



The Septuagint in the Life of the Early Church

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The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament that was widely used by writers of the New Testament (especially the author of Luke-Acts) and the early church, as well as by many Jewish faithful in the Diaspora. It was used by the church and synagogue because it was considered “inspired.” The earliest literary evidence about the inspiration and origin of the Septuagint came from the *Letter of Aristeas*, first mentioned by the Jewish historian Josephus. Modern scholarship doubts the genuineness of the letter and thus the authenticity of its content; nevertheless, the early church embraced its story as proof of scriptural inspiration.

Aristeas wrote that the Egyptian King Ptolemy Philadelphus commissioned the librarian Demetrius of Phalerum to collect all the books of the world in the Library of Alexandria. Demetrius suggested that the “Jewish Law” was an important addition to the library. The king dispatched a letter to the Jewish high priest in Jerusalem requesting six knowledgeable and pious elders from each tribe of Israel to translate the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. The seventy-two translators (hence the designation Septuagint) were taken to a quiet house on the shore of an island where all their needs were provided. The interpreters would wash and purify themselves, most probably in the sea, before they began their daily translations. After seventy-two days, they completed their transla-

Writers of the New Testament and early church considered the Septuagint translation inspired, including those books now regarded as apocryphal by most Protestants.

tion.¹ Josephus emphasized the piety of the translators and the ritual purifications that accompanied the execution of their translation. The story was later embellished by Philo, a Jewish philosopher and exegete. He locates the house on the island of Pharos in the harbor of Alexandria. Philo explains that the tranquility of the island was most suitable for such a work, which required translation of the text in seclusion accompanied by the lifting of the translators' minds and hearts in prayer. Philo continues to explain that God evidently accepted their prayers because all of the translations were compared and they were found identical word for word.² This tradition, which began within Judaism, was handed down to the Christian church. The status of the Septuagint as an inspired text was firmly fixed in the minds of early Christians. This essay will explore how some of the Septuagint readings sustained early Christians during the time of persecutions and were an inspiration for some of their liturgical prayer and devotion, as well as their art, and a source of both ethical and social wisdom. The Septuagint was the basis of some of the theological formulations of the early church. Some of the readings had an impact on the daily lives of early Christians.

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The Septuagint includes more books than the Hebrew Bible and follows a different order. There are about seventeen books or chapters within books in the Septuagint that are not included in the Hebrew Bible, such as the books of Maccabees, the Song of the Three Youths, Susanna, and Ecclesiasticus (The Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach), to name just a few. There are some variances from the Hebrew text in some books, including Job, 1 Kings, and Jeremiah. A significant example of the impact of the Greek translation can be found in Matt 1:23: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.” The Septuagint translators rendered the Hebrew word *’almah*, meaning a “young woman,” as “virgin.” The writers of the New Testament were not alone in quoting the Septuagint; early Christian writers, up to the end of the fourth century, considered the Greek translation inspired and used it as the standard and basis of their exegetical works as well as their theological formulations. The Septuagint's Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures held its privileged position until Jerome, in the early fifth century, provided a Latin translation based on the Hebrew text that later came to be known as the Vulgate. Even Jerome, however, included in his translation the Greek texts not present in the Hebrew Scriptures. The Vulgate became the text of the Latin-speaking church in the West. Thus the church, till the time of the Refor-

¹Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 12.11–118.

²Philo, *On the Life of Moses* 2.25–44.

mation, still included within its canon the septuagintal additions to the Hebrew text.³

SECOND MACCABEES: MARTYRDOM AND *CREATIO EX NIHILO*

The early Christians lived as a persecuted minority among an overwhelmingly pagan majority. The lives (and deaths) of martyrs were recorded as early as the second century in texts such as the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* in an attempt to provide a model that would inspire the faithful to keep the faith and to encourage them to endure the pain of torture for the sake of the heavenly Jerusalem. Though all these lives were inspiring, the story of a mother who died after watching her seven children die before her eyes was even more inspiring since it was written in Scripture—in the Second Book of Maccabees (2 Macc 7). Though less familiar today, the book was well known to early Christians and narrates the story of the family of the Maccabees who lived in Judaea in the third and second centuries B.C. during the oppressive rule of the Ptolemies and Seleucids. During their history, the chosen people had lived under many other oppressive political systems and survived because they adhered to God's commandments. But when the Seleucids considered obedience to the commandments an act punishable by law, the Jewish people were severely tested. The family of the Maccabees took it as their religious duty to liberate the chosen people from such an oppressive rule in order to prevent any deviation from the commandments of God. Though most of the two books of Maccabees follow the struggles of this family, it was the episode recorded in 2 Macc 7:1–42 that especially struck a chord with early Christians.

