

ΓΝΗΣΙΟΣ



TRUE ORTHODOX
CHRISTIAN RESOURCES



GNISIOS



Doctrine



Spirituality



Saints



Icons



Scriptures



History



Our Synod



Links

The Orthodox Bible

by **Bishop Nathanael of Vienna and Austria**
(1906-1986)

The Holy Scriptures were originally written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. The major portion of the Old Testament was written in Hebrew. In the Old Testament chapters 2-8 of Daniel, chapters 4-8 of I Esdras and the Book of Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach were composed in Aramaic, as was the Gospel according to Matthew in the New Testament. Second and Third Maccabees in the Old Testament, along with the Gospel according to Matthew and all the books of the Old Testament not recognized by the Jewish canon are preserved only in the Greek language, the originals in Hebrew and Aramaic being lost.

The first translation of the Holy Scriptures known to us is the translation of all the books of the Old Testament from Hebrew to Greek, accomplished by the so-called 70 (actually 72) interpreters in the third century B.C. Demetrios Phalarios, a learned courtier of the Hellenistic King of Egypt, Ptolemy Philadelphus, set himself the task of collecting at the capital of his for all books then in existence in the entire world. At that time (284-247 B.C.), Judea was a tributary of the Egyptian king, and Ptolemy Philadelphus commanded the Jews to send all their extant books to the library at Alexandria, sending also corresponding Greek translations along with them. It is probable that none of their contemporaries understood that this typical bibliophilic aspiration of the king and his courtier to compile the most complete collection of books was to have such an important impact on the spiritual life of mankind.

The Jewish chief priests, of course, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, approached this task with extraordinary seriousness and with an awareness of their responsibility. Despite the fact that virtually all the Hebrew nation consisted of the one tribe of Judah, and the Judeans could easily have taken upon

themselves alone the fulfilment of the Egyptian king's wish, in a fair and holy manner, desiring that the entire Old Testament Church, all of God's chosen people Israel, take part, the spiritual leaders of the Hebrew nation proclaimed a period of fasting and intensive prayer for the whole nation and called upon each of the twelve tribes of Israel to select six interpreters (i.e. translators) from each tribe, that by a concerted effort they might translate the Sacred Scriptures into Greek -- the language of all the tribes and nations at that time.

Among these translators was a righteous and pious man called Simeon, also known as the "God-receiver." While occupied with the translation of the sacred books from Hebrew to Greek, he paused in perplexity at the following words of Isaiah the Prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive in the womb and bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Emmanuel" (Isaiah 7.14). Not grasping the mystery of the Virgin Birth, the pious elder had already picked up a knife and was preparing to scrape out that place in the holy books, taking it to be an error, when an angel of the Lord appeared to him, stopped him and said: "Because thou didst not believe the Word of God, thou shalt not die until such time as thou seest with thine own eyes the fulfilment of this prophecy. Believe indeed that a virgin shall bear the Savior of the world" (see Luke 1.37).

This translation, shown to be the result of the concerted effort of the entire Old Testament Church, received the appellation "Septuagint," i.e. "Of the Seventy," and has become the authoritative version of the Holy Scriptures of the Old Testament for Orthodox Christians.

Considerably later (apparently about the first century B.C. for the Old Testament portion of the Holy Scriptures and about the beginning of the second century A.D. for the New Testament portion), a translation of the Holy Scriptures into Aramaic appeared, known as the Peshitta, which coincides on all important points with the Septuagint translation.

For the Syrian Church and for all Eastern Churches connected with the Syrian, the Peshitta holds the same authority as the Septuagint holds for us, and in every case these two translations (and for the westerners there is yet another translation done by Blessed Jerome which is known as the Vulgate, a term which means precisely the same thing as "Peshitta" in Syraic, i.e. "Common") are honored with far more authority than the Hebrew original. This may seem strange, and

we will attempt to explain it.

At the time of Christ, the ancient Hebrew language in which the Law and the major portion of the books of the Old Testament were written was already a dead language. The Hebrew inhabitants of Palestine spoke a language common to all the Semitic tribes of the near East -- Aramaic. Christ our Savior also spoke this language. Those few words of Christ which the Evangelists left in transliteration are all in Aramaic: "Talitha cumi" (Mark 5.41); "Abba" in the Lord's appeal to God the Father (Mark 14.36); our Lord's dying cry upon the Cross, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani" (Mark 15.34). (N.B.: In the Gospel of St. Matthew the words "Eloi, Eloi" -- "My God, My God" -- are set down in the ancient Hebrew form, "Eli, Eli," but the second half of the phrase in both Gospels is given in Aramaic.)

