

# Who Decides?

## *Unraveling the Mystery of the Old Testament Canon*

by Daniel Lieuwen

When the Church began, there were no New Testament books. Old Testament texts alone were used as Scripture. The Old Testament used in the early Church throughout the Roman world was **not** the Hebrew Old Testament, but a translation of the Old Testament into Greek called the Septuagint (LXX). The LXX was translated in Alexandria during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus in the middle of the third century B.C., and was the standard Old Testament in the synagogues throughout the Hellenistic world (including Palestine) at the time of Christ.

In addition to the books included in a Protestant Old Testament, the LXX contained a number of other books now commonly referred to as Apocrypha or Deuterocanonical. Some of these books are Tobit, Judith, Maccabees, and a longer version of Daniel.

The LXX is based on a very different text of the Old Testament from the Masoretic text, on which modern English translations are based. For instance, in many places the wording is quite different, and the content of the books also differs—generally the LXX text is longer, but there are also interesting additions to the Masoretic text that are not found in the LXX. The text on which the LXX is based is as ancient as the Masoretic text, as testified by the Dead Sea scrolls and many other ancient witnesses.

### **A 'Standardized' Judaic Text**

Judaism was quite fluid (fragmented; lost) at the time of Christ. There were seven distinct sects of the Jews in the early first century, according to Eusebius. The different sects accepted the authority of different collections of books (e.g., the Sadducees and Samaritans accepted only the five books of the Prophet Moses, the Torah), and there were often

significant differences in the composition of the books they accepted in common. Sometimes the same sect might even make use of multiple text bases, or as scholars call them, text traditions. For example, the Dead Sea scrolls, containing the sacred texts of the Essene sect of Judaism, show evidence of the Masoretic, Samaritan, and LXX text bases.

However, with the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70, an intense standardization process began. **Only the Pharisaic** and the Samaritan sects of Judaism survived this process. The collection of Old Testament books into what eventually became the Masoretic text was begun by the Pharisees at the Council of Jamnia, somewhere between AD 80 and 100, but was not completed until the sixth century. During this period, The Wisdom of Sirach, which was eventually excluded from the Masoretic text, was sometimes included in the Jewish canon, while Proverbs, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, and Esther, all of which eventually found a place in that text, were sometimes excluded.

The Pharisees wanted a standardized Hebrew text of the Old Testament partly because of the large number of Christian Jews. The older LXX version of the Old Testament contained many messianic passages that the Christians could use to convince Jews that Jesus was the Messiah. In fact, the early Christians charged that the Pharisees had deliberately truncated the canon to avoid messianic prophecy pointing toward Jesus Christ (see Justin Martyr, Trypho 71–73).

For instance, Isaiah 7:14 in the LXX says, “A virgin shall conceive and bear a son”—this clearly refers to the Virgin Birth of the Messiah. On the other hand, the Pharisees’ version of Isaiah now found in the Masoretic text only mentions a “young woman.” Moreover, many of the wisdom texts from the Deuterocanonical books, particularly Sirach, were commonly used by the Church as catechetical reading for converts. It is not surprising that the Pharisees would want to exclude these “Church texts” from their official Hebrew version of the Old Testament.

Since the Jews had never set an exact limit on the number of books in the Old Testament, it was not inconsistent with their own faith for the Pharisees to limit the books they wanted to include in their revised Hebrew canon. Like the early Church, the Jews of Christ's time were not united around a particular set of texts (beyond the Torah, that is). They were organized around a liturgical life in the temple and synagogue. For this liturgical life, they came to use texts in the services. However, the liturgical life preceded the production of the texts and formed their context. Historically, as the Jewish faith developed in the synagogues and in temple worship during the postexilic period (the four to five hundred years preceding the coming of Messiah), texts came to be used in worship (e.g., the Psalms) and teaching. As mentioned above, the exact collection of texts varied depending on the sect.

However, with the loss of their center in Jerusalem and of unified temple worship (after AD 70), preserving the Jewish faith required greater standardization. The Jews could no longer afford divisions if they were to survive as a people.

Thus, they needed a collection of unproblematic texts to use in their now dispersed population and synagogue-only worship. They needed to eliminate the use within their communities of texts useful to those whom they considered heretics (e.g., Christians, Gnostics, and Hellenizers). Particularly, they did not want to use in their services texts that the Christians could use to demonstrate that Jesus Christ is the Messiah promised by the Prophets of the Old Testament. The canon, or list of accepted texts, that the (Pharisees, now calling themselves 'Jews') produced as their standard is significantly shorter than the LXX and came to be known as the Masoretic text.

## **What Is the Christian Old Testament?**

This distinction between the Judaic version of the Old Testament (Hebrew Masoretic text) and the Christian version of the Old Testament (Greek LXX) would not have been a serious concern for the Church if it

hadn't been for the growing separation of the Latin-speaking Church in the Western Roman Empire from the Greek-speaking Church in the East. In the fifth century, St. Jerome produced what became the standard Latin version of the Old Testament. However, instead of basing his translation on the LXX, St. Jerome moved to Jerusalem, lived with a Pharisaic family to learn Hebrew, and translated the Old Testament based on an early version of the Masoretic text.

Jerome's translation [from the Pharisaic Hebrew text], together with a translation of the New Testament into Latin, came to be called the Vulgate and included most of the Deuterocanonical, or Apocryphal, books of the Old Testament, but separated them from the rest. It also preserved many of the Christological prophecies which later versions of the Masoretic text omit. But because it was based on a text tradition different from that of the LXX, significant differences between the Vulgate Old Testament and the LXX are evident.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Latin Vulgate was the standard translation of the Old Testament used in the West, while the LXX remained the standard in the East. While the New Testament of the earliest versions of the Vulgate is very similar to the Greek New Testament used by the Eastern Churches, the Old Testaments differed somewhat. But this did not present a significant problem for the Church at that time.

