

1

The Origin of the Septuagint and Other Greek Versions

Defining Our Terms. The term *Septuagint*, which has been used in a confusing variety of ways, gives the inaccurate impression that this document is a homogeneous unit. Important distinctions sometimes need to be made, such as the contrast between the initial translation of the Pentateuch (the Septuagint proper) and the earliest translation of other books (the Old Greek).

The First Greek Translation. The *Letter of Aristeas*, in spite of its legendary character, seems to preserve some valuable information. The Pentateuch was originally translated in Alexandria around the year 250 B.C.E., and the rest of the Hebrew Bible was translated within the following two centuries. The precise reason for the translation of the Pentateuch at that time is debated by scholars. Later traditions, which provide little help in sorting out the origins of the Septuagint, are in part responsible for the present terminological confusion.

The Later Greek Translations. For several reasons, such as dissatisfaction with the Septuagint, other attempts were made to render the Hebrew Bible into Greek. *Aquila* was a Jewish proselyte who tried to represent almost every detail of the Hebrew text consistently. *Symmachus* produced a careful translation that can be characterized as moderately "literal," while showing sensitivity to Greek idiom. The translation associated with *Theodotion* has some points of contact with that of Aquila, but its origin is the subject of much scholarly debate. We know little about the *Other Versions* from antiquity.

Defining Our Terms

Strictly speaking, there is really no such thing as *the* Septuagint. This may seem like an odd statement in a book entitled *Invitation to the Septuagint*, but unless the reader appreciates the fluidity and ambiguity of the term, he or she will quickly become confused by the literature.¹

One might think that the Septuagint is the Greek version of the Bible in the same way that the Vulgate, for example, is the Latin version. The difference between them, however, is much greater than simply the language used. The Vulgate was largely the work of one man (Jerome) at one time (the end of the fourth century) in one place (Bethlehem).² As a result, the Latin Vulgate is characterized by unity throughout. Not so with the Septuagint, which was produced by many people unknown to us, over two or three centuries, and almost certainly in more than one location. Consequently, the Greek Old Testament does not have the unity that the term *the Septuagint* might imply.

Because the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible has such a long and complicated history, the name *Septuagint* is used to refer to several quite different things. In its most general sense, the term refers to any or all ancient Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible, just as one might now refer in general to the “English Bible,” with no particular translation in mind. This is the sense in which the term is used in the title of our book—a book about the ancient Greek version(s) of the Hebrew Bible. Often, the term is also used to refer to a particular printed edition of the Greek text, whether that edition reproduces the text of a particular manuscript or prints a reconstructed text.³

Given these typical uses of the term *Septuagint*, one might understandably, though mistakenly, infer that the Greek translation found in a given ancient manuscript or modern edition is a homogeneous text produced in its entirety at one point in time. In fact, no such homogeneity exists in any collection of the Greek books of the Old Testament. Each edition—whether an ancient, hand-copied manuscript such as

1. See Leonard J. Greenspoon, “The Use and Abuse of the Term ‘LXX’ and Related Terminology in Recent Scholarship,” *BIOSCS* 20 (1987): 21–29.

2. Jerome’s work began as a revision of earlier Latin versions (the Old Latin), which had themselves been translated from the Septuagint. His own translation of the Hebrew text was produced in the years 390–405 and much later came to be known as the Vulgate, from Latin *vulgatus* (“commonly known, in general circulation”).

3. For example, *The Old Testament in Greek according to the Septuagint*, 3 vols., ed. Henry Barclay Swete (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1887–94), is a diplomatic edition that, aside from minor corrections, simply prints the text of Codex Vaticanus. On the other hand, *Septuaginta*, 2 vols., ed. Alfred Rahlfs (Stuttgart: Württembergische Bibelanstalt, 1935), prints an eclectic text based on several manuscripts. Both of these editions include at the bottom of the page a brief apparatus that indicates some of the more important differences (“textual variants”) among the manuscripts.

Vaticanus or a modern, printed book such as the Rahlfs edition—is an amalgam, with each section of the Bible having a long and separate textual history.

The books of the Hebrew Bible were originally translated independently into Greek by different translators over several centuries. What we call books were at that time written on individual scrolls. Typically no longer than thirty-five feet, a single scroll could not contain the Greek version of the Hebrew Bible in its entirety, and so each book was usually written on a separate scroll. A different format, the codex,⁴ came into use in the second century of the Christian era. This format made it possible to bind originally separate texts (which would fill many scrolls) into one volume, giving a false impression of homogeneity. Just because the texts were bound together, one should not infer that they shared a common origin. In fact, there was no one uniform Greek version of the entire Hebrew Bible—just individual scrolls that had been copied from other scrolls through the ages. For instance, a medieval Greek codex might contain the text of Genesis copied from a manuscript produced in the first century of our era and containing the translation originally made in the third century B.C.E. in Alexandria, while the text of Esther bound in the same codex may have been copied from a manuscript produced in the fourth century of our era and containing a translation made in the first century B.C.E. in Jerusalem.

