



Early Versions (Translations) of the Holy Bible

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Old Testament

1 - The Samaritan Pentateuch :

Which is a Hebrew version of the 1st five books of the Old Testament (O.T.) (The total canon of scripture for the Samaritan community which still survives and is now centered in modern Nablus in Palestine) , this version goes back to the 4th century before Christ.

2 - The Masoretic (received) Hebrew text :

The Masoretes are a body of scribes charged with O.T. text preservation beginning about A.D. 600 and extending to the 10th century.

Note :

- + There are two minor translations of the Samaritan Pentateuch that exist :
 - 1- The Aramaic Samaritan Targum from early Christian times
 - 2- Arabic translation from the 11th century.
- + There are some differences between these 2 versions.

3 - The Septuagint :

It is the 1st known translation of the O.T.. It is the version from which most of the O.T. quotations in the New Testament come, and it is the version. used by the early Church.

It is a translation from Hebrew into Greek for the Hellenized Jews of the diaspora , who no longer understand Hebrew . The story of this translation is told in the (letter of Aristeas) written around 150 – 100 B.C. Arsteas was an official of Ptolemy Philadelphus (285 – 247 B.C.). Ptolemy was attempting to gather all of the world's books into the great Alexandrian library . The O.T. was not on hand in Greek, so Ptolemy sent to the High priest in Jerusalem for text and scholars to translate , texts and six elders of each tribe were sent. The 72 elders were cloistered, and in exactly 72 days produced the full Greek translation of the O.T. called Septuagint (seventy) and usually abbreviated LXX in roman numbers.

This Translation was done between (as scholars argue) 250 – 100 B.C. and follows a different order from the one we have now . It also contains the 2nd canonical books. Because errors sometimes happen in copying any text , careful scholars compared manuscripts in an effort to recapture the original . by the 3rd century A.D. there were 4 versions of the Septuagint in wide usage :

- 1- The traditional one used by the Christians.
- 2- Jewish one done by Aquila in the 2nd century.
- 3- A free Jewish one of the traditional Septuagint by Theodotian.



4- A translation in more idiomatic Greek symmachus .

Then came the greatest textual scholar of all antiquity, Origen of Alexandria (A.D. 185 – 255) , who produced antiquity’s most massive Bible , the Hexapla (six). In his effort to find the best text of the Septuagint , Origen wrote out six Parallel columns :

- 1 – Hebrew
- 2 – The Hebrew translation into Greek characters
- 3 – The text of Aquila
- 4 – Text of Symmachus
- 5 – His own corrected LXX text .
- 6 – The text of Theodotian

This Hexapla was the source and origin of many other famous translations like :

- 1 - The Vulgate (Latin) translation done by Jerome four centuries after Origen’s death .
- 2 – Syriac translation of Origen’s 5th column (the corrected LXX) , by Bishop Paul of Tella (616 – 617 A.D)

In 638 A.D. Muslims invaded Caesarea and only fragments of the Hexapla survived. Only Bishop Paul’s Syriac translation of Origen’s 5th column remains and is kept in Milan Museum .

Other famous uncial (separate characters) , manuscripts of the LXX are the codexes:

- 1- Vaticanus : early 4th century , now in the Vatican library
- 2- Sinaiticus : mid 4th century and
- 3- Alexandrinus 5th century. Both the latter 2 are kept in London’s British Museum.

4 – The Aramaic version (Called Chaldee).

When Jewish exiles began to return from Babylon to Palestine in 536 B.C., they brought the Aramaic language with them. Many scholars believe that Ezra and the Levites “explained the meaning of the passage” as the book of the law was read (Neh 8:8) they were Paraphrasing the Hebrew into Aramaic so all could understand . Aramaic remained as the living language in Palestine up to the Bar-kochba revolt against the Romans (A.D. 132 – 135) and Hebrew became increasingly a religious language for synagogue and temple specialists. As priests and scribes read the law and prophets, the custom of following the reading with an Aramaic translation spread . Such translations were called targums.

Rabbinical leadership was very loath to formalize and write down the targums , but inevitably they were collected and standardized :-

- + The earliest standardized targum was that of the law done by Onkelos , sometime in the 2nd or 3rd century .
- + Targums on the historical and prophetic books were crystallized in the 3rd and 4th centuries A.D. with the most important one called the targum Jonathan ben Uzziel .
- + Targums of the wisdom literature (Proverbs, Ecclesiastes , Job , some of Psalms) were completed in the 5th century A.D.
- + Finally rabbinical Aramaic targums included all of the O.T. except Daniel , Ezra , and Nehemiah .
- + After the Islamic conquest of the entire middle east , Arabic became the common language .

Rabbis started to produce informal oral Arabic targums and Aramaic faded from the synagogue into religious history.