1870 Introduction

INTRODUCTION [1870]

An Historical Account of the Septuagint Version

T he earliest version of the Old Testament Scriptures which is extant, or of which we possess any certain knowledge, is the translation executed at Alexandria in the third century before the Christian era: this version has been so habitually known by the name of the Septuagint, that the attempt of some learned men in modern times to introduce the designation of the Alexandrian version (as more correct) has been far from successful.

T he history of the origin of this translation was embellished with various fables at so early a period, that it has been a work of patient critical research in later times to bring into plain light the facts which may be regarded as well authenticated.

W e need not wonder that but little is known with accuracy on this subject; for, with regard to the ancient versions of the Scriptures in general, we possess no information whatever as to the time or place of their execution, or by whom they were made: we simply find such versions in use at particular times, and thus we gather the fact that they must have been previously executed. If, then, our knowledge of the origin of the Septuagint be meagre, it is at least more extensive than that which we possess of other translations.

A fter the conquests of Alexander had brought Egypt under Macedonian rule, the newly-founded city of Alexandria became especially a place where the Greek language, although by no means in its purest form, was the medium of written and spoken communication amongst the varied population there brought together. This Alexandrian dialect is the idiom in which the Septuagint version was made.

A mongst other inhabitants of Alexandria the number of Jews was considerable: many appear to have settled there even from the first founding of the city, and it became the residence of many more during the reign of the first Ptolemy. Hence the existence of the sacred books of the Jews would easily become known to the Greek population.

T he earliest writer who gives an account of the Septuagint version is Aristobulus, a Jew who lived at the commencement of the second century b.c. He says that the version of the Law into Greek was completed under the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus, and that Demetrius Phalereus had been employed about it. Now, Demetrius died about the beginning of the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus, and hence it has been reasonably inferred that Aristobulus is a witness that the work of translation had been commenced under Ptolemy Soter.

D ifferent opinions have been formed as to what is intended by Aristobulus when he speaks of the Law: some consider that he refers merely to the Pentateuch, while others extend the signification to the Old Testament Scriptures

in general: the former opinion appears to be favoured by the strict meaning of the terms used; the latter by the mode in which the Jews often applied the name of Law to the whole of their sacred writings.

T he fact may, however, be regarded as certain, that prior to the year 285 b.c. the Septuagint version had been commenced, and that in the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus, either the books in general or at least an important part of them had been completed.

T he embellishments and fictitious additions which this account soon received might be scarcely worthy of notice in this place, were it not that they are intimately connected with the authority which this version was once supposed to possess, and with the name by which it is commonly known.

A writer, who calls himself Aristeas, says that when Ptolemy Philadelphus was engaged in the formation of the Alexandrian Library, he was advised by Demetrius Phalereus to procure a translation of the sacred books of the Jews. The king accordingly, as a preliminary, purchased the freedom of more than one hundred thousand Jewish captives, and he then sent a deputation, of which Aristeas himself was one, to Eleazar the high-priest to request a copy of the Jewish Law and seventy-two interpreters, six out of each tribe. To this the priest is represented to have agreed; and after the arrival of the translators and their magnificent reception by the king, they are said to have been conducted to an island by Demetrius, who wrote down the renderings on which they agreed by mutual conference; and thus the work is stated to have been completed in seventy-two days. The translators are then said to have received from the king most abundant rewards; and the Jews are stated to have asked permission to take copies of the version.

O ther additions were subsequently made to this story: some said that each translator was shut into a separate cell, and that all by divine inspiration made their versions word for word alike; others said that there were two in each cell, accompanied by an amanuensis; but at all events miracle and direct inspiration were supposed to be connected with the translation: hence we cannot wonder that the authority attached to this version in the minds of those who believed these stories was almost unbounded.

T he basis of truth which appears to be under this story seems to be, that it was an Egyptian king who caused the translation to be made, and that it was from the Royal Library at Alexandria that the Hellenistic Jews received the copies which they used.

In examining the version itself, it bears manifest proof that it was not executed by Jews of Palestine, but by those of Egypt:—there are words and expressions which plainly denote its Alexandrian origin: this alone would be a sufficient demonstration that the narrative of Aristeas is a mere fiction. It may also be doubted whether in the year 285 b.c. there were Jews in Palestine who had sufficient intercourse with the Greeks to have executed a translation into that language; for it must be borne in mind how recently they had become the subjects of Greek monarchs, and how differently they were situated from the Alexandrians as to the influx of Greek settlers.

Some in rejecting the fabulous embellishments have also discarded all connected with them: they have then sought to devise new hypotheses as to the origin of the version. Some have thus supposed that the translation was made by Alexandrian Jews for their own use, in order to meet a necessity which they had felt to have a version of the Scriptures in the tongue which had become vernacular to them.

