

Here's Something about the Bible of the First Christians I Bet Many of You Didn't Know

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Before there was a New Testament, the Bible of the first Christians (the writers of the New Testament and the early Church) was a Greek translation of the Old Testament. The general term used to designate that translation is "Septuagint."

Think about that: the Old Testament of the New Testament writers and of the early Church was a translation—and an imperfect one at that.

You'd think, at key moment of God's self-disclosure, the gospel of Jesus Christ, God would have worked from the original so nothing got lost in translation. But he didn't. Which should make you think about whether God is as uptight about the precise wording of the Bible as some make him out to be. But I digress.

Most Christians have never heard of the Church's first Bible. Today's post is an interview with Timothy Michael Law, who is going to talk about it.

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First of all, basically, what is the Septuagint?

It's the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The word means "seventy," which refers to the legendary idea that 72 Jewish scribes miraculously translated the Pentateuch in 72 days in the 3rd century BC. This is why the common abbreviation for the Septuagint is the Roman numeral LXX, "seventy."

In truth, the origins of the Greek translation are much more complex. Some books were translated in the 3rd century BCE in Alexandria, Egypt, but others were translated much later, perhaps as late as the 2nd century CE, in Palestine.

Some, like Samuel or Jeremiah, were translated from Hebrew texts that differ significantly from the Hebrew text that came to form the standard version of the Jewish Bible, which is the basis for our English Old Testament.

Also, most think of the Septuagint as simply the "translation of the Old Testament," but in fact the Septuagint also contains a number of other books composed in Greek (no Hebrew or Aramaic original). These were later designated as "Apocrypha." But all of these scriptures played a vital role

in both Hellenistic Judaism and early Christianity. Protestants have lost an awful lot by not knowing these books.

Another reason “translation of the Old Testament” is imprecise is that early on “Septuagint” referred only to the Pentateuch. But by the time you get to 3rd and 4th centuries CE writers like Origen and Eusebius, the term had already been applied to the entire body of Jewish Scriptures they now called the “Old Testament.” So this is why most of us today refer to the whole thing as Septuagint, even though we keep in mind the imprecision of the term.

Here’s the money question: why should we care? Tell us a bit about what you were trying to accomplish with this book.

The simplest answer is that in the first centuries of Christianity the Old Testament was the Septuagint. The Hebrew Bible that is now studied in most educational contexts, like seminaries and universities, emerged later. These early Christians also considered the Septuagint to be inspired by God, as did Greek-speaking Jews like Philo of Alexandria.

During my time as a seminarian, I was struck when I read a scholar’s claim that the Septuagint was the “First Bible of the Church.” I then noticed lots of New Testament citations of the Old Testament were derived from the Septuagint, not from the Hebrew Old Testament.

It was one of those moments when I thought, “Why haven’t I learned anything about this?” I soon found out that I wasn’t alone, and even many scholars had trouble articulating exactly what the Septuagint was beyond simply “it’s a translation of the Hebrew.”

But if this was the Bible of the early Church, surely it is important; and not only to people of faith but also to historians. Tessa Rajak succeeds marvelously in her gambit to recover the Greek Bible as a piece of Jewish history. I wanted to do something similar by exploring the Septuagint as a little known piece of Christian history.

So why has the Septuagint been underexplored or ignored?

Because, for centuries the Septuagint has been regarded as a mere translation of the Hebrew, one of the “versions,” and so mainly a tool to help us understand the “original” Hebrew. If you are a student of the Hebrew Bible, you hear of the Septuagint because you might need help every now and then when the Hebrew is unclear. Other than that, unless you are a specialist, you might never learn anything else about it.

What value is there to the Septuagint as a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament? What can we learn from it?

Any translation of the Bible is much more than a mirror copy (just think of how English translations differ from each other). In many places in the Septuagint, yes, one is reading word for word the

same text found in the Hebrew. In many other places, however, the translation yields different theological emphases than those found in the Hebrew Bible; the translation has created new meanings.

We also know, as I mentioned above, that some books in the Septuagint were translated from Hebrew texts that are radically different from those in modern editions of the Hebrew Bible, and thus in English Bible translations. This has been brought to light through studying the Dead Sea Scrolls.

That means the Septuagint sometimes reveals an older version of the Old Testament than those that exist in the Hebrew Bibles we use in seminaries and universities. The Septuagint gives us glimpses into earlier stages in the Bible's development, before the completion of the Hebrew Bible that is now the basis of modern translations. This is especially problematic for those who put their entire faith in the pursuit of the "original text."

Can you give us an example or two of how the Septuagint gives us glimpses into the earlier stages of the Bible's development?

One of the best-known stories from the Old Testament is that of David and Goliath. In the Septuagint, the story is about half the length as the account in the Hebrew Bible. It lacks the details about David delivering food to his brothers, his first hearing of Goliath's challenge, and his contemplation on the risk/reward of getting involved (17:12-31). Also missing are the covenant Jonathan makes with David (18:1-5) and the story of Saul's evil spirit (18:10-11).

Careful study reveals that the Septuagint version is definitely the earlier form of the story—the Septuagint didn't just "leave things out" by mistake. It was translated from an earlier version of the Hebrew Bible where these details were absent. The version of the story we know is a later, expanded, version.

Another interesting case is found in Jeremiah 31:27-34 (38:27-34 in the Septuagint). The Hebrew Bible highlights the unshakable faithfulness of God in spite of the disobedience of Israel. The key is in verse 32, which in the Hebrew Bible reads "…a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband."

The Septuagint, however, has "…because they did not abide in my covenant, and I was unconcerned for them."

