

Department of
New Testament Greek and Literature

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SEPTUAGINT FOR BIBLICAL STUDIES (Part I)

BY EVERETT F. HARRISON, TH.D., PH.D.

EDITOR'S NOTE : Dr. Harrison is Professor of New Testament at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California and an outstanding evangelical New Testament scholar.

In these days when the study of Greek as an element in ministerial training is being viewed with waning enthusiasm in many quarters, being reduced from a required to an elective status in institution after institution, some courage is required to maintain that the scope of Greek studies not only should be retained but broadened. Yet this is our conviction. How many seminary graduates of our era have made the acquaintance with the Greek Fathers through the original texts? Fortunately this deficiency is compensated for to some degree where there are courses in early church history which go into the source materials. But in the case of the Septuagint nothing in the curriculum helps to overcome the lack of familiarity with the Old Testament in Greek.

FIRST TRANSLATION OF OLD TESTAMENT

What Deissmann wrote years ago is worthy of repetition today. "The daughter belongs of right to the mother; the Greek Old and New Testaments form by their contents and by their fortunes an inseparable unity. The oldest manuscript Bibles that we possess are complete Bibles in Greek. But what history has joined together, doctrine has put asunder; the Greek Bible has been torn in halves. On the table of our theological students you will generally see the Hebrew Old Testament lying side by side with the Greek New Testament. It is one of the most painful deficiencies of Biblical study at

the present day that the reading of the Septuagint has been pushed into the background, while its exegesis has been scarcely begun."¹ The same writer holds out this inducement to the uninitiated: "A single hour lovingly devoted to the text of the Septuagint will further our exegetical knowledge of the Pauline Epistles more than a whole day spent over a commentary."² This was not theoretical with Deissmann, for he testified in another place, "In preparation on my first piece of work on the formula 'in Christ Jesus' I read rapidly through the whole Septuagint in order to establish the use in construction of the preposition 'ἐν.' (The English Concordance [Hatch and Redpath] fortunately had not then reached ε). I am indebted to this reading for great and continuous stimulus. For some years now there have been lectures and classes on the exegesis of the Septuagint held in the Theological Faculty at Berlin."³

To the Septuagint belongs the honor of being the oldest version of the Old Testament. Tradition tells us that the work was begun in Egypt during the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus (285-246 B.C.). At first the translation was confined to the Pentateuch, but within a century or thereabouts the remainder of the Old Testament had been rendered into Greek. Though the *Letter of Aristeas* ascribes the translation of the Law to the royal interest in literature, it is clear from the Letter itself, as Swete perceived,⁴ that the real inspiration for the version sprang from the need of the Jews in Alexandria for the Scriptures in their adopted language. Some Egyptian words, in fact, are imbedded in the text, testifying to its Alexandrian provenance. Examples are *κόνδυ*, a vessel or cup (Gen. 44:2); *θίβις*, ark (Ex. 2:3); and *πάπυρος*, which is well known in English in its transliterated form *papyrus* (Job 8:11). In addition, certain Greek words are chosen by the translators as specially fitted to convey information peculiar to Egyptian conditions. Such is the expression *ἀφέσεις*;

¹ *The Philology of the Greek Bible*, pp. 11, 12.

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³ Paul, p. 101, fn 1.

⁴ *Introduction to the O.T. in Greek*, p. 20.

ὕδατων in Joel 1:20, reflecting the network of channels or canals familiar to residents of Egypt. Deissmann notes that in Genesis 50:2 the Septuagint does not use the ordinary term for physician in rendering the Hebrew, but rather ἔνταφιαστής, "the technical term for members of the guild that looked after embalming."⁵ The facts seem to warrant Kahle's contention that, "It is clear that the version was not made by Palestinian Jews, but by people acquainted with the language spoken in Egypt."⁶ In the history of Bible translation, then, the Septuagint took a pioneering place, becoming the first of many hundreds of attempts to place the Scriptures, whether in whole or in part, in the hands of the people in a form they are able to comprehend for themselves.

During the course of the early Christian centuries several linguistic groups derived their Old Testament from the Septuagint rather than from the Hebrew. The most important of these versions were the Coptic, Syriac, and the Old Latin (in distinction from the Latin Vulgate of Jerome, who used both Hebrew and Greek in his work).

