

ANCIENT TRANSLATIONS AND REVIEWS OF THE HOLY SCRIPTURES IN THE GREEK LANGUAGE. CONTRIBUTION TO THE HISTORY OF BIBLICAL TRANSLATIONS

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Abstract. The article offers a scholarly overview of the historical translations and reviews of the Bible from Greek sources. It lists the historical ancient manuscript translations that have become widely accepted canonical models, known as the "Biblical canon" in the translations of the Holy Scriptures. The tradition of these translations is with extremely wide boundaries in chronological and linguistic terms is of interest for understanding the origin and semantics of the modern Synodal translation of the Bible.

Keywords: Bible; translations; history; Greek: manuscripts

The biblical Old Testament translations into Greek are newer, dating from the era of the Ptolemies (332 – 80 BC), when the Seventy translated the Old Testament, and they date from the beginning of the Christian era, coinciding with the writing of the New Testament books. By the 3rd century, their autographs are also lost, and Christian authors such as Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and others make great efforts to harmonize the New Testament text into a common codex. Their early disappearance is primarily explained by the fact that they were written on papyrus, which is less durable than parchment, and secondly, during the centuries of Christian persecution, alongside the slaughter of Christians, their sacred books were destroyed. Biblical scholarship discovered numerous copies in the 20th century. They are relatively few – ten Greek copies of the complete Old Testament text according to the translation of the Seventy. The entire New Testament text and individual Old Testament books from other translations are contained in hundreds of manuscripts. The manuscripts containing the New Testament text linguistically stand closer to their original sources because a shorter period of time separates them. Of particular scholarly interest are the palimpsests, parchment manuscripts whose original text has been erased and overwritten. Scholars face difficulty and require extensive study to reconstruct the original text from these manuscripts. In terms of script and form, some of the Greek manuscripts are written in uncial,

majuscule script (capital letters). These manuscripts are earlier, with a total of 127 such preserved copies. The majority of the manuscripts have reached us in minuscule script (lowercase letters).

Ancient biblical manuscript translations primarily emerged to satisfy the theological and proselytizing needs of the diasporas and gradually gained official status. According to their origin, they can be direct, made directly from the original text, or indirect, copied from preceding translations.

1. Targums

For ancient Judaism, the need for translations into a comprehensible Jewish language arose after the Babylonian exile (597 – 539 BC), when most Jews no longer understood classical ancient Hebrew. A similar situation exists with most Bulgarians today, who no longer understand classical Old Bulgarian or its Church Slavonic revision from the 17th century, necessitating the translation of the Bible into modern Bulgarian at the beginning of the 20th century.

During the time of the prophets Ezra and Nehemiah, following the Babylonian exile, the Jewish language had already been strongly influenced by Chaldean languages. Therefore, in the Sabbath services when excerpts from the Holy Scriptures were read in classical Hebrew, it became necessary to translate the readings into the understandable vernacular. Thus, the Aramaic targums (i.e., translations), specifically Jewish-Aramaic ones, emerged. The targums represent bilingual translations written in one language but in its various spoken characteristics. Initially, they were recorded for use in liturgical books and depended on the linguistic culture of the individual translator and interpreter, which accounts for their diversity. Later on, they began to be recorded separately, but both intentional changes, made to clarify the text, and unintentional errors due to omissions and mistakes, were permitted during recording and transcription. Therefore, their scholarly value is not high.

Among the most well-known Chaldean targums (translations) are:

“Targums of the Pentateuch by Onkelos”, which represent a literal translation, with poetic passages given in a free translation.

“Targum of the Prophets”, written by Rabbi Jonathan ben Uzziel, which has reached us in copies.

“Targum of the Hagiographa”, characterized by rich stylistic diversity, as it was composed by various authors, and individual books differ in style and language.

“Targum of Chronicles”, written by Rabbi Joseph the Blind in the early 4th century, published scientifically in 1888 by E. Mercus (*Christomatia targumica*).

It is believed that during the time of Jesus Christ, there existed numerous targums of all the Old Testament books in contemporary Hebrew and Aramaic, as well as in Greek for the Pentateuch. Over time, the targums of the remaining Old Testament books were translated into Greek for the Jewish diasporas who spoke Greek.

