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The Septuagint – an Ancient Translation with an Impact Spanning over two Millennia

ABSTRACT

The article discusses selected aspects of the cultural role of the Septuagint over the centuries. It begins with a brief characterization of this Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible and an overview of its origins, both legendary and factual. The article then explores its significance as a foundational text for Christianity and highlights some traces of its influence that are still visible in European culture today. In conclusion, it asserts that the Septuagint can be considered “the greatest translation of all time” and emphasizes its lasting impact on Western civilization.

KEYWORDS: Septuagint, Susanna and the Elders, Wawel Dragon, reggae music

STRESZCZENIE

Septuaginta – starożytny przekład, którego wpływ rozciąga się na ponad dwa tysiąclecia

Artykuł omawia wybrane aspekty kulturowej roli Septuaginty na przestrzeni wieków. Po krótkiej charakterystyce tego greckiego tłumaczenia Biblii hebrajskiej i prezentacji jego genezy (zarówno legendarnej, jak i faktycznej) przedstawiona została jego rola jako tekstu fundacyjnego dla chrześcijaństwa oraz niektóre ślady jego wpływu widoczne w kulturze europejskiej do dzisiaj. W konkluzji stwierdzono, że Septuaginta to „największy przekład wszechczasów”, który odcisnął trwale piętno na zachodniej cywilizacji.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Septuaginta, Zuzanna i starcy, Smok Wawelski, muzyka reggae

Introduction

There are few texts in the Western tradition that can rival the Septuagint in terms of age, historical impact, and cultural significance. This Greek translation of Jewish religious texts, most of which would later constitute the canon of the Jewish Bible, dates back to the third century BC. It was not the first great translation project in antiquity of which we know since it was preceded by a much earlier translation of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* from Sumerian to Akkadian between around 2000 and 1200 BC (Miles, 2010, p. 365). Yet unlike this long forgotten translation, the Septuagint's cultural role did not diminish with time; instead, it grew in significance.

The question of how the Septuagint relates to time and temporality suggests several possible answers. In addition to being simply a very old text, it is also the oldest extant translation within the Western cultural sphere as well as the text that changed the course of time in Western history, being the foundation of Christianity. And finally – as suggested in the title – in some respects its impact spans over two millennia. I will examine these various roles of the Septuagint in relation to time in more detail below, but let us start with its origin as the first major translation project in the Western culture.

The Septuagint's origin

The circumstances of the origin of the Septuagint are depicted in *Letter of Aristeas to Philocrates*, a pseudepigraphic work that traces back to the third or early second century BC. According to this legendary narrative, the custodian of the Library of Alexandria, Demetrius of Phaleron, was said to have encouraged Ptolemy II Philadelphus, the ruler of Egypt (283–246 BC) to enrich the library's resources with the law of the Jews, which is “most philosophical and flawless, inasmuch as it is divine” (Hadas, 1951, p. 111). Seventy-two Jewish sages were summoned by the king and having worked individually and then discussing together the versions they created each day, they produced the harmonized translation of Torah in seventy-two days.¹ When the translation was ready, it was solemnly decreed that

1 The Septuagint or *Septuaginta* means “seventy” not “seventy-two (*septuagintaquaduo*)” in Latin since later authors repeating this legend, including Josephus Flavius, wrote about seventy translators. This tradition was adopted by Western Christianity, and we know from the writings of Augustine that the term *Septuaginta* (or simply *LXX*) was commonly used by the Western Church Fathers (Wasserstein & Wasserstein, 2006, pp. 52–53). The full Latin name for this translation is “interpretatio septuaginta virorum”; the Greek name is “*ῥατα τῶν ἑβδομήκοντα*” (Dines, 2004, p. 1).

“it should remain in its present form and that no revision of any sort take place,” ordering at the same time that

imprecation be pronounced ... upon any who should revise the text by adding or transposing anything whatever in what had been written down, or by making any excision; and in this they did well, so that the work might be preserved imperishable and unchanged (Hadas, 1951, pp. 222–223).

