Septuagint, Jamnia, the Masoretic Text and the Qumran discoveries

The Septuagint

The Septuagint is the earliest example of an Old Testament canon which we have (there were earlier canons of the Jewish Scriptures, but we cannot be certain as to exactly what they contained and these canons were not "closed" - the Tanakh was not closed until as late as the destruction of the Second Temple and the rise of Rabinical Judaism according to some scholars). This canon is therefore of primary importance for this reason alone. However, even if this were not the case, it would still be a very important document – as the Septuagint is the version of the Jewish Scriptures which was used by the early Church – the authors of the Gospels and Saint Paul quote from it extensively (over 90% of the quotes from the Old Testament found in the New are from the Septuagint) and it was the version used by the Church Fathers in their extra Biblical writings.

The Septuagint is a translation and compilation of the Jewish Scriptures made in Alexandria by Egypt (this city is often called Alexandria *in* Egypt, but this is not the correct name. It was called Alexandria *by* Egypt to emphasize its distinctiveness and separation from the Persian culture of Egypt. Alexandria was a Greek city – founded by Alexander the Great of Macedon – and was the center of Greek learning and culture in the ancient world). The translation and compilation was made approximately between the years 280 BC and 150 BC.

The Septuagint derives its name from Latin *septuaginta interpretum versio*, "translation of the seventy interpreters" (it is for this reason that the commonly-used abbreviation LXX came to be – as LXX is 70 in Roman numerals) . The Latin title refers to a legendary account in the pseudepigraphic Letter of Aristeas of how seventy-two Jewish scholars were asked by the Greek King of Egypt Ptolemy II Philadelphus in the 3rd century BC to translate the Torah for inclusion in the Library of Alexandria. A later version of that legend narrated by Philo of Alexandria states that although the translators were kept in separate chambers, they all produced identical versions of the text in seventy-two days. Although this story may be improbable, it underlines the fact that some ancient Jews wished to present the translation as authoritative (both Philo and Josephus ascribed divine inspiration to its authors).

The truth of the matter is hard to determine – as is the order in which the books were translated. The general consensus is that the Pentateuch was the first portion to be translated, and it may be that King Ptolemy II (the son of King Ptolemy I, the general and – according to some legends – the illegitimate half-brother of Alexander the Great) asked 70 or 72 scholars to produce the initial translation of the Torah. From thence, other Jewish texts may have been collected and translated for the great library of Alexandria. In any case, the Septuagint was – by the time of its completion – the most extensive collection of the Jewish Scriptures, and certainly the only complete set available in the universal language, Greek (Greek was so widely spoken because of the conquests of Alexander of Macedon in the 4th century BC).

Because the Septuagint was compiled and translated over a long period of time and prior to the final canonization of the Tanakh after the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD, there are differences between the canon of the Septuagint and what came to be known as the Hebrew canon. As is seen in the article on the Tanakh, the Torah and Nevi'im were established as canonical before the finishing of the composition of the Septuagint, but the Ketuvim were not established as canonical until after the destruction of the Second Temple and perhaps even the Council or School of Jamnia. Accordingly, the Septuagint canon is not identical to the Hebrew one.

For example, the Septuagint versions of the books of Daniel and Esther contain extra material. The books of Macabees and the Wisdom of Ben Sira (also known as Sirach) are included in the Septuagint, but were not canonized (despite the fact that Sirach contains perhaps the *only* example of a canonical list of Jewish works inside Sacred Scripture!) Some works, such as the Wisdom of Solomon

and II Maccabees, appear to have been originally written in Greek. Other works, such as Judith, were written in Aramaic and no Hebrew copies have been found.

The Septuagint translators did not, however, simply sweep *everything* which was a Hebrew writing concerning God into their work – for example, the books of Enoch and Jubilees are not present in the Septuagint. It is very difficult to determine what process the translators used to select which books (other than the canonized Torah and Nevi'im) would be brought into the Septuagint. Indeed, there are several different versions of the Septuagint – some of which include material which other versions do not. Examples of this would be the inclusion of III & IV Maccabees, the 151st Psalm, the additional books of Esdras and others. These books appeared in certain versions of the Septuagint.