The Western Council of Hippo (393) was probably the first council to specify the limits of the New Testament canon, and it accepted the twenty-seven-book canon that we have today, allowing only these books to be read in church under the name of "canonical writings." The discussion of the limits of the New Testament canon continued for centuries, but by the early sixth century, nearly all Christians recognized only the twenty-seven books in our current New Testament as canonical. (To this day, the Nestorians recognize a twenty-two-book subset and the Ethiopians a superset of the New Testament.)

The canon of the Old Testament books, on the other hand, has never been clearly decided or closed by the Church. It is clear from the quotations from the Old Testament by the New Testament writers and other very early Christian witnesses that the preferred and almost exclusive version of the Old Testament for the earliest Christians was the LXX. However, the books cited as Scripture vary widely even among the New Testament writers. For example, St. Jude, the stepbrother of the Lord, in his canonical New Testament letter cites the apocryphal Book of Enoch. Today, the only Christian group to include Enoch in the canon of the Old Testament is the Ethiopian Coptics.

In fact, differences in Old Testament canons exist among most major Christian groups in spite of a common New Testament canon. Most Protestants reject the Deuterocanonical books completely. The Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox lists of accepted Deuterocanonical books differ (the Greek list is longer). There are even slight differences between the Russian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox versions of the Old Testament. However, these distinctions are irrelevant to most English-speaking Christians, because most Bibles published in English omit the Deutero-canonical books completely.

## **The Protestant Canon**

Most Bibles that are available in North America today are published by Protestants; consequently, the Old Testaments in these Bibles are translations based on the Pharisaic Masoretic text and omit the Deutero-canonical books. The historical reasons for this appear almost accidental, and most English-speaking Christians are unaware of them.

The Protestant Reformers' emphasis on [what they assumed to be] original languages (coming out of their Renaissance heritage) led most of the Reformers to insist on using the Old Testament canon available to them in Hebrew, which had become standard among the

Pharisees (the Masoretic text). During the late Middle Ages, the Germans and Englishmen who began to translate the Bible into “the language of the people” were ignorant of the importance of the LXX (or in some cases even completely ignorant of its existence). They assumed that the Hebrew Masoretic text used by the European Jews of their day was more authentic than the Latin Vulgate, which in their mind was tainted by its association with the Latin Church based in Rome.

Although modern English translations of the Old Testament take into consideration the LXX and other text traditions, they have continued to rely principally on the Masoretic tradition. This has led to the sometimes embarrassing situation of an English Bible in which the New Testament quotations of the Old Testament are very different from the supposed “original” found in the Old Testament translation included in the same Bible.

For example, the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible has Paul quoting Isaiah as saying, “**He who believes in Him [the Messiah] will not be put to shame**” (Romans 9:33). The footnote in the New Oxford Annotated edition of the NRSV refers the reader to Isaiah 28:16, which reads only, “One who trusts will not panic.”

Just as the Protestant acceptance of the Masoretic text of the Old Testament had little to do with theology, the Protestant omission of the Deuterocanonical books from the Old Testament has very little to do with theology, although in the past hundred years or so it has taken on theological significance among many Protestant groups.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, most Protestants accepted the Deuterocanonical books as inspired in at least some limited sense. For example, the original version of the King James Bible, the most popular version of the Bible in English, included most of the Deuterocanonical books. And for many years in England, it was even illegal to publish a Bible without these books.

They continued to be included in almost all Protestant versions of the Bible until the missionary movement of the first part of the nineteenth century. In order to save on shipping costs, missionary Bible societies began publishing partial Bibles (New Testaments, Gospels, etc.). Converts and religious movements that were born out of this missionary movement came to believe that the thirty-nine books in the truncated, missionary-society-produced Old Testaments were the only “true” books of the Old Testament.

Most evangelical Protestants in America are heirs of this missionary movement. Consequently, many Americans who take the Bible seriously hold a grave misunderstanding about the Old Testament. They sincerely but mistakenly believe that the Deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament are not a part of the Christian Bible. They are ignorant of the fact that most of the Deuterocanonical books are quoted or alluded to as Scripture by the Apostles, the Church Fathers, and even Jesus Christ Himself.

## **A Septuagint Revival**

Currently **[this was written pre 2007 – now the Orthodox Study Bible is available, in full]** there is no translation of the LXX into modern English. Thank God that the St. Athanasius Academy has undertaken the Old Testament Orthodox Study Bible project in order to provide a good translation of the LXX into contemporary English. However, this project will not be completed for a few more years. In the meantime, an excellent translation of many of the Deuterocanonical books is available in most editions of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. However, for the thirty-nine books of the Protestant Old Testament, it too is based primarily on the Masoretic text. Sir Lancelot Brenton’s Septuagint with Apocrypha can be used to supplement the NRSV, although its language is somewhat archaic. Holy Transfiguration Monastery’s translation of the LXX Psalter (and Biblical Canticles) is also available and highly recommended.

Many prayers in the Church are based on prayers found in the Deuterocanonical books. The stories (or full stories) of many saints and angels celebrated in the liturgical calendar of the Orthodox Church are found in these books. The Wisdom of Solomon and the Book of Sirach, listed among the Deuterocanonical books, are storehouses of wisdom on a par with Proverbs. Edification and inspiration await those who take the time prayerfully to read these important books of the Church.