While the *Letter of Aristeas* is a legend, it nevertheless contains a kernel of truth. Researchers assume that Torah was translated most likely in Alexandria between 280–250 BC, yet it was initiated by the Jewish diaspora in that city to serve Jews unfamiliar with Hebrew for liturgical and/or prayer needs while allowing them to cultivate their own religious and cultural identity (Dines, 2004, pp. 41–44). The project was of vital importance to the diaspora because from the fourth century BC onwards Jews in Egypt as well as in other parts of the Hellenistic world became almost completely Greek speaking (Gallagher, 2012, pp. 108–109). Yet we should not exclude the possibility that its possible recipients may have been Jews in Palestine, educated Greeks, or even the court of Ptolemy;² opinions of scholars are divided here (Tcherikover, 1958; Marcos, 2000, p. 43).

Determining the precise origins and chronology of translations of other Hebrew Bible books is more difficult. Broadly speaking, the Septuagint as a corpus of translations of Torah and other Jewish scriptures that would later constitute the Tanakh or the Hebrew Bible, was created between the second century BC and the second century AD (Law, 2013, p. 56). This, as well as later corrections introduced to the text, means that speaking of the Septuagint as a single “translation” oversimplifies the matter, since we are in fact dealing with dozens of translations resulting from the work of different translators at different times, as well as copyists and redactors.³ As we will see later, equally important is also the fact that some books (or their parts) that were incorporated into the Septuagint were most probably not translated from Hebrew but were original Greek texts. These include two historical books, 1 and 2 Maccabees, and additions to Book of Daniel.

The complexity of the Septuagint as translation reflects in a sense its unique character. While it is true that religious texts had already been translated sporadically and the translation of official documentation was the order of the day in antiquity, the Septuagint – given its genre and

2 Sylvie Honigman has argued that the translation may have been indeed commissioned by Ptolemy II for prestigious reasons (Honigman, 2003, pp. 105–106).

3 The issue is more complex as scholars distinguish several forms of the Septuagint, depending on textual differences between manuscripts (Dorival, 2021, p. 53) but these nuances go beyond the scope of this article.

volume – was an undertaking without precedent in the Hellenistic world, since its anonymous translators had no models on which to rely (Brock, 1972, p. 12). It should also be remembered that this was the first translation of an Eastern religious text into Greek on this scale (Brock, 1980, p. 161) or actually the only major translation into Greek known to us, since from the very beginning of our recorded history the Greek culture was almost always a donor and never a recipient of cultural values (Miles, 2010, pp. 346–347). Most importantly, the Septuagint not only introduced the ideas of Hebraic monotheism into the Greek culture but at the same time it Hellenized the Jewish Bible itself (Seidman, 2010, p. 46) transforming it into a sacred text whose potential recipients were no longer the members of one specific nation (Jews) but any member of a much broader cultural milieu. Specifically, terms known from Greek philosophical education that appear in the Septuagint could be now interpreted through the prism of Greek philosophy:

the Hebrew *ehyeh* (I am) became in the Septuagint *ho ōn* (the Being) ... the Hebrew *davar* became the Greek *logos*. ... Greek concepts, in brief, did not need to be read into scripture. They were already there, by virtue of the new language of the text (Fredriksen, 1988, p. 14).

Simultaneously, many Greek terms used in the translation gained theological meanings (Mickiewicz, 2021). Indeed, to some prominent Hellenised Jews, the Septuagint was the proof of Jewish cultural superiority over Greeks and at the same time “the apologetic claim by an ethnic minority attempting to assert its identity” (Veltri, 2006, p. 93). For example, to Aristobulos (fl. c. 181–124 BC) “Pythagoras, Socrates or Plato followed in the path laid out by Moses” (Feldman, 2006, p. 108), while Plato himself was Moses speaking Attic Greek (Feldman, 2006, p. 64). Yet the reconciling the concepts of these two distant cultures was not as easy as Fredriksen’s remark seems to suggest. This was especially relevant with regard to the Hebrew vision of YHWH and the concept of God in Greek philosophy as the supreme and perfect being. Philo of Alexandria (c. 20 BCE – c. 50 CE) struggled with this in his works (e.g. *On the Unchangeableness of God*), defending the Greek idea of immutable God against the clearly anthropomorphic vision of the Jewish God who often displays anger or changes his mind (Moberly, 2015, p. 108).⁴

