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ONE GOOD VERSION NOT ALONE

Learning from early Christian attitudes to the Septuagint.

By David W T Brattston

A classic of English literature beloved for almost four hundred years, the Authorized (or King James) Version of 1611 of the Bible is regarded by some Christians as uniquely inspired and preserved by God and the only translation that should be used in church or personal matters.

Whilst there are also other reasons for valuing the Authorised version it is easy to forget that there have been other periods in history when Christians regarded particular translations as uniquely accurate and approved by God to the exclusion of all others. In very early Christianity some believers held a translation known as the Septuagint in this regard and their arguments were strikingly similar.

The Septuagint is a version of the Old Testament translated over a century or two before Christ from the original Hebrew into Greek, at that time the language of international culture and civilisation. According to the most popular account of events, Pharaoh Ptolemy II Philadelphus employed seventy translators, each working in isolation from the others. The result was seventy complete and independent translations. Yet when they were compared, they were word-for-word identical, which the ancients believed was a miracle of that only God could perform.

There are significant differences between the Septuagint and the text later standardised as the Hebrew-language Old Testament used by Jews and for the Authorized Version. In addition to the Jewish books, the Septuagint contains books of which Article 6 of *The Thirty-nine Articles* states 'the Church doth read for example of life and instruction in manners; but yet doth it not apply them to establish any doctrine'. Some books of the Old Testament in the Septuagint contain more material than the Hebrew text. Other books are shorter than the same books in the standard Hebrew text. The wording is frequently different; for example, the most disputed point was Isaiah 7.14, which Jews using the Hebrew text said 'a young woman' will bear Immanuel, while Christians using the Septuagint said it would be 'a virgin'.

When New Testament authors quoted from the Old Testament, they often copied from the Septuagint, and Christian reliance on the Septuagint grew after the apostles time because later Christians were largely Gentiles who did not know Hebrew. Justin, a well-educated philosopher who was converted to Christianity and later (AD 165) martyred for the Faith, wrote *Dialogue with Trypho*, a debate between a Christian and a rabbi over which was the true religion. Much of the discussion hinged on whether the Jewish (Hebrew) or the Christian (Septuagint) version of the Old Testament was correct and authentic. In it, the Christian made the following accusation against the Jews' treatment of the Old Testament:

I am far from putting reliance in your teachers, who refuse to admit that the interpretation made by the seventy elders who were with Ptolemy [king] of the Egyptians is a correct one; and they attempt to frame another. And I wish you to observe, that they have altogether taken away many Scriptures from the translations effected by those seventy elders who were with Ptolemy, and by which this very man who was crucified is proved to have been set forth expressly as God, and man, and was crucified, and as dying.

Justin also cited passages in the Septuagint accepted by Christians but allegedly deleted by the Jews in their (and hence King James) text. For Justin, the Septuagint was the Old Testament of

Christians while the ancestor of the King James Version was considered a Jewish corruption.

When growing up in a Christian home in western Turkey, Irenaeus often associated with men who had been acquainted with the apostles. Later he became a minister at Lyons in southern France, where he wrote his *Against Heresies* sometime between AD 182 and 188. In this work he repeated the story of Ptolemy Philadelphus and the seventy translators, and commented:

Since, therefore, the Scriptures have been interpreted with such fidelity, and by the grace of God, and since God has prepared and formed again our faith toward his Son, and has preserved to us the unadulterated Scriptures in Egypt...truly these men are proved to be impudent and presumptuous, who would now show a desire to make different translations, when we refute them out of these Scriptures, and shut them up to a belief in the advent of the Son of God. But our faith is steadfast, unfeigned, and the only true one, having clear proof from these Scriptures, which were translated in the way I have related; and the preaching of the Church is without interpolation. For the apostles, since they are of more ancient date than all these [heretics], agree with the aforesaid translation; and the translation harmonizes with the tradition of the apostles.

It thus appears that as regards the number and length of books and the wording, Irenaeus considered the Septuagint as God's own unaltered, pure, preserved word and a divinely-inspired translation, approved and used by no less than the apostles themselves. Like some twentieth-first-century enthusiasts for the Version of 1611, the bishop of Lyons condemned anyone who would use another text or make another translation different from the one he so highly esteemed.

Three to four centuries after the Septuagint was translated, the dean of the most prominent Christian theological school of its day was an extraordinarily well-rounded convert from paganism named Clement. In his *Stromata* (circa AD 190-202), he told the story of Ptolemy, the scribes and the identical translations they produced. From this account Clement concluded that 'it was the counsel of God carried out for the benefit of Grecian ears. It was not alien to the inspiration of God, who gave the prophecy, also to produce the translation, and make it as it were Greek prophecy.' As with Irenaeus and Justin, Clement held the same belief in the unique inspiration and accuracy of the Septuagint that some Christians now do for the King James Version, which is based on the texts they rejected. Clement's successor as dean of the seminary was Origen. Origen spent much of his life comparing various translations of the Old Testament. When one of his associates, Julius Africanus, wrote that in at least one respect the Hebrew text should be preferred to the Septuagint, Origen began his reply with a comparison of the two versions. Asserting throughout his letter that the Septuagint was the Old Testament of Christians, Origen mentioned that there were thousands of differences between the two versions, gave examples, and finally asked rhetorically:

What needs there to speak of Exodus, where there is such diversity in what is said about the tabernacle and its court, and the ark, and the garments of the high priest and the priests, that sometimes the meaning even does not seem to be akin? And, forsooth, when we notice such things, we are forthwith to reject as spurious the copies in use in our Churches, and enjoin the brotherhood to put away the sacred books current among them, and to coax the Jews, and persuade them to give us copies which shall be untampered with, and free from forgery! Are we to suppose that that Providence which in the Sacred Scriptures has ministered to the edification of all the Churches of Christ, had no thought for those bought with a price, for whom Christ died...?

In AD 405 Jerome completed a translation of the traditional Jewish text into Latin, the language of western Christians. The famous Augustine of Hippo opposed his efforts because this translation was not based on the Septuagint. Augustine feared that a translation directly from Hebrew rather than from the Septuagint would create unnecessary differences with the Greek-speaking churches in the east. When Jerome's new Latin version was first read to one congregation, a riot broke out and

the minister was forced to revert to a Latin translation based on the Septuagint.

Like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement and Origen, Augustine championed exclusive use of the Septuagint yet subsequent generations of Christians came to reject their arguments. Whilst there are various arguments used in favour of the King James Version some are amazingly similar to those used to defend the Septuagint. Although a translation or version of the Bible may be as familiar as an old friend, widely-used, and always readily available, Christian history should put us on guard against dubious arguments. Christians must also remember that the supreme purpose of God's word written is to lead us to God's Word made flesh, that in Him we may have life (Jn 5.39).

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