But the influence of the Septuagint was even greater and more continuous throughout the Greek-speaking church. Few of the Greek Fathers were conversant with Hebrew, so they read their Old Testaments in Greek and built their homilies on this text. Of the influence on the New Testament it will be necessary to comment later and in more detail.

RELATION TO OLD TESTAMENT CANON

The Septuagint necessarily enters into the discussion about the canon of the Old Testament. Our great uncial manuscripts of the Greek Bible, namely, Aleph, B, A, and C all contain the Old Testament Apocrypha whether in whole or in part. From this the conclusion has often been drawn that originally there was no clear-cut line between such books and the canonical Old Testament Scriptures, or at least that a more liberal attitude prevailed in Alexandria than in Palestine. The Pales-

¹ *The Philology of the Greek Bible*, p. 97.

² Paul E. Kahle, *The Cairo Genizah*, p. 132.

tinian view of the canon is set forth in Josephus' work *Contra Apionem* I, 8. Here it is indicated that the Jewish Scriptures consist of twenty-two books. Certain groups of books were treated as one in such an enumeration. It is clear that the canon did not admit of the inclusion of the Apocryphal books. New Testament use of the Old supports this restricted canon.

As to the attitude of Alexandrian Jews, we are fortunate in possessing a considerable body of writings from the pen of Philo, who flourished near the middle of the first Christian century. Philo's great preoccupation was with the Pentateuch, which he quotes about 2,000 times as over against some 50 times for the balance of the canonical Old Testament. But what of the Apocrypha? H. E. Pyle comments as follows on this matter: "Philo makes no quotations from the Apocrypha; and he gives not the slightest ground for the supposition that the Jews of Alexandria, in his time, were disposed to accept any of the books of the Apocrypha in their Canon of Holy Scripture. That there are occasional instances of correspondence in subject-matter and in phraseology between Philo and the books of the Apocrypha, in particular the Sapiential books, no one will dispute. But it is very doubtful whether the instances contain actual allusions to the Apocryphal writings. It is more probable that the use of similar terms arises merely from the discussion of similar topics. The phraseology of Philo helps to illustrate and explain that of the Apocrypha, and vice versa. More than this can hardly be affirmed with any confidence."⁷ It should be noted also in this connection that in no case where there is a supposed allusion to the Apocrypha does Philo make use of a formula of citation such as he employs when quoting passages from the acknowledged canon.

Some of the above-mentioned manuscripts of the Greek Bible include works of the early post-apostolic age also, such as the Epistle of Barnabas, the Shepherd of Hermas, and First Clement, which occupied a deuterocanonical position at best in the eyes of those who regarded them highly. Their

⁷ *Philo and Holy Scripture*, p. xxxiii.

presence, however, appended to the sacred text, helps us to understand the inclusion of the Old Testament Apocrypha. F. F. Bruce makes a suggestion as to the manner in which these latter books became joined to the canonical Old Testament Scriptures. "There is no evidence that these books were ever regarded as canonical by any Jews, whether inside or outside Palestine, whether they read the Bible in Hebrew or in Greek. The books of the Apocrypha were first given canonical status by Greek-speaking Christians, quite possibly through a mistaken belief that they already formed part of an Alexandrian canon. The Alexandrian Jews may have added these books to their versions of the Scriptures, but that was a different matter from canonizing them. As a matter of fact, the inclusion of the apocryphal books in the Septuagint may partly be due to ancient bibliographical conditions. When each book was a papyrus or parchment roll, and a number of such rolls were kept together in a box, it was quite likely that uncanonical documents might be kept in a box along with canonical documents, without acquiring canonical status. Obviously the connection between various rolls in a box is much looser than that between various documents which are bound together in a volume."⁸

RELATION TO OLD TESTAMENT TEXT

Another area in which the Septuagint proves its value is in the opportunity it affords us to compare the extent of the text in each book with the text as we have received it from the Hebrew tradition. Antedating as it does our Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament, it gives us a check on the actual amount of the text. The agreement is not complete, but substantially so, especially when the addition to Daniel and Esther are excepted, since they really form part of the Apocrypha. Ordinarily one may read chapter after chapter and find that the text underlying the Greek is the same in its length as the text of our Hebrew Old Testament. The differences in order, especially in Jeremiah, constitute a vexed

⁸ *The Books and the Parchments*, p. 157.

problem, but it a rather peripheral problem as compared to the possession of the text itself.

