

Insider – Not Outsider. A Plea for the Septuagint

Knud Jeppesen

1.

Teaching a class of students from different denominations and countries at the ecumenical institute Tantur, Jerusalem, I once said something like: "You will never get to a full biblical theology by reading the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament only. You have at least to take the Septuagint into consideration to understand a Christian Bible." Immediately, one of the participants reacted and said loudly and very emphatically that we should not use anything from *outside* the Bible to develop a biblical theology. His opinion was that if we use our historical knowledge and grammatical skills when we read the Bible, we would be able to extract the one and only and true theology from it. The only thing necessary is the Bible itself and a history that proves the Bible is right; from the Bible and the Bible history you will know what is worth knowing about God.

If it was as simple as that, there was not much to discuss. The man who protested would rely upon scholars who can make a summary of the Bible's religious message without taking too many things "from the outside" into consideration. He expects the scholars that he considers believers to present him with an objective biblical theology, illustrated with Bible quotations, and when he has read that, there will be nothing more to talk about or to learn. But this is of course not the case; as soon as you start to ask basic questions like, what are the age and the size of the Bible, you realise that there are many open questions left and many things to explore.

Later on, of course, I explained to the class that the order of the books in the Hebrew Bible has a history, and the order of the books in the Old Testament, or rather Old Testaments, has another history, and the sequence of events which got the Old and the New Testament linked to each other is an important history, too. I don't think I was able to convince my opponent; he would probably never admit that these histories are to be taken into consideration if you want to find and describe a biblical theology. He would hardly understand or discuss the issues caused by the fact that the different Christian denominations don't have exactly the same Bible. But, there are not only different translations; there are different bibles, and from a historical point of view the Bible is not a well-defined body.

It is part of the Bible's history that the books of which the Bible is made up have undergone selection and redaction through history. The choices made by

redactors and congregations, Jewish or Christian, were on the one hand made from a more or less conscious theological point of view, and on the other hand these choices have been of great importance for the understanding of the Bible. In short, you cannot separate the biblical books' message and theology from their tradition history. As far as I know, the Septuagint plays a role somewhere in the tradition history of all the Christian Bibles. It came into being at an important point in the early history of the church. Therefore, the choices that brought the Septuagint into the world are important and must not be overlooked if we want to deal with the biblical heritage.

Teaching these matters to so many different people as I have had the privilege to do during my years at Tantur has underscored a feeling I got some years ago, that we in the western theological tradition need to give more space to the Septuagint than has been done so far in many departments of biblical studies. Many scholars have only used the Septuagint to understand the Hebrew text better. But the Septuagint represents something original on the way from the Hebrew-Jewish tradition to the Christian understanding. It marks a key point in the Bible's history and is *not* something from outside the Bible in its totality.¹

I am in agreement with scholars who stress that the Septuagint is much more than a translation of the Hebrew Bible; it is a "Dokument der Wirkungsgeschichte biblischer Texte" (Rösel 1994:254), but it is also the beginning of a "Wirkungsgeschichte". It is part of a "Geschichte" we cannot escape if we want to understand our contemporary Bibles, and that is true for both academic and religious reasons. The Septuagint started as a Jewish-Hellenistic translation, but it became an important key to the understanding of the early Christian movement. Its existence is inseparable from this movement's theology, which of course from the beginning was based on an understanding of the holy texts from the Hebrew Bible, read in the light of the life and preaching of Jesus from Nazareth. Because of the universal aim of the Christian preachers it became important that the text was found in the international language Greek, and not in Hebrew only. Later on, of course, the Bible was translated into other national languages, like Syrian, Armenian, and Arabic.

2.

I have elsewhere, in a paper read to the annual meeting of Collegium Biblicum in January 2005 (Jeppesen 2005b), admitted that it was my friend and colleague Mogens Müller, to whom this volume is dedicated, who almost twenty years ago gave me a push, so I started a re-evaluation of the Septuagint.² Especially his book, Müller 1994, provoked me to do research in this field myself (Jeppesen

1995). In the English translation from 1996 the book has a subtitle different from the original Danish, namely "A Plea for the Septuagint". To recognise the importance of this work and my debt to it, I have taken the liberty to use his subtitle as the subtitle of my article in the honour of him.

