

## HISTORY OF THE SEPTUAGINT

The Septuagint is the ancient translation of the Old Testament into Greek by the Jews. The Pentateuch, the central core of the Old Testament canon, was translated first, and, according to the Letter of Aristeas this was done during the rule of Ptolemy Philadelphus (285-247 B.C.). The Letter informs us that this translation was made in Alexandria by 70 or to be more accurate 72 Jewish scholars, and that is how it received the name "Septuagint" (LXX). This title, though it originally applied only to the translation of the Pentateuch, was eventually used for the whole of the Greek version of the Old Testament. That is because the translation of the Pentateuch was followed by that of the other books.

The translation of these latter was evidently the work of a great number of different people. We know this first of all because of the variations in rendering, ranging from quite literal to quite free, and in the second place because of the differences in Greek style. As the Prologue to the Book of Ecclesiasticus shows, around the end of the 2nd century B.C., there was in existence a Greek translation of the whole Old Testament. There is no reason to doubt that the LXX text of that day was in general agreement with our present-day LXX text.

Nevertheless, as far as details are concerned, it may well be that several kinds of alterations have taken place. The LXX went through an eventful history from the time of its origin up to the 4th century A.D., when our most ancient complete manuscripts were produced. For the time before the 4th century A.D., we possess only some fragments, but the history of the LXX before that time had to have had a determining impact on the existing manuscripts.

The LXX was a Jewish work and was held in high esteem by the Jews until its use by the Christians became very important. According to the Letter of Aristeas, the translation of the Pentateuch was accorded official recognition by the Jewish Community in Alexandria, and Jewish writers such as Philo and Josephus used it primarily and often exclusively. The LXX was of the greatest importance to the preservation and expansion of Judaism. The Jews who, after the beginning of the Dispersion, lived far from the land of Israel, came to be less and less familiar with the Hebrew language, so they needed something in a more or less universal language. Greek served that purpose, and the LXX enabled them to remain faithful to the Law and the rest of the Sacred Scriptures, and (not of least importance) enabled those who were not Jews to study these writings.

The LXX also paved the way for Christian missions when they came along. In the first days of Christianity the Old Testament was the

only Holy Scripture for the Christians, just as it was for the Jews, and the Christian missionaries were able to discover a ready-made point of contact wherever there had already spread a knowledge of the Old Testament. So it was only natural that the earliest Christian communities were formed to a large extent of Jews of the Dispersion, and the LXX, which had already spread to all such places and was well-known, was simply adopted by the Christians as the Church's Bible.

Thus it was that the Jews became alienated from the LXX a short time after they discovered the Christian Church was using it. Several factors seem to have been key to this:

1. In the frequent debates that took place between Christians and Jews, the former often quoted from the LXX, which the Jews did not like. So they discovered differences between the Hebrew versions and the LXX, particularly the well-known difference in Isaiah 7:14, where the Greek says "Behold a virgin shall conceive and give birth to a son." The Jews said this was because of inaccuracies in the LXX and the Christians pointed out that the word was used by the old Jewish translators themselves.
2. It is possible that towards the end of the first century A.D., the text and canon of the Old Testament were definitely fixed by the Jewish scholars in Palestine. The LXX, which was produced at an earlier time, often differed from this new fixed canon. It included books and portions of books which did not belong to the Palestinian canon and which sometimes also assumed a different (and earlier) Hebrew text. As the rulings which at that time prevailed in Palestine came to be accepted as normative for the whole of the Jewish Dispersion, the LXX naturally lost its former authority among the Jews while at the same time it had become the authority for the Christians. They would certainly differ.
3. In the first thirty or so years of the 2nd century A.D., a school of Rabbinic interpretation became dominant which laid emphasis on every letter of the sacred text and which drew the most far-fetched and quite unusual conclusions from the most unimportant of details. This made quite a different thing of the Old Testament than a straight-forward reading of the LXX.
4. As a result the Jews of that time put together an entirely new Greek translation of the Old Testament, rendering every detail of the sacred Text as precisely as possible into Greek and often with outrageous interpretations of the Greek language. In fact, this translation, done by one Aquila, was in places completely incomprehensible to non-Jews. The Jews, however, held this translation (if it could even be so called) in the highest esteem, using it even in their services. It was not until finally it was required in all Jewish communities that the Hebrew text be

used for study and for services that Aquila's translation lost its authority.

5. Soon after Aquila also in the 2nd century A.D. two other Greek translations were done, those of Theodotion and Symmachus. Theodotion mostly followed the LXX, "correcting" it according to the current Hebrew text. Symmachus did do an entirely new translation, keeping close to the current Hebrew text. There were also some translations of single books of the Old Testament, most of which are preserved only in fragments.

All these translations influenced the Christian Church, particularly through the work of Origen, who devoted himself to an intense study of the Old Testament Text. His most famous work was the Hexapla, which he produced in Palestine about the 4th decade of the 3rd century A.D. He placed side by side in 6 parallel columns the Hebrew text, a Greek transcription, and the four Greek translations mentioned above: LXX, Aquila, Theodotion, and Symmachus. In this Hexapla Origen made several alterations to the LXX.

Origen said his Hexapla was designed only for the use of scholars. He intended, according to his letter to Julius Africanus, that it should serve in particular as armor for the Christian controversialist in his conflict with the Jews, who were continually going to their Hebrew O.T. and ridiculing their opponents use of the LXX. The object of the Hexapla was to enable the Christians to defeat the Jews with their own weapons and win their respect. On the other hand, where it was a matter of the use of the Old Testament in church, it was Origen's wish that the Church retain the traditional LXX text. Actually, the gigantic size of the whole Hexapla kept it from being used very widely at all.

In the middle of the 3rd century A.D., however, the presbyter Lucian at Antioch made revisions of the LXX, using great freedom in making grammatic and stylistic changes. And, his intent to make a revision for use in the Church was somewhat successful. His recension received wide circulation. By 400 A.D. this version was predominant throughout the area from Antioch to Constantinople.

In Palestine, at the beginning of the 4th century, however, a Christian scholar named Pamphilus had dug out Origen's revision, and this became popular throughout the area around Palestine. Jerome ran across it there in the late 3rd century. He also mentions a third recension of the LXX which must be traced to a certain Hesychius, about whom we know practically nothing. That version was widely used in Egypt about 400 A.D., having already been around for about a century.

Continuously, since those days the LXX has been the Old Testament

of the Orthodox Church. Even to this day, however, there has not been a translation of the whole of the LXX, in the order in which it has been passed down, into the English language. That is our current task.