The story begins with seven brothers and their mother who were arrested and severely tortured for keeping the commandments. One of the brothers said to his interrogator and torturer, “[W]e are ready to die rather than transgress the laws of our ancestors” (2 Macc 7:2). In the narrative, a gruesomely detailed description of the torture of each member of the family follows. None of the brothers recant their faith and each one of them dies uttering statements such as: “I got these [his tongue and hands] from Heaven, and because of his laws I disdain them, and from him I hope to get them back again” (2 Macc 7:11), and “One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!” (2 Macc 7:14). The writer commends the mother for her bravery, for she “was especially admirable and worthy of honorable memory. Although she saw her seven sons perish within a single day, she bore it with good courage because of her hope in the Lord” (2 Macc 7:20). When persecuted Christians read the story of a mother who endured torture and witnessed the deaths of her children before her and still kept her faith, they found affirming inspiration and great solace.

³Additions to the Hebrew Bible can be found, for example, in *The HarperCollins Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version, with the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books*, ed. Wayne A. Meeks and Jouette M. Bassler (New York: HarperCollins, 1993).

The early Christians identified easily with the biblical story of the family in Maccabees. Both groups were tortured and persecuted for their faith rather than for sins of their own. Both preferred death to disobeying the commandments or transgressing against God. Both died with the hope of the resurrection. The son was not worried about losing his hands because of his faith in God “from [whom] I hope to get them back again” (2 Macc 7:11); every faithful Christian going through similar torture sought to display the same hope and courage. When families were arrested, mothers had a model of a mother who lost all seven of her children rather than recanting. Since the Maccabean narrative and the persecutions experienced by early Christians both took place during the period of Roman rule, and since the names of the mother and the sons of the Maccabean narrative were never mentioned, their story could be seen by early Christians as the story of every Christian family enduring similar torture in anticipation of the resurrection. The narrative conformed to so many Christian ideas and ideals that it captured the minds and hearts of the persecuted Christians.

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From the fourth century on, the Christian and Jewish communities upheld a tradition that placed the death of the Maccabean mother and her sons at Antioch.⁴ So strong was the Christian identification with the family in Second Maccabees that after persecution abated, the shrine built in their memory in Antioch became a site of pilgrimage for both Christians and Jews. With the report of some miraculous healings, pilgrimage to the shrine increased. By the end of the fourth century, when John Chrysostom was in Antioch, he delivered three short sermons, *In sanctos Macchabaeos*, in which he praised the martyrs and their courage, and emphasized the continuity between the Old and New Testaments.⁵ What began as a veneration of martyrs soon developed into a veneration of the relics rather than the martyrs themselves, and the resultant syncretism became a threat to the Christian faith. When John Chrysostom saw the threat, he delivered eight discourses, *Against Judaizing Christians*, imploring his hearers to keep their liturgical celebrations within the church.⁶

In 2 Macc 7:28 the mother utters the words, “I beg you, my child, to look at the heaven and the earth and see everything that is in them, and recognize that God did not make them out of things that existed.” Here, early Christian writers

⁴Jonathan A. Goldstein, *II Maccabees: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984) 297.

⁵John Chrysostom, *Discourses against Judaizing Christians*, trans. Paul W. Harkins (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1979) xlv, note 103.

⁶*Ibid.*, xvii.

found a verse containing an explicit biblical witness for the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (out of nothing). Thus, the Maccabean story of the mother and her seven sons emphasized two important and interconnected doctrines, creation *ex nihilo* and the resurrection.⁷

The seventh chapter of the Book of Maccabees provides but one illustration of the impact of the septuagintal biblical texts on the life of the early Christians. It affected their religious rituals, pastoral concerns, and dogmatic formulations.

ADDITIONS TO DANIEL: THE THREE YOUTHS AND SUSANNA

Consider also two of the additions to the book of Daniel found in the text of the Septuagint—the Song of the Three Youths, which is found inserted between Dan 3:23 and 3:24, and the story of Susanna, which appears in some manuscripts before chapter one of Daniel and in other manuscripts after chapter twelve.