One who has a strictly linguistic interest finds the Septuagint worthy of his attention. There was a day when men thought of the language of the Greek Old Testament as a literary vehicle which was forged out by the translators themselves in large part as an attempt to render a Semitic original in a Greek dress. It was doubted that the Septuagint at all accurately reflected any Greek being spoken at the time. But all this has been changed through the papyri discoveries made in the very region where the Septuagint was created. These fragments, covering a wide range of human activities and relationships, are obviously in the language of every-day life. Misspellings are not infrequent. Enough parallels have been established between these non-literary papyri and the Septuagint to make it apparent that the latter represents a living form of Greek, so that the Septuagint must be included in any list of sources for the koine.

The student of the history of religion also will find the study of the Septuagint rewarding. For example, the New Testament acquaints us with the fact that Judaism had been active for some time making proselytes among the Gentiles (Acts 2:10; 6:5; 13:43). The zeal of the Pharisees on behalf of their own sect is also noted (Matt. 23:15). Now the word proselyte is Greek, and makes its first appearance in Exodus 12:48-49—ἐὰν δέ τις προσέλθῃ πρὸς ὑμᾶς προσήλυτος ποιῆσαι τὸ πάσχα κυρίῳ, περιτεμείσῃ αὐτοῦ πᾶν ἀρσενικόν, καὶ τότε προσελεύσεται ποιῆσαι αὐτὸ καὶ ἔσται ὡσπερ καὶ ὁ αὐτόχθων τῆν γῆς πᾶς ἀπερίτμητος οὐκ ἔδεται ἀπ' αὐτοῦ. νόμος εἷς ἔσται τῷ ἐγγωρίῳ καὶ τῷ προσελθόντι προσηλύτῳ ἐν ὑμῖν. Here one catches the flavor of the word. It denotes literally one who draws near. He has a desire to identify himself with the Hebrew nation, especially in the observance of this great national festival of the Passover. The noun and the verb forms of the same root jostle one another in the passage. It is interesting to observe that in the Epistle to the Hebrews the verb has an almost technical sense as a designation for a worshipper, being translated *come* or *draw near* (e.g. Heb. 4:12; 11:6). Incidentally, the statement in

Hebrews 11:28 concerning Moses, *πεποίηκεν τὸ πάσχα*, may be said to gain illumination from Exodus 12:48, just cited, where *ποιέω* is used in the sense of observance of the Passover.

A chapter in the history of polemics belongs to the Septuagint. Although the Jews of the Dispersion highly regarded this translation at first (even Philo acknowledged its inspiration), the increasing use of it by Christians, especially in their appeal to it for the verification of the Messianic dignity of Jesus of Nazareth, gradually estranged the Jews. We find Justin Martyr in his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* registering the accusation that Trypho's people had tampered with the sacred text in order to remove proof texts favorable to the Christians. One of the most famous of these passages is Psalm 96:10, which according to Justin Martyr properly read, Tell ye among the nations that the Lord hath reigned *from the wood* (cross).⁹ Of this alleged original there is no trace. The last three words must be put down as a Christian invention. Even more famous as a ground of contention was Isaiah 7:14. Christians pressed the fact that it was the Jews themselves who had translated the Hebrew *המלע* by *παρθένος*, virgin. The pressure of debate forced the Jews to construct a new Septuagint, which was undertaken by Aquila in the second century. It used *νεάνις*, 'young woman,' in Isaiah 7:14. In general the translation was marked by an almost painful literalness in rendering the Hebrew. But at least it gave the Greek-speaking Jews a version which they could use after the Septuagint was proscribed by the synagogue.

In the discussions on Christian theology the Septuagint has ever and again played an important role. A good example of this is the battle which raged over Proverbs 8:22 f. in the Arian controversy. This famous passage on Wisdom runs as follows according to the Septuagint: "The Lord created me as (the) beginning of his ways for his works; before time (the age) he established (founded) me, in the beginning before he made the earth. . ." Here the crucial word is *ἔκτισε*, which we have translated "created." The Arians found a basis

⁹ *Dialogue with Trypho*, chapt. 73.

here for their doctrine of the creaturehood of Christ, that there was a time when he was not. Athanasius sought to meet the exegesis by asserting that it was our Lord's humanity which was created and manifested to us for our salvation.¹⁰ The stamp of this controversy remained on the text of Scripture for many centuries. To avoid any possible Arian connotation, the Vulgate rendered the crucial word *possedit*. Both the A.V. and the R.V. have *possessed*, showing their dependence on the Vulgate. However, the Hebrew קנה has the thought of acquisition rather than possession, and the Septuagint has rendered it faithfully. The student will find it interesting to note that in a passage like Genesis 14:19, removed from theological controversy, the Vulgate rendered the same root by *creavit*.

