

The Septuagint

How the Hebrew Scriptures Became Greek

A source-first historical account

Biblical Translation Histories, BT-01

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1 One Name, Several Histories

“Septuagint” is Latin for “seventy.” The name preserves a story: that seventy—or seventy-two—Jewish elders, summoned from Jerusalem to Alexandria by King Ptolemy, turned the Law of Moses into Greek, and that their work was so evidently guided by God that the translation could stand beside the original. Augustine already knew the name as a settled custom: “their translation is now by custom called the Septuagint,” he wrote around A.D. 420, while retelling the story with the marvel attached.¹ By his day the word covered far more than the story ever claimed: a complete Greek Old Testament, copied in great parchment codices, read in the churches, and defended as inspired even where it differed from the Hebrew.

This account asks what actually happened. How did a Greek Torah come to be made in Ptolemaic Alexandria? How did one translation event grow into a corpus covering the whole Hebrew Bible and more? Why do the Greek and Hebrew Bibles differ, and what do those differences witness? And how did Jews, Christians, and finally modern editors successively adopt, revise, abandon, defend, and reconstruct these texts?

Governing thesis

The Septuagint is not one thing. The name covers, by turns, a third-century B.C. Greek translation of the Torah made in Alexandria; a book-by-book accumulation of later translations and Greek compositions; a first-century Jewish and Christian working Bible; a fourth-century Christian manuscript corpus; and a modern editorial reconstruction. The origin legend attached to the name is itself a historical object with a traceable growth, from a sober collaborative procedure in its earliest telling to a miracle of seventy identical texts in its latest. The history must therefore be told as several linked acts, with each witness kept at its own date.

The method is evidence-first. The earliest continuous origin narrative, the *Letter of Aristeas*, is read at its own date and for its own purposes, not as a transcript of events; papyri and scrolls from Egypt and the Judean Desert speak as artifacts; Philo, Josephus, the rabbis, and the Fathers are dated witnesses to what their communities believed and did; official acts, from the Council of Trent to *Dei Verbum*, establish their own object and no more. Modern scholarship reconstructs, and its live disagreements are preserved rather than resolved by fiat. Work-wide bounds, terminology, and the evidence classes used throughout are stated in the terminal appendix.

2 Alexandria: A Greek City with a Jewish Scripture Problem

The translation presupposes a community that needed it. Alexandria, founded in 331 B.C. and ruled after Alexander’s death by the Macedonian dynasty of the Ptolemies, became within two generations the largest Greek-speaking city in the world, the seat of a royal court that collected books as deliberately as it collected territory. The *Letter of Aristeas*—whatever its date and reliability, examined below—already takes for granted the institution that made the request plausible: a royal library whose keeper reports more than two hundred thousand volumes and an ambition to reach five hundred thousand, and who tells the king that the laws of the Jews deserve a place in it but are written in a peculiar script and language and so “need to be translated.”²

The community itself is better attested than the commission. Jews had settled in Egypt continuously since at least the sixth century B.C.; under the early Ptolemies a large Jewish population grew in Alexandria and in the countryside, and within a few generations its working language was Greek. The surviving material record makes the linguistic shift concrete: Jewish papyri from Ptolemaic and early Roman Egypt are overwhelmingly Greek, and the oldest surviving pieces of the translation itself are Egyptian artifacts—Papyrus Rylands 458, scraps of Greek Deuteronomy assigned on handwriting to the mid-second century B.C., and Papyrus Fouad 266, a Greek Pentateuch scroll of the second or first century B.C. that writes the divine name in Hebrew square letters inside the Greek text.³

Two limits on this setting deserve stating at once. First, no Ptolemaic administrative document, dedication, or archive mentions the translation; everything narrative comes from Jewish and later Christian literature. Second, a translation of the Torah would have served several needs at once—synagogue reading and instruction for Greek-speaking Jews, communal self-presentation to Greek neighbors, possibly legal reference for a community living under its ancestral law, and royal prestige—and the sources do not allow the motives to be ranked. The scholarly literature continues to argue liturgical, educational, juridical, and library-driven origins precisely because the evidence underdetermines them; this account does not choose.⁴

3 The Letter of Aristeas: The Story at Its Source

Everything later told about the translation's origin descends from one Greek text: a long narrative letter in which a writer calling himself Aristeas, a gentile courtier of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (reigned 285–246 B.C.), describes to his brother Philocrates how the Law came to be translated. Because every later version of the story is either dependent on this text or demonstrably elaborating it, its exact claims—and its exact limits—control the entire tradition.

3.1 What the letter actually claims

In the letter, Demetrius of Phalerum, keeper of the royal library, proposes adding the Jewish Law; the king writes to Eleazar the high priest in Jerusalem, freeing Jewish captives as a goodwill gesture and requesting translators; Eleazar sends seventy-two elders, six from each of the twelve tribes, with Torah scrolls; after a week of banquets in which the king tests each elder with a philosophical question, the translators are installed on the island of Pharos. There they work as a committee: they “set to work comparing their several results and making them agree,” and what they agreed was copied fair under Demetrius's direction. The work was finished “in seventy-two days, just as if this had been arranged of set purpose.” Demetrius then read the version to the assembled Jewish community of Alexandria, which approved it and pronounced a curse on anyone who should alter it by addition, change, or omission; the king marveled and sent the elders home with gifts.⁵ The letter also has Demetrius report that earlier, “carelessly” transmitted copies of the Law circulated, and that the pagan writers Theopompus and Theodectes were divinely afflicted for trying to use badly rendered Jewish material—a warning frame around the new version's accuracy.⁶

Three features of this earliest telling deserve emphasis, because the later legend will erase all three. The translation covers the Law alone—the five books of Moses, not prophets or writings. The procedure is human and collaborative: conference, comparison, agreement, a fair copy. And the authorizing act is communal reception—the assembly's approval and its curse against alteration—not a miracle.