In the history of biblical translations, three main periods and significant events

stand out, playing a particularly important role in the development of culture, literature, and the dissemination of Christian ideas. The oldest translations of the Bible include the Septuagint (Greek) and the Vulgate, *Vetus Latina/Itala* (by Blessed Jerome, Latin), the Syriac Peshitta, Egyptian, Ethiopian, Gothic, Armenian, Georgian translations, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Jewish-Samaritan Pentateuch, the Greek-Samaritan Pentateuch, and the Aramaic Pentateuch. The Eastern Orthodox tradition unequivocally follows the undisputed canonicity of the Septuagint, while the Western Christian tradition became familiar with the Vulgate translation, known from a late copy, only from the 16th century.

2. The Greek Translation of the Seventy (Septuagint)

The translation by the Seventy translators (or interpreters) forms the basis of the Old Testament translation in the Orthodox Bible, which ancient Christian apologists and interpreters use as a primary source. Most ancient translations used today by various Christian denominations are derived from the Septuagint translation. It does not precisely correspond to the Hebrew text. The Seventy translators sought and, in most cases, found Greek equivalents for the Hebrew words, but if they did not find any, they translated descriptively, using additional explanatory words. Therefore, the Seventy translators are often referred to as interpreters.

Like any translation, the Septuagint translation also has some shortcomings, but they pale in comparison to the many merits of the text. In the history of translation, throughout all periods and in all countries, the distinction between secular and religious literature is quite clearly traced. While secular literature was translated so little in Ancient Greece that significant traces of translations have not remained, the situation is different in the realm of religion, and sacred texts have been translated multiple times from Hebrew into Greek. This occurred during the period when Greece was an independent state and when it became part of the Eastern Roman Empire – Byzantium.

2.1. Historical Information about the Septuagint Translation

The “Translation of the Seventy Interpreters” is associated with the legend of the miracle, of the hierophany that made possible the creation of this remarkable text. The prefix is used here in its direct sense of “joint action”. The myth of the miraculous “creation” first appears in the work “Letter of Aristeas”, considered one of the most famous propaganda works of Alexandrian Judaism. It is claimed that the letter was written during the reign of the Egyptian king Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285 – 246 BC). Historians believe it was composed much later, around 100 BC.

In this letter addressed to the imaginary brother Philocrates, Aristeas, the commander of Ptolemy, recounts how he was sent by the king to Jerusalem with a request to the high priest Eleazar to provide him with a translation of the Jewish Law (the Old Testament) into Greek. According to assumptions, the request was prompted by the desire of the court librarian Demetrius Phalerus to have this work

in Greek in the famous Library of Alexandria, as well as by the curiosity of Ptolemy, who decided to acquaint himself with the Jewish Law.

According to another interpretation, it was the Jewish diaspora in Egypt, mainly in Alexandria and along the banks of the Nile, which communicated entirely in the Greek language, that was behind the commission. As a result, the administration of the service in the synagogues was also carried out with difficulty. Jewish ritual required the obligatory reading of the Torah in Hebrew. There was always a translator next to the reader, who translated the readings into Greek. With such a practice, errors in interpreting some passages were inevitable. Instead of correcting and interpreting the multitude of versions by the interpreters, who were not even allowed to peek into the sacred Hebrew text, it was more reasonable to have a single standardized version in written form. This single version would be read in Jewish synagogues, where only the Torah is preached.

A third possible reason for translating the Jewish Bible into the Greek language should not be overlooked, namely the desire of ancient non-Jewish priests to spread the ideas of Judaism to other countries, mainly among the peoples of the Mediterranean basin. Considering the dominant role of the Greek language in this region, it can be fully assumed that the Greek version of the Old Testament was called upon to fulfill an important mission and introduce the ideas of ancient Jewish monotheism among new peoples.

Returning to the legend, at the request of the leaders of the Jewish communities in Egypt, the pharaoh decreed that the Old Testament should be translated into the Greek language. It should be emphasized that this translation was initially intended not for the Greeks, but for the Jews in Egypt, who only knew Greek.

