<sup>10</sup>, what we now call ‘the Bible’ is *certainly* distinct from that of Hellenistic Judaism (and, thus, of the Septuagint).

The particular Bible which became the Septuagint is, simply put, bipartite: roughly speaking, it is the *Tanakh* (the so-called “Hebrew Bible”) and an extra group of texts called *Anagignoskomena* (ἀναγιγνωσκόμενα, "things that are read"). **TaNaKh** is an acronym of *Tōrah* (“laws”, or the five books of Moses”), *Nevi'im* (“Prophets”) and *Ketuvim* (“writings”, which include sections such as Chronicles, Ecclesiastes, Daniel and Ezra). To be completely accurate, the order and grouping of the texts within the *Tanakh* portion of the Septuagint is not identical to that of its Hebrew counterpart but is, on the whole, similar.<sup>11</sup> The *Anagignoskomena* are the collection of texts *not* found in the Hebrew but are now part of the Orthodox and Catholic canon. Overlapping with the Protestant and Anglican ‘apocrypha’, the *Anagignoskomena* contain books such as Tobit, Judith and the Wisdom of Solomon.

Now that the biblical texts and the contexts of the Hellenistic Jews has been roughly laid out, what was the relationship between the Jews and the Septuagint, and, furthermore, between the Septuagint and Orthodox Christianity?

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<sup>10</sup> Before the split between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, there was one attempt at canonization in the 5th century CE; later attempts include that of the Council of Trent (1546), Church of England (1563), English Calvinists (1647) and the Synod of Jerusalem (1672) which included additional canons for the Orthodox Church.

<sup>11</sup> For example, the Septuagint presents Samuel I&II and Kings I&II simply as “Of Kings” (Βασιλειῶν). The reasons behind different order and grouping is unclear.

The earliest mention of the Septuagint's origin, which establishes direct contact with the Jews, is in the 2nd-century BCE pseudo-epigraphic 'Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates'. Attempting to create a 'universal' library, Ptolemy II, a 4th-century BCE king of Egypt is said to have asked seventy-two Jewish scholars to translate the *Torah* from Biblical Hebrew into (Koine) Greek. A similar story is also found in a Jewish source, the Babylonian Talmud:

"King Ptolemy once gathered 72 Elders. He placed them in 72 chambers, each of them in a separate one, without revealing to them why they were summoned. He entered each one's room and said: "Write for me the Torah of Moshe, your teacher." God put it in the heart of each one to translate identically as all the others did."<sup>12</sup>

However, if both the famous pseudo-epigraphic 'Letter of Aristeas' and the Babylonian Talmud assert that the number of translators was *seventy-two*, how, then, did this text come to be called the 'Septuagint'? One possible theory, proposed by Ralph Marcus, is that Josephus, in paraphrasing the Letter of Aristeas in his *Jewish Antiquities*, ended up 'paraphrasing' the number itself. In sections 12.39, 46 and 56, Josephus refers to "seventy-two" translators, yet in the next, he writes:

"But I have not thought it necessary to report the names of the seventy (*hebdomekonta*) elders... who brought the Law."<sup>13</sup>

This reference to the number "seventy" is then enforced by Augustine approximately 250 years later, in *The City of God*: "this name ["Septuaginta"] has now become traditional."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Tractate Magillah, from the Babylonian Talmud.

<sup>13</sup> Marcus, *Josephus*, vol. 7, p. 31.

<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 18.42

However, by 200 CE, approximately 600 years after its translation, the Jewish use of the Septuagint had declined. Würthwein states that this may have been due to its increasing association with the new (and growing) religion, Christianity.<sup>15</sup> After all, (gentile) Christians of the Early Christian period had to read the Bible in Greek (i.e., the Septuagint) rather than in Hebrew. As such, Jews during that period may have wished to distance themselves from the movement by returning to the traditional Hebrew and Aramaic scriptures.

The next (and last) question addresses the relationship between the Septuagint and Christianity. There are two possible ways of answering this: the first is textual, while the other looks at the Septuagint's influence on the New Testament. First, the Septuagint has become the Old Testament of the Eastern Orthodox Church.<sup>16</sup> A clear example of this is that the Greek term for 'Old Testament' is *Ἡ μετάφραση τῶν ἑβδομήκοντα* ("the translation of the seventy"). (Since the Greek Orthodox Church prefers to use the Septuagint version of the Old Testament, one major difference then between the Greek Old Testament and (Jewish) *Tanakh* is the presence of the *Anagignoskomena* in the Greek text.)

The second answer to the question of the relationship between the Septuagint and Christianity lies, perhaps surprisingly, in the New Testament itself: of the 300 or so Old Testament quotations in the New Testament, approximately 200 are of the Septuagint. Examples of these quotations (with their Greek-Hebrew difference) include: perhaps most famously, Matthew 1:23, quoting Isaiah 7:14, "behold, a virgin will conceive"<sup>17</sup>, while the Hebrew text (of Isaiah) states "behold, a young woman shall

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<sup>15</sup> Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament*, trans. Errol F. Rhodes, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. Eerdmans, 1995

<sup>16</sup> Orthodox Study Bible, p. xv, Conciliar Press, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> Septuagint Isaiah 7:14 "....ἰδοὺ ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἔξει καὶ τέξεται υἷόν..."

conceive”<sup>18</sup>. Furthermore, in Mark 7:6-8, Jesus quotes (as Mark writes it) the Septuagint form of Isaiah 29:13: “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precept of men.”<sup>19</sup>

The most important point regarding the significant amount of quotations from the Septuagint by major New Testament authors may be that we are given a sense of which *particular* text and *in what language* the like of John, Luke and Matthew read. This case, then, is surely exemplary of the legacy of Alexander the Great on Hellenistic Jews and, subsequently, the work of the Hellenistic Jews on early and later Christianity.

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<sup>18</sup> *Tanakh* Isaiah 7:14 “הַנְּהַהֲעֲלֶמָה, הַרְהַרְוּ לִדְתַּבְּנִי”

<sup>19</sup> Isaiah 29:13 of the Septuagint: εἶπεν κύριος ἐγγίξει μοι ὁ λαὸς οὗτος τοῖς χεῖλεσιν αὐτῶν τιμῶσίν με ἢ δὲ καρδία αὐτῶν πόρρω ἀπέχει ἀπ’ ἐμοῦ μάτην δὲ σέβονται με διδάσκοντες ἐντάλματα ἀνθρώπων καὶ διδασκαλίας