The particular collection of Greek texts of the biblical books that comprise the earliest one-volume Bibles, such as Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, usually came to be by the historical happenstance of whatever texts were at hand, irrespective of their origin and character. Therefore, whatever one may say about the history and characteristics of the Greek text of one biblical book may not be true of the others, even though they are bound together in one codex. And because modern critical editions of the Septuagint are based on the ancient manuscripts, the same misleading appearance of homogeneity exists today.

When one enters the highly specialized world of textual criticism, the name *Septuagint* takes on a more precise and technical sense. It may be used specifically to distinguish the oldest Greek translation from subsequent translations and revisions of the Greek. If the term is used in this narrower sense, it refers only to the original Greek version of the Pentateuch, for that was the first part of the Hebrew Bible translated in the third century B.C.E. The remaining books of the Hebrew canon were translated by different people in different places during

4. The term *codex* refers to ancient books, the leaves of which were handwritten and stitched together by hand, thus resembling the modern book format. The earliest complete copies of the Greek Bible survive in this form.

the next two centuries. It has become customary, however, to extend the term *Septuagint* to refer to the complete Greek canon of the Hebrew Bible.

It is probably better to refer to the original translation of books other than the Pentateuch as the Old Greek (OG) so as to distinguish them from the original translation of the Pentateuch and from the later revisions and new translations. (When referring to these initial Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible as a whole, some scholars prefer the combined abbreviation “LXX/OG” as a continual reminder of the diversity that characterizes the corpus.) However, when the Greek version of a biblical book survives in more than one form, it is not always possible to know with certainty which is the older. Nor is it possible to know for sure if the oldest surviving form was in fact the first Greek translation made of that book. Therefore, even the term *Old Greek* is not totally satisfactory. Unless the context requires a distinction, we will in this book continue to use the term *Septuagint* in its general sense (but enclosed in quotation marks if some ambiguity is present).

The scope of modern Septuagint studies extends beyond the canon of the Hebrew Bible. It includes texts from the Hellenistic period that are not translations from the Hebrew at all, but rather Jewish writings composed in Greek, such as 3 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees, and the Wisdom of Solomon. Some other books, such as Judith, survive as complete copies only in Greek, even though they were probably translated from a Semitic source that is no longer extant. These texts may also be in mind when the term *Septuagint* is used.

The reader is cautioned, therefore, that there is really no such thing as *the* Septuagint. One must pay particular care to the context in which the term is used, even by the same writer—and even in the present book! Unfortunately, some writers use the term carelessly and equivocally, and the inevitable confusion that results from such ambiguity has led Septuagint scholars to call for standard terminology. This may be easier said than done, however, for the ambiguities of the term go back to antiquity.

We have no evidence that any Greek version of the Hebrew Bible, or even of the Pentateuch, was called the “Septuagint” prior to the second century of this era. The word came into English from Latin *Septuaginta* (“seventy”), a shortened form of the title *Interpretatio septuaginta virorum*: “The Translation of the Seventy Men.” This title arose from the Greek word for “the seventy” (*hoi hebdomēkonta*), which had been used by second-century Christian writers to refer to the entire Greek Old Testament, even though only the first five books were traditionally said to have been produced by seventy (either a round figure or an abbreviation for seventy-two) translators in Alexandria, Egypt, in the

third century B.C.E.⁵ These circumstances also explain why the Septuagint is commonly abbreviated today with the Roman numeral for seventy, LXX.

The First Greek Translation

The earliest extant account of the original Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible is found in the *Letter of Aristeas* (or *Pseudo-Aristeas*).⁶ This document purports to be a lengthy, personal letter from a man named Aristeas to his “brother” (or friend) Philocrates. It describes, among other things, how the Jewish Torah was first translated from Hebrew into Greek for the great library of the Egyptian king Ptolemy Philadelphus (285–247 B.C.E.) in Alexandria. Copies of this so-called letter survive in about two dozen medieval manuscripts, the earliest of which dates to the eleventh century. The length and character of the *Letter of Aristeas* and its apparently wide copying and circulation suggest that the document was not personal correspondence from one person to another, but was intended as an “open letter” to a wider audience.