To carry out the translation, the high priest of Jerusalem sends 72 – six from each “family” – mature scholars who are virtuous and proficient in both ancient Hebrew and Greek languages, to Egypt. For convenience, the number 72 is traditionally rounded to 70. Thus, the Latin designation for this translated version arises, namely LXX or Septuaginta.

“The Letter of Aristeas” is a vivid example of ancient Jewish apologetics and presents Ptolemy II, whose political and civilizational authority is well known, in his role as a suppliant before the God of Israel: according to legend, Ptolemy kneels seven times before the scrolls of the Holy Scriptures, which are brought from Palestine, and for seven days at the festive table, he converses with the translators of the future Septuagint translation who have come to him. In “The Letter of Aristeas”, for the first time, the Jewish Law is referred to as the “Books” – the Bible. Initially, the Septuagint is presented as the product of collective creativity. However, in later versions of the legend over the centuries, the story of its creation is shrouded in new mysterious traits. In the 1st century, this work is also mentioned by Josephus Flavius. Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish-Hellenistic religious philosopher and a founding figure of patristics, also mentions “The Letter of Aristeas”. According to

later versions, the translators were placed in isolation from each other, unable to communicate. After 72 days, they simultaneously completed the translation of the Old Testament (according to some versions, only the Pentateuch, i.e., the first five books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy). When their translations were compared, it was found that they all coincided word for word. This is an example of hierophany and theophany, i.e., divine enlightenment and divine inspiration, in which each of the translators is in contact with God during their work, so that the original Sacred text is not subjected to the slightest distortion.

This mythical conclusion is highly significant for translation theory and history. It demonstrates that even in this period, translation was clearly perceived as an individual endeavor, and since it is individual, it is unique, not fully reproduced in all details. Therefore, the complete coincidence of the texts of translations made by different people can only be regarded as the will of God, as the presence of a direct spiritual connection of each translator with the divine Providence.

2.2. The emergence of the Septuagint

It is presumed that the Septuagint was translated between 250 and 150 BCE. Researchers note that the biblical text used by the translators differs from the ancient Masoretic text. Data is contained in the book of Samuel, where there are both shortened paraphrases of the original and interpretive expansions of the text. There are additions in the first book of Kings and omissions in the book of Job. Sometimes the translators interpret expressions from the original text in their own way. Thus, the phrase Yahweh Sabaoth (Lord of Hosts), which occurs 282 times in the text and literally means “God of the armies”, is consistently translated by them as “Lord Almighty”. It can be assumed that the army was understood by them as an integral part of the Universe, whose arrangement is subject to God.

Contemporary historians question the truthfulness of the legend about the creation of the Septuagint. They believe that the Septuagint is the result of combining multiple different translations of individual fragments of the Bible, carried out over a long period of time. Jean Daniélou, a French researcher of the works of Philo of Alexandria, believes that only the first book of the Old Testament was translated in the manner described in the “Letter to Aristaeus”, while the others were translated over the next two hundred years by various translators. Supporting this assumption, Daniélou cites differences in style and translation methods noted in different parts of the text, as well as instances where different translations are given for the same Hebrew words.¹

We will not cast doubt on the conclusions of the French historian. However, the arguments he presents do not seem persuasive. The method of translation and the style of the translator often change in parallel with the changes in the original text itself. As for the difference in translation equivalents for the same forms of the original text, this may indicate not only that the translation of different parts was performed by different individuals and at different times. Perhaps the translators of

antiquity already understood that the same word in different contexts could have different meanings and therefore should be translated differently. The Septuagint poses many questions for historians, for example: 1. What was translated by the 72 translators in 72 days — the first book (about 5% of the Old Testament), the entire Pentateuch (about 25%), or the entire Old Testament? 2. Do all the translated texts truly match each other perfectly? 3. When does the work on the translation of the Septuagint begin and end?

2.3. The significance of the Septuagint translation for the history of the biblical translation of the Old Testament

For the history and theory of biblical translation, despite all the historical uncertainty and the unquestionably mythological nature of the story of the Septuagint's creation, it is important that the translation of the Old Testament into Greek represents one of the most significant milestones. Indeed, the role of the Septuagint in the history of European civilization proves to be quite profound. First, as correctly believed by Van Oort, the Septuagint is the first (perhaps one of the first) translations of ancient Jewish texts into a European language. Secondly, according to legend, this is the first attempt at a collective translation recorded in history.