In this paper I will not deal with canon history proper or go into the present discussion about this topic.³ Instead, I will make a selective comparison between the Septuagint and the Hebrew Bible and sometimes take the Vulgate into consideration. It is obvious that thorough investigations into the Greek Septuagint texts provide us with a lot of details, useful in our search for the history of theology from antique Judaism to early Christianity. An important starting point in this history is that the Hebrew god's name Yahweh had in antique Judaism been replaced by the word for Lord, *adonaj*, and was thus translated into Greek *kyrios*. For the Christians, however, *kyrios* was both God the father and the son, and even sometimes the Holy Spirit; this gave place for readings of the texts which were unthinkable for the Jews.

When we go further into the text there are many more details to look at. Here, however, I will confine myself to mentioning only Rösel 1994 about the Septuagint Genesis, which he finds is of Jewish-Hellenistic origin, and Schaper 1995, who shows that the theology in the Septuagint Psalter is more eschatological than in the Hebrew Psalter. But instead of going into more text analysis, I will ask the question whether there are theological or ideological tendencies in the way the books of the Septuagint follow each other, different from the order in the Hebrew Bible.

According to the tradition so well explored in Müller 1994, the Septuagint is made up of a Jewish edition in Greek of the books from the Hebrew Bible and a few more texts. There is no reason to doubt that the essence of this tradition is historical; Greek Bible translations were an obvious consequence of the way in which Jews became part of the Hellenistic world. But if this Greek translation was ever considered authoritative for any Jews, it has long ago lost this authority. For modern Jews the holy text is to be found exclusively in the Hebrew Bible and not in a Greek Version. The Christians, however, whose thinking was much more universal than the Jews', and who wanted to bring their message to the Hellenistic world, took the Septuagint to their heart.

It is most probably a result of the Christian use of the biblical books in Greek that we find the books in an order different from *Biblia Hebraica*, and that the Hebrew division into three parts, the law, the prophets, and the writings, was not followed here and never used again in Christian Old Testaments. Whether we should consider the Septuagint a kind of "authorised" Christian Bible or not is a

difficult question. At least in the west this Greek edition was overtaken by the Latin Vulgate text, going back to St. Jerome, who according to tradition translated the Hebrew text into Latin in Bethlehem in the years 385-405. The Vulgate translation and order of books don't follow Biblia Hebraica, but were also influenced by the Septuagint, but sometimes it seems that Jerome has known another order than we are familiar with from modern editions of the Septuagint. Probably in its present form the Vulgate is a later development of Jerome's translation.⁴

The Septuagint is not, as already stated, a direct translation of the texts from the Hebrew Bible into Greek. It is of course a translation, but in several cases it is clear that it was based upon another text than the masoretic text; and even more, often the Greek translation unveils ideas and tendencies which were non-existent in the original. There are other differences; for instance the outlines of the Book of Jeremiah and the Book of the Twelve Prophets are different from the outlines in the Hebrew Bible. On top of these differences the tables of content in Hebrew and Greek are different, as already mentioned a couple of times; there are more books in the Septuagint than in the Hebrew Bible, but not even the books which are found in both the Hebrew and the Greek edition follow each other in the same order.

3.

We know from the New Testament and early church history that the Christians could not bring the gospel to the world and at the same time demand that the new converted Christians should follow the Jewish law with its directions for all aspects of life. The books of Moses were by the Jews placed on a higher level than the other books in the Jewish Bible, and this is not only because the books of Moses were supposed to be older than the rest of the biblical books; the law was the core of the revelation for the Jews. But the Pentateuch was not read by the Christians as *the Law* in the same way as the Jews did; the Christians read the law in a much more selective manner and accepted much more than the Jews that they had to follow e.g. the Roman laws from outside the Bible. Therefore, the tendency among the Christians was to read all the Jewish holy books at the same level, and consequently, in the long run, the law lost its priority. The Christians concentrated their interest upon the stories told in Genesis through Deuteronomy instead of the paragraphs of the law in these books.