Daniel narrates that when Nebuchadnezzar was filled with rage at the three youths who remained faithful to God and defiant of the king, he ordered the furnace to be heated to seven times its usual temperature and threw the three youths into it. But the young men were delivered when the angel of the Lord came down “and made the inside of the furnace as though a moist wind were whistling through it,” and “[t]he fire did not touch them at all and caused them no pain or distress” (Add Dan 26–27). It was then that the three youths began glorifying the Lord and offering praise, singing a song that came to be called the Song of the Three Youths. Their song, comprising forty verses, contains themes similar to Pss 96, 97, 136, and 148. The first four verses are as follows:

Blessed are you, O Lord, God of our ancestors,
and to be praised and highly exalted forever;
And blessed is your glorious, holy name,
and to be highly praised and highly exalted forever.
Blessed are you in the temple of your holy glory,
and to be extolled and highly glorified forever.
Blessed are you who look into the depths from your throne on the cherubim,
and to be praised and highly exalted forever. (Add Dan 25–32)

Because the song is poetic and includes themes of praise, the church found it a very valuable inclusion in some of its liturgical prayers. This practice began in the early church and some Eastern traditions still retain it.

Evidence for the influence of the septuagintal Song of the Three Youths can be found in the writings of Niceta of Remesiana (A.D. 335–415), who traveled twice to Nola in southern Italy (in 398 and 402) as a guest of Paulinos of Nola.⁸ Niceta

⁷Origen was the first to use this verse for the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John* 1.17.103, and in *On First Principles* ii 1.5. In Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, 307.

⁸Remesiana was located in present-day Serbia. Emperor Theodosius annexed the territory in A.D. 379 to the eastern part of the empire; however, it remained dependent ecclesiastically on Rome. His friend Paulinos of Nola wrote a letter and two poems that portray Niceta as a “saintly, scholarly, lovable personality” and a “venerable

wrote a treatise on *Liturgical Singing* (*De utilitate hymnorum*) in which he spoke “of the ministry of hymns and psalms.”⁹ He defended the use of “hymns and psalms during divine service” against those who advocated the silent singing of the heart.¹⁰ He found support for his ideas by referring to many biblical verses that presented examples of famous biblical figures who praised the Lord in loud praise, such as Moses, Deborah, David, Zachariah, Elizabeth, and many others. He then added: “With Isaias, we keep our night watch. We join Habacuc in song. With the holy fathers, Jonas and Jeremias, we join song to prayer. *With the three children in the flames, we call on every creature to bless the Lord.* With Elizabeth our soul magnifies the Lord.”¹¹ Niceta referred to the Song of the Three Youths with other biblical examples and did not treat it differently because of its source. As an Eastern bishop writing in the West, where he was present by invitation, Niceta provides us with a glimpse into the common life of the Eastern and Western church of his day. It can be suggested that it was common practice in the fifth century in both parts of the Roman Empire to use the Song of the Three Youths as part of the liturgical praise during church services. Some contemporary liturgists also suggest that the Song of the Three Youths was one of the earliest canticles used in Christian liturgy.

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A fifth-century ostrakon showing the text of the praise of the three youths was found in Egypt.¹² Since papyrus was expensive, an ostrakon—a shard of pottery on which an inscription could be written—was often more affordable for everyday uses such as letters, bills, and school exercises. Finding an ostrakon with the text of the Song of the Three Youths provides an indication that the hymn was commonly used, perhaps in this case either as a school exercise or as a memorization aid for use in church services. Some Orthodox churches continue to use the Song of the Three Youths regularly during the daily midnight praises and other festal occasions. Among Protestants, Martin Luther translated the hymn, explaining that because he wanted “to keep them from perishing, we have put them here in a kind of

bishop.” Niceta leaves his friend Paulinos in southern Italy to return to Serbia and heads to the frontiers of what is present-day Romania. There he preached the gospel to “pagan barbarians.” Johannes Quasten, *Patrology: The Golden Age of Latin Patristic Literature from the Council of Nicea to the Council of Chalcedon*, vol. 4 (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1986) 190–191.

⁹Niceta of Remesiana, *Liturgical Singing* (*De utilitate hymnorum*), trans. Gerald D. Walsh, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 7 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1949) 65.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*, 73–74. Italics mine.

