

THE AUTHORITY OF THE LXX
IN AUGUSTINE

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As seen both in usage and by explicit affirmation, the authoritative version of the Bible in the early church was the "Septuagint." In the West, this authority was ascribed not only to the Greek text itself, but also to the Latin translations which were made from it. This situation did not change until at least the seventh century, when the Latin version based on Jerome's work began to displace the Old Latin.¹ Yet, even the abandonment of the Old Latin by the western church did not constitute an intentional rejection of the Septuagint, since the preference given to Jerome's work was based more on the quality of its Latin than on a philosophical commitment to the "Hebraica veritas."²

Augustine is perhaps the most important figure for defining the authority of the Septuagint in the Latin church. By the late fourth century, the authority of the LXX was already established by a longstanding tradition which Augustine felt compelled to defend. In addition, Augustine's efforts to define the authority of the Septuagint were carried out partly in dialogue with Jerome, who was at the same time trying to

¹ H. F. D. Sparks, "Jerome as Biblical Scholar," *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 521.

redefine the place of the Septuagint in light of the Hebrew text. Most important, the intellectual abilities of Augustine were such that he was able to take the received tradition and recast it to meet the challenges of his own time.

Early Christian beliefs about the Septuagint ultimately derive from the *Letter of Aristeas*,³ which was probably composed sometime in the second century BCE.⁴ It describes the translation of the Law (Pentateuch only) into Greek by Seventy-two Jewish translators under the direction of Ptolemy II Philadelphus. Not only does *Aristeas* affirm the skill of the translators and the success of their work, but it even hints at a divine purpose in the translation. An allusion is made to this divine role when the *Letter of Aristeas* states that the seventy-two translators finished their work in seventy-two days, οἷον ἐὶ κατὰ πρόθεσίν τινα τοῦ τοιούτου γεγενημένου.⁵ Also, the ratification of the translation by the people, the reference to elders ἀφ' ἐκάστης φυλῆς ἕξ, and the final curse on any who would alter the translation all confirm the religious authority ascribed to the work of the Seventy.⁶ Nevertheless, the *Letter of Aristeas* does not emphasize the divine origin of the

² Ibid.

³ The statement of Aristobulus on the translation of the Law, preserved in Eusebius' *Praeparatio evangelica* 13.12, was not as influential on later writers for the development of the LXX origins account.

⁴ M. Hadas suggests a date shortly after the translation of *Ben Sirah* in 132 BCE; Moses Hadas, *Aristeas to Philocrates* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), 54.

⁵ *Aristeas to Philocrates* 307.

Septuagint, but commends it primarily as a work of outstanding scholarship.

The account of the Greek translation of the Law as found in *Aristeas* was developed through successive layers of restatement, beginning with Philo and Josephus. While the version of Josephus is essentially non-supernatural,⁷ Philo adds several elements, including the explicit mention of the divine inspiration of the translators,⁸ and the assertion that God had intended for the translation to profit the human race.⁹

The first Christian witness to the origin of the LXX is Justin the Martyr, who relates that not only the "Law" in the strictest sense (the Pentateuch), but also the prophets (presumably the entire Old Testament) were translated by order of Ptolemy King of Egypt.¹⁰ Justin also brings the number of translators down to seventy, which became the traditional number.¹¹

Irenaeus was apparently the first to popularize the story of how each of the LXX translators arrived miraculously at the same translation, although working in different cells.¹² He claims that the LXX is in agreement with the apostles, since it

⁶ Harry M. Orlinsky, "The Septuagint as Holy Writ and the Philosophy of the Translators," *HUCA* 46 (1975), 94-103.

⁷ *Jewish Antiquities* 12:11-118.

⁸ *De vita Mosis* 2.37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.36.

¹⁰ *Apology* 31.1-5.

