

Poor LXX

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The LXX has been much abused, put to false use for well over 100 years, or so I deem. To begin, what do we really know about the LXX? What are the bare facts (without interpretation or imagination)? We know that it exists, being a translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek. Do we know when the translation was done, or by whom? Statements on this subject generally derive from a single source, Aristeas, who offers an answer to both questions.

Alfred Rahlfs offers the following (*Septuaginta*, 2 vols., Sixth edition [New York: The American Bible Society, n.d.], vol. I, p. xxii):

The Septuagint is the ancient Jewish translation of the Old Testament into Greek. The Pentateuch, the earliest and the fundamental part of the Old Testament Canon, was translated first of all, and, according to the Letter of Aristeas, this took place during the rule of Philadelphus (285—247 B.C.). The story is told that this translation was made in Alexandria by 70—or to be more accurate 72—Jewish scholars; hence it received the name of “Septuagint” (LXX). This title, though it originally applied only to the translation of the Pentateuch, was eventually transferred to the whole of the Old Testament. The translation of the Pentateuch was followed by that of the other books. The translation of these latter was evidently the work of a great number of different hands. This we know, in the first place, from the variations in rendering, which range from the most literal to the most free, and in the second place from the differences in the Greek style

Note that the date given applies only to the Pentateuch; the other books were presumably done later, by different translators.

Kenneth Scott Latourette offers the following (*A History of Christianity* [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1953], p. 15):

The Septuagint was made up of translations of Jewish sacred books into Greek. The name is derived from the tradition that the task of translation was accomplished in the third century B.C. in seventy-two days by seventy-two scholars sent from Jerusalem to Alexandria at the request of one of the Ptolemies. This tradition is found in a letter which is undoubtedly spurious.

I have read a transcription of the letter, and it does seem to be rather fanciful, improbable.

However, since both Philo and Josephus evidently cite this Aristeas, we may reasonably conclude that at least the Pentateuch, in Greek, existed at the time of Christ, whatever the circumstances that produced it. But even if a translation of the OT into Greek existed in His day, what possible reason would Jesus Himself have had for using it? He taught in Hebrew, and would certainly use a Hebrew OT. For that matter, how many Jews, residents of Judea and Galilee, could read Greek in those days? Probably very few, and even those who could, why would they use a translation when they had access to the original in their mother tongue? It seems to me to be perfectly obvious that neither Jesus nor His disciples made any use of the LXX (or whatever) during His lifetime. It was only later, as they were composing

the books that make up the Greek NT, when the OT is quoted, that the question of an existing translation comes to the fore.

To give an idea of just what is at issue, I offer statistics taken from Gleason L. Archer & G.C. Chirichigno (*Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1983]):

A: N.T. = LXX = M.T. [Masoretic Text]	— 268 = 70%
B: LXX is closer to M.T. than is N.T.	— 50
C: N.T. is closer to M.T. than is LXX	— 33
D: N.T. = LXX ≠ M.T.	— 22
E: N.T. ≠ LXX ≠ M.T.	— <u>13</u>
	386 quotations

The 70% where all are in agreement are ‘home free’; it is the remaining 30% that require scrutiny. We must begin by defining the terms. The Masoretic Text is an objective entity; we know what it is. But what about N.T., which of the many competing editions are we going to use? Archer and Chirichigno used the eclectic text currently in vogue. Someone using a ‘Majority Text’ may come up with slightly different numbers, but the difference will be minimal, for this purpose. The principal difficulty with the comparison above lies with LXX, and here I must go into detail.

The LXX that we know and use is primarily based on three manuscripts: Vaticanus, Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus, none earlier than the fourth century A.D. On what basis do people assume that the NT writers used the LXX? What hard evidence do we have that it even existed in their day? Considering the proclivities of the Alexandrian school of textual criticism, why would they not alter the LXX to conform to the NT? With reference to the NT, the three MSS mentioned above are of poor quality, objectively so. Sinaiticus is one of the worst copies in existence, followed quite closely by Vaticanus, with Alexandrinus lagging somewhat behind (in poor quality), but only in the Gospels. Based on their performance in the NT, what should we expect from them in the Old? We should expect equally poor work. Since they made deliberate changes in the New, why would they not do so in the Old as well?

And then there is the little matter of the Apocrypha. The LXX contains ‘Judith’, ‘Tobit’, ‘Bel and the Dragon’, four ‘Maccabees’, and so on. Since those books were not in the Canon recognized by the Hebrew community of faith, where did they come from? And why would someone translating the Hebrew Canon include them? Recall that the Letter of Aristeas, such as it is, deals only with the Pentateuch. So what about all the other books; and what confidence can we place in whoever produced the three Alexandrian MSS mentioned above? Judging by their works, they were ‘sons of the disobedience’ (Ephesians 2:2).

And then there is the further matter of Origen’s Hexapla. I here quote Alfred Rahlfs again (*Ibid.*, p. xxviii):

In his famous and voluminous work, the Hexapla, which he produced in Palestine about the 4th decade of the 3rd century A.D., he placed side by side in 6 parallel columns the original O.T. in Hebrew characters, and in Greek transcription, together with the 4 Greek translations. It is clear from the very arrangement of the Hexapla that to him, being a scholar, not the LXX, but the original text was ultimately the primary authority, for he put

the original text first, and then had next to it the translations of Aquila and of Symmachus, since they furnished the most accurate renderings of the original text. The LXX followed next, and then Theodotion as a revised version of it. The same method is discernible in the way in which Origen adapted the LXX to bring it into line with the original text.

Note that in Origen's estimation both Aquila and Symmachus are better than the LXX, and that Theodotion felt the need to improve it, a felt need that Origen himself shared. Evidently Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion produced their versions during the second century, and the LXX must also have been in existence at that time. Perhaps another fifty years after Origen, Lucian of Antioch prepared yet another revision of the LXX, considerable, and it was probably his revision that was used in the Byzantine Empire.

Really, we have no objective way of knowing what Greek translation of the OT, if any, the authors of the NT may have used. Why might not the Holy Spirit have guided them in their own translation, which most of the time would coincide with any other serious translation of the same text? Further, the Holy Spirit was obviously within His prerogatives to give to an Apostle an interpretation of the OT that might not be transparent to us. An Apostle under divine inspiration would have guidance that we do not.

Going back to the chart above, I would simply delete the LXX. Under divine inspiration the authors of the NT translated the OT as they were so guided. I reject as unfounded any criticism of the NT based on the LXX.