Scholars have long recognized the value of the Septuagint as an instrument for textual criticism of the Old Testament. While the consensus of opinion has been to the effect that in places where the Massoretic Text and the Septuagint diverge, the former must be given the preference in the vast majority of cases, especially since it is often possible to trace the very processes by which the Greek translators have strayed from the path, yet it has been conceded that here and there the Greek rendering has undoubtedly preserved the original. One of the clearest cases is Genesis 4:8, where the words "let us go into the field" have dropped out of the Hebrew text in some way. That something is needed at this point is evident because the verb אמר does not mean *to speak with* but *to say*. In this case the Septuagint does not stand alone, but is supported by the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Targums, the Latin and the Syriac versions.

A common objection raised against the Revised Standard Version is that too large a use has been made of the Septuagint (and other ancient versions) instead of clinging to the Massoretic Text as the basis of translation. It is possible that the translators have erred in judgment in certain passages by relying on the Septuagint as opposed to the Massoretic

¹⁰ *Expositio Fidei*, 4; *De Decretis* III, 14.

Text, but it is certain that their procedure is not faulty as to principle. Modern research has demonstrated that the Hebrew text was revised and fixed in its present form early in the Christian era and that it does not represent throughout a pure text which can with confidence be said to represent the original. Students of the Septuagint have long been suspicious that the Greek Old Testament is more trustworthy here and there than the Massoretic Text. Archaeology has begun to confirm this conjecture. Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament are coming to light in the Dead Sea region which in some cases (others agree closely with the MT) correspond to the Septuagint rather than to the Hebrew. This is particularly true of Samuel. Frank M. Cross Jr. writes, "In these Samuel fragments there is now direct proof that there were Palestinian Hebrew texts of Samuel of precisely the type used by the Greek translators, and that the Greek version is a literal and faithful translation of its Hebrew predecessor. Hence reconstruction of the text of Samuel in the future must put serious weight on the witness of the Septuagint."¹¹

RELATION TO NEW TESTAMENT QUOTATIONS

We come now to quotations. Everyone knows that the New Testament is written in Greek, although its writers, with the probable single exception of Luke, were Hebrews. It is natural, then, that when they desire to draw excerpts out of the Old Testament, that they should resort to the Septuagint. Certainly the vast preponderance of quotations lies on the side of the Greek rather than the Hebrew original, although some New Testament writers knew Hebrew and resorted to the Hebrew text on occasion. An example of this is found in Matthew 8:17, where a slavish adherence to the Septuagint would have resulted in support for the idea that our Lord bore men's sins during His ministry and not simply at His death. Therefore Matthew made use of the Hebrew text which has "sicknesses" rather than the Septuagint text which has "sins." The context of Matthew 8:17 is Jesus'

¹¹ *The Biblical Archaeologist*, February 1954, p. 18.

healing activity. But the general fact is undisputed, that the large use of the Septuagint in the quotations shows its dominant position in the early church and the high regard in which it was held. However, the presence of a considerable number of quotations agreeing neither with the Hebrew nor with the Septuagint constitutes a difficult problem.