¹²The ostrakon is preserved in the Coptic Museum in Cairo, Egypt.

special little spice garden or flower bed since much that is good, especially the hymn of praise, *Benedicite*, is to be found in them.”¹³

The story of Susanna takes place within the large house of Joakim, a wealthy Jewish notable who is part of a Jewish community during their exile in Babylon. Customarily, men such as Joakim hosted community gatherings and local courts. At one such event, two elders appointed as judges were drawn by the beauty of Susanna—Joakim’s wife—and they plotted to seduce her. They waited until everyone else had left the house and ambushed her while she was bathing in the pool at the back of her house. Trapped, she was forced to choose either death or the transgression of her religious and moral integrity. She screamed for rescue, but when the maids and the rest of the family arrived, the elders accused Susanna of adultery with a young man who, the two elders alleged, had fled when they had arrived. The two judges who wanted to seduce Susanna took her to court. The following day, the Jewish community convened to observe the trial. Susanna raised her voice in an urgent prayer saying, “O eternal God, you know what is secret and are aware of all things before they come to be; you know that these men have given false evidence against me. And now I am to die, though I have done none of the wicked things that they have charged against me!” (Sus 42–43). But the narrative continues to tell us that “[t]he Lord heard her cry” (Sus 44), and Susanna was saved when Daniel appeared and revealed the deceit of the two judges. The community condemned the judges and put them to death for their false accusation and testimony against Susanna.

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The majority of early Christian preachers focused on Susanna’s virtue and her courage in standing against the corrupt judges of her day. She did not submit to threats of humiliation and false accusation as other women in the community did. However, there were other aspects of the story that the early church also highlighted. Susanna is portrayed as a model of prayer, who in the depth of her trial cried out to the Lord, the eternal God; God immediately answered her prayers and sent Daniel to her rescue. The text of the Septuagint states, “Just as she was being led off to execution, God stirred up the holy spirit of a young lad named Daniel” (Sus 45). Here, early Christians found a strong message about the power of prayer. The chapter introduces Susanna as “a very beautiful woman and one who feared the Lord. Her parents were righteous, and had trained their daughter according to the law of Moses” (Sus 2–3). Jerome used these verses to exhort parents to educate their daughters.¹⁴

¹³Martin Luther, “Preface to Parts of Esther and Daniel” (1534), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35, ed. Helmut T. Lehman, trans. E. Theodore Bachmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 353 (hereafter *LW*).

¹⁴Cathrine Brown Tkacz, “Susanna as a Type of Christ,” *Studies in Iconography* 20 (1999) 101.

Early Christian writers such as Jerome, Ambrose, and Augustine portrayed Susanna as a type of Christ. Augustine contrasted Susanna with Christ, “noting that God freed all the Old Testament heroes from danger, but not Christ. Jerome and Ambrose both comment[ed] that there were two witnesses against Susanna just as there were two against the Lord.”¹⁵ Ambrose drew upon the image of “Susanna silent at her trial...like Christ silent before Pilate.”¹⁶ Ambrose noted the additional typological parallel that, just as Christ was falsely accused, so was Susanna. Susanna stood silently, but even in spite of this she conquered and was proven innocent.¹⁷ Susanna has been seen by Christians to portray a type of Christ as early as the fourth century and as late as the seventeenth century. This typology was identified and commented on in Latin writings as well as in vernacular commentaries.¹⁸

Artistic renderings of Susanna are typically focused on the garden scene and depict Susanna in the nude with the two elders trying to seduce her. The Brescia Casket (ca. 390) is a major exception.¹⁹ The focal point of the casket is Susanna. The ivory work is very sophisticated and depicts not only Susanna, but also Jacob, Moses, and the angel in the fiery furnace with the three youths, as well as other scriptural figures who were understood as types of Christ. In one panel she appears with Jonah and Daniel.²⁰ The ivory work depicts three major scenes of the Susanna narrative wherein she is fully clothed, contrary to other artistic renderings. In the first scene, Susanna is in the garden with the two elders hastening toward her. She appears here as a type of Christ praying in Gethsemane at the time of his arrest. In the second scene, Susanna is surrounded by the elders standing before Daniel, typologically representing Christ before the high priests and Pilate. The third scene depicts Susanna between two trees, prefiguring the resurrection of Christ.²¹ The two trees are symbols of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life located in paradise (Gen 2 and 3). Their presence in the resurrection scene reminds the spectator that the resurrection renewed humanity and restored it to its state before the fall.

