

Septuagint

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Name. The name "Septuagint" designates the ancient Jewish-Greek translation of Hebrew Scripture. *Septuaginta* means "seventy" in Latin ("LXX") and this name derives from the tradition that the very first Greek translation, that of the *Torah* (Pentateuch), was translated by seventy-two elders, six from each tribe. The number of seventy-two translators was subsequently rounded off to seventy. The story of the miraculous creation of the translation (thirty-six pairs of translators working in separate cells yet producing identical renderings in seventy-two days) is first represented in the Jewish-Hellenistic *Epistle of Aristeas* § 301–7 and expanded in later sources, especially Epiphanius, *On Weights and Measures* (fourth century C.E.). At the same time, the tradition in rabbinic literature, especially *Soferim* 1.5, of there being five translators of the Torah, one for each book, is more realistic than that of seventy-two (seventy) translators.

Nature and content. The translation of the *Torah* into Greek was soon to be followed by that of the other books of Hebrew Scripture. However, the first translation was so dominant that its name, the "Septuagint," was ultimately attached to these other translations as well. The various translations differ greatly among themselves and the name "LXX" ultimately came to designate a group of many translations of different nature that represent different approaches and were produced at different times. Most translation units reflect the original Greek translations (the "Old Greek"), while some reflect later revisions.

The collection of Greek Scripture contains Greek versions of all the books of Hebrew Scripture (the Hebrew "canon"). In addition, it contains Greek versions of Hebrew books

such as Baruch and Sirach that were not included in the collection of Hebrew Scripture. It also includes writings originally written in Greek (e.g. 1–4 Maccabees), so that the “LXX” is not only a collection of translated works. All these Greek books, most of them translations from Hebrew and Aramaic, were accepted as authoritative (sacred) by the Alexandrian Jewish community and later by all the Jews. Subsequently, all the books of Greek Scripture that are not included in the collection of Hebrew Scripture have been rejected by traditional Judaism, and are therefore traditionally named *sefarim hitzoniyim* (“outside books”) or Apocrypha (“the hidden books”).

The books in the LXX are arranged differently from their position in Hebrew Scripture (“canon”). In the latter collection, the three large divisions are Torah, Prophets, and Writings. On the other hand, the books of Greek Scripture are arranged according to their content (Torah and historical books, books of poetry and wisdom, and prophetic books). Within each group, the sequence of the books differs from Hebrew Scripture. For example, in Greek Scripture, Ruth (one of the Five Scrolls, included among the Writings in Hebrew Scripture) follows the book of Judges since its story took place “in the days of the Judges” (Ruth 1:1). Often the names of the books differ from their counterparts in Hebrew Scripture (e.g. Samuel–Kings are named 1–4 Kingdoms in the LXX).

Documentation. The LXX is known from ancient leather and papyrus scrolls and codices, among them several early copies found near the Dead Sea. The most reliable complete texts of the LXX are the codices B (Vaticanus), A (Alexandrinus), and S (Sinaiticus), from the 4th-5th centuries C.E.

Date. According to the *Epistle of Aristeas*, the translation of the Torah was initiated by Ptolemy II Philadelphus (reigned 285–246 B.C.E.). This date is probably correct, while

most other details in this Epistle may be fictive. The translations of the Prophets and Writings were completed by the middle of the first century B.C.E. The grandson of Ben Sira knew the translation of the Prophets and part of the Writings in 132 or 116 B.C.E. according to different computations of the date of his Greek translation of Ben Sira.

Origin. The Jewish origin of the LXX is described in the Epistle of Aristeas, rabbinic literature, and various additional sources. Its Jewish nature is reflected in its terminology and exegesis. However, it was soon recognized that the LXX often differed from the Hebrew text that was current in Palestine from the second-first centuries B.C.E. onwards and that was later to become the Masoretic Text. These differences were not to the liking of the Pharisaic (proto-rabbinic) circles, and soon a trend developed to replace the LXX with new translations. These new translations adapted the Old Greek translation to the Hebrew text then current in Palestine.

The dislike of the LXX by the Jews became stronger when the Greek writings of early Christianity (the "New Testament") based themselves, quite naturally, on the LXX. The LXX influenced the NT at various levels. At an early stage the belief developed that this translation was divinely inspired and hence the way was open for several Church Fathers to claim that the LXX reflected the words of God more precisely than the Hebrew Bible. Christianity held on to the LXX as Holy Scripture until it was replaced by the Vulgate translation produced by the Church Father Jerome (created around 400 C.E.). In the Russian and Greek Orthodox churches, the LXX is still considered sacred.

Background. Many renderings reflect the cultural environment of the translators, which consisted of elements of both the Palestinian and Egyptian societies. When

analyzing individual renderings, the translator's focus is on their linguistic and exegetical background and on the ideas behind them.

The translators often added religious background to verses in Hebrew Scripture. This phenomenon occurs especially in Esther and Proverbs. Probably the most characteristic feature of the LXX of Esther is the addition of a religious background to a book that lacks the mentioning of God's name in MT. In several places, the LXX translators interpreted the context as referring to the Messiah. In other instances, the translators avoided a physical depiction of God.

Textual and literary analysis of Hebrew Scripture. The LXX was translated from a Hebrew text that differed, often greatly, from MT. This is not surprising, since in antiquity many differing copies of the Hebrew Scripture text were in circulation. Some of these differences are minor, while others involve a whole paragraph, chapter, or even book. All these copies contain "Scripture."