Because of the extensive use of Greek as a language of commerce, trade, international agreements and simple communication in the former Alexandrian Empire in the first century AD, the Septuagint was a very widely-used translation. In the New Testament (which is, of course, written in Greek) there are many quotes from the Old Testament (usually presented in the form "As it says in the book of Isaiah", for example). Over 90% of these quotes are identical to the Greek of the Septuagint, showing that the first Christians were part of the large number of Jews who were using the Greek Septuagint. As Saint Paul continued on his missionary journeys and founded new Christian churches in the pagan west, the number of Christians speaking Greek would have grown (even Roman citizens would use Greek for communication between them and their slaves or subjugated people in the Roman Empire). These Greek-speaking Christians would have used the Greek Septuagint as their Scriptures.

The Council or School of Jamnia

Following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD, Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai relocated to the city of Jamnia (also known as Yavne) and founded a school of Jewish law there. This school if often understood as being the foundation of Rabbinical Judaism (as opposed to Priestly Judaism which had existed before).

The notion of a Council of Jamnia is a hypothetical notion which was first introduced by Heinrich Graetz in 1871. He felt that, based on various sources, that there had to be a definitive Council which had decided and settled the Jewish canon sometime late in the first century AD. This was the prevailing scholarly consensus for much of the 20th century. However, from the 1960s onwards, based on the work of Jack P. Lewis, Sidney Z. Leiman, and others, this view came increasingly into question. In particular, later scholars noted that none of the sources actually mentioned books that had been withdrawn from a canon, and questioned the whole premise that any discussions were about canonicity at all, asserting that they were actually dealing with other concerns entirely.

Today, there is no scholarly consensus as to when the Jewish canon was set. However, regardless of whether or not there was even a Council of Jamnia, the outcomes *attributed* to the Council of Jamnia certainly did occur; whether gradually or in a definitive, authoritative council. Several concerns of the remaining Jewish communities in Israel would have been the loss of the national language, the growing problem of conversions to Christianity, based in part on Christian promises of life after death. What emerged from this era was two fold:

i) A rejection of the Septuagint or Koine Greek Old Testament widely then in use among the Hellenized diaspora along with its additional books not part of the text now known as the Tanakh and which eventually became the Masoretic text (see below).

ii) The inclusion of a curse on the "Minim" which probably included Jewish Christians (Birkat ha-Minim). According to the Jewish Encyclopedia article on Min: "In passages referring to the Christian period, "minim" usually indicates the Judæo-Christians, the Gnostics, and the Nazarenes, who often conversed with the Rabbis on the unity of God, creation, resurrection, and similar subjects. In some passages, indeed, it is used even for "Christian"; but it is possible that in such cases it is a substitution

for the word "Noẓeri," which was the usual term for 'Christian'... On the invitation of Gamaliel II., Samuel ha-Ḳaṭan composed a prayer against the minim which was inserted in the "Eighteen Benedictions"; it is called "Birkat ha-Minim" and forms the twelfth benediction; but instead of the original "Noẓerim" ... the present text has "wela-malshinim" (="and to the informers"). The cause of this change in the text was probably the accusation brought by the Church Fathers against the Jews of cursing all the Christians under the name of the Nazarenes."

Sociologically, these developments achieved two important ends, namely, the preservation of the Hebrew language at least for religious use (even among the diaspora) and the final separation and distinction between the Jewish and Christian communities. (Through nearly the end of the first century, Christians of Jewish descent continued to pray in synagogues.)

Some of the books not admitted into the Hebrew canon, such as Wisdom and II Maccabees, gave the only textual support for the common first century Jewish belief in the after-life. The martyrs' prayers for the dead and the living praying and offering sacrifices for the dead motivated Martin Luther to reject these books as apocryphal because they supported Catholic doctrine and practice.

