

The Bible: Its translation and its interpretation

“The Hebrew language has, in all, about 7,000 words, and of those words 1,000 occur in the Old Testament over 25 times each. The Hebrew grammar has only one form for the Relative Pronoun in all cases, numbers and genders; but three forms for the Demonstrative Pronouns. The possible verbal forms are about 300 as compared to the 1,200 found in the Greek. It has practically no declensions.” The foregoing quote from a document treating of the differences in languages illustrates the difficulty in the translation of the Old Testament in not only translating from the Hebrew into Greek, but also the translation of the Greek into English. The Greek language is far more replete in its nuances than is the English. The Koine, or colloquial Greek language of the New Testament has more than 50,000 words, the English language of the time of Chaucer in the 1300s had about the same number; whereas modern English, as represented in Webster’s Dictionary contains some 750,000 words. The point is that it is difficult to translate from one language to another with such a discrepancy in the number of words. In addition, Biblical Hebrew presents one with the added difficulty that the meaning of words depends upon their context in a sentence.

Everything in Orthodoxy goes back to, and in some ways stems from the Holy Bible as canonized by the Orthodox Church, as interpreted by the consentient holy Tradition. It is hardly open to question that native speakers of Greek had a better sense of the Greek Bible’s meaning than those who have known it only in translation. The compiler and ratifier of the canon in the latter part of the fourth century was the Orthodox Church – there was no other.

Luther, however, in the 15th century viewed the matter differently. In his translation of the New Testament placed several of the books in a separate category, rejecting their catholicity because they disagreed with his theology. He strongly rejected the Epistle of James, saying it was “a right strawy epistle”, i.e. worthless.,” Not even a pope has ever gone that far. Luther, based on his biased point of view revised Romans 3:28 – *Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the Law*” – to make it agree with his theology. Luther’s translation simply expressed his personal, plainly biased and non-objective opinion. The same holds true of those individuals who choose to interpret the Bible according to their own prejudices and biases.

Now, with regard to the Old Testament I want to digress and interpret some opening verses in Genesis in accordance with what of some modern quantum physicists have to say. While not expressed in the Scripture in the same way, it is not contrary to it and indeed, I think, sheds light on it. In Hebrew Genesis 1:1 says the newly created cosmos was *tohu wa –vohu*, both *tohu* and *vohu* are nouns, and mean “invisible” and “unfinished”, (Orthodox Study Bible (LXX). Brenton’s LXX says “unsightly and unfinished.” Verse 2 says that “darkness”, (lack of light or energy, they mean the same thing) was on the face of the “*tehom*”, meaning “empty deep or

abyss". It goes on to say that God's Holy Spirit was moving on the face of "*hammayim*" "the waters". Quantum physics interprets it as "waves of energy". Verse 3 next tells us of the creation of "light". Verse 7 tells of God dividing the light and dark, "*God divided the light from the darkness. God called the light Day; the darkness He called Night; and there was evening and morning, one day.*" Further, the "*orme*" that Orthodox theologians speak of in connection with the creation is the Orthodox equivalent of the "Big Bang" of creation. Unless one argues that the Hebrew cannot be used to help the canonical LXX to make sense of the chronology that one assumes is there for future generations to interpret in harmony with "*energeia*" of Orthodox ontology and the *different but not conflicting* sense of "energy" as understood by Quantum Physics, what can the word for "waters" mean in verse 3? The word for "waters" means different things in several different languages—it doesn't always mean H₂O. It can mean "mist" or an otherwise undefineable entity such as "energy". The words having to do with "energy" ought to be translated as such, without this whole thought world of Eastern Orthodoxy is obscured.

The Old Testament Canon

There are 10 complete books and 4 additions to books which are in the LXX, but not the Hebrew Masoretic Bible and which are added to the OT of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches. The complete books are 1 & 2 Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus (Wisdom of Sirach), Baruch, 1 & 2 Maccabees, and the Prayer of Manasseh. The additions consist of three sections—Song of the Three Hebrew Children, Sussanah, and Bel and the Dragon (added to Daniel), as well as some additions to the book of Esther.

It is commonly believed that the canon of the Old Testament was not closed until the Jewish Council of Jamnia in C. 130 A.D. However, the councils' decision was not confirmed until centuries later, some say as late as the 9th century. There is evidence that they were chiefly concerned with the prophetic claims in the LXX that foretold of Jesus as Messiah, and they deliberately removed them or reworded them in such a way as to disprove the Jesus was in mind.

How did we get the Bible?