Others believe that around 130 BCE, the entire Old Testament had already been translated into Greek. This translation is known as the Septuagint and has reached us in the form of the Codex Alexandrinus I, denoted in biblical scholarship by the Latin letter G. The original translation has not survived, and the reason for this is not clear. It is only known that by the 2nd century CE, it was widely used among both Jews in the diaspora and Christians. Soon after, the Jews rejected it as blasphemous and spread the myth that a three-day darkness had descended upon the earth upon its completion by the Seventy. A more plausible explanation is that with the rise of Christianity, this translation was embraced by Christians as part of a unified codex alongside the Old and New Testaments and the intense rivalry between the synagogue and the Christian church extended to the translation of the Septuagint, known as the Alexandrian Bible of Christ's followers.

Throughout the course of historical development, the Christian church and the Jewish diaspora witnessed the emergence of several other new Greek translations:

1. The translation by Aquila, a relative of Emperor Hadrian and governor of Jerusalem.

2. The translation by Theodotion, a Jewish proselyte from Ephesus who lived in the 2nd century. Although less precise than Aquila's, it was highly esteemed among Christians. The Septuagint translation was corrected and interpreted according to Theodotion's version.

3. The translation by Symmachus, a Samaritan proselyte from the 2nd century. His translation was more liberal than Theodotion's but was praised for being "exceedingly clear and remarkably elegant" (Eusebius).

All of these mentioned works are fragmentarily preserved in the writings of Origen and his followers.

The oldest originals with translations of the Old Testament date back to the 4th century and later, extending until the advent of printing. Some contain only selected texts, church readings for liturgical use (lectionaries), but over 900 translations with the complete text have been discovered. Others are written without punctuation – *Scriptio continua* *codices textus perpetui*. Third ones contain the text only in Greek – pure codices (*Codices puri*). In others, the text is presented in parallel in several languages – mixed codices (*Codices mixti*; *Codices graeco-latini*).

3. Ancient majuscule uncial Greek biblical manuscripts with translations of the Old Testament

3.1. The Vatican Codex – Codex Vaticanus (B)

The Vatican Codex is preserved in the Vatican Library in Rome. It is unknown when and how the codex came to be housed there. It is dated to the mid-4th century and is considered one of the 50 manuscripts commissioned by the court historian, Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea (+340), at the behest of Emperor Constantine the Great (306 – 337) for the needs of the newly constructed Roman basilicas. For his translation, Eusebius enlisted the services of a skilled Egyptian calligrapher. Eusebius' translation contains the entire Bible – the Old and New Testament, excluding the First and Second Book of Maccabees, the Epistle to Philemon, and a significant portion of the Epistle to the Hebrews. Until the discovery of the Sinai Codex, the Vatican translation was considered the oldest. It is written in Hellenistic Greek and arranged in three parallel columns. The critical printed edition was prepared by Cardinal Angelo Mai in 1838, but printing was delayed due to some omissions. After a thorough examination, the codex was finally printed in 1857. Professor Constantin von Tischendorf (1815 – 1874) produced a critically valuable edition in 1867, followed by other editions in 1872, 1890, and 1905.

3.2. The Sinai Codex – Codex Sinaiticus (S)

Scholars consider the Sinai Codex as the oldest witness to the biblical translations. It was compiled in the early 4th century AD and contains almost the entire Old Testament, all four books of the New Testament, the Epistle of Barnabas, and the Shepherd of Hermas. The text is written in four vertical columns per page. The manuscript is parchment with majuscule script, lacking accents and breathings, and without word spacing, known as *scriptio continua*.

The Sinai Codex was discovered in parts during two visits by C. Tischendorf to the Sinai Monastery of St. Catherine, from where the codex takes its name. Tischendorf presented it as a gift to the Russian Emperor Alexander II, who later transferred it to the National Library in St. Petersburg. Tischendorf published it in 1846 and 1862, and later only the New Testament.