In the Hebrew Bible the books from Joshua to 2 Kings belong to another and not so important part of the bible as the Pentateuch, and they are labelled the former prophets. They were not the words of God like his words to Moses; the Jews were convinced that there has not arisen and will never arise any prophet

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red. Troels Engberg-Pedersen, Niels Peter Lemche and Henrik Tronier

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like Moses, whom they obeyed (cf. Deut 34,9-12). This Hebrew historical prophecy gave examples of how God had acted against and especially for his people in the past. He acted in history in order to warn his people against disastrous consequences of their wrongdoings, and even more in difficult times to keep up their hope that God is able and willing to help if they obey the rules of the Law of Moses.⁵

These books, which we in the present academic discussion call the deuteronomistic history, are in the Hebrew Bible placed in the same section as the later prophets, from Isaiah to Malachi, but in the Septuagint the two kinds of prophecy were separated from each other with consequences for the way they were read and understood by the Christians. For the books in the deuteronomistic history the result was that the emphasis was much more placed upon God's involvement in the history of this world than upon the sagas, myths, and legends as examples of sermons about God. They were understood as a history where God fulfils his promises and his threats, in continuation of what he did in the primeval history and later on to the fathers and to Moses and his people according to the Pentateuch. The Christians read the deuteronomistic and other stories as descriptions of periods of time before Christ, the period of the judges, the period of the kings, the exile etc., and we still do so.

That the books from Joshua to 2 Kings were now considered more history than prophecy is underlined by the fact that other "historical" books from the Hebrew Bible, situated in the third section, the Writings, are in the Septuagint found in the same section as the deuteronomistic history. The book of Ruth is placed among the deuteronomistic history books after the book of Judges, and that is probably because Ruth's story according to the text took place in the days, "when the judges ruled" (Ruth 1,1). It was of no significance for the Christians that the book of Ruth and some other minor books were related to Jewish feasts. In other words in the long run it means that the history connection of these books is taken to be more important than the literary and religious connection in the Jewish tradition.

1 – 2 Sam and 1 – 2 Kings, in the Septuagint called 1 – 4 Kingdoms, are followed by other history books, 1 – 2 Chron and two books of Ezra; they are related to what in the learned discussion is called the chronistic history work, but the Septuagint 1 Ezra is not from the Hebrew Bible; Septuagint 2 Ezra is a book of 23 chapters, which are the Hebrew book of Ezra's ten chapters and the book of Nehemiah's 13 chapters in one book.⁶

In some editions of the Septuagint (see Swete 1887ff) the books which follow the books of Ezra are poetry and wisdom, beginning with the Psalms. Connected

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to this group we find the Book of Esther, originally another feast scroll, in an extended form and two minor books which are not in the Hebrew Bible, Judith and Tobit. These three books could as well as the book of Ruth have been placed among the history books, and that is actually the case in other editions of the Septuagint (see Rahlfs 1935). Here these three books are found after the Ezra literature. Possibly Jerome knew an edition of the Septuagint where Esther, Judith and Tobit followed Ezra, because that is where these books are situated in the Vulgate.

The Septuagint has a third history work, the books of Maccabees, unknown to the Hebrew Bible tradition. The Greek tradition has four books of Maccabees, and like the books of Esther, Judith and Tobit, there are problems with the placement of them in the modern editions. In Rahlfs 1935 1 – 4 Maccabees are situated after the book of Tobit, which means that in this edition we have all the books which are considered history writing gathered in the same section. In Swete 1887ff the books of Maccabees are the last books of the Septuagint, situated after the prophets. They are neither connected to the history section nor to Esther – Tobit, but seem to be a separate section. Again Jerome probably knew a Septuagint tradition different from the one behind Rahlfs' edition. In the Vulgate Bible we find the books of Maccabees, in Latin only two of the four, after the twelve Minor Prophets. The Vulgate translation became, as is well known, the authorised bible for the western Catholic Church. That means that in a traditional catholic bible, the Old Testament begins and ends with narratives about events which are placed in history.

4.