At the time of the earthly life of Christ the Savior, Hebrew was the language only of the learned Scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducee priests, all of whom became enemies of the Lord. So from the very beginning of Christianity, the Scriptures were not listened to or read in Hebrew in the Church.

With the passing of the first and second centuries after the storm of the Jewish War and the revolt of Bar-Kokhba the existence of small Judeo-Christian communities ceased, and the Holy Scriptures in Hebrew vanished completely from the Christian milieu. It was shown to be pleasing to the will of God that, having rejected Him and been unfaithful to its original destiny, the Jewish community received a different charge. Being the sole repository of the Holy Scriptures in the ancient language, it began to testify, against its will, that all the Church of Christ says in regard to the ancient prophecies and prefigurations of Christ the Savior and of God the Father preparing the people to accept the Son of God are not fabricated by the Christians, but reveal a genuine, many-faceted, established truth.

After many centuries of separate existence in different places and within inimically opposed circles, the Holy Scriptures in Greek and Aramaic translations and translations from Greek and Aramaic on the one hand and the Hebrew originals on the other, when they were brought together for comparison, were found to be identical in all matters of any consequence, with rare exceptions. In the face of widespread slander, which exists in all centuries, and which especially in our time has arisen and wages war against the Word of God, this agreement attests to the fact

that, as malicious as the unscrupulous slander is, so carefully and lovingly has the holy text of the divine words been preserved, and so humanity has praiseworthily vindicated the trust of God, Who delivered the absolute Truth to aid weak and limited human powers.

But if the texts coincide so on all the important points, why do the Greek and Aramaic translations hold greater authority for Orthodox Christians than the Hebrew original? Because the Greek and Aramaic translations have been preserved free of corruption in the Church of Christ by the grace of God and the struggles of grace-bearing men whereas the Hebrew text in the Jewish community was saved by technical means.

When the verses of the Bible were copied by Christian scribes, the scribe himself, being a child of the Church, a participant in the Church's divine life, knowing the Truth, did not make grave errors in the transcribed text; those who listened to that text, to whom he presented his transcribed book, would not have overlooked any distortion of the meaning of the holy words to which the Church is so attentive. In the Hebrew community, the text was transcribed by Jews who did not know the fullness of the Truth. Many of the verses of the Bible which speak of the coming of Christ or of the other mysteries of the Christian Faith were not understood by them. They themselves, working with mistakes of transcription, were not able to arrive at a correct understanding of the text, nor were the Jews who listened to them able to correct them. Having lost its grace, the Jewish community did not have a built-in, living corrective for correcting its entrusted text -- as had the Church of Christ. Therefore, in the work of preserving the holy texts, the Jews relied only upon natural human means which are prone to error.

The Jewish community clearly and agonizingly was aware of this and, seeing that with every century, with every generation, the manuscripts, mistakes and oversights in the sacred texts multiplied, and that it became impossible to judge the authenticity of this or that variant reading, it decided on an astonishing and massive undertaking to prevent the complete perverse corruption of the text of the Holy Scriptures.

During the first centuries of Christianity, the Jewish scribes known as "massorettes" (i.e. preservers of tradition) removed all the manuscripts of the sacred books from all the synagogues throughout the world and replaced them with their own transcriptions, strictly precise and repeatedly checked letter by

letter by the massoretes themselves. In the future, under threat of curse, not one book of the Sacred Scriptures could be presented to a synagogue without first being checked letter by letter with the initial texts. So it is that by earthly human measures the Old Israel guaranteed that integrity and immutability of the text of the Holy Word which the Lord gives freely to His Church by means of grace.

The extent of the immutability of the synagogue's massoretic text is astounding. At the end of the 19th century, in central China, Hebrews books of those who had lived apart from the mainstream of Jewish life from the fourth or fifth century were discovered. It was shown that between the books they had (i.e. the Torah, the Prophets and Psalms) and the European synagogue text there were only sixteen variations in spelling. However, all this uniformity amounts to absolutely nothing. Only standardization of the text was achieved; those errors which already existed at the time of the massoretic reform were not only allowed to remain, but some distortions were purposely introduced by the massoretes to obscure the clarity of the prophecies which foretell Christ the Savior.