¹¹ *Dialogue with the Jew Tryphon* 71.1-2.

was inspired by God to testify prophetically to the coming of the Lord. There is therefore no reason for a different translation of the Old Testament into Greek.¹³ The story about the translators working in separate cells is also found in the *Exhortation to the Greeks* (Pseudo-Justin), where the author claims to have visited the island of Pharos and seen the actual cells where the translation had been made.¹⁴

Clement of Alexandria describes how the seventy translators rendered the Scriptures (i.e. the Law and the Prophets) into Greek, working separately but arriving at the same translation. The same God who had inspired the prophets also inspired the translators, who produced their own kind of Greek prophecy.¹⁵ The LXX was part of God's plan to make the Scriptures available to the Greeks, as Clement explains: θεοῦ γὰρ ἦν βούλημα μεμελετημένον εἰς Ἑλληνικὰς ἀκοάς.¹⁶

It should be noted that in the first three centuries Tertullian alone mentions *Aristeas* by name. Tertullian's version follows *Aristeas* more closely than the others, lacks the supernatural elements, and even indicates the correct number of translators (seventy-two).¹⁷

¹² *Against the Heresies* 3.21.2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.21.3-4.

¹⁴ *Exhortation to the Greeks* 13.

¹⁵ *Stromateis* 1.22.148-149.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.22.149, 2.

¹⁷ *Apologeticum* 18.5-9.

In the fourth century, Eusebius of Caesarea recounts in some detail the story of the LXX, following the account of the *Letter of Aristeas*.¹⁸ Eusebius indicates that the LXX was intended by God especially for the conversion of the Greeks.¹⁹

A creative defense for the Septuagint is brought by Hilary of Poitiers. First, the LXX translators cannot be accused of bias, since they translated before the bodily coming of the Lord. Second, the seventy translators, "per Moysen quoque doctrina secretiore perfecti," incorporated this secret teaching into their translation, thus rendering the Hebrew text unnecessary.²⁰

Cyril of Jerusalem gives a short version of the *Aristeas* account, citing the story of the separate cells as proof that the translation had been carried out by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.²¹ John Chrysostom also refers to the origin of the LXX, once to illustrate the providence of God in using an idol-worshiper (King Ptolemy) to bring the Old Testament to the world,²² and once to defend the LXX rendering of *παρθένος* in Isaiah 7:14, arguing that later Jewish translators would be biased against Christ, but that the Seventy, because they were many in number and translated prior to the coming of Christ, should be trusted.²³

¹⁸ *Praeparatio evangelica* 8.1-15.9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.1.1-7.

²⁰ *Tractatus in psalmum* 2.3.

²¹ *Catechesis* 4.34.

²² *Homilies on Genesis* 4.9.

²³ *Homilies on Matthew* 5.4.

Final mention may be made of Epiphanius of Salamis (ca. 315-403), who gives a full account of the origin of the LXX, providing a detailed version of the standard Christian embellishment of the story.²⁴

In view of the unanimous support for the Septuagint in the early church,²⁵ it is not surprising to find that in Augustine's first reference to the LXX, *Epistle 28* (394/5), he is objecting to Jerome's practice of translating the Old Testament from the Hebrew text.

Augustine opens *Epistle 28* with a personal commendation to Jerome on behalf of the bearer of the letter, Profuturus. After this, he comments on Jerome's translations from the Hebrew. Finally, the largest part of the letter is a critique of Jerome's commentary on Galatians 2:11-14 (the confrontation between Peter and Paul), which became a point of serious contention between Augustine and Jerome.²⁶

Augustine begins his discussion of the LXX by praising Jerome for his translations of Greek commentaries. He requests, however, that if Jerome is going to continue to translate the

²⁴ *De mensuris et ponderibus* 3-11.

²⁵ Origen essentially lends his support to the LXX, although he does not make use of the *Aristeas* account, but rather relies on the tradition of the church (e.g. *Epistle 4*). Nevertheless, Origen's belief that the LXX should be corrected towards the Hebrew text, as well as his acceptance of Daniel according to Theodotian, set the stage for Jerome's return to the Hebrew (A. Kamesar, *Jerome, Greek Scholarship, and the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 18-21).

