

Book Review

Timothy Michael Law, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible* (Oxford University Press, 2013): 216 pp.

The author is the publisher and editor of *The Marginalia Review of Books*. This work presents a non-technical introduction to the influential Greek translation of the Old Testament, which came to be known as the Septuagint (LXX). It also presents an apology for the Septuagint's ongoing significance for Christians. Law would revive the ancient debate between Jerome, who argued that the Hebrew text of the Hebrew Bible was authoritative for Christians and should be the basis of its translations of the Old Testament (as in his Latin Vulgate), and Augustine, who defended the church's use of the Greek Septuagint (the basis of the Old Testament translation of the Old Latin).

Overview of Content:

After an introduction in which Law argues that “the Septuagint lies at the foundations of Christianity” (p. 7), he traces the historical background of Hellenization in the ancient world, particularly under Alexander, which resulted in *koine* Greek becoming the lingua franca of the ancient world. He concludes this section: “The translation of the Hebrew Torah, the creation of the Septuagint, was arguably one of the greatest cultural achievements of any people in the ancient world” (p. 18).

Law points, in particular, to the ways in which the twentieth century Dead Sea Scroll discoveries have altered our understanding of the Septuagint and of the Old Testament. Some of the texts found in the Judean desert support Septuagintal readings in places where it diverges from the traditional, Hebrew Masoretic text, which Law is fond of describing as “medieval.” Law calls attention to an early period of “textual plurality” for the Hebrew Bible and urges the reader not to distort this picture by looking back “through the lenses of our present knowledge of the authoritative status later gained by the Hebrew Bible” (p. 32).

How did the LXX translation come about? Law discusses the *Letter of Aristeas* and its account of the work being completed by seventy-two translators (six from each of the twelve tribes) upon a commission for the royal library at Alexandria, Egypt, attempting to discern history from legend. His modest conclusion is that the Septuagint began with the translation of the Torah by Jewish scholars in Alexandria in the late third to early second century BC (Law prefers the term BCE, p. 35) and later expanded to include the rest of the Old Testament writings. One of the distinguishing features of the Septuagint is the fact that it also contains the apocryphal books that are not included in the canon of the Hebrew Bible. Law provides a particularly insightful review of these works (see chapter six, pp. 58-74).

The Septuagint obviously exerted a significant influence upon the authors of the New Testament writings as evidenced by their frequent citations of Old Testament passages from the Septuagint.

Law provides a survey of various such usages from the Gospels to Paul to the general epistles. He is particularly keen to argue that the distinctive usage of the LXX shaped early Christian doctrine. Sometimes this is overstated. For example, Law comments that “the doctrine of the virgin birth would not have been found in the Hebrew version” (p. 116). This might be challenged, however, given that the Hebrew *almah* in Isaiah 7:14 would likely have been taken to have the same meaning as the Greek *parthenos* in the same verse.

Law’s contention is that early Christian usage of the Septuagint initially led to the adoption of a “New Old Testament,” based on the Greek translation and not the Hebrew original. This had an impact on the early Christian view of canon as many accepted the apocryphal books and additions of the Septuagint as authoritative. Thus, he concludes: “The Septuagint stands at the heart of the early church” (p. 139). According to Law, most early Christians would have been shaped by the LXX “without knowing anything about its relationship to the Hebrew” (p. 139).

Given this early success, how then did Christians come to a consensus that the Hebrew Masoretic Text and not the Septuagint should be authoritative for the Christian Old Testament? Law concludes that the root of the blame (or credit) goes back unintentionally to Origen’s *Hexapla*. The *Hexapla*, now no longer extant, was a book which laid out the Bible in six columns of various languages (including Hebrew, the Septuagint, and other Greek translations) and allowed its readers to compare them. Early Christians noted the difference between the Hebrew and Septuagint and instinctively believed that their authoritative text should not be based on a translation but the original. This shift was solidified when Jerome based his Latin Vulgate translation of the Old Testament on the Hebrew and not the Septuagint, despite the protestations of the likes of Augustine.

Law wants to revive what might be called the Augustinian position on the Septuagint, though he wants nothing to do with Augustine’s theology, which he terms “the pessimistic Calvinistic model of predestinarian theology” (p. 162). He thus joins with other scholars who “have sounded as voices in the wilderness, calling for a reappropriation of the Septuagint as Christian scripture” (p. 169), while conceding that, as yet, “the Septuagint has not been given the part it deserves in the drama of the church’s reception and use of scripture” (p. 171).

Analysis and Response:

Law can be thanked for the survey he provides of the historical origins and theological influence of the Septuagint in Christian theology. Indeed, the movement he describes to reappropriate the Septuagint is becoming more self-evident as time goes by, particularly when one examines how modern translations of the Old Testament are increasingly preferring readings from the LXX and the Dead Sea Scrolls over against the traditional readings of the Hebrew Masoretic Text. This remains a live issue also with regard to canon, one that still divides Protestants from Roman Catholics.

In the end, however, we must defend the “Jerome position” with regard to preference for the Hebrew Old Testament, over against Law’s Augustinian view. The original Hebrew text, particularly that which came to be the traditional standard, the Masoretic text, must be defended as authoritative over against versions like the Septuagint, no matter how they might have been providentially used in the formation of the New Testament or shaped later Christian doctrine.

This matter was wisely studied and a consensus reached and articulated in the classic Reformed confessions like the Westminster Confession of Faith and, later, in the Second London Baptist of Faith (1689). These confessions stake out a “Jerome” position in that they explicitly state that “the Old Testament in Hebrew ... and the New Testament in Greek” were “immediately inspired by God” (WCF; 2LBCF, chapter one, “Of the Holy Scriptures”). The Septuagint cannot be authoritative for Christians, because it was not immediately inspired. The “Jerome position” on the Hebrew Bible as authoritative over the Septuagint is, therefore, the Reformed confessional position. Furthermore, those same confessions also clearly articulate a canon that is limited to sixty-six inspired books. Furthermore, they describe the apocryphal books, including those in the LXX, as “not being of divine inspiration.”

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