One of the features which make the Christian Old Testament different from the Hebrew Bible is, as we have already seen, the emphasis on history instead of the law. We cannot understand how this change came into being if we pass by the Septuagint without discussing its structure. But this is not the only reason why we cannot pass by the Septuagint when we deal with biblical theology in a Christian context. The Septuagint is not like the Hebrew Bible divided into three, but four or five parts. As we have seen, the two first parts are the Pentateuch and history block of different length. In the third section most of the books are related to the part of the Hebrew Bible which is called the Writings.

The first book in this third section, the Psalter, is ascribed to the first Israelite king of Jerusalem, David. In the Septuagint Psalter, more Psalms are attributed to David than in the Hebrew Bible and it ends with a "supernumerary" Psalm, often called Psalm 151, which more expressly than any other Psalm stresses that it was

written by David himself (Ps 151,1). In the end of the Psalm, David declares that he took the disgrace away from the Israelites (v. 7).⁷

After the Psalms of David a collection of books attributed to his son Solomon is found, and this is again a sign of the interest in history and chronology, characteristic of the Septuagint. In some editions (e.g. Rahlfs 1935), this collection is opened by the Odes of Solomon, and then three books follow, which all are in the Hebrew Bible, namely Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs. Another book from the Hebrew Bible is next, the book of Job; but it is probably not understood as having anything to do with Solomon. Maybe it is placed here for literary reasons, because the ideas of Job are related to the two following books, the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus, which are not from the Hebrew Bible. In the Vulgate, on the other hand, the book of Job is taken out of the wisdom context and placed after Tobit, Judith, and Esther (in that order) in the history section. It is then a question whether Job is understood as the last historical book or the first poetical book. In any case, one wonders whether the authors of the Vulgate thought that Job was before David, and thus continued the history interest from the other parts of the Septuagint.

This section of the Septuagint is a mix of poetry and wisdom, but without any clear distinction between the two types of literature. The section is also a mix of books from the Hebrew Bible and so-called apocrypha. Especially important among the last mentioned are the two substantial books of Proverbs, the Wisdom of Solomon and Ecclesiasticus, also called the book of Sirach. These two books have changed the balance of the biblical collection of Old Testament books, a change in balance which continues into the Vulgate and later Catholic bibles. It is important that the wisdom literature got a dominant role in the first Christian bibles; the theology in the wisdom literature is much more international, or maybe better universal, than the theologies in the rest of the Old Testament. Even the parts which later on play the most prominent role in Christianity, the prophecy and the psalms, are not universal in the same way as the wisdom texts; where the neighbouring people and the great powers of the past are mentioned, Israel and its relation to the Lord is at the centre of interest.⁸ In the Hebrew wisdom literature, however, God is rarely called Yahweh, and references to history, including the history of Israel, are few.

5.

Above, we have touched upon the problem that sometimes the books of the Maccabees are the last books in the Septuagint and sometimes they are part of the second, historical section. 1 – 2 Macc take up the interest in history found in

the first sections of the Septuagint. They tell an important part of ancient Jewish history, and thus they bring to a certain degree the Old Testament history up to date, and not least closer to the time of the New Testament gospels, which are of course the next books in the Christian Bible. Only these first two books of the Maccabees came into the authorised western Catholic bible, the Vulgate. 3 – 4 Macc are partly apocalyptic and never became part of an official western bible. On the other hand, they represent a theology which is not far from that of the prophetic books in the contemporary understanding. Therefore it is not totally wrong to connect the books of the Maccabees to the prophets, especially as long as there were four of them.

The fourth section contains the prophets; or rather what in the Christian tradition is called prophecy, not least because they are supposed to foretell the history of the Messiah and of the church until the last days. Here there are, like in the second and third sections, both books from the Hebrew Bible and books from elsewhere, the apocrypha. The Hebrew books are mostly taken from the Hebrew later prophets, but there are also books from the Writings. Swete 1887ff and Rahlfs 1935 agree upon the order of the prophetic books, but the order of the prophets in the Vulgate is not exactly the same, so Jerome might have known another Septuagint order.