In the context of our further discussion more important than this philosophical transfer is the unique character of the Septuagint highlighted by

⁴ It is suggested that translators of the Septuagint may have avoided Greek equivalents of Hebrew terms that might be easily associated with God’s mutability (Moberly, 2015, p. 108; Rösel, 1998).

Letter of Aristeas. Ptolemy II's solemn proclamation that the translation he commissioned should remain untouched transforms it into a sacred text in its own right, equal to the Torah (Gallagher, 2012, p. 150). Since it remains unchanged, this means that it is perfect; the king worships it, commands it to be cared for and guarded. What is more, later rewritings of the legendary origin of the Septuagint see it as the work not of men, but of God. According to Philo, the translators did not consult their versions of the text every day but each of them worked in isolation; yet at the end their translations were identical, since, as he says, "they prophesied the same word for word, as though dictated to each one individually by an invisible prompter" [i.e. God] (Pearce, 2021, p. 413). Of the same opinion was Augustine who extended this inspiration on other books of the Septuagint beyond the Torah (*De Civitate Dei* XVIII, 43; Augustine, 1998, p. 885). (Of entirely different opinion was Jerome that stressed *veritas hebraica* present in the original and not necessarily in its Greek translation).

Interestingly, we can also find in the Septuagint the first observations on the nature of translation as an intercultural process formulated by a translator who introduces himself as "the grandson of Ben Sira" who lived "in the thirty-eighth year under Euergetes the King," (probably 132 BC) they "are congenial to his present successors" (Cadbury, 1955, p. 220) and we may notice similar views in modern translation theories. These observations precede the translation of the Book of Sirach:

You are invited therefore to read it with good will and attention, with indulgence for any failure on our part, despite earnest efforts, in the interpretation of particular passages. For words spoken originally in Hebrew do not have the same effect when they are translated into another language. That is true not only of this book but of the Law itself, the prophecies, and the rest of the books, which differ no little when they are read in the original (New American Bible, Revised Edition).⁵

This concise passage encapsulates several insights familiar to any translation theorist. First, the acknowledgment that languages, as lexical systems, are not isomorphic ("words spoken originally in Hebrew do not have the same effect when they are translated into another language"), which would be emphasized over two millennia later by Jakobson in his assertion that "there is ordinarily no full equivalence between code-units" (Jakobson, 1959, p. 233). Second, the anonymous translator does not confine his perspective to words or sentences, but speaks of a "book" and "books," which may reflect a broader and a very contemporary conception of

5 The same translation below.

a “translation unit,” namely understanding a text as an integrated whole. Third, the term “earnest efforts” highlights the imperative of “interpretation” of the text, a necessity arising from the absence of isomorphism. This observation anticipates the hermeneutic theory of translation. Fourth, this earliest example of translational reflection concludes with a salient conclusion that every translation results necessarily in difference. It is worth noting that these observations by “the grandson of Ben Sira” inspired other translators, including King Alfred, who draws on them in his Preface to the translation of *Pastoral Care* (Discenza, 1998).

The Septuagint – the text that changed the course of time in Western history

The most important role of the Septuagint is that of being the constitutive text of Christianity.