The New Testament is the second part of Holy Scripture, after the Old Testament. It details Christ's life and the teachings of the early Church. It is thus a fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament and the most important text in the life of the Orthodox Church. The New Testament consists of the Gospels, which detail Jesus' earthly life, Acts of the Apostles, the Epistles, and the Book of Revelation. It is acknowledged to have been written by various authors between 48 A.D. and generally acknowledged to have been completed by ca. 110 A.D. It consists of twenty-seven separate works: the four narratives of Jesus' ministry, called Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Twenty-one narratives, commonly called Epistles, which were written by various authors and consisted mostly of Christian counsel and instruction, and an apocalyptic prophecy, which is also technically the twenty-second epistle.

The Acts of the Apostles, also called the Book of Acts or just Acts, is a narrative of various Apostles ministries following Jesus' crucifixion and a sequel to the third Gospel. Holy Tradition, as well as style, phraseology and other evidence, say that Acts and Luke have the same author, the Apostle Luke. Luke wrote his narrative from the words of the Apostle Paul, with whom he traveled

The Pauline Epistles constitute those epistles traditionally attributed to Paul, although his authorship of some is disputed (such as Hebrews, which is often attributed to Paul, although there was debate, even the early Church about its authorship.) They consist mostly of moral counsel and behavioral instruction, though they do include other elements as well. Paul appears to have dictated the epistles to a scribe and some specifically mention his habit of appending a salutation in his own handwriting.

The Old Testament is the Septuagint, a name derived from the Latin word for "seventy", also commonly referred to by the Greek numerals LXX, for 70. It is a 3rd century B.C. translation of the Hebrew scriptures into the Greek Language. It is the Canonical Old Testament of the Orthodox Church. Its translation was undertaken in Alexandria at the behest of the Egyptian King Ptolemy. He wanted to expand the celebrated library of Alexandria to include the wisdom of all the ancient religions of the world. Because Greek was the language of Alexandria at the time, the Scriptures therefore were translated into the Koine – or common Greek language instead of the classic Attic Greek which was much more difficult.

The *Letter of Aristeas*, the oldest known source we have for the origin of the Septuagint, tells how Ptolemy contacted the chief Priest, Eleazar, in Jerusalem and asked him to send translators. Six were chosen from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, giving the number 72, which was subsequently referred as the Seventy—LXX. In the time of Jesus the Septuagint was the Bible in use by most Hellenic Jews, who no longer spoke Hebrew, instead their language was Aramaic. Greek was a common second language. Jesus spoke Aramaic and knew Greek as well—maybe even Latin, since the sign placed on the cross was in Aramaic, Greek and Latin, indicating that all three languages were in common use in Palestine at the time.

Following in the footsteps of those first generation Christians, the Orthodox Church continues to regard the Septuagint as its only canonical text. There are a number of differences between the canon of the LXX and that of the Roman Catholic and Protestant Christians, based on differences in translation, tradition or doctrine. The differences with Rome are fairly small and have never been a subject of much contention between Rome and the Orthodox. The canonical lists are essentially the same in content, except for the following items: the Latin canon does not include 1 Esdras (though it uses that name for what the Orthodox call II Esdras; also, there are only 150 Psalms in the Latin canon, while the LXX has 151, and the Psalms are numbered and divided differently between the two canons, because the modern Latin canon is based on the Hebrew Masoretic text, though the Vulgate used the Septuagint Psalm numbering. The Epistle of

Jeremiah is a separate book in the LXX, while it is included as part of Baruch for the Roman Church. Also, the Roman Catholic Church do not include either III or IV Maccabees. Since the Second Vatican Council, Roman Catholic publications, including Catholic Bibles and liturgical texts, have the numbering of the Masoretic Bible, a late 9th century A.D. compilation by Jewish Scholars who, among other things changed any passages that might be interpreted as prophecies of Jesus as Messiah.

The differences with the Protestant canon are based on the 16th century misunderstanding of Martin Luther. When he was translating the Old Testament into German, he mistakenly believed that the oldest source for the Old Testament would be in Hebrew, so he used the Masoretic text, which, as already noted was a 9th century Jewish canon. The Masoretic is also the basis for the Old Testament of the 17th century English text. However, it should be noted the authorized version in English, the King James Version of 1611 was copied from the LXX. Thereafter, however, all English versions have followed the Masoretic text.

How do we know it is true?

A biblical canon—spelled with one ‘n’ not two—the word “cannon”, spelled with two ‘ns’ is an outmoded name for a piece of heavy artillery—whereas, c-a-n-o-n is simply a list of Biblical books which establishes which books are to be regarded as authoritative as Scripture by a particular Jewish or Christian community. Believers regard these canonical books to be inspired by God, expressing the authoritative history of the relationship between God and His people. The Orthodox Church recognizes all the books contained in the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament into Greek, and from which translation was the only reference made by Jesus or the Apostles as being Scripture.

