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The Septuagint

The Septuagint (pronounced sep'too-uh-jint) is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible that was widely used by many Jews in the Roman Empire. The translation appears to have been made in the third century BCE in Alexandria, though revisions continued for some time after that.

Why Is It Called the “Septuagint”?

The name Septuagint comes from the Greek word for “seventy” and the traditional abbreviation for the Septuagint is LXX, seventy in Roman numerals. This name is consistent with a legend that seventy scholars were involved in the work: each translated the Scriptures independently and, miraculously, they produced seventy identical translations.

The origin of this legend is difficult to trace. The closest we find in ancient literature is a tradition recounted in the *Letter of Aristeas*, which says that seventy-two Jewish translators were brought to Egypt by Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285–246 BCE) to translate the Pentateuch. Why the number seventy-two was rounded off to seventy in later versions of the Septuagint legend is uncertain, but it may have seemed appropriate, since seventy elders had accompanied Moses up the mountain to receive the Torah from God (Exod. 24:1, 9).

The Septuagint's Challenge to "Hebrew Old Testament Tradition"

Old Testament scholars are mainly interested in the LXX because of its impact on establishing the original text of the Bible. For centuries, the standard Hebrew text used for all editions and translations of the Christian Bible (as well as for Jewish translations of their Scriptures) was "the Masoretic text." Scholars had always noted that the LXX did not appear to be a translation of that standard text. Sometimes, material was presented in a completely different order in the LXX than in the Masoretic Hebrew text and, at other times, there were significant omissions or additions.

Various explanations for the discrepancies were offered but, in any case, consensus held that biblical translations should be based on the Hebrew text (i.e., the Masoretic text) and not on a sometimes idiosyncratic Greek translation of the Hebrew text.

The matter got more complicated when the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered in the late 1940s. Among the documents found in Qumran were numerous manuscripts of the LXX as well as Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible that preserved a tradition older than any extant copies of the Masoretic text. Comparison of these documents determined that the LXX frequently preserves a translation of an earlier version of Hebrew books than that which had traditionally been used to prepare translations and editions of Jewish and Christian Bibles. To take one example, the book of Jeremiah is one-

eighth shorter in the LXX than in the Masoretic text. Is this because the LXX translation was done from a defective copy of the book? Or was the LXX translation done from a version closer to the original, before material was added to the book by later scribes? Scholars tend to think the latter scenario is more likely, though the longer version of Jeremiah continues to be appear in modern Bibles.

Today, the LXX is regularly consulted in production of biblical translations and it is regarded as a valuable resource in resolving textual difficulties. There is continued discussion as to whether (or when) LXX readings should be given precedence over the Masoretic text; frequently, alternative readings are simply noted in footnotes to the text, in comments included in study Bibles. Deeper discussion is reserved for academic biblical commentaries.

Importance for New Testament Study

The LXX was the biblical text from which the New Testament writers, who wrote in Greek, quoted most often. Moreover, the translation of Hebrew words into Greek resulted in Greek words taking on Hebraic meanings, a fact of some significance for the interpretation of the New Testament. For example, the Greek word for “grace” (*charis*) came to mean “God’s benevolence” because it was used to translate Hebrew *hesed*, whereas in Greek literature before the LXX it had no particular religious significance.