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The Septuaginta: incorporating new perspectives

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ABSTRACT

The Greek translation of the Hebrew (and Aramaic) text of the Bible is commonly called the Septuaginta. In this collection, there are Biblical books that are translated from Hebrew and Aramaic into Greek as well as Biblical books that were originally written in Greek. Studying how the translators went about is helpful when attempting to reconstruct the Old Greek text and the Hebrew underlying text on the basis of which it was rendered. In some cases, the Old Greek text and its revisions shed light on the evolution of the Hebrew Biblical text. Moreover, for some books or parts thereof, not a text resembling the Old Greek text as it left the hands of the translators, but a revision of that Greek text is transmitted. The earliest revisions came from Jewish hands and are most commonly associated with the names of Aquila, Theodotion and Symmachus. Their texts (or traces thereof) were being used by the later Christian revisers, such as Origen and Lucian. In the texts of the Old Greek as well as in the later revisions, one can observe the phenomenon of rewriting, which is also attested in texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The article as submitted has benefited from extensive research on the books of Joshua and Esther.

Introduction

The Septuagint (μετάφρασις τῶν ἑβδομήκοντα, *hē metaphrasis tōn hebdomēkonta*, in abbreviation, LXX) is a collection of Jewish writings, which also became the Old Testament of the Greek-speaking Christians. The writings are mainly translated from Hebrew or in the case of Daniel and Ezra, partly from Ara-

maic scriptures, but include also some works composed in Greek by Jews in the Hellenistic period as well as others translated from lost (or meanwhile recovered) Semitic originals.

According to the Letter of Aristeas (Gruen, 2016; Rajak, 2009; Wasserstein and Wasserstein, 2006; Wright, 2015), during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadephus (mid 2nd century BCE) seventy-two translators (with the number 70 later becoming more popular), working on the peninsula of Pharos near Alexandria, translated the Hebrew books of Moses into Greek. Later the word also started to refer to the translation of the entire Bible, including the books (deuterocanonical/apocryphal) that were composed in Greek. The translation was done by different hands (Figure 1) at different times between the 3rd century BCE and the beginning of the Christian era. It was intended primarily for those Jews who, having migrated into Egypt and other Greek-speaking lands, became more at home with the Greek language than with the Hebrew (De Troyer, 2012; De Troyer, 2013; Greenspoon, 1997; Ross, 2022; Tov, 1986).

The Septuagint, the Old Greek, and revisions

This earliest Greek translation is often labelled the Old Greek (OG). Already in the pre-Christian era, some Jews (Theodotion, his predecessor Kaige, Symmachus and Aquila) had begun to revise this Old Greek text in the light of the Hebrew text. The collection of all these Greek writings, which we *now* call the Septuagint, however, not only included Old Greek texts (Figure 2), but for some books (or parts thereof), instead of the Old Greek, a later revision of the Old Greek (such as the *Kaige* revision, for instance, in parts of Samuel and Kings, or the Theodotion revision for Daniel). In the Christian era, this collection, the Septuagint, also became the Bible of the Christian movement and is quoted in the New Testament and in later Christian writers as well as by the Jews Philo and Josephus. The Old Greek was later translated into other languages, such as Latin, the *Vetus Latina* (Figure 3), and many other languages, like Georgian, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, *etc.*

The Greek translations of the Biblical books or parts thereof vary in style and in degree of literalness. When not (too much) influenced by the original Semitic idiom, their Greek, as in the New Testament, and in non-literary documents of the period, the Greek translation represents the vernacular Hellenistic (*koinē*).

The work of Origen, Lucian and their predecessors

Wanting a tool at hand to discuss Biblical text, Origen first developed his Hexapla (or Tetrapla), in which he collected the following available texts and put them in six columns (hence, Hexapla): the Hebrew text, a transliteration of the Hebrew text in Greek characters, the Greek text of Aquila, Symmachus, and in the sixth column, mostly Theodotion. In his fifth column, Origen printed his revised text of the Old Greek, in which he aligned the Old Greek with the Hebrew text, using especially the text of Theodotion. The "Hexaplaric" text of the fifth column started to have a life of its own and influenced many other manuscripts.

Although the Letter of Aristeas situates the origins of the Old Greek in Egypt, the discoveries of Greek texts at Qumran demonstrate that Greek was also in use in Judaea. Moreover, there was a revised Greek text found in the Cave of Horrors - this revised Greek text is labelled the *Kaige* text of the Twelve Minor Prophets (Tov, 1990). There is no *Kaige* evidence found for the Pentateuch;
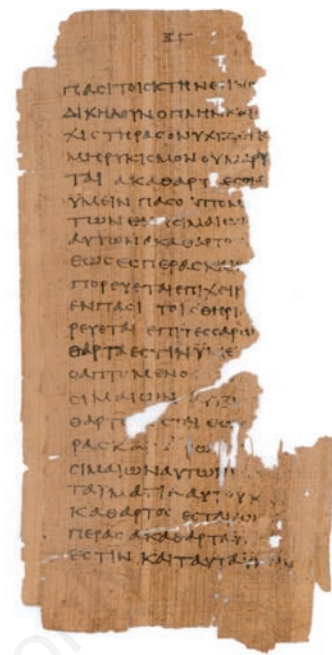

Figure 1. Papyrus MS 2649 (Joshua), Martin Schøyen Collection. Courtesy of Martin Schøyen.
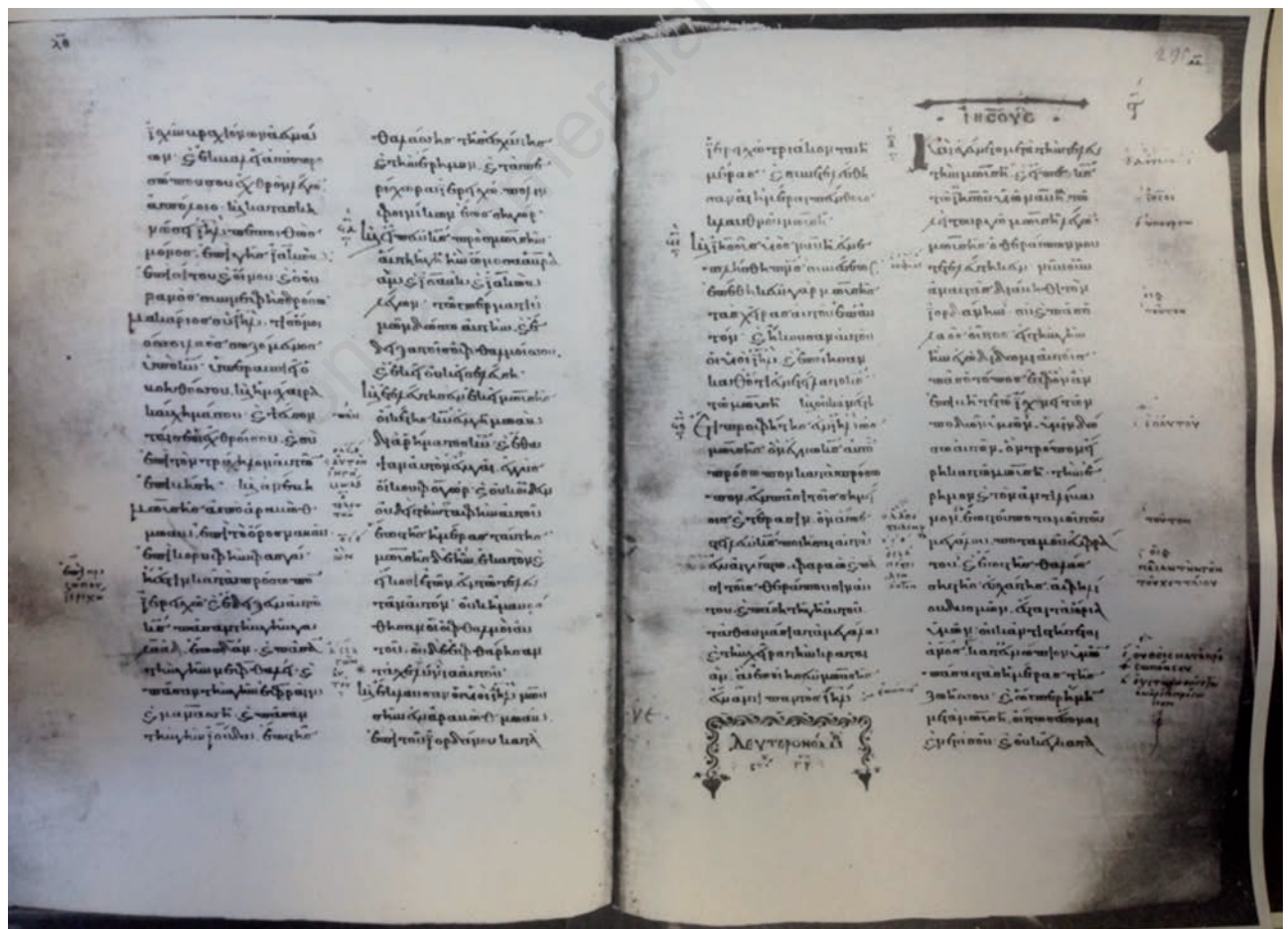

Figure 2. Old Greek manuscript 344, beginning of the book of Joshua. Courtesy of Septuaginta Unternehmen, Göttingen, Germany.

for the book of Joshua the evidence is scant and Theodotion seems to have taken over his readings from *Kaige* (De Troyer, 2006; Greenspoon, 1983), but the Greek text of the so-called *Kaige* sections in the books of Samuel and Kings were so important that already in Codex Vaticanus, the *Kaige*-text is the Greek text printed and that in Judea the text of the Minor Prophets books which was also circulating was a *Kaige* text. As to when these revisions started, there is still some debate (Aejmelaeus, 2022). The *Kaige* Nahal Hever text itself is dated to the late first century BCE (Aejmelaeus, 2022; Albrecht, 2018; Parsons, 1990).

With regard to 1-4 Kingdoms (1-2 Sam and 1-2 Kings): the Rahlfs edition, based on Codex Vaticanus, offers partly an OG text and partly a *kaige* text. In the *kaige* sections of these books (namely the so-called βγ section 2 Sam. 11 to 1 Kings 2 and the γδ section 1 Kings 22 to the end of 2 Kings) (Aejmelaeus, 2022; Pessoa da Silva Pinto, 2019; Wirth, 2016; Wirth, 2017), there is no OG text available but only the *kaige* text. In order to reconstruct the OG text in these sections, one one has to study the Antiochene text (Fernández Marcos and Busto Saiz, 1989, 1992, 1996), as this revision was most likely based on *the* OG or *an* OG.

A later recension is the Lucianic recension, which aligned the Old Greek text, using Hexaplaric sources to the Hebrew text and undertaking many stylistic, grammatical, lexical and syntactical changes (Huotari, 2024). Traditionally the Lucianic recension is associated with Lucian of Antioch, a Christian theologian (240-312 CE), who is known to have produced a revision of the OG. The texts of 4QSam[a,c] changed our thinking somehow, as these texts were dated in the pre-Christian era and offered a Hebrew

Figure 3. Admont, Benedictine Library, Vulgate manuscript, beginning of Judges. Courtesy of Kristin De Troyer.

text similar to the Greek (and Antiochene) text of Lucian (Tov, 1999). The relation between the so-called Lucianic text, also known as the Antiochene text, and the OG, on the one hand, and the Hebrew text, on the other, as well as its traces in many daughter versions has been studied at length (Torijano and Piquer Otero, 2012; Trebolle Barrera, 2020).

Comparing texts

When comparing the OG with the MT, one observes pluses (additions to the text), minuses (omissions from the text), and variants (changes to the text) (Müller *et al*., 2014; Müller and Pakkala, 2017, 2022; Pakkala, 2014). Two main theories have developed to explain these phenomena. First, scholars claim that the OG is a free translation of the MT and pluses, minuses, and variants are credited to the OG translators who added to, omitted from, or changed the text. Second, there are those who claim that the pluses, minuses, and variants stem from a different Hebrew *Vorlage* (prototype) and that the translators translated this slightly different parental text. For almost all, but especially the more text-critically complex books, scholars belonging to either category can be found.

All attempts to explain pluses, minuses, and variants point to some editorial work, which could be called "interpretation" or "rewriting" (Darshan, 2023). Whether OG Isaiah interpreted the MT, or OG Esther rewrites its MT *Vorlage*, these new texts have an element of rewriting in them.

There are multiple light forms of rewriting such as reading what the Hebrew text may offer as possibilities, often done through metathesis (i.e., transposition); offering a new interpretation; or rendering explicit what was implicit (exploiting, for instance, a semantic or even syntactic possibility). This form of interpretation was inspired by the Jewish rules for exegesis (esp. the seven or thirteen rules applied in scriptural exegesis (Fishbane, 1985; Langer, 2016). The level of interpretation and rewriting is also dependent on the sort of literature that was being translated. The Pentateuch has minimal interpretation, even if the OG Leviticus created many new words, while the translators of the later books offered fuller interpretations, such as in OG Daniel, where texts were added (Susanna, Bel and the Dragon); similarly, OG Esther has many additions. There is also the rewritten text labeled 1 Esdras (called 3. Esdras in German speaking countries), which most likely is a rather slavish Greek translation of a rewritten Hebrew/Aramaic *Vorlage* (De Troyer, 2002).

Rewritings in all sorts and varieties can also be found among the texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls (De Troyer, 2003; White Crawford, 2008; Zahn, 2020; Zsengellér, 2014) as well as in Aramaic translations of the Bible and in other rabbinic literature (Cook, 1986; Smelik, 2013). One has to pay much attention to variants which the OG, or its later texts and/or cognate, have in common with the DSS (De Troyer and Herbison, 2020).

When studying the Old Greek text, one has to also decide on how the OG represents its Hebrew *Vorlage*: rather slavishly or freely? (Barr, 1979). Translators, however, tried to translate what was in front of them (whether in manuscript or by dictation) with a view to ensuring that the audience would understand the text. The adherence to what was in front of them seems to have been greater when it came to the Pentateuch and lesser with the Writings. How the Hebrew was rendered in Greek can be analysed using translation technique studies on the level of *semantics*, *style* and *syntax*. The better one knows the translators and their activities and results, the more one can speak about how the underlying,
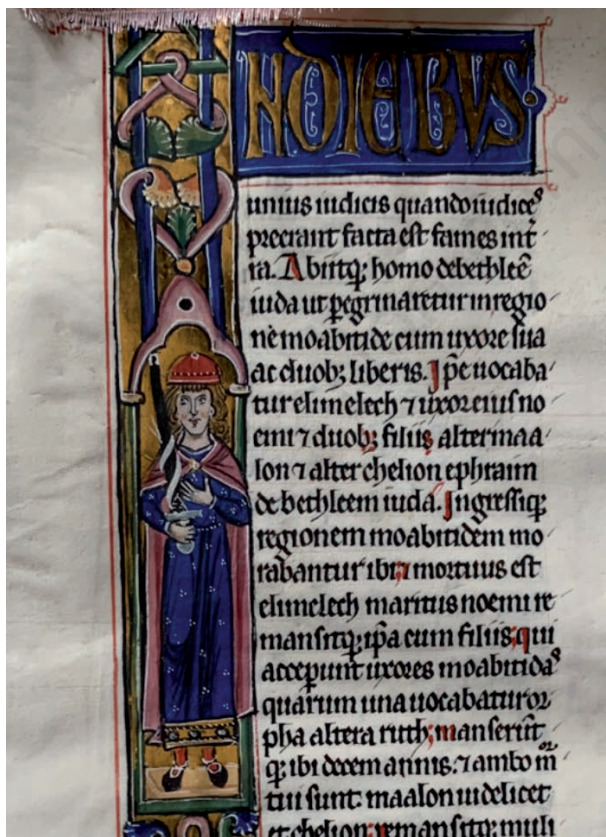
parental *Vorlage* looked and whether this *Vorlage* was the MT or a Hebrew text that was slightly different. Similarly, one also develops a sense of how the translators interpreted their text. Moreover, when studying the OG, one has to understand the data as offered in the text-critical apparatus of especially the critical edition of the OG, whether it is the Cambridge edition (Brooke and McLean, 1906) or the Göttingen Septuagint edition (Albrecht, 2021). A series of tools explains how the apparatus is built up (De Troyer, 2003; Schäfer, 2012a, 2012b). The apparati allow the reader to understand the choices made in order to construct the lemma text, as well as the history of the text since its beginnings, including the work of the early Jewish revisers (De Troyer, 2011).

Aim of the article

The aim of this article was to show how new findings in either manuscripts or in the analyses of the variants therein provide new insights into the history of the Greek Biblical text, which in itself sheds light on the history of the Hebrew Biblical text. It also demonstrates that when studying the Biblical text, one must take into consideration the Old Greek text, its textual development as well as its revisions. Moreover, it shows the need to distinguishing between variants as resulting from a specific translation technique and/or rewriting and those resulting from possibly different manuscript traditions.

Novelty of the article

In this article, three lines of research are described that, when properly done and only if all three are done, influence the depiction of the development of the Biblical text: the study of the textual data as found in the manuscript tradition of the Greek text, its daughter versions, as well as the Hebrew text, the study of the translation technique of the Greek books, as well as the study of the literary development, especially the phenomenon of rewriting, of the different Biblical books.

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