3.2 What the letter is

The letter is not what it pretends to be. Its author writes as a Greek courtier, but his knowledge, sympathies, and purpose are Jewish; the self-presentation is a literary device, and the work has been recognized as pseudonymous since Humphrey Hody's demonstration of 1685. Its date is disputed: the standard placements run through the second century B.C.—some scholars near 200, many in the Maccabean and Hasmonean decades afterward—with outliers proposed on either side; on any dating it stands a century or more after the translation it describes.⁷ Its purpose is visible in its shape: the banquet questions, the tour of Jerusalem, the high priest's apologia for the food laws, and the closing curse all commend the Greek Law—to Greek-speaking Jews above all—as accurate, authorized, and final. It is advocacy for a translation already in use, not a witness independent of it.

Witness: *Letter of Aristeas* (Greek, 2nd c. B.C., disputed within that century; pseudonymous).

What it establishes: That the Greek Torah existed and mattered enough, a century or so after its making, to deserve an elaborate authorization narrative; the earliest extant form of every later origin story; a Torah-only scope, a collaborative procedure, and communal reception.

Limit: No independent corroboration of the royal commission, Demetrius's role, the Jerusalem embassy, the number seventy-two, or the seventy-two days; a named courtier-author who did not exist; details (including Demetrius's position at Philadelphus's court) that the critical scholarship begun by Hody has judged anachronistic.

What survives critical reduction is modest but real: a Greek translation of the Torah was made in Alexandria, plausibly in the earlier third century B.C., under or near the horizon of royal patronage the letter assumes, for a community that received it as authoritative. The precise year, personnel, procedure, and patron are unrecoverable.⁸

4 The Growth of a Legend

The origin story can be watched growing, witness by dated witness. Each step below is a checked text, not a reconstruction.

Philo of Alexandria (before A.D. 50). In his *Life of Moses*, Philo retells the Pharos story with the procedure transformed. His translators do not confer and compare; they prophesy, each writing the self-same words “as if some unseen prompter had suggested all their language to them.” Greek and “Chaldean” are no longer original and version but to be revered “as sisters, or rather as one and the same”; the translators are not mere interpreters but “hierophants and prophets.” Philo adds a datum of practice no earlier source has: in his own day an annual festival on Pharos, attended by Jews and others alike, still celebrated the spot where the light of the translation first shone out.⁹ The miracle has entered the story, and it enters as the conviction of a community that treated its Greek Bible as Scripture without remainder.

Josephus (c. A.D. 93). Retelling the story in *Antiquities* book 12, Josephus goes the other way: he paraphrases the *Letter of Aristeas* at length, names Aristeas and Demetrius, keeps the Torah-only scope (“the law”), keeps the committee procedure and the seventy-two days, and keeps the assembly’s approval—adding that provision was made for review and correction of anything found superfluous or omitted, so that the settled text “might continue for ever.” No miracle appears.¹⁰

Justin Martyr (c. A.D. 155). With the first Christian retellings the story loses its anchors. Justin tells the Roman emperor that Ptolemy, king of Egypt, collecting a library, sent to Herod, king of the Jews, for the books of the prophets and then for men to translate them—an anachronism of well over a century—and he extends the translation to “the books of the prophets,” which is what his argument from prophecy needs.¹¹ The enlargement of scope is no slip: by Justin’s day the Greek corpus in Christian hands did include the prophets, and the origin story was stretching to authorize what was actually in use.

Irenaeus (c. A.D. 180). Irenaeus, defending the reading “virgin” in Isaiah 7:14 against the newer Jewish versions, gives the legend its classic apologetic form: the king (here Ptolemy son of Lagus, the first Ptolemy—the tradition is already unstable about which king) separated the translators from each other to prevent collusion; each translated alone; and when the versions were compared, all agreed “in the very same words,” so that those present recognized that “the Scriptures had been interpreted by the inspiration of God.” For Irenaeus this settles the authority question: God performed a proof, and the apostles’ quotations agree with the result.¹²

The cells become architecture. A treatise transmitted under Justin’s name but now generally judged later and spurious, the *Hortatory Address to the Greeks*, makes the isolation physical: the king built “little cots” for the translators at the Pharos, and the author assures his readers that he saw the ruins of the cells himself when he was in Alexandria.¹³ Epiphanius of Salamis (late 4th century) completes the growth: now there are thirty-six cells, the translators work in pairs, each pair renders the whole sequence of books, and the completed copies agree even in their additions and omissions—and the scope has become the entire canon.¹⁴

Augustine (c. A.D. 420). Augustine knows the tradition of separate translation and identical results and declines to decide its truth—but argues that even if the seventy conferred as a committee, their agreement carries the authority of one Spirit, and that where the Seventy diverge from the Hebrew, both readings may be prophetic. The Church, he notes as a plain fact of practice, “has received this Septuagint translation just as if it were the only one.”¹⁵

The rabbis. Rabbinic memory preserved the same story with its own freight. A baraita in the Babylonian Talmud tells how King Ptolemy gathered seventy-two elders, placed them in seventy-two separate rooms without telling them why, and asked each to write out the Torah of Moses their teacher; God put wisdom in the heart of each, and all wrote identically—including a list of some fifteen deliberate changes made for the king (reordering the Torah’s opening words so that God unmistakably stands as subject, avoiding the word “hare” because Ptolemy’s wife bore that name, and so on). The sugya’s legal frame is telling: the miracle story is cited to explain why Torah scrolls, exceptionally, may be written in Greek.¹⁶ Later rabbinic tradition darkened: the minor tractate Soferim transmits both a version of the Ptolemy story and the judgment that the day the Torah was written in Greek for the king was as calamitous for Israel as the day the golden calf was made, because the Torah admitted no adequate translation.¹⁷

The trajectory is the finding. The earliest source has a committee, a Torah, and a communal blessing; five centuries later the story has cells, miracles, the whole canon, and—in one tradition—a day of mourning. Each form is evidence for its own teller’s relation to the Greek Bible, and none after Aristeas adds independent information about the third century B.C.