²⁶ Cf. *Epistles* 40, 82, and 112.

books of the Old Testament directly from the Hebrew, he should include critical signs indicating where his edition differs from the LXX, as he had done for his translation of Job.²⁷ Augustine is apparently referring to Jerome's revision of Job according to the Hexaplaric recension, which included Origen's critical signs. The LXX, according to Augustine, possesses the highest authority.²⁸

Augustine goes on to express his surprise that anything at so late a time could be found in the Hebrew text which had not already been seen by previous translators. If the seventy translators of the LXX, who were very experienced in the Hebrew language, did not choose to translate a certain way, it does not make sense that one man later on would be in a position to correct them. Anything in the Hebrew text which was clear enough for Jerome to understand, the "Seventy" would surely have understood as well. If something in the Hebrew text was too obscure for the "Seventy," it is certain that Jerome would also be mistaken about it.²⁹ Augustine concludes this section by asking Jerome to explain his view on this subject.

²⁷ *Epistle 28.2.*

²⁸ De vertendis autem in linguam Latinam sanctis litteris canonicis laborare te nollem nisi eo modo, quo Job interpretatus es, ut signis adhibitis, quid inter hanc tuam et Septuaginta, quorum est gravissima auctoritas, interpretationem distet, appareat (I do not, however, want you to work at translating the canonical sacred Scriptures into Latin, unless you use the method by which you translated Job, so that, by the signs which are employed, that which differs between your translation and the Septuagint, which possesses the highest authority, may be made clear, *Ibid.*).

²⁹ *Ibid.*

Unfortunately, Augustine's letter did not immediately reach Jerome. In fact, Jerome did not see it until 403 CE, when Augustine attached a copy of this letter to *Epistle 71*, in order to clear up some confusion that had arisen concerning its original contents. In the meantime (396 CE), Augustine gave a more complete presentation of his views in *De doctrina Christiana* 2.15.

Among the translations, the "Itala" should be given preference. If necessary, it should be corrected according to the Greek, especially in accordance with the version of the "Seventy." The story of the seventy cells is reported among the more learned churches, demonstrating that the Holy Spirit was at work in the translation and supporting the authority of the LXX. Even if, however, the "Seventy" were not separated but rather worked together, their authority should still be preferred over the efforts of only one man. And even if differences are found between the Hebrew and the LXX, the "Seventy" are to be preferred on the basis that the Holy Spirit used them providentially to transmit the Scriptures to the Greeks.³⁰ While

³⁰ Qamobrem etiamsi aliquid aliter in hebraeis exemplaribus inuenitur, quam isti posuerunt, cedendum esse arbitror diuinae dispensationi, quae per eos facta est, ut libri quos gens Iudaea ceteris populis uel religione uel inuidia prodere nolebat, credituris per dominum gentibus ministra regis Ptolemaei potestate tanto ante proderentur. Itaque fieri potest, ut sic illi interpretati sint, quemadmodum congruere gentibus ille, qui eos agebat et qui unum os omnibus fecerat, spiritus sanctus iudicauit (For this reason, even if anything is found in the Hebrew texts which is different than what those men (the "Seventy") established, I think that it should yield to the divine dispensation which worked through them. As a result of this dispensation, the books which the Jewish nation did not want to disclose to other peoples, because of religious belief or jealousy, were disclosed long beforehand, by the assisting power of king Ptolemy, to the nations who were going to believe through the Lord.

other translations (the "recentiores") may be of value for explaining the sense of words, the priority for correcting the Latin text should be given to the Septuagint.

As mentioned above, *Epistle* 28 did not initially reach Jerome, so that Augustine attached a copy of it to his *Epistle* 71 (403 CE). Concerning the LXX, *Epistle* 71 reiterates the request that Jerome insert signs into his translations from the Hebrew. Augustine states that he would have given examples to illustrate his concerns, except that he did not have access to any copies of Jerome's Hebrew translations.³¹

Augustine provides two additional reasons why Jerome should translate the Old Testament from the Septuagint alone. First, if Jerome's version should become widely read in the West, a rift may occur between the Latin churches and the Greek churches, since the Greek churches will continue to read the Old Testament in Greek. Second, if someone were to object to an expression in Jerome's translation, how would the church be able to evaluate his work? With the Old Latin, it was always possible to find a Greek manuscript and a Greek-speaking Christian who could settle any disputes about the text. But who would settle disputes about Jerome's translation? If the Jews are asked to verify Jerome's translation, who will arbitrate

Thus, it is possible that those men translated in such a way as the Holy Spirit, who was leading them and who had made all of them as one voice, had determined to be suitable for the nations, *de doctrina Christiana* 2.15).