According to the author of the letter, the king’s librarian requested the high priest of the temple in Jerusalem to send translators with the Hebrew Torah scrolls to Alexandria. The high priest complied, sending six men from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, that is, seventy-two translators, with a large escort carrying gifts for the king. The twelve tribes of Israel had long before been dispersed, so if there is any truth to this unlikely story, the number of people sent would have been merely a symbolic gesture. Aristeas was among the envoys.

The entourage from Jerusalem was welcomed to Alexandria with a royal banquet lasting several days, during which time the king and the envoys from the high priest discussed questions of theology and ethics. Finally, the translators were escorted to an island called Pharos, connected by a causeway to Alexandria. Working there for seventy-two days, they produced the first Greek translation of the Pentateuch. When the translation was complete, it was read to an assembly of the

5. Because the Greek letter *omicron* is used to represent the numeral 70, the Septuagint (or Old Greek) is often referred to with the abbreviation $\omicron\iota\omicron'$ or simply \omicron' .

6. For an English translation of Aristeas, see R. J. H. Shutt, “Letter of Aristeas,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 2.7–34. The Greek text of the document is printed in Henry Barclay Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914; repr. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1989), 533–606. See also Moses Hadas, *Aristeas to Philocrates (Letter of Aristeas)* (Dropsie College Edition: Jewish Apocryphal Literature; New York: Harper, 1951), which includes a full introduction, the Greek text and English translation on facing pages, and notes.

Jews of Alexandria, who enthusiastically received it and gave the translators a great ovation. The Jews asked the king's librarian to make a copy of the new translation for use in their community. To ensure that the original words of the translators would be preserved in perpetuity, the priests and elders pronounced a curse on anyone who should later change the text in any way.

Scholars today believe that this letter was written, not at a time contemporaneous with the events it describes, but in the second century B.C.E., to defend Judaism in general and the Greek version in particular.⁷ During the conflict in Judaism over Hellenization, some Jews embraced the Greek language and culture while others resisted such acculturation on religious principle. It is also very likely that the Greek translation of the Pentateuch did not enjoy universal favor among the Jews. A hundred years or more after the translation was produced, the *Letter of Aristeas* was probably written to address this situation. Claiming that the translation was made from the Jerusalem scrolls under circumstances that paralleled the giving of the law on Sinai, the author seeks to give the Greek version of the Scriptures used in Alexandria authority and veneration, such as the Hebrew texts in Jerusalem enjoyed.

Even though the authenticity of the letter should be rejected, some of its information is probably reliable. The first Greek translation of the Hebrew Torah would have been needed by Jews living in the Diaspora during the Hellenistic period (i.e., after Alexander's conquest in 333 B.C.E.). Even earlier, during the Persian period, significant communities of Aramaic-speaking Jews already lived in Egypt: papyri from Elephantine show an established Jewish community there as early as 495 B.C.E. After Alexander's conquest of the Persian Empire, Alexandria became home to a large Greek-speaking Jewish population. It is therefore likely that the Pentateuch was first translated into Greek by or for the Alexandrian Jews during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus in the middle of the third century B.C.E. (The historical and prophetic books of the Hebrew Bible were probably translated into Greek during the following century, but we do not know where or by whom.)⁸

7. The debate about the origin, date, and purpose of the *Letter of Aristeas* is itself a well-defined topic of research within Septuagint studies.

8. Around the middle of the second century, Jewish historian Eupolemos seems to have used a Greek version of Chronicles (Swete, *Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, 24–25). The Greek text of the Wisdom of Joshua ben Sira (also known as Sirach or Ecclesiasticus), dated about 132 B.C.E., contains a prologue that makes reference to a translation of "the law, the prophets, and the rest of the books." (The original Hebrew of this book was written by Joshua ben Sira ca. 180, then later translated into Greek by his grandson, who added the prologue.) In spite of this statement, scholars believe that most of the Writings, such as the wisdom books, were not translated until the first century B.C.E.

But what about the other details of the story? The language of the translation bears the marks of the Greek spoken in Egypt, and it seems improbable that it would have been produced by a large group of Palestinian scholars. It is much more reasonable to believe that a handful of Greek-speaking Alexandrian Jews were responsible for it. As for the claim that the translation was based on Hebrew scrolls brought from Jerusalem, we have no clear evidence to refute it, but few scholars accept its validity.

More difficult to assess is the role supposedly played by the king's librarian. Many scholars, thinking it unlikely that the Greeks themselves would have taken the initiative to produce a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, reject this element of the story as pure embellishment. On the other hand, some specialists are hesitant to dismiss altogether the possibility that court officials may have had an active interest in gaining access to the formative documents of the large and significant Jewish population. The *Letter of Aristeas* may reflect some reliable information concerning the Ptolemaic court's support, if not sponsorship, of the translation.