Today we tend to forget that this global religion was in its beginnings nothing more than a small Jewish sect of Aramaic-speaking followers of Jesus of Nazareth in whom they saw the Messiah. The equation Jesus = Christ (signifying “Messiah” in Greek), an affirmation that in the eyes of the majority of Jews was a fraud and a blasphemy (Badiou, 2003, p. 20) became, through Greek-speaking Paul, the hallmark of a new religion whose followers spoke Greek and that quickly spread across the whole Roman Empire and later on evolved into a global religion and the cornerstone of our civilization. This far-reaching cultural transformation would not have been possible without the Septuagint.

Paul was proclaiming Jesus Christ as the saviour whose life, death and resurrection fulfilled prophecies of Jewish Scriptures, yet the Greek-speaking inhabitants of the Roman Empire to whom he addressed that message could verify these prophecies only by consulting the Septuagint (see e.g. Watson 2014). In a word, without the Septuagint Paul’s missionary project would have failed. More specifically, Paul and all Christian missionaries in the first decades of Christianity, when the new religion did not have its own “sacred texts” (the earliest Pauline letters, Galatians and 1 Thessalonians, were written between 49–52 AD; the earliest gospel, by Mark 65–75 AD; Ellis, 2021, p. 311, 357) were using testimonies or compilations of passages from the Jewish Scriptures “that were most readily applicable to Jesus as the Christ” (Pelikan, 1971, p. 16) as evidence supporting their claims; these passages were, of course, in Greek. In other words, Christianity took over the Greek version of Scriptures of its maternal religion, the version that was by then regarded as sacred and inspired (see

above) to validate its own claims that were heretical to Jews. This “hostile takeover”⁶ is clearly illustrated in Justin Martyr’s apology of Christianity where he says to his opponent, an imaginary Jew Trypho, that the passages about Christ are “contained in your Scriptures or rather not yours but o u r s [emphasis mine – AG]” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 29; Justin Martyr, 2010, p. 191).

Referring to the Jewish Scriptures is also the fundamental and most important method of argumentation in all texts that later became the New Testament, starting with gospels, through Paul’s letters and Letter to Hebrews, ending with Revelation, with the vast majority of quotes from these Scriptures taken from the Septuagint (Jobes & Silva, 2015, pp. 187–189). What is more, the unavoidable differences between the Hebrew original and the LXX, mentioned by the anonymous translator of the Book of Sirah paved the way for new theological insights constitutive for Christianity as illustrated in Letter to Hebrews. It is “the climax of New Testament with thirty-five quotations [of Jewish Scriptures] and approximately twenty four allusions”, all of them most probably from the Septuagint and none from Hebrew manuscripts (Karrer, 2006, p. 336). One of its crucial passages (9:15–18) plays on the dual meaning of the Greek word *diatheke* (covenant/testament; Quell, 1933, pp. 107–109), which allows its author to assert the redemptive significance of Jesus’ crucifixion (Swetnam, 1965).⁷

We also tend to overlook the fact that each time a phrase “the Scriptures” (*grafai*) or “the Scripture” (*grafē*) appears in a New Testament book, its author actually means the Jewish Scripture in the Greek, most often the Septuagint (Hengel, 2002, p. 105). Furthermore, the Septuagint is often introduced by semi-citations or allusions in the form of a specific wording of the text (see below).

The Septuagint as “the Scripture” not only validated the status of Christ as the Messiah for his followers but may have played also a crucial role in assigning him the divine status. According to Vermes, this was possible because his Christological title “Lord” (*Kyrios*) began to be identified

6 This appropriation of the Jewish Scriptures involved also modifying certain verses in the Septuagint to align them more closely with Christian beliefs. Two books were most affected by such procedure: Psalms (twenty-five instances) and Isaiah (forty-six instances). These two books are the ones most often quoted in the New Testament (Dorival, 2021, p. 79). Note that it was in the era of manuscripts, when adjusting a text during copying was a relatively easy thing to do.