³¹ *Epistle* 71.2.

between Jerome and the Jews when they disagree? Jerome would be the only Christian authority on the text of the Old Testament. According to Augustine, it seemed as if Jerome was attempting to make himself appear indispensable to the church.³²

Augustine then gives an example of the kind of problems which can occur when Jerome's version is read in the churches. A certain Bishop in the town of Oea read from Jerome's version of the prophet Jonah in his congregation. When the church, especially the Greek Christians, heard something in the reading which differed from what had been read in the churches for generations, they raised such a commotion that the Bishop almost lost his congregation. When the Bishop asked some local Jews to explain Jerome's rendering, they indicated that the LXX rendering was correct, and that Jerome's rendering was mistaken. "Quid plura?" asks Augustine. Jerome is liable to make mistakes, and his work cannot easily be checked because Hebrew is not in common use in the church.³³

Augustine closes the letter by praising Jerome's translation of the Gospels, and then reaffirming his stance on the authority of the Septuagint. The privileged position of the LXX should be maintained because it enjoys such wide circulation among the churches, and also because it was used by the

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.* 71.3.

apostles. It would be more profitable, argues Augustine, if Jerome would devote his efforts to making a Latin translation of the Septuagint.³⁴

In *Epistle 75* (404 CE),³⁵ Jerome finally responds to Augustine's criticisms, both on the interpretation of Galatians 2:11-14 and on the question of the text of the Old Testament. First, Jerome explains that his most recent translations do not have critical signs because they were made directly from the Hebrew, and not from Origen's Hexapla; the nature of Augustine's question indicates that he does not understand the issue. If Augustine were really committed to the "Seventy," why is he willing to accept those passages which are under asterisk in Origen's recension, seeing that they were borrowed from a Jew (Theodotian). Of course, as Jerome points out, the churches do in fact accept these Hexaplaric additions, since it is difficult to find a manuscript which lacks them.³⁶

Next, Jerome answers Augustine's charge that nothing new of value could come from retranslating the Old Testament from Hebrew, since anything too obscure for the "Seventy" would be too obscure for Jerome, and anything simple enough for Jerome would have been simple for the "Seventy." Jerome applies the same reasoning to Augustine's commentary on the Psalms. The Book of Psalms, Jerome notes, has already been commented on by

³⁴ *Ibid.* 71.4.

³⁵ *Jer.Corp. Epistle 112.*

Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea, Theodore of Heraclea, Asterius of Scythopolis, Apollinaris of Laodicea, and Didymus of Alexandria in Greek, along with Latin translations of these by Hilary of Poitiers and Eusebius of Vercellae, with Ambrose also agreeing on several points. How could Augustine understand what was too obscure for these men? If a matter was sufficiently clear to Augustine, was it too difficult for those before him? Of course, Jerome recognizes fully the need for continued study of the Scriptures; he simply wishes that Augustine would grant to him the same liberty which he accepts for himself. After all, Jerome is not attempting to replace the LXX, but simply to correct those things which have been altered or omitted by the Jews. He is not trying to force anyone to read his version against their will.³⁷

Jerome also takes up Augustine's charge that the church has no way to check the fidelity of his work. If people have doubts about a rendering of Jerome, they can ask the Jews. Certainly, not every Jew will decline to comment on Jerome's translation.³⁸

As to the commotion caused by the public reading of Jerome's version in the church in Oea, Jerome points out that Augustine failed to indicate which word was in question, thus depriving Jerome the opportunity to defend himself.

³⁶ *Epistle* 75.5.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 75.6.