5 Beyond the Torah: A Corpus Accumulates

No ancient source records a second commission. The rest of the Greek Old Testament came into being the way large literatures usually do: book by book, over roughly two centuries, by different hands, in more than one place, without a controlling authority—and the one contemporary witness we possess says so plainly.

That witness is the prologue that the grandson of Jesus ben Sira attached to his Greek translation of his grandfather's Hebrew wisdom book (*Ecclesiasticus*/Sirach). Writing after his arrival in Egypt in the thirty-eighth year of King Euergetes—on the usual reckoning, 132 B.C.—he apologizes for his own rendering and observes that “the law itself, and the prophets, and the rest of the books, have no small difference, when they are spoken in their own language,” since things first uttered in Hebrew “have not the same force in them” when translated.¹⁸ Four facts stand in this single paragraph: by the later second century B.C. the prophets and other books already existed in Greek; individuals (here a named one) made such translations on their own initiative; contemporaries knew the versions differed in quality from the originals; and “the Septuagint” as a bounded, authorized whole is nowhere in view.

The corpus that eventually sailed under the name confirms this piecemeal origin by its internal variety. Rendering styles run from the studied literalism that tracks Hebrew particles into Greek, to the free literary manner of Job and Proverbs, to outright rewriting; some books circulated in two Greek forms (Daniel, Judges); some Greek books are expansions of their Hebrew base (the additions to Esther and Daniel); and some—the Wisdom of Solomon, 2 Maccabees—were composed in Greek and translate nothing.¹⁹ “Septuagint,” extended from the Torah legend to this whole shelf, is thus a Christian-era convenience label. Scholars mark the distinction by reserving “Old Greek” for the earliest recoverable translation of a given book—an editorial construct, not a surviving manuscript—and this account uses the name “Septuagint” for the corpus only in that loose, received sense.

6 What the Scrolls Showed: Textual Character and Diversity

Until the mid-twentieth century, the differences between the Greek and Hebrew Bibles could be explained only by conjecture: translator's license, scribal corruption, or a different underlying Hebrew. The manuscript discoveries in the Judean Desert converted parts of that conjecture into evidence, in both directions.

Greek biblical texts among the scrolls. Qumran Cave 4 yielded Greek fragments of the Pentateuch, including a papyrus of Leviticus (4QpapLXXLev^b, 4Q120) assigned to the first century B.C. that renders the divine name not by *kyrios* (“Lord”), as the great Christian codices later do, but by the Greek letters *Iaō*; Papyrus Fouad 266 from Egypt writes the Tetragrammaton in Hebrew letters inside the Greek.²⁰ Greek Scripture was thus present even in Judea, and in copies older than any Christian transmission.

A Hebrew text behind the Greek. Fragments of Jeremiah from Cave 4 (4QJer^b and 4QJer^d) attest a Hebrew text of the short type that the Greek Jeremiah translates—the Greek book is roughly one-seventh shorter than the received Hebrew and orders its oracles differently. Here the deviant witness is not the translator: he rendered a Hebrew edition of Jeremiah that really existed and differed from the one the Masoretic tradition transmitted.²¹ Similar, differently distributed evidence in Samuel and other books has made “the translator changed it” a hypothesis to be argued rather than assumed. The methodological rule this account applies throughout follows: a Greek–Hebrew difference may reflect the translator's technique, his different Hebrew source, later Greek revision, or simple transmission error, and only local evidence can decide among them.

Revision toward the Hebrew—before Christianity. The most consequential find for the Septuagint's history was not from Qumran but from Naḥal Ḥever: a Greek scroll of the Minor Prophets (8ḤevXII gr), palaeographically placed around the turn of the era, whose text is recognizably the old Greek version—systematically corrected toward the Hebrew. Dominique Barthélemy's analysis of this scroll (*Les devanciers d'Aquila*, 1963) identified a whole revising tradition, nicknamed *kaige* from its habit of rendering a Hebrew particle by *kai ge*, and showed that the impulse to align the Greek Bible with the Hebrew text was Jewish and pre-Christian, not a reaction against the Church.²² The significance is hard to overstate: already in the Second Temple period, Greek-speaking Jews possessed both a venerable translation and a newer Hebrew standard, and some of them chose the standard. Everything in the next act follows from that choice.

7 The Bible of Hellenistic Jews and of the Apostles

For perhaps three centuries the Greek Bible was simply the Scripture of Greek-speaking Judaism. Philo, who shows no sign of reading Hebrew, built an entire exegetical corpus on the Greek text and, as seen above, ranked it with the original; the Pharos festival he describes was a Jewish feast, not a Christian one. The deep vocabulary decisions of the third-century translators—*kyrios* for the divine name, *christos* for “anointed,” *diathēkē* (“testament”) for covenant, *nomos* for Torah—had by the first century become the religious Greek of the eastern Mediterranean.²³

The New Testament was written inside that language. Its authors, writing Greek for communities whose Scripture was Greek, quote the Old Testament most often—not always—in its Greek form, and sometimes their argument depends on wording the Hebrew does not have. Hebrews 10:5 reads Psalm 40 (Greek Psalm 39) with the Greek’s “a body hast thou prepared me,” where the Hebrew text speaks instead of opened ears; the letter’s argument about the Incarnation rides on the Greek noun. Acts 15:16–17 has James carry the council of Jerusalem with Amos 9:11–12 in its Greek form—“the remnant of men,” and all the nations who bear God’s name, will seek the Lord—where the Hebrew has Israel possessing the remnant of Edom. Matthew 1:23 cites Isaiah 7:14 with the Greek translator’s *parthenos*, “virgin,” the very rendering over which Jew and Christian would part ways in the second century.²⁴

Two inferences are commonly drawn from this and must be kept apart. That the apostolic churches received the Jewish Greek Bible as Scripture is a fact of the texts. What that reception implies for the boundaries of the canon is a separate and harder question—taken up below—because the first-century Greek Bible was not a bound volume with a table of contents but a body of scrolls whose edges no surviving Jewish or Christian source of that century defines.²⁵

8 Parting Ways: Jewish Withdrawal and the New Greek Versions

As the Church made the Greek Bible its own, Greek-speaking Jewry moved the other way—not by a single decree (none is attested), but along the path the Naḥal Ḥever scroll had already marked: toward the Hebrew.