Matthew's Gospel offers an especially interesting area in which to study the quotations. H. St. J. Thackeray noted that in addition to quotations from the Septuagint which Matthew has in common with other Synoptists there is a group of eleven "proof-texts" introduced by the formula, "that it might be fulfilled," which derive from another source. This he thought may have been a "Testimony Book" which possibly contained this material already in Greek dress, which Matthew utilized.¹²

The subject of *Testimonia* has engrossed scholars both in the ancient and the modern church. Cyprian was one of the first to draw up such a list of passages, but it was based on earlier attempts of the same kind. One of the most outstanding is in the New Testament itself.¹³ Among modern writers Rendel Harris in his two volumes entitled *Testimonies* sought to demonstrate that the New Testament quotations were drawn up according to subjects and with indications of the source of their quotations. Such groupings of Scripture, if they were thus utilized as a source for New Testament quotations, would help to explain the composite character of some of the quotations and also the attribution to one Old Testament writer of what is found in another, as in Matthew 27:9. But further research has put Harris' position in doubt, especially with regard to the materials in Matthew. According to J. A. Findlay, "Subsequent collections of testimonies do not follow his (Matthew's) model either in order or language."¹⁴

Krister Stendahl has opened a new line of investigation. He builds upon the discovery of J. C. Hawkins that whereas the quotations in Matthew which occur in the common Synoptic

¹² *Journal of Transactions of the Victoria Institute*, Vol. 58, pp. 162, 163.

¹³ Romans 3:10-18.

¹⁴ *Amicitiae Corolla*, p. 69.

narrative tradition (Mark or Luke or both) follow the Septuagint very closely in the main, those which are introduced by the writer of the First Gospel show much less agreement with the Septuagint, only slightly more than half the words being derived from that source.¹⁵

This latter group is the same as that which Thackeray commented on, as noted above. It may be said to consist of formula quotations. Stendahl believes that the situation receives illumination from the Habakkuk Commentary of the Dead Sea Scrolls, where the Hebrew text of the first two chapters of this prophecy is quoted with considerable alteration and adaptation in order to fit the belief of the sect responsible for the scroll that the Teacher of Righteousness, as he is called, had fulfilled the terms of Habakkuk's prophecy. Stendahl finds in Matthew's formula quotations "scholarly interpretations" akin to those of the Qumran sect, except that Matthew's interest centers in Jesus of Nazareth rather than the Teacher of Righteousness.¹⁶

The whole of Stendahl's thesis regarding the nature and origin of Matthew need not detain us here, but he favors the view that the Gospel reflects the interest in theology and teaching of the particular group from within which it sprang. His conclusion on the quotations is that, "The formula quotations would thus have taken shape within the Matthean church's study of the Scriptures, while the form of the remainder is on the whole that of the Palestinian LXX text."¹⁷ This is a highly interesting observation and one which promises to be fruitful for further study. It is clear that in the New Testament generally the actual form of the quotations is determined by the use to which they are put, their New Testament setting demanding some alteration for purposes of smooth and suitable application as well as to bring out the element of fulfillment. Certainly the New Testament conception of fulfillment is not exhausted by a "this is that" correspondence between the Old and the New. It includes the

¹⁵ *Horae Synopticae*, pp. 154, 155.

¹⁶ *The School of St. Matthew*, p. 201.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

clear by the fuller revelation of the New (note, for example, how the word *fulfill* is used in Romans 8:4).

In addition to passages of greater or lesser length which are clearly intended to be quotations either by the presence of some formula of citation or by the way in which they are treated in the context, the Greek text of the New Testament abounds in words and phrases which modern editors have put in bold type in order to show their Old Testament provenance. In the margin of the Nestle text the location of the Old Testament passage is indicated. Even so, there is room for further work in identifying passages in the Old Testament upon which the New Testament writers have drawn. Recently the present writer was reading in the Septuagint text of Deuteronomy 1:16 and noticed the striking verbal agreement of ἀνὰ μέσον ἀδελφοῦ with Paul's language in 1 Corinthians 6:5. His word σοφός may well have its seed-plot also in the previous verse, where it occurs in the plural.

A question naturally arises, in view of the large use made of the Septuagint in the composition of the New Testament and the high regard in which it was held in the early church, as to its authority in relation to the Hebrew text. Does it have equal inspiration with the Hebrew, or does it have any at all? We have no basis on which to plead its inspiration except in the broad, uncritical sense in which people today designate their English Bible as inspired. A version is entitled to be called the Word of God if it represents an honest and faithful attempt to reproduce the original text. But the Septuagint is unique in this respect, namely, that some hundreds of verses from its corpus have been lifted out and transplanted into the organism known as the New Testament, and there they have taken their place in the category of inspired Scripture as truly as the text around them which they are called upon to support or explain.

Pasadena, California.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Dallas Theological Seminary
3909 Swiss Ave.
Dallas, TX 75204
www.dts.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu