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# THE SEPTUAGINT & MODERN CHALLENGES TO THE TRADITIONAL TEXT AND TRANSLATION OF THE HEBREW OLD TESTAMENT PART 1

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**Introduction:**

With the rise of modern textual criticism in the Enlightenment-influenced nineteenth century, the traditional text and translation of the Bible have been under fire. For over a century the primary target of this attack was the Received Text of the Greek New Testament. This included the exclusion or undermining of longer passages (e.g., Mark 16:9-20; John 7:53-8:11), individual verses (e.g. Acts 8:37), and significant parts of verses (e.g., 1 John 5:7) in the traditional text. Changes made to the modern text then trickled down to modern translations based on those texts.

Initially, the Old Testament text was seemingly less affected by the rise of modern textual criticism, as even modern translations generally continued to follow the traditional Masoretic Hebrew Text. Most of the early challenges to the traditional Old Testament came by way of suggested changes in translation rather than text. The Revised Standard Version (1952), for example, infamously suggested that the Hebrew word *almah* in Isaiah 7:14 be rendered as "young woman" rather than "virgin," not so subtly undermining the Biblical foundations for the doctrine of the virgin birth of Christ (cf. the citation of Isaiah 7:14 in Matthew 1:23).

In recent decades, however, significant challenges have also arisen against the traditional Hebrew text. It is now common to read and hear modern Old Testament scholars, including Reformed and evangelical men, suggest that the traditional Hebrew text has been hopelessly corrupted and that the "original" text, lost for centuries, needs to be "restored" by means of modern textual criticism. Many of these suggested "improvements" have come from analysis of ancient versions (translations) of the Old Testament in Greek (the "Septuagint"), Latin, and Syriac. Such scholars suggest that these versions *might* have been based on superior underlying Hebrew manuscripts (the *Vorlage* [template, model] of these ancient translations) and then use them to "correct" the Hebrew text.

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In addition to and alongside of the ancient versions, these scholars have also relied upon analysis of manuscript discoveries, including a cache of ancient documents, with both Biblical and non-Biblical manuscripts, discovered near the Dead Sea at Qumran in Israel in the mid-twentieth century and known as the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS). They have also sometimes made use of a Hebrew work known as the Samaritan Pentateuch. As the name indicates, the Samaritan Pentateuch is a Hebrew edition of the first five books of Moses used by ancient Samaritans but differing in many significant ways from the traditional Hebrew Pentateuch used by Jews and Christians. Suggested "revisions" to the traditional Hebrew text based on analysis and speculations drawn from sources like the ancient versions, the DSS, and the Samaritan Pentateuch are now increasingly reflected in modern translations of the Old Testament.

## Examples of supposed "corrections" to the Hebrew Old Testament in modern Bibles:

Here are only three examples of Old Testament passages in modern Bible translations which involve the supposed "correction" of the traditional Hebrew Masoretic Text based on readings taken from ancient versions or witnesses:[2]

First, we can compare 1 Samuel 10:1 in the King James Version (KJV), which follows the traditional Masoretic Text, with the same verse in the English Standard Version (ESV), which follows a modern reconstructed text (emphasis added):

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| **1 Samuel 10:1 (KJV)** Then Samuel took a vial of oil, and poured it upon his head, and kissed him, and said, Is it not because the LORD hath anointed thee to be captain over his inheritance? | **1 Samuel 10:1 (ESV)** Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on his head and kissed him and said, "Has not the LORD anointed you to be prince **over his people Israel? And you shall reign over the people of the Lord and you will save them from the hand of their surrounding enemies. And this shall be the sign to you that the Lord has anointed you to be prince** over his heritage." |

[2] Many more examples might be provided. For a chart surveying changes made to the traditional Hebrew text based on ancient versions and other witnesses, see "Appendix II Chart for the Departures of Modern Translations from the Masoretic Text," in Russell T. Fuller, "John Owen and the Traditional Protestant View of the Hebrew Old Testament," SBJT 20.4 (2016), 94. The chart indicates, for example, that there are 226 places in the ESV where the LXX is preferred over the Hebrew text, 226 in the NIV, and 576 in the NRSV.

A footnote in the ESV indicates that the expanded reading in this verse (in bold) is taken from the Septuagint and does not appear in the Hebrew. One might assume the ESV translators are making use of a reconstructed Hebrew text, which holds the addition to be original and assumes it was omitted, perhaps due to a scribal error of *parablepsis* ("prince over his people Israel… prince over his heritage"). They believe they are now restoring this expanded reading by means of the Septuagint, even though there are NO extant Hebrew witnesses which support it.

Second, in 1 Samuel 13:5 the traditional Hebrew Masoretic Text says the Philistines gathered "thirty thousand chariots" to fight with Israel (in this both the KJV and the ESV follow the traditional Hebrew text). The New International Version (NIV) and Christian Standard Bible (CSB), however, follow a reconstructed text reading, which reports only "three thousand chariots." The NIV note cites in support, "Some Septuagint manuscripts and Syriac." The CSB note says "One LXX ms, Syr." Advocates of the modern reconstructed text, no doubt, see the "corrected" text as more historically plausible with the defeated Philistines mustering a mere three thousand chariots over against what they presumably judge to be an over-inflated and exaggerated thirty thousand chariots in the traditional text. Generations of Jews and Christians, however, apparently had little difficulty accepting the more numerous "thirty thousand chariots" in the traditional reading.

A third example is found in Psalm 145:13. In Hebrew this Psalm is an acrostic poem with each line beginning with a different consecutive letter of the Hebrew alphabet. In the traditional Masoretic Text, however, it is a broken acrostic with the "*nun*" letter missing. So, it skips from the "*mem*" in verse 13 to the "*samech*" in verse. 14 with no line supplied beginning with "*nun*." Some modern translations now insert the supposed missing line at the end of verse 13. This shift can be seen if one compares this verse in the KJV, which follows the broken acrostic of the traditional Masoretic Text, and the ESV, which follows a reconstructed text, attempting to "correct" the broken acrostic by adding a verse presumably beginning with "*nun*," surmising that it was present in the original but somehow came to be omitted. Compare:

**KJV Psalm 145:13**
"Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion *endureth* throughout all generations."

**ESV Psalm 145:13**
"Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,

and your dominion endures throughout all generations."
[The LORD is faithful in all his words
and kind in all his works.]

The added "verse" in Psalm 145:13b in the ESV is included in brackets. The ESV footnote reads, "These two lines are supplied by one Hebrew manuscript, Septuagint, Syriac, (compare Dead Sea Scroll)." As Larry Brigden has pointed out, however, "there is positive evidence that the נ [*nun*] verse is intentionally omitted from Psalm 145," and the Psalm is not, in fact, in need of "correction."[3]

From a traditional Protestant perspective there are significant problems with these kinds of suggested changes to the text of Old Testament Scripture. Here are two: *First,* it assumes that the immediately inspired Hebrew text has been corrupted. Thus, it denies the doctrine of the providential preservation of Scripture, that God's Word has been, as it states in *Westminster Confession of Faith* 1.8, "kept pure in all ages." *Second*, and correspondingly, it assumes that an ancient translation might be used to correct the divine original.

## What is the Septuagint?

As illustrated in the three examples above, many of these changes are suggested by making appeal to the Septuagint. What is the Septuagint? The term "Septuagint" is generally used in reference to translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into the Greek language. The word "Septuagint" comes from the Latin *Septuaginta*, meaning "Seventy." In fact, the Septuagint is often abbreviation by the Roman numerals LXX meaning "Seventy." The term derives from an epistle known as the Letter of Aristeas (or Pseudo-Aristeas), which claims to offer an account of how this translation came into existence.[4] It suggests that a group of seventy (or seventy-two) Jewish scholars were brought to Alexandria in Egypt c.250 BC to translate at least part of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, so that this work could be added to the city's famed library. Early Jewish sources (like Philo and Josephus) suggest that this translation did not include the entire Hebrew Old Testament but only the Pentateuch. Various other translations of both the Pentateuch and the other books of the Old Testament were made in later years.

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[3] Larry Brigden, "The Supposed Missing נ [nun] Verse in Psalm 145," Quarterly Record, No. 602 (January-March, 2013), 13-16.

[4] Though it claims to describe events that took place c.250 BC, the letter survives only in about two dozen medieval manuscripts, the earliest of which is dated to the eleventh century. See Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, Invitation to the Septuagint, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2015), 18.

The word “Septuagint” is, in fact, problematic, because many today, including scholars and pastors, inaccurately use the term, speaking as if a complete, unified, stable, and singular translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek existed in the first century, and that it was uniformly read and cited by the apostles and other early Christians. This simply is not the case. The earliest extant Greek translations of all the canonical Old Testament books (along with other non-canonical writings, like the Apocrypha) collected into one literary work only dates to the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era in Codices like Sinaiticus (Aleph), Alexandrinus (A), and Vaticanus (B).

The most frequently referenced modern printed edition of the Septuagint was produced by the German scholar Alfred Rahlfs in 1930.[5] It is based on the three previously mentioned Greek uncials manuscripts from the Christian era (Aleph, A, and B). There are indeed many citations of the Old Testament within the New Testament that exactly or closely resemble passages in the “Septuagint” of the Christian era, and which are available in the Rahlfs-Hanhart printed edition. The citations of the Old Testament in the New Testament, however, are far from uniform or obvious in origins. Many of the citations do not resemble the Septuagint, but other Greek translations and paraphrases, including ones that might have been done by apostolic authors themselves (like Paul, who knew Hebrew and Greek). Many of the citations agree most clearly with the traditional Hebrew text rather than the Septuagint (cf. the citation of Hosea 11:1 in Matthew 2:15 and of Zechariah 12:10 in John 19:37). Contemporary scholars now routinely suggest that, rather than saying a New Testament author cites *the* Septuagint, one should simply say he is citing a Greek translation of the Old Testament. For example, in a 2015 Gospel Coalition lecture titled “Why I don’t believe in the Septuagint,” Peter J. Williams of the evangelical Tyndale House in Cambridge suggested that rather saying a New Testament writer cites *the* “Septuagint,” he should instead speak of “pre-Christian translations of the Old Testament into Greek.”

Various Greek translations of the Old Testament were, in fact, widely used among many early Christians, especially as they evangelised Greek speaking Jews and pagans in the Roman Empire. Some early Christian writers like Justin Martyr and Irenaeus of Lyons did, however, speak particularly positively about the Greek translation associated with the “Seventy,” even claiming it was inspired by God. In the third century, the controversial ecclesiastical scholar Origen of Alexandria and Caesarea composed a massive edition of the Old Testament known as the *Hexapla*. It presented the text in six columns, including the Hebrew Text and a transliteration of the Hebrew Text in Greek letters, along with four Greek translations from the early Christian era (Aquila, Symmachus, Septuagint, and Theodotian).

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[5] A revised edition of this work was published in 2006 by the German Bible Society, listing Robert Hanhart as co-editor. It is now known as the Rahlfs-Hanhart Septuagint.

This massive work apparently existed in only one copy and is now only partially extant in a very small number of fragments.[6]

Though the *Hexapla* did not survive intact, it reflects the early Christian notion that the Hebrew text was the standard by which to evaluate the faithfulness of the Greek (or other) translations. When Jerome of Stridon and Bethlehem (c.342-420) was commissioned to create the Latin translation of the Bible known as the Vulgate, he made his translation of the Old Testament, not from the popular Greek translations, but directly from the *Hebraica Veritas* (the original Hebrew). This decision brought Jerome into conflict with some Christians of his day, including even the famed Augustine of Hippo, who preferred the Old Latin translations of the Old Testament made from Greek versions to Jerome's Latin Vulgate. An even wider East-West divide eventually developed between Greek speaking Eastern Christians who preferred the Septuagint and Latin speaking Western Christians who preferred the Latin Vulgate based on the Hebrew. This divide remains today, with Eastern Orthodox traditions making the Septuagint their standard for the Old Testament, while traditional Protestants in the West prefer the Old Testament in the Hebrew original as the standard.[7]

*(To be concluded)*

[6] Jobes and Silva, Invitation to the Septuagint, 42.

[7] Though Rome affirmed Jerome's decision to base his Latin translation of the Old Testament from the Hebrew, after the Council of Trent (post 1563) the Roman church dogmatically insisted on the Latin Vulgate and not the Hebrew and Greek originals as its authority.