But the questions do not end here. Even if the Greeks had some involvement in this project, the interests of the Jewish population itself must have been prominent. Was the translation then undertaken because of the needs of the Greek-speaking worshipers who no longer understood Hebrew? Or was it done rather for the academic purposes of Hebrew students and scholars who would be more likely to make sense of the translation's many difficult, literal renderings? It may well be that all of these concerns, and perhaps others as well, were motivating factors in the production of the Septuagint.

The very intensity with which the *Letter of Aristeas* defends the legitimacy of the translation raises an additional question. A great Hebraist of a previous generation, Paul Kahle, argued forcefully that the author of this document was in fact defending the Alexandrian version against competing Greek translations.⁹ Septuagint scholars, following the lead of Paul de Lagarde in the nineteenth century, have generally believed that there was only one initial Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible and that the recovery of that "Proto-Septuagint" (Ur-Septu-

9. Kahle articulated some of his views on the Septuagint very early in his career. For a mature statement, see *The Cairo Geniza*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), chap. 3. Part of the argument was based on the meaning of the Greek verb *sēmainō* in the *Letter of Aristeas* §30, which says that the Jewish laws found in the Hebrew language had been "written" carelessly. Kahle claimed that the verb means "translated" and that this statement refers to the existence of previous and unsatisfactory Greek translations rather than to imperfect Hebrew manuscripts. This interpretation has been refuted by several scholars. See especially the articles by David W. Gooding and Günther Zuntz reprinted in *Studies in the Septuagint: Origins, Recensions, and Interpretations*, ed. Sidney Jellicoe (New York: Ktav, 1974), 158–80, 208–25.

aginta) is the great task at hand.¹⁰ Kahle insisted, however, that originally simultaneous Greek translations were produced over time, in a manner not unlike that of the Aramaic Targumim, and that the *Letter of Aristeas* sought to impose the authority of one such translation over the other ones. Although Kahle's theories created heated controversy during his lifetime, relatively few scholars were persuaded by them. Lagarde's position, with some modifications, has been confirmed by later investigation and functions as the working assumption for most specialists.¹¹

Writers subsequent to the *Letter of Aristeas* add little information of substance.¹² Philo, a Jewish Alexandrian philosopher who lived in the first century of our era, embellished the story of the origin of the Greek version of the Bible. Probably relying on an earlier tradition, he writes that the translators worked independently of each other, yet produced the same translation word-for-word through divine dictation. Philo believed that the Greek translation had been divinely inspired just as the original Hebrew had been.

By the second century, we have evidence of an alternate Jewish tradition, found in rabbinic material, that gives the number of translators who went to Alexandria as seventy, not seventy-two.¹³ This detail is probably intended to justify the claim that the Greek version, like the Hebrew, was divinely inspired. Seventy elders of Israel accompanied Moses to Mount Sinai and saw God (Exod. 24:1–2, 9–11); moreover, seventy elders received a share of the Spirit that was in Moses (Num. 11:10–25). By numbering the translators of the Torah as seventy, the tradition portrays them as assistants to Moses working centuries later to administer the law. The name *Septuagint* reflects this tradition. It first appears in Greek (*hoi hebdomēkonta*, “the seventy”) in the mid-second century and thereafter only in Christian writers, such as Justin, Irenaeus, Eusebius, and Chrysostom. The term was most often used by these writers to refer in general to the entire Greek Old Testament, without distinguishing its various revisions and forms.

10. For further information on Lagarde, see below, chap. 11, pp. 242–45.

11. See especially John W. Wevers, “Proto-Septuagint Studies,” in *The Seed of Wisdom: Essays in Honour of T. J. Meek*, ed. W. S. McCullough (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964), 58–77; idem, “Barthélemy and Proto-Septuagint Studies,” *BIOSCS* 21 (1988): 23–34, esp. 24–26.

12. For a description of embellishments to the story as it was transmitted through history, see Sidney Jellicoe, *The Septuagint and Modern Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 38–47.

13. See *Sefer Tora* 1.8 (a minor tractate in the Babylonian Talmud). Still another tradition gives the number of translators as five. The minor tractate *Soferim* 1.7–8 combines two of these traditions by stating that an initial unsatisfactory translation was made for Ptolemy by five elders, but that subsequently seventy-two elders who had divine assistance produced a successful work.