3.3. The Alexandrian Codex – Codex Alexandrinus (A)

The Alexandrian Codex with the biblical translation was compiled in the 5th century AD. It was discovered in a monastery on Mount Athos in the 17th century. Patriarch Cyril Lucaris (+1638) then gifted it to the English King Charles I (1625 – 1649). Since 1753, the manuscript has been kept in the British Museum. It is believed to have been originally written in Alexandria and was initially owned by the Alexandrian Church. It contains the Old Testament, the four Books of Maccabees, the New Testament, and two epistles of St. Clement of Rome. As a collection, it is quite extensive, comprising 639 leaves. The text is written in majuscule script without accents and breathings, with the beginning of punctuation. Paragraphs are separated, starting with a new stanza. The text was facsimiled between 1812 and 1826. This was followed by a lithographic edition from 1881 to 1883, a newer facsimile edition in 1915. Particularly valuable are the two scholarly editions from 1786 and 1860. The monument is also known as Codex Londoniensis.

3.4. The Paris Codex – Codex Parisiensis / The palimpsest of Ephrem the Syrian – Codex Efremitus (C)

The codex was compiled in the 5th century and originally contained a translation of the Old and New Testaments into Greek. However, in the 12th to 13th centuries, the text of the Holy Scriptures was erased from the parchment, and translations of some works by the church author St. Ephrem the Syrian (+373) were written in minuscule script. This is where the second designation of the monument comes from. After the fall of Constantinople to Ottoman rule in 1452, the parchment found its way into the library of the Medici family in Florence, and from there to the Paris Library, which gave it the name by which it is best known.

At the end of the 17th century, the National Library of Paris restored a significant portion of the Old Testament text on the palimpsest using chemical methods. However, the parchment was damaged by the chemicals, causing the pages to fade, and a considerable part of the written text suffered damage. As a result, the text remained undeciphered for a long time until the skilled Professor Tischendorf managed to decode the entire monument and restore its full text, which he published in Leipzig in 1845.

The manuscript is very incomplete. The Old Testament books are fragmentarily written. Nearly one-third of the New Testament is missing. However, originally, the codex contained the full extent of the Old and New Testaments.

3.5. The Claramontan Codex – Codex Claramontanus (D)

The Codex Claramontanus contains only the sacred books of the New Testament and the epistles of St. Paul. Between the Epistle to Philemon and the Epistle to the Hebrews, it includes a catalog of all canonical and some non-canonical Old Testament books. The codex is preserved in the National Library of Paris. Theodore Zahn attributes it to the period before St. Athanasius the Great and suggests that it was compiled in the late 3rd or early 4th century.

The science of Isagoge has also examined and studied other biblical codices from later periods, but the ones mentioned above are the most significant. The multitude of ancient Greek minuscule manuscripts are of importance because they provide insight into how the text has been preserved in various churches over time.

The Greek Old and New Testament manuscripts, similar to the Hebrew ones, have also undergone certain changes because they were dictated and copied (transcribed and transliterated). Here, inadvertent errors are due to carelessness or mishearing during copying and dictation. Scholars accept that in both Jewish and Greek manuscripts, there is no deliberate or malicious alteration of the text, except for occasional attempts by heretics over the centuries, which are quickly discovered and exposed. Just as in the past with the Jewish synagogue, so too, to this day, the Church ensures the faithful and unchanged transmission of the biblical text. Accidental errors and intentional corrective changes are neither doctrinally significant nor essential to the biblical translation.

3.6. Reviews of the Greek translation of the Septuagint

The translation of the Old Testament by the Seventy underwent some changes over time. These changes are also evident in later translations (such as those by Theodotion, Aquila, Symmachus, and others), which contain certain differences and inconsistencies both among themselves and in relation to the Hebrew text, which had already acquired an established canonical structure, content, and official church recognition.

During the 3rd century, religious disputes arose between Jews and Christians, often grounded in discrepancies between the texts of their respective codices of faith. It became necessary to review the original texts, eliminating differences that had accumulated over six centuries, and establish a unified text based on the Hebrew original and the Septuagint translation, which was already lost but was particularly important for the accurate interpretation and understanding of the Hebrew text, as well as its alignment with newer translations.