The polemical friction is audible by the mid-second century. Justin tells Trypho that the Jewish teachers “refuse to admit that the interpretation made by the seventy elders . . . is a correct one” and “attempt to frame another,” and he accuses them of deleting messianic passages—among them the words “from the wood” in Psalm 96’s “the Lord reigned.” Modern scholarship has largely reversed the charge: the disputed words are absent from the Hebrew and from the best Greek witnesses alike, and most of Justin’s “deletions” are Christian expansions that his copies carried, not Jewish excisions. The accusation is nonetheless first-rate evidence for the situation: by c. 160 the two communities were reading measurably different Greek Bibles and each blamed the other.²⁶

Three named versions replaced the old translation in Jewish use, all known today almost entirely from fragments and from Origen’s and the Fathers’ reports.

Aquila. A rigorously literal version—calqued Hebrew syntax, etymologizing renderings—attested by Irenaeus already as the work of Aquila of Pontus, a Jewish proselyte. Epiphanius, writing two centuries later, dates him under Hadrian (early second century) and makes him a relative of the emperor, a lapsed Christian, and a convert to Judaism; the biographical detail is late and partly hostile, but the dating fits Irenaeus’s knowledge of him. Rabbinic tradition, strikingly, remembers the same figure with honor: in the Jerusalem Talmud, Aquila the proselyte translates the Torah before Rabbis Eliezer and Joshua, who praise him in the language of Psalm 45’s tribute to beauty.²⁷

Symmachus. A version in idiomatic, literary Greek, faithful to the Hebrew sense without Aquila’s violence to Greek. Eusebius calls its author an Ebionite (a Jewish Christian); Epiphanius makes him a Samaritan convert to Judaism; the identifications cannot both be right and neither can be verified.²⁸

Theodotion—and the Theodotion problem. A revision of the old Greek toward the Hebrew, traditionally placed in the later second century. The difficulty, recognized since antiquity and sharpened by Barthélemy, is that characteristically “Theodotionic” readings appear in texts older than Theodotion—including the New Testament—and that the church’s preferred Greek Daniel, transmitted under his name, displaced the Old Greek Daniel almost everywhere. Either “Theodotion” finished a revising tradition (*kaige*) generations older than himself, or the name shelters more than one enterprise; the question remains open.²⁹

The withdrawal was gradual, regional, and never total—Greek-speaking Jews were still hearing Greek Scripture centuries later—but its direction was settled: the version the Church had adopted ceased to be a Jewish book, and the mourning notice in Soferim shows how some rabbinic memory finally judged the whole episode. As late as 553,

Justinian's Novella 146 was still regulating a live dispute: it permitted synagogue reading in Greek—commending the Septuagint, allowing Aquila—against those who insisted on Hebrew alone.³⁰

9 Origen's Hexapla: Scholarship Takes Inventory

By the third century a Christian scholar could see the whole tangle—old version, rival versions, divergent copies—and one undertook to organize it. Eusebius, who had Origen's papers at Caesarea, describes the project: Origen learned Hebrew, obtained from Jewish owners copies in the Hebrew script itself, hunted down the versions of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion and others beyond them—one found at Nicopolis near Actium, another “in a jar in Jericho”—and set them out in parallel columns: the Hebrew, the Hebrew in Greek letters, then the versions, the whole called the Hexapla (“sixfold”), with a reduced Tetrapla of the four Greek columns.³¹

Origen's fifth column carried his working text of the Seventy, furnished with the critics' signs: an obelus against words of the Greek absent from the Hebrew, an asterisk where he supplied, usually from Theodotion, words of the Hebrew absent from the Greek. His purpose, as he explains to Julius Africanus—who had challenged the authenticity of the Greek Susanna on the sharp grounds that it puns in Greek and is absent from the Hebrew Daniel—was double: to know exactly how the church's copies differed from the Hebrew, laboring, as he puts it, “to get at the meaning in all the editions and various readings,” so that in disputes with Jewish interlocutors he would not allege what their copies lack; and nevertheless not to depose the church's text, for Providence had ministered Scripture to the edification of all the churches, and “You shall not remove the ancient landmarks which your fathers have set.”³²

The Hexapla itself, reportedly enormous, was almost certainly never copied whole; it survives in fragments, excerpts, and marginal notes. Its influence was double-edged. It preserved the rival versions for posterity; but once the fifth column circulated without its signs, Origen's supplements melted invisibly into the text, producing the “hexaplaric” contamination that modern editors labor to undo. Later antiquity spoke also of a recension of Lucian of Antioch; disentangling these editorial layers from the Old Greek is a chief task of the critical editions described below.³³

10 The Church's Old Testament: Codices, Canon, and the Vulgate Quarrel

10.1 The great codices

The fourth century gave the Greek Bible its monumental form: complete parchment Bibles produced by Christian scriptoria. Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus (both 4th century) and Codex Alexandrinus (5th) are the oldest surviving attempts to put the whole of Scripture between two covers—and they do not agree on what “the whole” is. Sinaiticus includes 1 and 4 Maccabees but not 2–3; Alexandrinus carries all four books of Maccabees and appends Psalm 151 and a collection of liturgical Odes; Vaticanus has no Maccabees at all.³⁴ Two conclusions follow, one positive, one negative. These pandects witness what fourth- and fifth-century churches actually copied as Scripture—the translated Hebrew books together with Tobit, Judith, Wisdom, Sirach, Baruch, Maccabees, and the expanded Esther and Daniel. They are not an inventory of what Alexandrian Judaism held canonical six centuries earlier, and projecting their contents backward as “the Alexandrian canon” outruns the evidence.