Of these distortions we will point out first of all the famous alteration by the massoretes of Isaiah 7.14: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive in the womb, and bring forth a son ..." Knowing that this passage is a great favorite of the Christians and testifies best of all to the all-undefiled birth of our Lord, the massoretes, while carrying out their reform, inserted the word "al'ma" (young woman) in place of the word "vetula" (vrrgin) in all the Hebrew texts throughout the world. At the time, the ancient Christian apologists took exception to this with the Jewish interpreters: "And what kind of sign, about which the prophet speaks here, would the birth of a son to a young woman have been, since this is known to be an everyday occurrence?"

In a manuscript of the Prophecy of Isaiah written before the birth of Christ, which was discovered not too many years ago and reported in *Time* magazine (1952, No. 18, p. 5), the word "virgin" is used in Isaiah 7.14, and not "young woman."

It is, therefore, clear why for the authoritative text of the Old Testament the Church prefers the Septuagint translation over the currently existing Hebrew text, for as we have shown, the Septuagint is the text established under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit by the concerted effort of the Old Testament Church.

Among the most ancient translations, it is necessary to point

out the ancient paraphrases of the Holy Scriptures in the Aramaic language known as the *Targums*, i.e. -- interpretations. When the ancient Hebrew language fell into disuse by the Jews and was replaced by Aramaic, the rabbis had to change to this latter language when interpreting the Scriptures in the synagogues. Not desiring to abandon completely the precious heritage of their fathers -- the original law of God -- they therefore introduced a reading of the Holy Scriptures in the Hebrew original followed by an explanatory interpretation in Aramaic in place of a direct translation. These interpretations are known as Targums.

The most ancient and noteworthy of the Targums are the Babylonian Targum, compiled in the first century B.C. by the Rabbi Onkelos and which covers all the Holy Scriptures, and the Jerusalem Targum, of slightly more recent date, which is attributed to Jonathan ben Uziel and which interprets the Torah. Other Targums are still extant, though of much more recent date. Although both of the earliest Targums appeared before the massoretic reforms, the text interpreted by them coincides almost perfectly with the massoretic, firstly because the Targums were also a product of the rabbinical milieu from which the massoretic emerged, and secondly, because the texts of the Targums, which have come down to us only in later manuscripts, underwent "correction" at the hands of the massoretic.

In this respect the Samaritan Targum, which dates from the 10th or 11th century, but which takes as its foundation not the massoretic, but a pre-massoretic Hebrew text which coincides in many respects with that of the Septuagint, is very important to us.

In the Russian Church, first-class translations of both variants of Holy Scriptures are readily available: the Church Slavonic translation done from the Septuagint, and the Russian Synodal edition from the Hebrew text. The original translation into Church Slavonic was done by the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius, Equals to the Apostles, but only those portions of the Old Testament text used as readings (i.e. "paremies") in the divine services have come down to us from their translations. Of the complete Bible translated by the holy brothers not a single copy has come down to us. In the sixteenth century, when the Church began to combat the heresy of the Judaizers, it was discovered that there was not a complete Bible anywhere in Russia. Thus Archbishop Gennadius commanded that a translation of the holy books be done anew from the Greek. This

translation of the holy books from the Greek has come down to us in the contemporary Church Slavonic Bible.

The Russian translation of the Bible was done from the Hebrew in the 19th century. In the better Synodal editions, the most important variants between the Hebrew and Septuagint are noted, and translations from the Greek are supplied in parentheses. The Bible Society edition was done exclusively from the Hebrew text without noting the differences with the Greek.

Almost contemporary to the Church Slavonic translation and just a little later, a translation of the Holy Scriptures was made in Arabic by Saadi Haon al Phaoum (circa beginning of the 10th century). This translation was done from the Peshitta.

The late date of the translation of the Holy Scriptures into Arabic is explained by the fact that the Aramaic language, having received its final, definitive form in Palmyra among the northern Arab tribes, was the literary language of all the northern Arabs and Syrians until the invasion of Mohammed, and was readily understood by the simple people. The Islamic conquest brought north the language of the southern Arabs, from which modern Arabic arose. But for a long time the Arab and Syrian Christians employed Aramaic in their Church life, considering it priceless in that it was the language spoken by Jesus Christ.

Source: *Orthodox Life*, Volume 27, No. 4 (Jul.-Aug. 1977), pages 18-23. Translated from the *Canadian Orthodox Herald*, No. 5, 1962.

[Home](#)