First among the prophets in the Septuagint we find the twelve Minor Prophets, which in the Hebrew Bible are the last Prophets. Furthermore, the order of the first six Minor Prophets is different from the order of the same prophets in the Hebrew Bible. The order of Hosea through Micha in *Biblia Hebraica* might follow what was thought to be the chronological order; in the Septuagint the prophets from Hosea to Obadiah seem to be placed after size, Hosea being the longest book and Obadiah the shortest of these five (Jeppesen 2004), in a way a development contrary to what we find elsewhere in the Septuagint; the book of Jonah is placed as the last in this group, being a prophet legend like the beginning of the group, Hos 1-3. The second half of the twelve prophets is placed in the same order as in the *Biblia Hebraica*.

The Vulgate has the same order of the Minor Prophets as *Biblia Hebraica* and the book of the Twelve is also the last book in the prophetic section. Especially the latter is of importance in the later history of the western bibles. When the reformation bibles left the Vulgate tradition and gave up the apocrypha, the book of Malachi became the last Old Testament book, which means that it is followed directly by the New Testament gospels when one reads the whole Bible as one book.

We have earlier in this article quoted some words from the end of the Pentateuch (Deut 34,10-12), where it is stressed that Moses is unique. The end of the prophetic section in the Hebrew Bible and the Vulgate again mentions the "teaching of my servant Moses", but here is more than Moses: "I will send you the prophet Elijah" to prevent the curse and destruction of the last day from coming (Mal 4,4-6).⁹ These words of course got a special meaning in the Christian tradition and are therefore an excellent link to the gospels.

After the Dodecapropheton the Septuagint has the books of the three Major Prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah¹⁰ and Ezekiel. But between Jeremiah and Ezekiel are situated three books of another character than the usual prophetic books. All three of them are related to Jeremiah, first is the book of Jeremiah's scribe Baruch, then Threni, which laments the fall of Jerusalem in the time of Jeremiah, and finally the letter of Jeremiah. Only the second, Threni, is found in the Hebrew Bible among the Writings. The book of Baruch, but not the letter of Jeremiah, is found again in the Vulgate.

Probably, the most important difference between the prophetic sections of the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint is that the Book of Daniel has been moved from the Writings to the Prophets. Daniel is, as is well known, the most apocalyptic Old Testament text, and this is even more obvious in the Greek edition; the book of Daniel is extended in different ways and the last Septuagint chapters are those about Bel and the Dracon.¹¹ In the edition of Swete 1887ff, Daniel with its extensions is the last book among the prophets and could thus have become the last Old Testament book.

The possibility of having Daniel as the last book before the New Testament stresses the point that the connection between the prophets and past history has become thinner in the Christian Old Testament than in the Hebrew Bible. Near the end of the Septuagint the prophetic preaching of God becomes more apocalyptic and eschatological, and in this way the link to the New Testament preaching becomes more prominent.

6.

In this short review of the order of books in *Biblia Hebraica* and the Septuagint we have seen that literary genres play a role for the ordering of the books in both editions, but it is fair to say that this is more dominant in the Hebrew than in the Greek edition. More important is that we have found that the interest in history and chronology plays another role in the Septuagint than in the Hebrew Bible, and that the connection between prophecy and history is not so strong in the Septuagint as in the Hebrew Bible.

An important step, which in the long run made the Christian Old Testament different from the Hebrew Bible, is of course that the historical and the prophetic part of the Hebrew prophecy, the former and the later prophets, were taken away from each other. The history part of the former prophets was then understood more as history than preaching, and this understanding influenced the reading of the Pentateuch. The emphasis was no longer upon the Law of Moses as the most important part of the Bible, but on the creation as the beginning of universal history. I am convinced there is a connection between this development and my above-mentioned opponent's wish to stress the Bible history. The irony is that conservative people, who subscribe to the idea that history is the important feature in the Bible, will not accept the Septuagint, where this idea is rooted, as part of their bible's tradition.

The Christian edition of the books which originally were the Hebrew scripture did not end with an admission to Jews in the Diaspora to go up to Jerusalem, as it does in *Biblia Hebraica* (2 Chron 36,22); this admission might be understood as a prophecy, also for modern Jews, but for the Christians it was more important to let the Bible end with prophecies that open up for an *eschaton* with consequences for the whole created world.¹² This understanding is related to another important step from the Hebrew Bible to the Septuagint, namely that Daniel became one of the prophets.