10.2 The canon question

Christian lists tell a story of unresolved tension long before the Reformation made it urgent. Melito of Sardis (c. 170), who traveled east to learn accurately the number and order of the books of the old covenant, returned a list close to the Hebrew Bible—without Esther, and without Tobit, Judith, Sirach, or Maccabees.³⁵ Athanasius's festal letter of 367 canonized twenty-two books matching the Hebrew count (Esther again excluded; Baruch and the Letter of Jeremiah counted with Jeremiah) while naming Wisdom, Sirach, Esther, Judith, and Tobit as books “appointed by the Fathers to be read” though not in the canon.³⁶ The African councils of the 390s, with Augustine, listed the fuller church canon; Jerome, in the same years, planted the flag of the Hebrew count and named the rest “apocrypha.” The Catholic resolution came only at Trent: the decree of 8 April 1546 defined the canon with Tobit, Judith, Wisdom,

Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and both books of Maccabees, “entire with all their parts,” under anathema, and declared the “old and vulgate edition” authentic for public use.³⁷

10.3 Jerome against Augustine

The Septuagint’s status in the Latin West was decided in a correspondence. Jerome, translating the Old Testament afresh from the Hebrew (c. 390–405), dismantled the origin legend with philological relish: “I don’t know who was the first author to construct with his lying the seventy cells in Alexandria,” he wrote in the preface to his Pentateuch, when Aristes and Josephus report the translators gathered in one basilica, comparing—not prophesying: “It is one thing to be a seer, another to be an interpreter”—and he pointed out that the apostles quote words from the Hebrew that the Seventy do not contain.³⁸ Augustine, receiving the new version with alarm, urged Jerome to translate from the Seventy instead: the Greek Bible was the bond between Latin and Greek churches, and novelty had costs—at Oea in Tripolitania, he reported, a congregation rioted when Jonah’s gourd became ivy, the local Jews (consulted as referees) sided against Jerome’s rendering, and the bishop had to retreat.³⁹ The outcome was a compromise neither man designed: Jerome’s Hebrew-based version became the Vulgate of the West—carrying within it his Gallican Psalter, translated not from the Hebrew but from the hexaplaric Septuagint, and the deuterocanonical books he had disparaged—while the Greek East simply kept the Seventy. To this day the Septuagint remains the received Old Testament of the Orthodox churches, which have never replaced it with a translation from the Hebrew nor defined a single critical text of it.⁴⁰

11 Editions, Scholarship, and Catholic Teaching

11.1 From printed text to critical edition

Since the Renaissance the “Septuagint” a reader holds has been an editorial product, and the editions differ in kind. Early printings and the long Cambridge and Oxford traditions reproduced or collated the great codices—diplomatic editions of particular manuscripts. Alfred Rahlfs’s Stuttgart hand edition (*Septuaginta*, 1935; his *Psalmi cum Odis* appeared 1931) offered a working semi-critical text based principally on Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, and Alexandrinus; revised in over a thousand particulars by Robert Hanhart as the *editio altera* (2006), it remains the standard reading text worldwide.⁴¹

The full critical enterprise belongs to Göttingen. The Septuaginta-Unternehmen, established at the Academy of Sciences in 1908, pursued for over a century the book-by-book *Septuaginta: Vetus Testamentum Graecum*, whose volumes reconstruct the oldest attainable text (the Old Greek) with a full apparatus of the manuscript families, daughter versions, and hexaplaric materials. The institute closed in 2015 with the edition incomplete; a successor commission (from 2016) and a new long-term academy project for a critical edition of the Greek Psalter (from 2020) carry the work forward.⁴² Alongside the editions stands the professional infrastructure of the discipline—the International Organization for Septuagint and Cognate Studies, whose *New English Translation of the Septuagint* (NETS, Oxford, 2007; corrected printings since) renders the critical texts where they exist and Rahlfs elsewhere.⁴³

11.2 Catholic teaching

The Catholic Church’s present teaching touches the Septuagint at two defined points, and it is worth stating exactly what each says. The Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (1965), n. 22, teaches that “the Church from the very beginning accepted as her own that very ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament which is called the septuagint,” alongside her honor for the other Eastern translations and the Vulgate, while directing that new translations be made “especially from the original texts of the sacred books.”⁴⁴ The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* does not discuss the Septuagint by name in its treatment of Scripture; its canon list (CCC 120), received “by the apostolic Tradition,” comprises the forty-six Old Testament books including the deuterocanon—the practical inheritance of the Greek Bible’s fuller collection—and its following paragraphs affirm the permanent value of the Old Testament against every Marcionite shortcut.⁴⁵ The teaching, in short, canonizes neither the legend nor a text form: it receives the Greek Bible’s historical role and its fuller canon, and simultaneously blesses exactly the return to the sources that Jerome championed—a settlement Origen would have recognized.

12 The Answer to the Question

What happened, then, is recoverable in outline and lost in detail. In third-century B.C. Alexandria, for a Jewish community whose language had become Greek, the Torah was translated—competently, collaboratively, and with sufficient communal authority that within a century a legend was needed to explain it. The rest of the Hebrew Scriptures followed book by book over the next two centuries, unevenly and anonymously, joined by Jewish works composed in Greek. This Greek shelf became the Scripture of Hellenistic Judaism and then of the apostolic Church, whose writers argue from its wording; meanwhile Jewish revisers were already correcting it toward the Hebrew, a movement that issued in the versions of Aquila, Theodotion’s tradition, and Symmachus, and finally in rabbinic estrangement from the whole enterprise. Origen inventoried the resulting plurality; the great codices monumentalized the Christian corpus; Jerome broke with it for the Hebrew and Augustine defended it; the West went with Jerome while keeping the Greek Bible’s canon, the East kept the Seventy themselves; and modern criticism, from the Judean Desert scrolls to the Göttingen apparatus, has recovered both the translation’s Jewish antiquity and its irreducible plurality.

The one-event story and the one-book assumption are the two errors this history corrects. “The Septuagint” names a process—translation, accumulation, revision, collection, edition—and every community in this account met it as something already in motion. That is not a deflationary conclusion. The Greek Torah is the first sustained translation of a sacred law into another civilization’s language known from the ancient world; its vocabulary furnished the New Testament’s theology; its differences from the Hebrew, once an embarrassment, now witness stages of the biblical text older than any complete Hebrew manuscript. The elders of the legend were seventy-two; the real makers of the Greek Bible were legion, and anonymous; and what they made proved durable enough that church, synagogue, and academy are still reading—and still editing—their work.

13 Notes

1. Augustine, *City of God* 18.42, in the Marcus Dods translation (Edinburgh, 1871; NPNF series 1, vol. 2), checked at CCEL, 2026-07-24. All web loci cited in these notes were read on 2026-07-24; full bibliographic detail is in the References.
2. *Letter of Aristeas* 9–11, in the English translation printed in R. H. Charles’s Oxford pseudepigrapha volume (1913), checked in the transcription at attalus.org. The library figures are the narrator’s, not an archival record.
3. Rylands 458 and Fouad 266 are dated palaeographically; dates of this kind are ranges, not years. Both artifacts postdate the translation they copy by a century or less and are the earliest physical controls on its existence and wording.
4. The competing origin models are surveyed in the modern literature listed in the References. The judgment that the evidence underdetermines the motive is this account’s own (class S).
5. *Letter of Aristeas* 28–51 (commission and personnel), 301–311 (procedure, seventy-two days, public approval and curse), checked at attalus.org in the 1913 Oxford translation.
6. *Letter of Aristeas* 30, 312–316. What the “careless” earlier copies were—defective Hebrew manuscripts or earlier partial Greek renderings—is itself disputed; the Greek is ambiguous, and this account asserts neither.
7. The pseudonymity is common ground in the scholarly literature; see the 1906 *Jewish Encyclopedia* survey (“Aristeas, Letter of”), which reports datings from Schürer’s c. 200 B.C. through the Hasmonean period, and treats a first-century placement as refuted. Hody’s *Contra historiam Aristeae* (Oxford dissertation, 1685) began the critical demolition.
8. Class S synthesis. The third-century placement rests on the letter’s own horizon, on citations of the Greek Torah by the later third and second centuries, and on the second-century Egyptian papyri of the Pentateuch already named.
9. Philo, *Life of Moses* 2.25–44 (Yonge translation, 1855), checked at earlychristianwritings.com. The festival notice is first-person contemporary evidence for Alexandrian Jewish veneration of the translation; the inspiration claim is Philo’s theology, not a report.
10. Josephus, *Antiquities* 12.2 (Whiston translation), checked at the University of Chicago Penelope transcription. Josephus’s dependence on Aristeas is direct and explicit; his testimony is therefore evidence for the letter’s second-Temple circulation, not an independent account.
11. Justin, *First Apology* 31 (ANF vol. 1), checked at New Advent. The Herod anachronism and the prophets-wide scope are both Justin’s; neither is in Aristeas.

12. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.21.1–3 (ANF vol. 1), checked at New Advent. The separation motif—the engine of the later legend—appears here first in the extant record, already serving a polemic against Aquila’s and Theodotion’s rival renderings (3.21.1).
13. Pseudo-Justin, *Hortatory Address to the Greeks* 13 (ANF vol. 1), checked at New Advent. The author’s date is disputed (placements run from the late 2nd to the 4th century); the eyewitness claim concerns ruins shown to visitors, that is, an established local tradition, not the event.
14. Epiphanius, *On Weights and Measures* 3–11, consulted in the 1935 Dean translation as presented at tertullian.org, and paraphrased. Epiphanius is the fullest ancient form of the legend and the farthest from Aristeas.
15. Augustine, *City of God* 18.42–43 (Dods translation), checked at CCEL. Augustine’s inspiration argument is examined again below in the dispute with Jerome.
16. Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 9a–9b, read in the William Davidson (Steinsaltz) English at Sefaria and paraphrased here (the translation is licensed CC BY-NC and is not reproduced). The mishnah’s rule and R. Simeon b. Gamaliel’s Greek-only position frame the baraita; the listed changes only partly correspond to the extant Greek text, and are memory about the translation, not collation of it.
17. *Soferim* 1.7, read at Sefaria in the Soncino minor-tractates translation (1965) and paraphrased. *Soferim* is a post-Talmudic compilation; its mourning notice witnesses later rabbinic estrangement from the Greek Bible, examined below, not the Ptolemaic event.
18. Prologue to Sirach, quoted from Brenton’s public-domain English (1851), checked at ebible.org. The prologue’s threefold “law... prophets... rest of the books” is also a key early witness to the shape of the Hebrew collection itself.
19. Book-level characterizations follow the standard modern surveys and edition introductions listed in the References (class K); the argument here needs only the uncontested variety, not any single book’s profile.
20. 4Q120 and Fouad 266 as in the editions and standard descriptions cited in the References. The originality of *kyrios* versus a written Tetragrammaton in the earliest copies remains debated; the artifacts establish only that pre-Christian Jewish copies handled the name in more than one way.
21. 4QJer^{b,d} as reported in the text-critical literature cited in the References (class K over class D artifacts). The inference is book-specific: a demonstrated variant Vorlage in Jeremiah licenses no conclusion about, say, Isaiah.
22. The scroll was edited by Emanuel Tov in *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* VIII (1990). The extent of the *kaige* tradition, its date range, and its relation to “Theodotion” (below) remain actively debated; its existence and direction are not.
23. Class S synthesis over the translation’s standard vocabulary; the individual equivalences are uncontested and visible in any concordance of the Greek Bible.
24. Greek wording checked against Brenton’s translation of the received Greek text (Psalm 39:7; Amos 9:11–12) at ebible.org; the New Testament citations at their stated loci. The general statement is bounded: citation practice varies by author and passage, quotations were often adapted or made from memory, and no single “apostolic Bible” with fixed contents can be reconstructed from the quotations. No percentage of “Septuagint quotations” is asserted; the evidence does not support one.
25. The judgment that no fixed “Alexandrian canon” is attested for the first century is a scholarly commonplace but still a judgment (class K/S); the fourth-century codices, sometimes cited as evidence for it, are Christian artifacts five centuries after Philadelphus and are treated below.
26. Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 71–73 (ANF vol. 1), checked at New Advent; the modern assessment of the “removed” passages follows the standard critical literature (class K).
27. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.21.1; Epiphanius, *On Weights and Measures* 14–15 (Dean translation, paraphrased); Jerusalem Talmud, *Megillah* 1:9 (Guggenheimer translation at Sefaria, paraphrased). The rabbinic praise shows Aquila’s version was a Jewish project with rabbinic approbation, not merely an anti-Christian maneuver.
28. Eusebius, *Church History* 6.17 (NPNF series 2), checked at New Advent; Epiphanius as reported in the modern surveys. The disagreement is preserved, not resolved.
29. Irenaeus already names Theodotion (*Against Heresies* 3.21.1) a generation after Justin quotes “Theodotionic” wording; the proto-Theodotion/*kaige* analysis is Barthélemy’s (class K), refined and contested since. The near-total loss of Old Greek Daniel from the manuscript tradition is uncontested.
30. *Soferim* 1.7, cited above; Justinian, Novella 146 *De Hebraeis* (553), consulted in the Blume translation published by the University of Wyoming law library. The novella attests continuing Jewish Greek-Bible use in the sixth century, imperial interference in it, and a rabbinic preference for Hebrew—each within the law’s own polemical frame.