There would be, however, many difficulties in the way of this hypothesis. We would hardly suppose that in a space of thirty-five years the Alexandrian Jews had found such a translation needful or desirable: we must also bear in mind that we find at this period no trace of any versions having been made by Jews into the languages of other countries in which they had continued for periods much longer than that of their settlement at Alexandria.

The most reasonable conclusion is, that the version was executed for the Egyptian king; and that the Hellenistic Jews afterwards used it as they became less and less familiar with the language of the original.

If the expression of Aristobulus does not designate the whole of the books of the Old Testament as translated in the time of Ptolemy Philadelphus, the question arises, When, were the other books besides the Pentateuch turned into Greek? To this no definite answer could be given: we may however be certain that various interpreters were occupied in translating various parts, and in all probability the interval between the commencement and the conclusion of the work was not great.

The variety of the translators is proved by the unequal character of the version: some books show that the translators were by no means competent to the task, while others, on the contrary, exhibit on the whole a careful translation. The Pentateuch is considered to be the part the best executed, while the book of Isaiah appears to be the very worst.

I n estimating the general character of the version, it must be remembered that the translators were Jews, full of traditional thoughts of their own as to the meaning of Scripture; and thus nothing short of a miracle could have prevented them from infusing into their version the thoughts which were current in their own minds. They could only translate passages as they themselves understood them. This is evidently the case when their work is examined.

I t would be, however, too much to say that they translated with dishonest intention; for it cannot be doubted that they wished to express their Scriptures truly in Greek, and that their deviations from accuracy may be simply attributed to the incompetency of some of the interpreters, and the tone of mental and spiritual feeling which was common to them all.

O ne difficulty which they had to overcome was that of introducing theological ideas, which till then had only their proper terms in Hebrew, into a language of Gentiles, which till then had terms for no religious notions except those of heathens. Hence the necessity of using many words and phrases in new and appropriated senses.

T hese remarks are not intended as depreciatory of the Septuagint version: their object is rather to show what difficulties the translators had to encounter, and why in some respects they failed; as well as to meet the thought which has occupied the minds of some, who would extol this version as though it possessed something resembling co-ordinate authority with the Hebrew text itself.

O ne of the earliest of those writers who mention the Greek translation of the Scriptures, speaks also of the version as not fully adequate. The Prologue of Jesus the son of Sirach (written as many suppose b.c. 130) to his Greek version of his grandfather's work, states: □□ γὰρ □σ□δ□□αμ□□ α□□ὰ □□ □α□□□□□ □βρα□σ□□ λ□γ□μ□□α, □α□ □□α□ μ□□α□θ□ □□□ □□□ρα□ γλ□σσα□· □□ μ□□□□ δ□ □α□□α, ἀλλὰ □α□ α□□□□ □ □□μ□□ □α□ α□ πρ□φ□□□□α□, □α□ □ὰ λ□□πὰ □□□ β□βλ□ω□ □□ μ□□ρὰ□ □χ□□ □□□ δ□αφ□ρὰ□ □□ □α□□□□ λ□γ□μ□□α: "For the same things expressed in Hebrew have not an equal force when translated into another language. Not only so, but even the Law and the prophecies and the rest of the books differ not a little as to the things said in them." The writer of this Prologue had come into Egypt from the Holy Land: he had undertaken the translation of his grandfather's work into Greek, but in explanation of the difficulty which he had to encounter in this work, he refers to the defects found even in the version of the Law, the prophets, and the other books, of which he had previously spoken. Doubtless coming into Egypt he was more conscious of the defects of the Septuagint version than could have been the case with Egyptian Jews, who had used the translation commonly and habitually for a century and a quarter.

A t Alexandria the Hellenistic Jews used the version, and gradually attached to it the greatest possible authority: from Alexandria it spread amongst the Jews of the dispersion, so that at the time of our Lord's birth it was the common form in which the Old Testament Scriptures had become diffused.

I n examining the Pentateuch of the Septuagint in connection with the Hebrew text, and with the copies preserved by the Samaritans in their crooked letters, it is remarkable that in very many passages the readings of the Septuagint accord with the Samaritan copies where they differ from the Jewish. We cannot here notice the various theories which have been advanced to account for this accordance of the Septuagint with the Samaritan copies of the Hebrew; indeed it is not very satisfactory to enter into the details of the subject, because no theory hitherto brought forward explains all the facts, or meets all the difficulties. To one point, however, we will advert, because it has not been sufficiently taken into account,—in the places in which the Samaritan and Jewish copies of the Hebrew text differ, in important and material points, the Septuagint accords much more with the Jewish than with the Samaritan copies, and in a good many points it introduces variations unknown to either.