In the third century, the use of the term became even more confused. As we shall see in the next chapter, Origen revised the Greek translation commonly used in the third century, “correcting” it on the basis of the Hebrew text available to him. After his work, the name *Septuagint* began to be used to refer both to the Greek text he had used as his base *and* to the text that resulted from his revisions!

The term *the Seventy* is found in colophons in biblical manuscripts as early as the fourth century.¹⁴ It is not known if such a notation was used to distinguish the text of these manuscripts from other Greek versions known to the scribes at that time or was intended simply to identify the proper textual pedigree of the manuscript. In any case, the confusion resulting from the imprecise and ambiguous use of the name *Septuagint* today reflects the long and complicated history of the term and the texts to which it refers.

The Later Greek Translations

As we have seen, early Christian writers made frequent use of the Greek Old Testament and referred to it with the Greek or Latin term meaning “the Seventy.” From time to time, however, they would also refer to alternate renderings found in other translations. These references are often vague, but many passages specifically identify translations attributed to three scholars: Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion. Sometimes they are referred to as a group, “the Three (Translators).”¹⁵ Today they are often called “the Later Versions” or (for reasons to be discussed in the next chapter) “the Hexaplaric Versions.” None of these works has survived, except for a few fragments,¹⁶

14. A colophon is a scribal notation at the end of a manuscript (or of a section in the manuscript), giving indications regarding its production. For example, a note following the Book of Genesis in Codex Vaticanus (fourth century) says that the Greek text is *kata tous hebdomēkonta* (“according to the seventy”; see Rahlfs’s *Septuaginta*, 1.86). In Codex Ephraemi (fifth century), the Greek text of Proverbs is followed by the comment *para hebdomēkonta* (“from the seventy”; see Swete’s *Old Testament in Greek*, 2.479). Since both of these codices also contain the books of the New Testament, the manuscripts were apparently produced within the Christian tradition.

15. These translations are often referred to by the initial Greek letter of each name: α’, σ’, θ’. As a group, they may be called οἱ τρεῖς (“the three”), abbreviated οἱ γ’, or οἱ λοιποὶ (“the others”), abbreviated οἱ λ’.

16. In 1897, for example, as a result of excavations in the genizah (a storage area for worn-out documents) of a synagogue in Cairo, a sixth-century palimpsest was discovered. (A palimpsest is a manuscript that was erased and rewritten with a second text. By applying chemicals and ultraviolet light, the erased text can be read with some difficulty.) When the manuscript was brought to Cambridge, England, its underwriting was found to preserve two small portions of an uncial manuscript of Aquila’s translation of 1–2 Kings. See Swete, *Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, 34.

but we have valuable evidence in numerous patristic quotations, as well as in marginal notations in manuscripts. With regard to their origin, these later translations are to be clearly distinguished from the "Septuagint," but as we shall see, the textual transmission of all these documents eventually became closely intertwined.

The rise of Christianity from Judaism in the first century of our era is usually given as the reason new Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible were needed. The Christian church first flourished in Jerusalem among Jews who recognized Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and who interpreted the death and resurrection of Jesus in light of the sacred Scriptures of the Judaism of their day. When Christianity spread outside the borders of Palestine, it was apparently the Greek version of the Jewish Scriptures from which the apostles, especially Paul, preached Christ. It is usually said that the resulting tension between Christians and Jews, both of whom used the Greek Bible but understood it differently, was the primary reason that the synagogue abandoned the "Septuagint" to the church and produced a new translation of the Hebrew texts.

While the early relationship between Christians and Jews no doubt played a major role in the history of the Greek versions, there was another factor that should not be overlooked. The recently discovered Dead Sea Scrolls provide indisputable evidence that at the turn of the era, before the birth of Christianity, the text of at least some books of the Hebrew Bible circulated in more than one form. One of these textual forms, however, emerged as *the* standard text by the beginning of the second century C.E., apparently supplanting all previous Hebrew texts. This situation alone could provide the need for a new Greek translation faithful to the newly standardized Hebrew text.

In addition, it is now clear that, even apart from Jewish-Christian polemics, there were different ideas among the Jews themselves about what a translation should look like. The discoveries in the Judean Desert have shed light on this issue as well. One of the more significant manuscripts found there is actually a Greek translation of the Minor Prophets.¹⁷ Dated no later than the first century of our era, it appears to be a revision of the "Septuagint" for those books of the Bible. This find provides clear evidence that prior to the second-century debates among Jews and Christians, more than one Greek version of the Bible was in circulation.