31. Eusebius, *Church History* 6.16 (NPNF series 2), checked at New Advent. The jar at Jericho invites association with the Judean Desert manuscript finds of our own era, but the identification of Eusebius’s anonymous versions remains speculative.
32. Origen, *Letter to Africanus* (ANF vol. 4), checked at New Advent; Africanus’s objections are summarized from the same exchange. Origen’s stance—full critical knowledge, continued ecclesial use—anticipates the whole later Catholic position more nearly than either side of the Jerome–Augustine dispute below.
33. The loss, the fragmentary survival (notably the Milan and Cairo Genizah palimpsests), the unsigned diffusion of the fifth column, and the Lucianic/Antiochene recension are standard results of the modern literature (class K); the exact configuration, extent, and purpose of the Hexapla remain disputed because the work is lost.
34. Contents as given in the standard catalog descriptions of the three codices (see References). The codices’ New Testament supplements (Barnabas and Hermas in Sinaiticus; the Clementine epistles in Alexandrinus’s table) tell the same story of soft edges.
35. Melito in Eusebius, *Church History* 4.26 (NPNF series 2), checked at New Advent. The “Wisdom” in his list is ambiguous—possibly an alternative title for Proverbs—and is not pressed here.
36. Athanasius, *Festal Letter* 39 (NPNF series 2, vol. 4), checked at New Advent.
37. Council of Trent, Session IV (8 April 1546), decree on the canonical Scriptures, checked at papalencyclicals.net. Trent’s act settles the Catholic canon question as law; it does not, and does not claim to, rewrite the earlier history just narrated. The books are called deuterocanonical in Catholic usage; Protestant usage retained Jerome’s “apocrypha.”
38. Jerome, Prologue to Genesis (to Desiderius), checked in the public-domain Edgecomb translation at tertullian.org against the NPNF presentation of Jerome’s prefaces; *Letter* 112 for what follows, checked at New Advent (= Augustine, *Letters* 75).
39. Augustine, *Letter* 71 to Jerome, checked at New Advent; his considered theology of the two texts is *City of God* 18.43: one Spirit spoke through prophets and translators, and divergences may both be prophetic. Jerome’s reply defends *hedera* (ivy) for the Hebrew *ciceion* and denies condemning the Seventy, noting he had himself earlier revised a Latin Psalter from Origen’s hexaplaric Greek, signs and all.
40. Class S synthesis; the Orthodox reception is stated at the level of received liturgical use, not of any conciliar definition, and modern Orthodox scholarship engages the critical editions described below.
41. Edition facts checked against the German Bible Society’s edition descriptions and the Göttingen project pages cited in the References. “Semi-critical” is the conventional characterization: a genuinely reconstructed text, but from a restricted witness base.
42. Project history as stated on the official Göttingen project site (septuaginta.uni-goettingen.de), checked 2026-07-24. A Göttingen text is an editorial reconstruction: “the Old Greek” of a book is a scholarly best approximation, not a surviving artifact—a distinction this account has relied on throughout.
43. NETS edition facts from the official NETS electronic edition pages at the University of Pennsylvania, checked 2026-07-24. NETS is copyright IOSCS; nothing from it is reproduced here.
44. *Dei Verbum* 22, quoted from the Vatican website’s English text, checked 2026-07-24.
45. CCC 120–123, checked at the Vatican website’s English text, 2026-07-24. The negative observation (no named treatment of the Septuagint) is bounded by the sections consulted: the Catechism’s article on Scripture, CCC 101–141.

A Scope, Method, and Historical Coordinates

A.1 Identity and corpus boundary

Subject: the Greek translation of the Jewish Scriptures conventionally called the Septuagint (LXX), treated as the layered object the body of this account distinguishes: the Ptolemaic Greek Torah; the book-by-book Old Greek translations and Greek compositions accumulated through c. 100 B.C.; the Jewish and Christian corpus in use in the first centuries A.D.; the revised Jewish versions and Christian recensions; the fourth–fifth-century codex corpus; and the modern editorial reconstructions. “Old Greek” denotes the earliest recoverable translation of a particular book (an editorial construct); “Septuagint” is used strictly for the Torah translation where origins are in view and loosely for the received corpus elsewhere, as flagged in the prose. “Masoretic Text” denotes the received medieval Hebrew tradition, not automatically any translator’s source; “canon” is used only of a named community’s or authority’s determination.