Here, too, the Septuagint reading is the original, and the later change is theologically driven. The later editors of the Hebrew Bible thought the idea that God was "unconcerned" for Israel was out of step with his character of faithfulness claimed by other texts.

This prompted the change to this startling phrase in order to reinforce God's faithfulness, having him say, "though I was their husband," which means, "though I remained faithful to them in spite of their disobedience."

As an example of how important and authoritative the Greek Old Testament was for New Testament writers, the author of Hebrews (8:9) quotes the LXX of Jeremiah to reinforce the idea that God was "unconcerned" for disobedient Israel.

This brings us to an important question especially for those interested in Protestant Christian history. The Reformers, in focusing on the Hebrew Old Testament, were not really going back to the sources, as they claimed, were they?

Well, no, not exactly. They thought they were, but they weren't. We can't be too hard on them for not knowing about all these textual complexities, though, since the Dead Sea Scrolls weren't discovered until 1947. We, however, need to be more nuanced in our thinking.

My book ends in the fifth century with Jerome, who gave the Church the Vulgate, the Latin translation of the Old and New Testament that would come to dominate the western Church for centuries. Jerome's work is the beginning of the end for the Septuagint in western Christendom. After studying with rabbis and engaging in polemical interactions with Jews, Jerome felt the Church needed a translation based on the "original" Hebrew Bible of his Jewish counterparts. This inclination actually started before Jerome, but Jerome was the first to make such a strong case that the Church had gone off the path by following the Septuagint.

Reformers, then, have to be seen as the ones who completed the job. The new offshoot of Christendom that came to be known as Protestantism would likewise prioritize the Hebrew Bible above the Septuagint and even the Vulgate. What is almost tragically comical, though, is that they didn't actually lead the Church back to the "sources," at least if one understands the sources as the earliest Hebrew text.

This is where the Dead Sea Scrolls messed everything up, because no one could call the Septuagint translators crazy anymore. We know now that there were many other variant forms of the Hebrew scriptures circulating before the time of Jesus. The Hebrew Bible that Jerome and the Reformers took to be more authentic and "original" was nothing of the sort. It was a later, heavily edited version of a diverse back history of the Hebrew Old Testament. The Septuagint provides an earlier glimpse into that history. The Reformers played a significant role in mislabeling as "original" the later version of the Old Testament.

Give an example or two of New Testament authors quoting the Septuagint where it differs significantly from the Hebrew Old Testament we have today.

In Romans 9:33, Paul cites Isaiah 28:16, which speaks of God laying in Zion (Jerusalem) a precious cornerstone. Paul adjusts this quote to say that the stone, i.e., Christ, will provide salvation to those

who trust in him, and that the stone will also be a stumbling block that many will trip over (he uses the same ideas in Rom 11:9-12 and 1 Cor 1:23).

Ross Wagner has shown that Paul relies on the Septuagint reading to give Isaiah a Christological meaning: the Septuagint asserts the one who trusts “in him”—that is, in the stone—will not be “put to shame.” The Hebrew version of Isaiah leaves undefined the object of one’s trust and says “will not panic” rather than “will not be put to shame.”

In Rom 15:11 Paul cites Deut 32:43. The Septuagint text of Deut 32:43 is not found in the Hebrew: “Be glad, O nations, with his people, and let all the angels of God prevail for him.” The mention of “nations,” or “Gentiles,” allows Paul to extend the invitation to Gentiles to come worship with Israel.

A third example, if I may, is more radical, since it shows how a New Testament writer adopts a Septuagint reading that is obviously a mistranslation or misreading of the Hebrew. In Rev 2:26-27; 12:5; and 19:15 we read of one who will come and rule with an iron rod, which is certainly an allusion to Psalm 2. “Rule” is the Septuagint reading, but the Hebrew psalmist says that the one to whom God gives authority will “break” the enemies with a rod of iron.

The Septuagint translator has either misunderstood or misread the Hebrew verb, which looks very similar to the verb for “rule.” The writer of Revelation has simply followed “his Bible,” the Septuagint, which allows him to make his theological point that the Lord will come to rule the nations.

What are some theological implications of all this for Christian readers of the Bible?

I end the book asking this very question. The Septuagint is a central component of the New Testament and the early Church, so it is mind-boggling that it has been ignored. Those with an interest in Christian theology will have plenty to consider, but until the Septuagint is taken seriously and studied extensively, we have to wait and see. I am also editing the Oxford Handbook on the Septuagint, and we have asked a contributor to explore this question. But it really could be a doctoral dissertation topic for some interested student.

One thing we do not need to wait any longer to say is this: the existence of multiple forms of scripture (Greek and Hebrew) in antiquity, both before, during, and after the time of Christ, did not bother early Christians. The search for an “original text” on which to ground one’s faith is a distinctively modern worry. Even when Christians began recognizing divergences between the Jewish Scriptures and their own, many saw it as an opportunity to discover more than one way to understand divine communication.

My book is certainly not meant to attack cherished beliefs for the sake of being a controversialist. Though potentially unsettling, I wrote constructively, to tell the story of an ignored part of the

history of the Christian Bible. We have to be honest that the nice, neat pictures we have constructed may not be true to reality. I like this quote of Augustine:

Accordingly, when anyone claims, "Moses meant what I say," and another retorts, "No, rather what I find there," I think that I will be answering in a more religious spirit if I say, "Why not both, if both are true?" And if there is a third possibility, and a fourth, and if someone else sees an entirely different meaning in these words, why should we not think that he was aware of all of them?

Augustine, *Confessions* 12.31.42