Aquila

According to ancient testimony, Aquila was a Gentile who had been commissioned by his relative, the Roman emperor Hadrian, to superin-

17. This discovery will be discussed in greater detail in chap. 8, pp. 171–73.

tend the rebuilding of Jerusalem (renamed Aelia Capitolina) around the year 128 c.e.¹⁸ While there, he became a Christian, but later converted to Judaism and studied under prominent rabbis. Aquila eventually undertook a new Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible that (a) was based on the recently standardized Hebrew text; (b) sought to correct perceived deficiencies in the Septuagint, including those that affected Jewish-Christian disputes;¹⁹ and (c) adopted a very literalistic approach that possibly reflected certain rabbinic methods of interpretation. Aquila's work, perhaps completed around the year 140, was received enthusiastically by the Greek-speaking Jewish communities and remained the form trusted by the synagogue well into the sixth century and beyond.

The literal character of Aquila's translation has not always been adequately understood. Some scholars give the impression that Aquila was either incompetent or eccentric, but the facts suggest otherwise. To begin with, we should note that Aquila allowed himself some flexibility in the area of syntax. Instead of representing Hebrew grammatical forms in one-to-one fashion, he would sometimes use the resources of the Greek language to provide stylistic variation.²⁰

In the area of vocabulary, undoubtedly, Aquila's policy was to represent every detail in the most consistent fashion, even at the cost of acceptable Greek. For example, Psalm 22:12b says, "Strong [bulls] of Bashan *surrounded* me." The Hebrew verb here, *kittēr*, happens to be related to the noun *keter* ("crown, turban"). Because this Hebrew noun is elsewhere rendered with the Greek *diadēma* ("band, diadem"), Aquila boldly makes up a new Greek verb, *diadēmatisō*, so that his translation would carry over into English as "strong ones of Bashan diademized me."²¹ We must not think that Aquila misunderstood the

18. For the evidence, see Swete, *Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, 31–34. Unfortunately, ancient statements can seldom be taken at face value.

19. The classic example is Isa. 7:14, where the Hebrew word *ʿalmâ* had been rendered *parthenos* ("virgin") by the Septuagint; Aquila used a different Greek word, *neanias* ("young woman"). Similarly, to represent the Hebrew word *māšiah* ("anointed, messiah") in Ps. 2:2, Aquila chose the Greek word *ēleimmenos* rather than *christos*, both of which mean "anointed."

20. Note, for example, his use of the optative and of the genitive absolute, for which Hebrew has no equivalents. See Kyösti Hyvärinen, *Die Übersetzung von Aquila* (Coniectanea biblica, Old Testament 10; Lund: Gleerup, 1977), 86. We strongly recommend that those who read Greek study carefully the specimens of Aquila's translation reproduced in Swete, *Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, 35–38, as well as the sample from Mal. 2:13 on p. 51 (the latter also includes the "Septuagint," Theodotion, and Symmachus).

21. See the evidence in Frederick Field, *Origenis Hexaplorum quae supersunt sive veterum interpretum graecorum in totum Vetus Testamentum fragmenta*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1875), 2.118. LSJ 393 has an entry for this verb (the only reference is this passage from Aquila) but gives the misleading meaning, "wear the [diadem]." The Hebrew verb is properly translated by the Septuagint (Ps. 21:13b) with *periechō* ("to surround").

meaning of the Hebrew verb or that he was simply being reckless. He was clearly guided by the principle of providing one-for-one lexical correspondences, and he did so even in the case of particles and certain word endings.

Almost surely, Aquila's method was intended as an aid to biblical exegesis, perhaps for people who had a minimal knowledge of Hebrew.²² We also have reason to believe that he may have been following a specific rabbinic approach to interpretation, although this point is disputed.²³ In any case, we should remember that some distinguished writers, even today, argue that translations ought to preserve both the content and the form of the original.²⁴ And for modern biblical scholars interested in reconstructing the Hebrew *Vorlage* or parent text of a Greek translation, Aquila's consistent method makes that task simpler.

Symmachus

Little is known about the origins of the Greek version attributed to Symmachus. He is said by some sources to have been an Ebionite Christian who produced his translation around the year 170 of our era.²⁵ A major recent study identifies Symmachus as a Jew (not an Ebionite) who undertook this task around the year 200 for the Jewish community in Caesarea of Palestine.²⁶

Scholars who have studied what remains of this translation agree that the work was carefully done. After examining the exegetical features of Symmachus's version of the Pentateuch, as well as its syntax and vocabulary, Alison Salvesen concludes that Symmachus produced a Greek translation of the Hebrew text of the Pentateuch that "combined the best Biblical Greek style, remarkable clarity, a high degree of accuracy regarding the Hebrew, and the rabbinic exegesis of his day: it might be described as a Greek Targum, or Tannaitic Septuagint."²⁷

22. Compare the way that "literal" English translations of the Bible are sometimes advertised as the next best thing to knowing Greek and Hebrew.