The Masoretic Text

The term Masoretic text is often used interchangably with the term Tanakh, and although this is acceptable from certain perspectives, it is sloppy scholarship at best. The Tanakh refers to the text itself – the collection of 24 books broken into three categories of Torah, Nevi'im and Ketuvim. The Masoretic text is not a translation of these books – for it is in Hebrew – but a very specialized text which non speakers of Hebrew might have trouble understanding.

The Hebrew written text originally consisted only of consonants, together with some applied vowel letters used as vowels. During the early Middle Ages Masoretes (Jewish scribes and scholars working between the 7th and 11th centuries) created a single formalized system – this is the Masoretic text. This was chiefly done by the Family Ben Asher, in the Tiberius school, based on the oral tradition for reading the Tanakh. It also included some of Ben Naftali and Babylonian innovations. These were codified in what is referred to as the Ben Asher System. It should be pointed out though, that while this was only codified much later, the pronunciation and cantillation (the ritual chanting forms) is from an ancient source dating back to antiquity, since it is impossible to read the text without knowing pronunciation and cantillation pauses. The combination of a text, pronunciation and cantillation enable the reader to understand both the simple meaning, and the nuances in sentence flow of the text.

So, in short, the Masoretic text is not merely a particular version of the text – it is also an *interpretation* of the text. The original Hebrew contained only the consonants – the vowels were added in as part of an oral tradition. Without the oral tradition (which is recorded in the Masoretic text) then the very words said are, in many cases, open to debate and question. This is not simply a matter of the *interpretation* being different, but rather the fact that the words read aloud would be. As an example in English, the phrases “bid and beard” and “bed and board” have very different meanings, but they have the same consonants!

While the development of the Masoretic text is a very interesting subject, it is not actually relevant for the creation of the Christian Bible – although the above brief overview is included here for completeness and interest. The Masoretic text was developed about a thousand years after Christ lived and died, and several hundred years after the Christian Old Testament was canonized. It is also based on a formally canonized version of the Hebrew texts which came into being between fifty and seventy years after Christ's death – a version which was canonized specifically to exclude pro-Christian works!

It is certainly the case that the Masoretic text cannot be used as a simple answer to the question “what should be in the Old Testament?” Equally, however, the Septuagint canon cannot be used for this either – as there was no fixed canon. Later on, we will discuss the process of how canonization of the

Christian Old Testament was achieved.

View of the Septuagint and Masoretic Texts and the Qumran Scrolls

For many years it was felt that the Septuagint was a Greek translation of the text which eventually became the Masoretic text (that is, that both the Masoretic text and the Septuagint were effectively translations of the same original). This caused a number of problems, because the Septuagint differs extremely from the Masoretic text in meaning. There are places where whole verses are simply missing or incomplete. Other verses have entirely different readings. Psalm 22 reads "they pierce my hands and feet" in the LXX and "like a lion are my hands and feet" in the Masoretic, for example.

It was the belief of many scholars that the Septuagint was a subpar translation of the Hebrew – that it had been done sloppily and without due care and attention. The view was that there was a single version of the Hebrew Scriptures and that the scribes of Alexandria had got hold of it and simply not done a good job. This argument bolstered the viewpoints of Jews (because – in general – the LXX more clearly prefigures Christ) and Protestants (because not only does the LXX support Catholic doctrine, but also contains the Deuterocanonical works). However, recent discoveries have challenged this theory and shown it to be erroneous.

Discoveries of scrolls in the caves at Qumran (the so-called "Dead Sea Scrolls") between 1947 and 1956 have shown that there were a number Hebrew traditions of scripture – one of which closely corresponds two the Masoretic text and one of which corresponds to the Septuagint. The Dead Sea Scrolls are practically the only surviving Biblical documents from prior to 100 AD, and illustrate considerable diversity in late Second Temple Judaism.