Nevertheless, Jerome suspects that the issue surrounds the translation of קִיקִיִּן in Jonah 4:6, which the Septuagint had rendered κολοκύνθη ("gourd"), but which Jerome translated "hedera" ("ivy"), based on Aquila, the other recentiores, and the contemporary "Syri" cognate. Since no one would understand what was meant if he simply transliterated the Hebrew word into Latin ("ciceion"), he chose "hedera" as the closest approximation to the Hebrew which was also in keeping with the other translators. Jerome contends that the Jews who gave the false report to the Bishop of Oea "aut Hebraeas litteras ignorare aut ad inridendos cucurbitarios voluisse mentiri."³⁹

In *Epistle* 82 (405 CE), Augustine admits that some benefit may come from translating the Old Testament from the Hebrew, but only so as to correct what had been altered by the Jews.⁴⁰ Augustine does express doubt, however, that the LXX translators would have had reason to modify or omit anything, since they translated before the time of Christ. Nevertheless, Augustine's desire to see Jerome's *De optimo genere interpretandi*, and his repeated request that Jerome send him a copy of his translation of the LXX (which Augustine believed Jerome to have finished) demonstrate an increasing openness to Jerome's work on the Old Testament. Augustine emphasizes that his only reason for

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.* 75.7.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Epistle* 75.6.

objecting to the public reading of Jerome's translation was that he did not want to cause offense to the churches by challenging the authority of the well-known Septuagint. Yet, while willing to make concessions, Augustine remains committed to the LXX, and concludes his remarks to Jerome with a final word in favor of the "gourd."⁴¹

Before discussing Augustine's final statement on the LXX, it is necessary to mention one more argument made by Jerome in favor of the Hebrew text. Although this point was never made directly to Augustine, it clearly influences Augustine's final position as articulated in *De civitate Dei*.

It was commonly believed among early church leaders that the apostles cited the Old Testament according to the Septuagint text and not the Hebrew. This was an important point of validation for the authority of the LXX.⁴² As early as 395 CE, in the midst of his defense of sense-for-sense translation, Jerome had challenged this belief by citing passages where New Testament authors follow the Hebrew more closely than the Greek.⁴³ Jerome had also argued this point in some of his prefaces, and he included these with further examples in his

⁴¹ Unde illud apud Jonam virgultum si in Hebraeo nec hedera est nec cucurbita, sed nescio quid aliud, quod trunco suo nixum nullis sustentandum adminiculis erigatur, mallem iam in omnibus Latinis cucurbitam legi; non enim frustra hoc puto Septuaginta posuisse, nisi quia et huic simile sciebant (Hence, if in Hebrew that plant in Jonah is neither an ivy nor a gourd, but something else which stands upright, held up by its own stem without any props, I would still prefer that "gourd" be read in all the Latin churches. For I do not think that the "Seventy" would have put this without reason, unless they knew that it was similar to this, *Epistle* 82.5).

⁴² E.g. Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies* 3.21.2; Augustine, *Epistle* 71.4.

Apologia contra Rufinum (401 CE). In citing his preface to Genesis, Jerome provides Mt. 2.15, Mt. 2.23, Jn. 19.37, and Jn. 7.38 as examples of passages where the New Testament follows the Hebrew text.⁴⁴ In defense of his translation technique, he cites Jn 7.38 and Mt. 27.46 as examples where the New Testament follows the Hebrew.⁴⁵ Although not addressed to Augustine specifically, this argument made a significant impact on Augustine. It is an example of how Jerome served as an agent of change in Augustine's thinking on the text of the Old Testament.

Augustine's final statement on the authority of the Septuagint is found in *De civitate Dei*.⁴⁶ He begins by giving his own version of the *Aristeas* legend. The LXX was translated by seventy-two men who were most learned in Hebrew and Greek. Although each one translated separately, the translations which they produced were in exact agreement with one another, both in the selection and order of words. This was because the one Spirit had been in them all. The final product was an authoritative version of the Scriptures designed for the benefit of the nations.⁴⁷

⁴³ *Epistle* 57.7,11.

⁴⁴ *Apologia contra Rufinum* 2.25.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 2.34.

⁴⁶ Composed throughout the years 413-26 CE.