7 Actually, understanding the whole New Testament and all its allusions and doctrinal subtleties is not possible without the Septuagint (Jellicoe, 1969, pp. 191–199). Also some universally accepted interpretations of the Hebrew Bible were shaped by the Septuagint, e.g. the Hebrew noun rendered in the Septuagint as *pleura* i. e. a “rib”, from which Eve was created in the Garden of Eden, may have meant baculum or penis bone (Zevit, 2013, pp. 138–150).

with references to “Lord” in the Septuagint where this term was a translation of Jewish sacred term YHWH (Vermes, 1973, p. 105).

The Septuagint was also responsible for shaping or even creating other essential components of Christianity and Catholic Mariology is a case in point. The sole scriptural support for the virgin birth of Jesus is found in Matthew 1:22–23: “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: »Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel«”. Here Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14, following, of course, the Septuagint that speaks of *parthenos* (virgin). Yet this term narrows down the original Hebrew term *almah* that means a young woman, usually a young wife and not necessarily a virgin (as the context itself of this verse in Isaiah shows). This particular translation was “canonized by early Christian writers” (Pelikan, 1971, p. 19) and the term “virgin” became pregnant with theological meaning and importance, being the biblical source of the veneration of “the Holy Virgin,” and subsequently, a central element of the Marian cult. This devotion, vigorously propagated by the Catholic Church, had a profound influence on the Western anthropological perspective, elevating the concept of virginity that characterized our civilization for many centuries. Also other references to Mary in the New Testament follow often the wording of the Septuagint and contributed to her special status in Catholicism. For example, the term “overshadow” (*episkiazō*), used in Luke 1:35 echoes the God’s presence as the cloud that “settled down” (also *episkiazō*) in the Septuagint translation of Exodus 40:35, which implies in the context of annunciation that Mary will become the new and “living tent of meeting filled with God’s holy presence” (Gadenz, 2018, p. 45).

Most importantly, it was the Septuagint that was the basis of patristic thought and exegesis, because both Greek and Latin church fathers used it either directly or via its Latin translation (*Vetus Latina*) not only before Jerome’s translation of the Hebrew Bible but long after it, as not only Augustine but also Cassiodorus, and Gregory the Great were using *Vetus Latina* (Rebenich, 2002, p. 52). Since the patristic theology laid foundations for Christianity as a theological system we might therefore say that the Septuagint is a kind of “mitochondrial DNA” of the Christian doctrine, being an integral part of it right from its beginnings. While the Latin church ultimately accepted Jerome’s translation of the Hebrew text, the Greek-speaking Church in the East and later on the whole Orthodox Church embraced the Septuagint as its authoritative text for the Old Testament, interpreting the differences between it and the Hebrew text as the changes “made under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and... to be accepted as part of God’s continuing revelation” (Ware, 1993, p. 200). Therefore, to millions of Christians in the world, like to the Hellenized

Jews and the first Christians, the Septuagint remains the Holy Scripture *par excellence*, not merely a translation.

Finally, it must be stressed that, after Jerome's translation of the Hebrew Bible replaced *Vetus Latina*, the Septuagint did not disappear altogether from the Christian Bible but was transferred through centuries to our times (although in Latin disguise) thanks to Jerome himself, as out of his three translations of the Psalter it was his Gallican Psalter that found its place in the Sixto-Clementine Vulgate that was the official text of the Bible in the Catholic church from the Council of Trent to 1979 (Norris, 2023, p. 71). Jerome himself describes the Gallican Psalter as *emendatio*, seeing in it more a revision of an older Latin version (based on the Septuagint) than a true translation (Goins, 2014, p. 189).

What is more, also book names of the Christian Bible are taken from the Septuagint and differ from the Hebrew original (Dorival, 2021, p. 125). Words like “genesis” and “exodus” present in some form in many European languages, bear witness, both in their strict meaning as the titles of the biblical books and in their broader meaning to the lasting legacy of the Septuagint in Western culture.

Other examples of the far-reaching impact of the Septuagint

The cultural importance of the Septuagint extends beyond its foundational role in the emergence of Christianity and its impact can be seen, heard and noticed also elsewhere, including art, music and language. Let us look for its traces there.