T he Septuagint version having been current for about three centuries before the time when the books of the New Testament were written, it is not surprising that the Apostles should have used it more often than not in making citations from the Old Testament. They used it as an honestly-made version in pretty general use at the time when they wrote. They did not on every occasion give an authoritative translation of each passage de novo, but they used what was already familiar to the ears of converted Hellenists, when it was sufficiently accurate to suit the matter in hand. In fact, they used it as did their contemporary Jewish writers, Philo and Josephus, but not, however, with the blind implicitness of the former.

I n consequence of the fact that the New Testament writers used on many occasions the Septuagint version, some have deduced a new argument for its authority,—a theory which we might have thought to be sufficiently disproved by the defects of the version, which evince that it is merely a human work. But the fact that the New Testament writers used this version on many occasions supplies a new proof in opposition to the idea of its authority, for in not a few places they do not follow it, but they supply a version of their own which rightly represents the Hebrew text, although contradicting the Septuagint.

T he use, however, which the writers of the New Testament have made of the Septuagint version must always invest it with a peculiar interest; we thus see what honour God may be pleased to put on an honestly-made version, since we find that inspired writers often used such a version, when it was sufficiently near the original to suit the purpose for which it was cited, instead of rendering the Hebrew text de novo on every occasion.

A nother important point on which the Septuagint stands in close connection with the New Testament is the general phraseology of the version,—a phraseology in which the traces of Hebrew elements are most marked, but with regard to which we should mistake greatly if we supposed that it originated with the New Testament writers. Thus we may see that the study of the Septuagint is almost needful to any biblical scholar who wishes to estimate adequately the phraseology and usus loquendi of the New Testament.

B esides the direct citations in the New Testament in which the Septuagint is manifestly used, there are not a few passages in which it is clear that the train of expression has been formed on words and phrases of the Septuagint: thus an intimate acquaintance with this version becomes in a manner necessary on the part of an expositor who wishes to enter accurately into the scope of many parts of the New Testament.

T hus, whatever may be our estimate of the defects found in the Septuagint—its inadequate renderings, its departures from the sense of the Hebrew, its doctrinal deficiencies owing to the limited apprehensions of the translators—there is no reason whatever for our neglecting the version, or not being fully alive to its real value and importance.

A fter the diffusion of Christianity, copies of the Septuagint became widely dispersed amongst the new communities that were formed; so that before many years had elapsed this version must have been as much in the hands of Gentiles as of Jews.

T he veneration with which the Jews had treated this version (as is shown in the case of Philo and Josephus), gave place to a very contrary feeling when they found how it could be used against them in argument: hence they decried the version, and sought to deprive it of all authority. As the Gentile Christians were generally unacquainted with Hebrew, they were unable to meet the Jews on the ground which they now took; and as the Gentile Christians at this time believed the most extraordinary legends of the origin of the version, so that they fully embraced the opinions of its authority and inspiration, they necessarily regarded the denial on the part of the Jews of its accuracy, as little less than blasphemy, and as a proof of their blindness.

I n the course of the second century, three other complete versions of the Old Testament into Greek were executed: these are of importance in this place, because of the manner in which they were afterwards connected with the Septuagint.

T he first of the Greek versions of the Old Testament executed in the second century was that of Aquila. He is described as a Jew or Jewish proselyte of Pontus, and the date commonly attributed to his version is about the year a.d. 126. His translation is said to have been executed for the express purpose of opposing the authority of the Septuagint: his version was in consequence upheld by the Jews. His labour was evidently directed in opposing the passages which the Christians were accustomed to cite from the Septuagint as applicable to the Lord Jesus. The general characteristic of this version is bold literality of rendering: such an endeavour is made to render each Hebrew word and particle into Greek, that all grammar is often set at defiance, and not unfrequently the sense is altogether sacrificed. From the scrupulosity of Aquila in rendering each Hebrew word, his work, if we possessed it complete (and not merely in scattered fragments), would be of great value in textual criticism.

A nother Greek translator at a subsequent period in the second century was Symmachus. He is described as an Ebionite, a kind of semi-Christian. His version seems to have been executed in good and pure Greek: perhaps he was the more particular in his attention to this in consequence of the mere barbarism of Aquila.

A third translator in the same century was Theodotion, an Ebionite like Symmachus, to whom he was probably anterior. His version is in many parts based on the Septuagint. He is less servile in his adherence to the words of the Hebrew than Aquila, although he is void of the freedom of Symmachus. His knowledge of Hebrew was certainly but limited, and without the Septuagint it is hardly probable that he could have undertaken this version.

T hus, before the end of the second century there were, besides the Septuagint, three versions of the Old Testament in Greek, known to both Jews and Christians. All this could not fail in making the Old Testament Scriptures better known and more widely read.