23. See below, chap. 13, p. 286.

24. See the discussion in Moisés Silva, *Has the Church Misread the Bible? The History of Interpretation in the Light of Current Issues* (1987); repr. in *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation*, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 45–47.

25. The Ebionites were a second-century sect of Palestinian Christians who held fast to the practices of Judaism, especially circumcision and observance of the Sabbath. Some scholars identify Symmachus as a disciple of Rabbi Meir mentioned in the Talmud, a Samaritan who converted to Judaism.

26. Alison Salvesen, *Symmachus in the Pentateuch* (Journal of Semitic Studies Monograph 15; Manchester: University of Manchester, 1991), 296–97, building on the work of Arie van der Kooij.

27. *Ibid.*, 297. The term *Tannaitic* refers to the rabbinic tradition during the first two centuries of our era.

On the basis of syntactic and lexical characteristics found also in the other Greek versions, Salvesen concludes that Symmachus “certainly knew Aquila,” “probably knew Theodotion,” and “likely” knew of the Septuagint as he produced his translation for the Jewish community of Caesarea in Palestine around the year 200. In short, Symmachus

aimed to produce a translation in clear Greek which accurately reflected the sense of the Hebrew original. His respect for the LXX is evident: he revised it in the spirit of the original translators of the Pentateuch, ironing out their lexical inconsistencies and inaccuracies, yet preserving smooth diction where he found it and extending it where it was absent.²⁸

Another specialist similarly states that Symmachus’s work on the Major Prophets is characterized by clarity (representing Hebrew idioms with natural Greek expressions), variety (one Hebrew term may be represented with several Greek terms), and coherence. Although the translator allowed himself the use of exegetical expansions, his approach was sober. In general, the translation stands midway between Aquila and the Septuagint.²⁹

Theodotion

The Greek translation attributed to Theodotion is especially problematic. According to the traditional view, Theodotion was a convert to Judaism who lived in Ephesus in the late second century. Taking the existing Greek version as his base, he revised it toward the standard Hebrew text. His work—which may fairly be characterized as literal, but not excessively so—includes features reminiscent of Aquila. One peculiarity is his penchant for transliterating (i.e., using Greek letters to represent the sound of the Hebrew) rather than translating certain words, such as the names for animals and plants. His translation of the Book of Daniel supplanted that of the “Septuagint” (better, the Old Greek), which was widely regarded as defective.³⁰

28. Ibid., 262. Leonard J. Greenspoon believes that Symmachus’s work is primarily a revision of Theodotion; see “Symmachus, Symmachus’s Version,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman et al., 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6.251.

29. José González Luis, *La versión de Símaco a los profetas mayores* (diss., Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 1981), 367–68. The last comment, like all comparisons with the “Septuagint” as a whole, could be misleading. In books where the Septuagint is very literal, Symmachus does not stand midway between it and Aquila. For example, the literal Septuagint rendering *huios thanatou* (“a son of death”) in 2 Sam. 12:5 becomes *axios thanatou* (“worthy of death”) in Symmachus.

30. Specifically, all but two surviving manuscripts have Theodotion’s translation, not the Old Greek, for Daniel. The exceptions are manuscripts 88 (11th century) and 967 (a second-century papyrus that is part of the Chester Beatty collection, discovered in 1931). The Old Greek is also reflected in a Syriac version known as the Syro-Hexaplar.

One of the problems with this description is that certain renderings once thought distinctive to Theodotion are now known to have existed a century or two before he lived. Note, for example, the reference to Daniel 6:23 in Hebrews 11:33. Although the author of Hebrews is otherwise heavily dependent on the “Septuagint” or the Old Greek, this passage reflects Theodotion’s rendering: “[God] shut the mouths of the lions” (*enephraxe ta stomata tōn leontōn*), rather than the Old Greek, which says, “God saved me from the lions” (*sesōke me ho theos apo tōn leontōn*). This phenomenon led to speculation about the existence of a “Proto-Theodotion,” and recent discoveries confirmed the view that, for at least parts of the Hebrew Bible, a translation very similar to Theodotion’s was already in use in the first century B.C.E. For reasons to be discussed elsewhere in this book,³¹ most scholars now prefer to speak of *Kaige*-Theodotion, meaning by that term a well-defined, pre-Christian revision of the Old Greek; it is also thought that this revision became the basis for the work of both Aquila and Symmachus. The work of the historical Theodotion may then be viewed as a later updating of the revision.