The tension between the interest in history and the understanding of eschatology, which is typical of the Christian Old Testament, is present from the beginning to the end of the Septuagint. The universality of Christianity, which is supported by the wisdom literature, seems to be in conflict with the role of David and Solomon in the third section of wisdom and poetry. Especially the role of David as poet and author of the Psalter has to be understood in the right way; the Christians did not read the Davidic texts from a nationalistic point of view, but as messianic. Therefore the stress on David's authorship is probably more eschatological than historical. David and Solomon represent the family from which the Messiah should come, and the Christians knew that he had already come. Jesus was a son of David and the fulfilment of the promises to him, and he was also a famous teacher, following in the footsteps of Solomon, a point that is not clearly underlined in the New Testament.

The result is, as already indicated in the title of this article, that the Septuagint is an important element in the development of early Christian thinking; it is part of and not added to the Bible's history. Some of the questions which we still ask today are already dealt with, but not solved in the Septuagint. We are still struggling with the problem whether history or eschatology is the more important

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feature in biblical theology. For these reasons we cannot leave the Septuagint out of sight, but have to take it into consideration again and again. But the Septuagint is neither the Hebrew Bible nor a Christian Old Testament; it is a step on the road from the one to the other, and it is exactly as a step on the way from Judaism to Christianity that we should deal with it in Bible research.

Notes

¹ In this context I cannot explore the role of the Septuagint in the eastern, orthodox tradition, but my contact with orthodox theologians has convinced me it is worth doing. If we look upon the church as one body, the Septuagint seems to be just as "holy" as the Vulgate.

² My first encounter with Müller's Septuaginta research was a paper he read at Præstehøjskolen in Løgumkloster in the middle of the 1980'ties, and later I read his articles about the history of the Septuagint, e.g. Müller 1988.

³ Different aspects of the contemporary debate are found in McDonald & Sanders 2002 and Auwers & de Jonge 2003. In Chapman 2003 a short history of research into Canon history is presented and questioned. Among books of an earlier date I have found Beckwith 1985 very useful, especially his lists of the Old Testament books in different sources.

⁴ In my opinion it does not make sense to talk about a Christian Bible until after Jerome.

⁵ See more about this in Jeppesen 2005a.

⁶ Sometimes in the tradition Ezra + Nehemiah are one book, sometimes two. In *Biblia Hebraica* they are two, but when in some cases we read that there are fewer books in the Hebrew tradition than we know from the Hebrew Bible, one of the reasons might be that Ezra and Nehemiah are considered to be one book; that is probably the case when Ezra according to 4 Ezra 14,45 is told to publish 24 books. In the Vulgate Ezra and Nehemiah are called 1 and 2 Ezra.

⁷ See about the Psalms in the Septuagint Jeppesen 2002. – In Rahlfs 1935 the Psalter is followed by the Odes of Solomon and later on after Ecclesiasticus the Psalms of Solomon. Neither of these books is listed in the Septuagint proper by Swete 1887ff, but they are found in an appendix.

⁸ Seen from that perspective it is regrettable that the protestant bibles lost the apocrypha, and especially the wisdom books, after the reformation.

⁹ Blenkinsopp 1977 explores the importance of Deut 34,10-12 and Mal 4,4-6 in the history of the growth of the canon.

¹⁰ I cannot here go into the problems connected to the differences between the Hebrew and Latin editions of the book of Jeremiah, on the one side, and the Septuagint Jeremiah, on the other. The structure of Jer 25-51 is not at all the same in Greek as in Hebrew and Latin.

¹¹ The other extension of the Book of Daniel in the Septuagint, the story about Susanna in the beginning of the book, could as well have been found in the history section.

¹² I have elsewhere argued that in the Septuagint, with its four sections, we find an outline related to the outline of the New Testament, divided into four sections, gospels, history, letters, and apocalypse (see e.g. Jeppesen 2002:157).

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