A lthough many Christians believed in the inspiration and authority of the Septuagint, yet this could not have been universally the case; otherwise the disuse of the real Septuagint version of the book of Daniel, and the adoption of that of Theodotion in its stead, could never have taken place. This must have arisen from an apprehension of the poverty and inaccuracy of the Septuagint in this book, so that another version similar in its general style was gladly adopted.

W e have now to speak of the labours of Origen in connection with the text of the Septuagint. This learned and enterprising scholar, having acquired a knowledge of Hebrew, found that in many respects the copies of the Septuagint differed from the Hebrew text. It seems to be uncertain whether he regarded

such differences as having arisen from mistakes on the part of copyists, or from errors of the original translators themselves.

T he object which he proposed to himself was not to restore the Septuagint to its original condition, nor yet to correct mere errors of translation simply as such, but to cause that the Church should possess a text of the Septuagint in which all additions to the Hebrew should be marked with an obelus, and in which all that the Septuagint omitted should be added from one of the other versions marked with an asterisk. He also indicated readings in the Septuagint which were so incorrect that the passage ought to be changed for the corresponding one in another version.

W ith the object of thus amending the Septuagint, he formed his great works, the Hexapla and Tetrapla; these were (as the names imply) works in which the page was divided respectively into six columns and into four columns.

T he Hexapla contained, 1st, the Hebrew text; 2nd, the Hebrew text expressed in Greek characters; 3rd, the version of Aquila; 4th, that of Symmachus; 5th, the Septuagint; 6th, Theodotion. The Tetrapla contained merely the four last columns.

B esides these four versions of the entire Old Testament, Origen employed three anonymous Greek versions of particular books; these are commonly called the fifth, sixth, and seventh versions. Hence in the parts in which two of these versions are added, the work was designated Octapla, and where all the three appeared, it was called Enneapla.

R eferences were then made from the column of the Septuagint to the other versions, so as to complete and correct it: for this purpose Theodotion was principally used. This recension by Origen has generally been called the Hexaplar text. The Hexapla itself is said never to have been copied: what remains of the versions which it contained (mere fragments) was edited by Montfaucon in 1714, and in an abridged edition by Bahrdt in 1769–70.

T he Hexaplar text of the Septuagint was copied about half a century after Origen's death by Pamphilus and Eusebius; it thus obtained a circulation; but the errors of copyists soon confounded the marks of addition and omission which Origen placed, and hence the text of the Septuagint became almost hopelessly mixed up with that of other versions.

T he Hexaplar text is best known from a Syriac version which was made from it; of this many books have been published from a MS. at Milan; other books are now in the British Museum amongst the rest of the Syriac treasures obtained from the Nitrian monasteries. This Syro-Hexaplar translation preserves the

marks of the Greek text, and the references to the other translations. It may yet be made of great use in separating the readings which were introduced by Origen from those of an older date.

T here were two other early attempts to revise the Septuagint besides that of Origen. In the beginning of the fourth century, Lucian, a presbyter of Antioch, and Hesychius, an Egyptian bishop, undertook similar labours of the same kind. These two recensions (which they were in the proper sense of the term) were much used in the Eastern Churches.

F rom the fourth century and onward, we know of no definite attempt to revise the text of the Septuagint, or to correct the discrepancies of various copies. It is probable, however, that just as the text of the Greek New Testament became in a great measure fixed into the same form as we find it in the modern copies, something of the same kind must have been the case with the Septuagint. As to the Greek New Testament, this seems to have occurred about the eleventh century, when the mass of copies were written within the limits of the patriarchate of Constantinople. It is probable that certain copies approved at the metropolis, both politically and religiously, of those who used the Greek tongue, were tacitly taken as a kind of standard.

W e find amongst the members of the Eastern Churches who use the Greek language, that the Septuagint has been and is still so thoroughly received as authentic Scripture, that any effort to introduce amongst them versions which accurately represent the Hebrew (as has been attempted in modern times) has been wholly fruitless.

T hus the Septuagint demands our attention, were it only from the fact that the whole circle of religious ideas and thoughts amongst Christians in the East has always been moulded according to this version. Without an acquaintance with the Septuagint, numerous allusions in the writings of the Fathers become wholly unintelligible, and even important doctrinal discussions and difficulties (such even as some connected with the Arian controversy) become wholly unintelligible.

A s the Septuagint was held in such honour in the East, it is no cause for surprise that this version was the basis of the other translations which were made in early times into vernacular tongues. There was, however, also another reason;—the general ignorance of the original Hebrew amongst the early Christians prevented their forming their translations from the fountain itself. The especial exception to this remark is the Syriac version of the Old Testament formed at once from the Hebrew.

Abbreviations

ABBREVIATIONS AND SIGNS USED IN THE NOTES

Genesis