One of the most popular subjects in the history of the Western painting, “Susanna and the Elders” is directly tied to the Septuagint since the biblical story of this virtuous young wife and two lecherous men is one of three Greek additions to the Book of Daniel not to be found in its original, Hebrew version. Even if this narrative may have been originally composed in Hebrew, any external evidence for this is lacking (Schürer, Millar, & Vermes, 1987, p. 724), and but for the Septuagint, Western art galleries and museums would have been poorer for many splendid paintings.

A surprising echo of the Septuagint can be heard in reggae music. As mentioned earlier, several Septuagint books were not translated from Hebrew but were Greek texts incorporated into it. For this reason some Christians doubted whether they should be regarded as inspired (recall how closely inspiration and translation were intertwined in the legend surrounding the origins of the Septuagint) and as a result their canonical status is different in various Christian churches. The Catholic Church calls

them “deuterocanonical” and has them in its canon. To Protestants they are “apocrypha,” and located outside the canon. However, due to the fact that these books belonged to the Septuagint, they were usually printed along with other Old Testament books in English Protestant translations of the Bible, including the Authorized Version. This concerned also 1 and 2 Maccabees that recount the persecution of Jews under King Antiochus IV Epiphanes and the victorious Jewish revolt against him. The moral a reader can draw from them stands in a stark contrast to Jesus’ pacifist teaching in Gospels, encouraging the oppressed to resist rather than to “turn the other cheek.”

In 1827, the British and Foreign Bible Society ceased printing apocrypha in the copies of the Bible it distributed (Howsam, 2002, pp. 13–15) including those sent to the British colonies in the Caribbean. This move was interpreted by Black slaves in the colonies as an attempt to censor the biblical truth that enslaved people are allowed to take up arms like Judah Maccabee. This belief also found its expression in a reggae song *Maccabee version* by Max Romeo demanding that the black inhabitants of Jamaica be given an unabridged version of the Bible that included Macabees (Estate, 1994, p. 117; Tidemann, 2009).

Even more surprisingly, a thread spanning millennia connects the Septuagint to... Dragon’s Den at Wawel Hill in Kraków where, according to a legend, a fearsome beast once terrorized local people. It was killed by a boy named Skuba who stuffed ram’s hide with sulphur and when the dragon devoured the bait, it began to drink water until it burst. The resourceful youngster did more or less the same what biblical Daniel did centuries earlier, when he claimed that he would kill the Babylonian dragon without sword or club. Daniel namely “took some pitch, fat, and hair; these he boiled together and made into cakes. He put them into the mouth of the dragon, and when the dragon ate them, he burst” (Dn 14:27). Skuba was not the only one who followed in Daniel’s footsteps, since a Scottish lad Assipatle killed in the same way the Mester Stoor Worm and Albrecht of Trautenberg also used a lamb as a bait to kill his dragon (McCullough, 2013, p. 18, 66–67). Like Daniel 13 that contains the story of Susanna and Elders, similarly Daniel 14 is to be found only in the Septuagint version of the book.

Finally, the Septuagint may be regarded as a kind of linguistic time capsule. As scholars studying Hebrew Qumran manuscripts inform us, comparing these manuscripts with the Septuagint reveals that “many of the distinctive Septuagint readings ... had been preserved only in Greek” (Greenspoon, 2010, p. 162). This implies that whenever the Septuagint differs from the Hebrew Bible perhaps we might not necessarily attribute these differences to errors made by its anonymous translators. Instead,

the variations could potentially reflect a version of the Hebrew text that is no longer accessible to us and has been indirectly preserved through translation.

Conclusion

This brief overview highlights the significant cultural importance of the Septuagint. Referred to as the “greatest translation of all time” (Miles, 2010, p. 357), despite being written down and copied for centuries on papyrus scrolls, its enduring legacy surpasses that of numerous stone structures and military conquests. Notwithstanding its ancient origins, its impact continues to resonate to this day, making it a significant albeit not always conspicuous element of Western culture.

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