A.2 Coverage and exclusions

Chronological center: third century B.C. through the fifth century A.D., with a bounded modern extension (editions, Judean Desert discoveries, Catholic teaching) checked through 2026-07-24. Geographic center: Alexandria and Egypt, with Judea, Caesarea, and the wider Mediterranean as the evidence requires. This account creates no translation of any ancient text; quotations follow the identified public-domain English versions in the References, and copyrighted translations (Davidson/ Steinsaltz Talmud, Guggenheimer Yerushalmi, Soncino Soferim, Dean’s Epiphanius, NETS) are paraphrased, never reproduced. Excluded: any verse-level textual commentary; any complete history of individual books, daughter versions (Old Latin, Coptic, and the rest), lectionaries, or patristic citation; any theological judgment on inspiration, inerrancy, or the correctness of any communion’s canon; any percentage claim about New Testament citation habits; and any selection of one edition as “the original Septuagint.”

A.3 Evidence classes

Class	Meaning
D	Documents and artifacts: dated or palaeographically placed papyri, scrolls, and codices (Rylands 458, Fouad 266, 4Q119–120, 8HevXII gr, Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus), used for existence, date range, and wording only.
A	Ancient literary witnesses read at their own date and purpose: Letter of Aristeas, Sirach prologue, Philo, Josephus, New Testament usage.
T	Later tradition and reception: Justin, pseudo-Justin, Irenaeus, Origen, Eusebius, Epiphanius, Jerome, Augustine, rabbinic notices, Justinian’s Novella 146; evidence for their own tellers’ convictions and practice.
M	Official ecclesial acts, each limited to its object: Trent Session IV; <i>Dei Verbum</i> 22; CCC 120–123.
K	Named modern critical reconstruction: Barthélemy, Tov, the edition projects, and the survey literature in the References.
S	Source-grounded project synthesis, never attributed to a witness.

A.4 Method, uncertainties, and negative results

Earliest controlled evidence governs; each witness is cited at its own date; literary dependence (Josephus on Aristeas; the Fathers on the legend) is never counted as corroboration. Material uncertainties preserved in place: the exact date, personnel, procedure, patronage, and motive of the Torah translation; the date and unity of the Letter of Aristeas within the second century B.C.; the meaning of its notice of earlier “careless” copies; dates and places of the post-Pentateuchal translations; the boundaries of the *kaige* tradition and the identity of “Theodotion”; the biographies of Aquila and Symmachus; the configuration and purpose of the Hexapla; the absence of any attested first-century canon list, Jewish or Christian, matching a printed Septuagint. Bounded negative results: no Ptolemaic documentary record of the translation is known; no ancient decree of Jewish rejection of the Greek Bible was located, and none is asserted—the withdrawal is inferred from the versions, the polemics, and rabbinic memory; the Catechism’s article on Scripture (CCC 101–141) was checked and does not name the Septuagint. These are correctable search results, not proofs of absence. Mutable web sources were used as checked on 2026-07-24.

A.5 Rights and review state

Project prose is original and intended for CC BY 4.0; ancient texts are public domain; quoted English follows public-domain translations identified in the References; copyrighted translations and modern scholarship are paraphrased or cited without reproduction. This publication has received internal editorial checking only. No independent Septuagint-specialist, papyrological, rabbinics, patristics, theological, or rights review is claimed, and no ecclesiastical review or approval is claimed or implied.

A.6 Orientation timeline

Dates before the common era are approximate unless a witness supplies them; “convention” marks customary datings this account does not assert as established.

Date	Event or act	Witness or edition	Status
c. 280–240 B.C.	Greek translation of the Torah at Alexandria	No contemporary witness; horizon of Aristeas (A); citations and papyri set bounds (D)	Secure as event; date range only
c. 200–100 B.C.	Letter of Aristeas composed	The letter itself (A); dating disputed	Secure text; disputed date
132 B.C. (convention)	Sirach’s grandson in Egypt; Greek prophets and “other books” attested	Sirach prologue (A)	Secure witness; year conventional
mid-2nd c. B.C.	Oldest surviving LXX manuscript (Rylands 458)	Palaeography (D)	Range only
late 1st c. B.C.	Kaige-type revision toward the Hebrew in circulation	8HevXII gr (D); Barthélemy (K)	Secure
before A.D. 50	Inspiration claim and Pharos festival at Alexandria	Philo, <i>Life of Moses</i> 2 (A)	Secure witness
c. A.D. 50–100	New Testament written within Greek-Bible usage	NT citations (A)	Secure; extent varies by book
c. 93	Josephus retells Aristeas	<i>Antiquities</i> 12 (A/T)	Secure
c. 130 (convention)	Aquila’s version	Irenaeus by 180 (T); Epiphanius’s Hadrianic date (T)	Version secure; date conventional
c. 155–180	Christian legend grows; Jewish rejection alleged	Justin; Irenaeus (T)	Secure witnesses
c. 230–250	Hexapla at Caesarea	Eusebius (T); Origen’s letter (T)	Secure; configuration disputed
4th–5th c.	Great codices; canon lists diverge	Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, Alexandrinus (D); Melito, Athanasius (T)	Secure
c. 390–405	Jerome’s Hebrew-based Latin version; Augustine’s defense of the LXX	Prefaces and correspondence (T)	Secure
553	Novella 146 regulates synagogue reading	Text of the novella (T)	Secure
1546	Trent defines the Catholic canon; Vulgate declared authentic	Session IV decree (M)	Secure
1685	Hody demonstrates Aristeas pseudonymous	Hody, reported in later scholarship (K)	Secure
1908–2015	Göttingen Septuaginta-Unternehmen; edition continues under successor bodies	Project record (K)	Secure
1935/2006	Rahlfs hand edition; Rahlfs–Hanhart editio altera	Edition record (K)	Secure
1947–1961	Judean Desert discoveries (Qumran, Naḥal Ḥever)	Editions in DJD (D/K)	Secure
1965	<i>Dei Verbum</i> 22 on the Septuagint	Conciliar text (M)	Secure
2007	NETS published	Edition record (K)	Secure

B References

All web sources were accessed and checked on 2026-07-24. Citations in the text use conventional English titles with the numbering of the translations listed here. Sources are grouped by function.

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