With the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran in the mid-twentieth century, many examples have been recovered of the Old Testament from the time of Jesus and the Apostles. Scholarship during the past century has revealed a close agreement between the LXX and pre-Masoretic texts. In a review of some of that scholarship, translators note that “...*many Hebrew texts [are available] that were the base text for Septuagint translation...* Further, they note that what “..*texts like 4Q^{Sama} show is that the Septuagint translations are really quite reliable*” and “...*gives new authority to the Greek translations against the Masoretic text*”.

Quoting Frank Moore Cross (Co-author of the book “4Q^{Sama}” under review), it is noted that “*We could scarcely hope to find closer agreement between the Old Greek (Septuagint) tradition and 4Q^{Sama} than actually found in our fragments.*” The scholarship based upon the new information provided in the Dead Sea Scrolls thus supports the two thousand year old tradition on use of the Septuagint by the Orthodox Church.

The Holy Scriptures are a collection of books written over several centuries by those inspired by God to do so, in short, the answer to the second question: How do we know it's true? is a matter of **faith** on the part of the individual believer. It is a primary witness to the Orthodox Christian faith, within **Holy Tradition** and often described as its highest point. It was written by the prophets and apostles in human language, inspired by the Holy Spirit, and collected, edited and canonized by the Church. Above all it is a **faith** document.

The Scriptures both are the *word of God* and about the *Word of God*, Jesus Christ. They are God's revelation of Himself, the word of God in the words of men. The Bible is a witness to the revelation of God, and is a part of the active and living **Tradition** of the Church. If Tradition is the life of the Church, then the Scripture is the primary language of that life. The Scriptures---both the Old and the New Testaments---are fundamentally about Christ Jesus. It is Christocentric and Christological. The whole Bible presupposes the Incarnation and the Resurrection of Christ. Indeed, the very purpose in writing the New Testament was because Christ had already risen from the dead. It was after the death of the Apostle James that the Church realized that the apostolic eyewitnesses were not always going to be with them, therefore, the preaching of the eyewitnesses was written down.

We need to understand that it was the preaching of the apostles that preceded the written Scriptures, so we must understand the Scripture as a written witness of that preaching. That is why **Tradition** in Orthodoxy is so important—it is the apostolic witness to the accuracy of what is written. The Word of God had already been preached and established the Church, which served as the communal context for the Scriptures composition and canonization. Only later were their words and deeds recorded. Human beings naturally tend to speak before they make a written record. Moses words to the people of Israel after the Passover was first that they should tell their children and later were they written down. St. Mary Magdalene's first response upon learning of the Resurrection was to run and tell the apostles. Only later were these events recorded in writing.

The Bible simply presupposes the faith of the reader. It is a faith document—not science, philosophy, history, archaeology, or biography, although it has elements of these. Because of its origins and usage in the community of faith, it does not attempt to establish its own authenticity or even to prove its assertions. It was not intended to be logical proof for the existence of God or the reality of that to which it attests.

Faith is the acceptance of a truth on the word of another. In this case the world of the apostles, not on direct knowledge from being an eyewitness. St. John Chrysostom said the Church would die if it were founded only on the knowledge (i.e., direct experience); there must be those who would accept it on faith alone. Though in the Church's long history many “empirical” experiences of revelation have been had by the saints, they are by no means the norm. Most

Christians in this life will not directly witness the truths described in the Bible, and so they must read it and accept it with the eyes of faith.

This means that the Bible is a faith document, we must respect its integrity as the final revelation of the Orthodox Christian faith. We do not recognize any other writings as canonical Scriptures other than those listed in the Septuagint and the New Testament. Holy Scripture exists for the reason the Apostle John gives in John 20:30-31—*And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book, but these are written, that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you might have life through His Name.*

Addendum: New Testament Apocrypha

In ancient times there were dozens—perhaps hundreds—of Christian writings claiming apostolic authorship, but were ultimately rejected by the Church Fathers in the 27 book New Testament canon. All others were considered as “apocryphal”. These Apocrypha include a large amount of Gnostic writings, spurious prophecy, fantasy, and in general a number of other heretical writings

The common language spoken in the Holy Land at the time of Jesus was Aramaic, a cognate Semitic language. However, the original text of the New Testament was written in Koine Greek, the vernacular dialect in 1st century Roman provinces, and has since been widely translated into other languages, most notably, Latin, Syriac, and Coptic. Although some of the Church Fathers seem to imply that Matthew was originally written in Hebrew or more likely Aramaic, and there is also the contention of the Epistle to the Hebrews was written in Hebrew and later translated into Greek by Luke. Neither view holds much support among contemporary scholars, who argue that the literary facets of Matthew and Hebrews suggest that they were composed directly in Greek, rather than having been translated.

It is notable that many books of the New Testament, especially Mark and the Book of Revelation, are written in relatively poor Greek. They are certainly far from the classical Attic Greek found in compositions by the higher classes, ruling elites, and trained philosophers of the time. Exceptions to this are made for the gospels of Luke, John and the Acts of the Apostles.