3.7. Origen's Recension of the Septuagint Translation

The restoration of the Septuagint translation to its original purity and its preservation intact for Christianity was undertaken by the great Christian philosopher, interpreter, and translator Origen (+254).

Materially supported by his wealthy friend Ambrosius, Origen managed to acquire numerous original copies of the Septuagint and other ancient Jewish translations. Over a period of more than 22 years, from 232 to 264 AD, after careful comparison and collation with the Hebrew original, he transcribed six of the translations, placing them in six parallel columns – the famous Origen's Hexapla. This work represents the most extensive and exhaustive biblical text-critical endeavor of Christian antiquity, which still has no parallel in theological exegetical literature. Origen's Hexapla comprises 50 volumes with a total of 6,000 pages and includes the following six Old Testament translations:

- 1) Ancient Hebrew Masoretic translation in square script;
- 2) Ancient Hebrew Masoretic translation in Greek transcription;

- 3) Translation by Aquila;
- 4) Translation by Symmachus;
- 5) Origen's own critically reviewed transcript of the Septuagint translation;
- 6) Translation by Theodotion.

For convenience in use, Origen himself compiled a transcript of the "Hexapla", omitting the first two translations – the Aramaic-Hebrew and Hebrew-Greek, thus creating a new edition, called the "Tetrapla".

Due to the various readings found in some books, Origen added to the "Hexapla" two translations by unknown translators, known as the Jericho and Nicopolitan translations, and compiled a more extensive version with 8 translations, known as the Octapla. In this revised edition, Origen denoted additions to the Septuagint translation with an obelus - a horizontal line with a dot above it, or with two dots above and below the line, while omissions in the Septuagint translation that were present in the Hebrew text were marked with an asterisk – a cross or a straight line with a dot in the corners.

The "Hexapla" and "Tetrapla" were preserved for many years in the library in Caesarea Palestina, founded by Saint Martyr Pamphilus (+310). Here, the codices were discovered and used by the blessed Jerome (+420) for his translation of the Vulgate. When Palestine was conquered by the Arabs in 653 AD, Origen's translations were lost, presumably destroyed. A copy in Syriac from the Hexapla was preserved, made by Bishop Paul, a Monophysite from Tella. The translation is meticulously accurate to Origen's version, allowing for the reconstruction of Origen's Greek original. Bishop Paul's copy continues to serve scholarship today. An incomplete manuscript of this version has been kept since the 18th century in the Ambrosian Library in Milan, which was published twice, in 1787 and 1874.

Origen's Hexapla is of great significance to biblical scholarship: in it, albeit partially, are preserved the translations of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion. It facilitates biblical scholars in the use of the Hebrew text of the Bible and establishes the authority of the Septuagint translation, which is harmonized with the original Hebrew text.

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The development of translations of the Old Testament demonstrates the dynamics in improving biblical translation. In their functional purpose, ancient translations of the Bible are "supranational" and combine the functions of a liturgical sacred text and the historical tradition of Judaism. Initially, the purpose of creating a biblical translation is the necessity of having a tradition and worship in which the Bible must be in an understandable language. In ancient Judaism, the biblical text, and even the parchment on which it is written, are considered sacred. During the Reformation in Protestant denominations, similar to Orthodoxy in the Middle Ages, the biblical translation acquired the character of a liturgical text. An example of this is the Book of Psalms, which is separated into its own liturgical codex. During the Late Middle Ages, creators of biblical translations aimed to provide the people with a text in their own language that was beautiful and understandable, although not necessarily a precise copy of the original.

Contemporary national translations of the Bible follow the archaic idea that the translation itself can convey the entire meaning of the original. They are characterized by the tradition in theological and liturgical vocabulary, which traces back to the ancient translations. The desire to preserve earlier translations, rooted in national languages, accounts for the compilative nature of modern biblical translations. The coexistence of national Bibles with translations into new languages is functional equivalence. This is why ancient translations of the Bible, as a national heritage, require special attention. They become a heritage and serve to correct the Bulgarian Synodal Translation of 1925, which genetically belongs to the ancient type of translation texts of the Old Testament and will be a subject of further scholarly publications.

NOTES

1. Danielou, J. Philon d'Alexandrie, Paris 1958, p. 95.

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