Also debated is the question of Daniel-Theodotion in particular. Some argue that the characteristics of this translation do not fit those found in materials otherwise attributed to Theodotion.³² Moreover, doubts have been raised about the usual view that Daniel-Theodotion is a revision of the Old Greek.³³ These and other questions will continue to occupy scholars for years to come.

Other Versions

In addition to the Three, other attempts were made to translate parts of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. Some church fathers, for example, make reference to *ho hebraios*,³⁴ an ambiguous term that in some contexts appears to mean “the Hebrew translator.” One also finds quite a few references to “the Syrian” (*ho syros*) and nearly fifty to “the Samariticon” (*to samar[e]itikon*).

31. See chap. 8, pp. 171–73, and chap. 13, pp. 284–86.

32. See A. Schmitt, *Stammt der sogenannte θ'-Text bei Daniel wirklich von Theodotion?* (Mitteilungen des Septuaginta-Unternehmens 9; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966); and his update in a later article, “Die griechische Danieltexte («θ'» und σ') und das Theodotionproblem,” *Biblische Zeitschrift* 36 (1992): 1–29.

33. See Tim McLay, *The OG and Th Versions of Daniel* (SBLSCS 43; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996).

34. Greek ὁ Ἑβραῖος (also τὸ ἑβραϊκόν), abbreviated ο εβρ'. For a fine summary of the research on this and other versions, see Natalio Fernández Marcos, *Introducción a las versiones griegas de la Biblia*, 2d ed. (Textos y Estudios “Cardenal Cisneros” 23; Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1998) = *The Septuagint in Context: An Introduction to the Greek Versions of the Bible*, trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson (Leiden: Brill, 2000), chaps. 10–11.

Little can be said with confidence about these versions. Moreover, as we shall see in the next chapter, Origen was familiar with three anonymous translations that have come to be known as Quinta, Sexta, and Septima. Of these, the Quinta is best attested, but not sufficiently to give us a complete picture.

The existence of such a variety of translations in addition to the original “Septuagint” needs to be taken seriously. Although the primary focus of the present book is indeed on that earlier form, subsequent developments shed considerable light on the subject as a whole. Moreover, the other translations and revisions had a deep effect on the transmission of the earlier work.

To Continue Your Study

Because we learn best when material is presented from more than one perspective, students are encouraged to supplement the present chapter, as well as the rest of part 1, with brief treatments found elsewhere. Dictionary and encyclopedia articles are well suited for this purpose. Note, for example, Melvin K. H. Peters, “Septuagint,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman et al., 6 vols. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 5.1093–1104. Older, but still very useful, is John W. Wevers, “Septuagint,” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 4.273–78, which was updated by Emanuel Tov and Robert A. Kraft in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume*, ed. Keith Crim et al. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 807–15. Compare also Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica*, trans. Erroll F. Rhodes, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 49–63, and comparable textbooks.

The classic source for information on Septuagint studies is Henry Barclay Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914; repr. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1989). See pages 1–58 for a more detailed treatment of the material covered in the present chapter. In spite of its age, Swete’s book provides data not found anywhere else, though readers should keep in mind that he assumes knowledge of biblical scholarship and proficiency in Greek and Latin. Sidney Jellicoe provided an indispensable updating of that volume in *The Septuagint and Modern Study* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), which assumes that the reader is familiar with Swete’s work; pages 29–99 provide extensive supplementary information on the origins of the Septuagint and the early revisions.

Introductory works in other modern languages include Natalio Fernández Marcos, *Introducción a las versiones griegas de la Biblia*, 2d ed. (Textos y Estudios “Cardenal Cisneros” 23; Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1998),³⁵ chapters 3–11, the most thorough and up-to-date summary and evaluation of current scholarly work; it includes extensive bibliographies. Also important though addressed to a more general audience is *La Bible Grecque des Septante: Du judaïsme hellénistique au christianisme ancien*, 2d ed. (Initiations au christianisme ancien; [Paris]: Cerf/Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1994), coauthored by Marguerite Harl, Gilles Dorival, and Olivier Munnich; see chapter 2 for a discussion of the origins of the Septuagint, and pages 142–61 for a treatment of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion. Finally, note the important essay by B. Botte and P.-M. Bogaert, “Septante et versions grecques,” in *Dictionnaire de la Bible, Supplément* 12.536–692.

35. Now available in English translation: *The Septuagint in Context: An Introduction to the Greek Versions of the Bible*, trans. Wilfred G. E. Watson (Leiden: Brill, 2000).