JESUS SON OF SIRACH: WISDOM AND LOGOS

A final example of the influence of the Septuagint on early Christians comes from the Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach. Though this book of wisdom literature is not in the Hebrew canon, manuscripts were found both at Masada and among the texts of the Qumran community. By the end of the nineteenth century a Hebrew

¹⁵Ibid., 102–103.

¹⁶Ibid., 103.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid., 101.

¹⁹The Brescia Casket is an ivory reliquary preserved in Museo Civico Cristiano in Lombardy-Brescia. To view an image of the casket, see http://www.encarta.msn.com/media_121618187/Ivory_Reliquary.html (accessed 1 September 2006).

²⁰Tkacz, “Susanna,” 106.

²¹Ibid., 136.

manuscript dating to the eleventh or twelfth century was found in the Cairo synagogue *genizah*.²² The presence of this text in many Jewish communities as late as the twelfth century indicates the value of the wisdom encompassed in this book. The early church also embraced the Septuagint text of Sirach for its wisdom as well as for its value as a theological resource.

The book is poetic in form and begins with the praise of wisdom, followed by forty-four chapters of advice on many topics. The son of Sirach gives advice on duties toward one's parents, humility, everyday living, friendship, deceptive appearances, happiness, responsible use of wealth, temptations of commerce, betraying secrets, anger and vengeance, lending and borrowing, hospitality, etiquette at banquets, and many other social situations and ethical conundrums. Chapters forty-four to fifty are a "Hymn in Honor of Our Ancestors," among whom are the patriarchs and prophets. The last chapter, chapter fifty-one, is a prayer in praise of God. Commenting on Sirach, Martin Luther called it "a useful book for the ordinary man.... This indeed is the proper 'spiritual discipline,' and should be recognized as such."²³

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The imagery used by Sirach became a source of inspiration for early Christian writers searching for ways to formulate their doctrines of the divine Logos. Making use of the language of Sirach, early Christian writers could speak of the Logos "[i]n the assembly of the Most High" (Sir 24:2).

But not all early Christian writers were seen to have had the discernment to understand and use the text properly. Arius used images of Wisdom and applied them indiscriminately to the Son. For example, Arius used Prov 8:22—"The LORD created me [Wisdom] at the beginning of his work"—to argue in favor of his teaching that the Son was created. While opposed to Arius's view, Athanasius of Alexandria did not reject the identification of the Logos with Wisdom. Instead, he wrote in defense of the faith against the Arians:

For the Word of God is His Son, and the Son is the Father's Word and Wisdom; and Word and Wisdom is neither creature nor part of Him whose Word He is, nor an offspring passibly begotten.²⁴

The early Christian thinkers used Wisdom imagery in the Hebrew text (Prov 8:22) and in the Septuagint (as in Sirach) as a means to discuss, debate, and define the theological aspects of Wisdom/Logos.

²²A *genizah* is a storeroom in synagogues where old and unused holy texts are stored.

²³Luther, "Preface to the Book of Jesus Sirach" (1533), *LW* 35:348.

²⁴Athanasius, *Orations against the Arians*, 1.8, 28.

The Septuagint profoundly affected and influenced early church life. The poetical texts were used in liturgical services for praise and hymns in both the Latin West and Greek East. They found advice and moral support in these texts. Early Christian writers looked at the family in Second Maccabees, Susanna, and the three youths as exemplary figures they could emulate in their daily lives whether under the pressure of state persecution or under social adversity. Wisdom literature sustained the faithful of many centuries in a world they could not understand. Early Christian writers as well as artists contemplated this literature and found types of Christ, his crucifixion, and resurrection in many of the books.

For the churches that include these books as canonical Scripture, they are inspiring. For churches that do not include these books in the canon, they are nevertheless beneficial for instruction. As we have noted occasionally above, Martin Luther translated some of these books, finding their contents edifying. He included some of them in his 1534 edition of the Bible with the title, "Apocrypha: these books are not held equal to the Scriptures but are useful and good to read."²⁵ Praises and poetic wisdom literature can be inspiring in composing new hymns. Artists have often borrowed from the Septuagint narrative, and knowing these texts generates a better appreciation of art. Those interested in understanding the early church will find a knowledge of the full scope of the Septuagint indispensable in understanding early theological arguments and liturgical practices. Since these texts were part of the universal church's heritage for almost fifteen centuries, knowledge of them is beneficial for understanding the common heritage of the church and for cultivating better dialogue among Christians. ⊕

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²⁵Luther, *LW* 35:337, note 1.