⁴⁷ Et ideo tam mirabile Dei munus acceperant, ut illarum scripturarum non tamquam humanarum, sed, sicut erant, tamquam diuinarum etiam isto modo commendaretur auctoritas, credituris quandoque gentibus profutura, quod iam uidemus effectum (And so, they (the "Seventy") had received such a wonderful gift from God, that the authority of these Scriptures was commended not as human, but as they were, divine, even bringing benefit to the nations who would eventually believe, which we already see as having taken place, *De civitate Dei* 18.42).

For this reason, Augustine argues, the church has received the LXX as the only authorized version, and the Latin church has accepted the Latin translation made from it. As in *De doctrina Christiana*, Augustine states that even if the translators had reached agreement by comparing their work, they should still be preferred to the translation of one man. Yet, Augustine includes this statement on Jerome: "Although our times are not left lacking, thanks to Jerome, a most learned man, skilled in all three languages, who has translated these Scriptures into Latin speech not out of Greek, but out of Hebrew."⁴⁸ While the Jews acknowledge Jerome's work to be accurate, the church still holds that the LXX should be preferred.⁴⁹

Furthermore, the Septuagint should not be corrected towards the Hebrew text. The "Seventy" were prophets, and the differences between the LXX and the Hebrew text should be likened to the differences between the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. God may give one message through Isaiah, and another through Jeremiah, but it is the same Spirit which speaks through both. Often, the

⁴⁸ quamuis non defuerit temporibus nostris presbyter Hieronymus, homo doctissimus et omnium trium linguarum peritus, qui non ex Graeco, sed ex Hebraeo in Latinum eloquium easdem scripturas conuerterit, *Ibid.* 18.43.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

same meaning will shine forth through both versions, although the words are different. At other times, the meanings will differ, but only because the Spirit did not choose to say the same thing through both of them. The Spirit may have chosen to say one thing through the Hebrew prophets, and something else through the prophetic translators.⁵⁰ In this way, Augustine neutralizes any attempt to return to the Hebrew, since the differences between the original and the translation are viewed as a new prophetic message, given in accordance with God's plan for the nations.

Augustine concludes by giving an example of how this principle should operate. In the Hebrew text of Jonah 3.4, the prophet announces to the city of Nineveh עֹד אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְיִינָנָה נְהַפֹּכֶת, whereas in the LXX it reads ἔτι τρεῖς ἡμέραι καὶ Νινευη καταστραφήσεται. How is one to know what the prophet really said? In terms of the historical question, Augustine sides with the Hebrew text: "Si ergo a me quaeritur, quid horum Ionas dixerit, hoc puto potius quod legitur in Hebraeo: *Quadraginta dies, et Nineue euertetur.*" Yet, the LXX contains "unum eundemque sensum, quamuis sub altera significatione," so that one should not reject either, but rather transcend the level of history, in order to find "quae significanda historia ipsa conscripta est."⁵¹ The proclamation of Jonah did take place, but it was meant to signify something greater, just as Jonah's

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

three days "in uentre ceti" signified the three days spent by the Lord in hell. Nineveh represents the church of the Gentiles, overturned through repentance. The number of days represents Christ, in the Hebrew text because Christ spent forty days with his disciples after the resurrection, and in the LXX because he rose from the dead on the third day. The same Spirit was speaking through both. What is more, this dual approach is in harmony with the actual practice of the Apostles, who quote prophetic testimonies from both the Hebrew and the Greek, thus indicating that they considered both to be authoritative.⁵²

Augustine maintained his commitment to the authority of the LXX throughout his life, using some of the same arguments in *De civitate Dei* as he had employed in *de doctrina Christiana*. Yet, he also demonstrated a certain willingness to admit new data and assimilate them into his understanding. Even if he was forced to recast the form of an argument, or abandon it altogether, he could always appeal to the usage of the churches as evidence for the position of the LXX. As shown by the incident involving the Bishop of Oea, Augustine was very concerned about the stability of the churches and the harmony between Latin and Greek Christianity. Augustine's position on the Septuagint was in part a reflection of this concern.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 18.44

⁵² *Ibid.*

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