

The Murderous History of Bible Translations

The Murderous History of Bible Translations

Power, Conflict and the
Quest for Meaning

Harry Freedman

B L O O M S B U R Y

LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Continuum

An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

Bloomsbury, Continuum and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published 2016

© Harry Freedman, 2016

Harry Freedman has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in this publication can be accepted by Bloomsbury or the author.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4729-2167-3

ePDF: 978-1-4729-2169-7

ePub: 978-1-4729-2168-0

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com. Here you will find extracts, author interviews, details of forthcoming events and the option to sign up for our newsletters.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Talmud: A Biography

The Gospels' Veiled Agenda

Pursuing the Quest: Selected Writings of Louis Jacobs

Jerusalem Imperilled

How To Get a Job In a Recession

For Eli. Already gifted in several tongues.



Contents

Introduction 1

Part One Before The Violence 5

- 1 The Legacy of Alexandria 7
- 2 A Wandering Aramean 27
- 3 Old Words, New Tongues 39
- 4 The Sublime Bible 55

Part Two The Violence Begins 69

- 5 Medieval Conflict 71
- 6 The Murder of Tyndale 101
- 7 Confound Their Strife 117
- 8 King James's Bible 141

Part Three Enlightenment 155

- 9 A New Role 157
- 10 The Early American Bible 167
- 11 The Quest for Meaning 183
- 12 Reworking The Bible 201
- 13 The Future for the Translated Bible 211

Notes 215

Bibliography 235

Index 242

Introduction

Most of us take the Bible for granted. That is to say, irrespective of our religious beliefs we assume that the Bible in our hands, or the one we never take off the shelf, or the copy in the hotel drawer, has always been the way we see it now. Like any other book, it was written, printed, bound, published and is sometimes read. It may or may not be, depending on our views, sacred or divine. But that's not the point. It is what it is; it's the Bible.

The Bible that most of us are familiar with is not printed in its original languages. It's a translation. Translators tend to be anonymous people; when we read a foreign book in our own language we know who wrote it; we don't think much about who translated it. But the people who translated the Bible, many of them anyway, were not just ordinary translators commissioned to render a piece of literature into a different language. Almost without exception, they had a story. And for many of them, their story is every bit as illuminating, and frequently as violent, as the Bible itself.

In 1535, William Tyndale, the first man to produce an English version of the Bible in print, was captured and imprisoned in Belgium. A year later he was strangled and then burned at the stake. A co-translator, John Rogers, was also burned. In the same year, the translator of the first Dutch Bible, Jacob van Liesveldt, was arrested and beheaded. They weren't the only Bible translators to meet a grizzly end, they just happen to be among the best known.

The history of Bible translation has not always been murderous, but it has rarely been lacking in contention. Even in our own time the controversies have rarely gone away. The politics of modern Bible translation is peppered

with arguments and disputes about how to read the Good Book, and what it really says. The violence has dissipated but, given the history of religious conflict, it is not unthinkable that it may one day return. Religion generates extreme emotions. Unlikely as it may seem, there is only a fine line between Bible translation and sectarian conflict.

The translated Bible lends itself well to polemic and religious manipulation. The sixteenth-century translators of the Geneva Bible harnessed it to promote their anti-monarchist views. The medieval Church used it as a whipping boy, prohibiting its use to ensure that people believed what they were told, not what they read, or had others read to them. Missionaries and evangelists throughout history have relied upon it to promote their message among non-believers.

The Bible is central to Western civilization and the Judeo-Christian tradition. One doesn't need to be a believer to recognize that many of the principles we hold dear come straight from its pages. Can we imagine a world in which it had not been translated? If the Bible had remained exclusively in the hands of the priests, would science, education and freedom have prospered? Alternatively, had the hallmarks of civilization developed wholly independently of religion, is it conceivable that someone would not have translated the Bible?

The translated Bible was intended to be radical, liberating and inspirational. Yet in the hands of religious conservatism it became a negative force, a barrier to social evolution. In its earliest narrative, the story of the translated Bible reflects the separation of early Christianity from its Jewish ancestry. Centuries later, it became a paradigm for the battle between medievalism and modernity. And in modern times the experiences of the translated Bible encapsulate all the uncertainties afflicting formal religion in an open and secular age. But at no time has the translated Bible been free from violence; even now, when there is little physical threat, the turbulence a new translation engenders is palpable. The translated Bible's history is truly murderous.

Nobody ever sat down with the intention of writing a Bible. How could they? The concept didn't exist. Over the course of many centuries, individuals under varying degrees of inspiration wrote accounts of revelations, histories, prophecies and myths. The Bible is a collection of some of these accounts, or more accurately, three collections. The earliest collection is known

colloquially as the Old Testament, the Bible of the Jews. The most recent is the Christian New Testament. A third, slightly less revered compendium is known to the Catholics as the Deuterocanon and to everyone else as the Apocrypha.

The process of translating the Bible, of bringing it to the masses, began even before the collections, or canon, were complete. Parts of the Bible were being translated even as it was being written. The Book of Nehemiah, one of the later volumes in the Old Testament, relates how Ezra the Scribe translated the Five Books of Moses for the benefit of Aramaic-speaking, Jewish refugees returning home from Babylon. Acts of the Apostles describes how the Bible was miraculously translated into many languages simultaneously.¹ But the first Bible translation controversy did not erupt until much later, early in the second century of the Common Era. The cycle of controversies took several hundred years to reach a climax. Things moved more slowly in those days.

This book tells the story of those for whom the idea of a Bible that ordinary people could read was so important that they were willing to give up their time, their security, often even their lives. It tells the story of the translated Bible, but it does not pretend to be a comprehensive history of the translated Bible. Too many books on the Bible are overlong and full of dry facts; that is fine for an academic work but it can wear down readers who are not looking to become experts in the field. So, in this eclectic account, many translations, and many seminal characters in the translated Bible's history, get scarcely a mention, either because they managed to remain free from controversy, or because their story adds little to what has already been said. For similar reasons we do not delve into the technicalities of translation techniques, nor fret over contentious interpretations. The Bibliography lists many of the good books available on these and other subjects, for those who are interested.

Just a word on terminology. No designation of the Bible or its various constituents will satisfy everybody. For Jews the Bible is only the Old Testament, but the name itself is inappropriate because it implies that their Bible has been superseded. For Christians the Bible means both Old and New Testaments, together with the Deuterocanon, or Apocrypha, for Catholics and Orthodox,

and without it for many Protestants. The order of the books in the so-called Old Testament is different for Jews, Protestants and Catholics. To keep things simple I have used the traditional terms of Old and New Testament throughout and tried not to dwell overmuch on the various definitions of what actually constitutes the Bible.

Part One

Before The Violence

1

The Legacy of Alexandria

The Legend of the Septuagint

The story begins, as many good stories do, as a shard of truth, deeply buried within a legend. We are unlikely ever to uncover the whole story but the legend is as good a place to start as any.

The only indisputable fact in the legend is that the history of Bible translation began in the ancient world's most important city, in the vibrant, dazzling heart of Greek culture, science, architecture and scholarship. A city bearing the name of its recently deceased founder, Alexander Macedon, known to the world as Alexander the Great: the city of Alexandria, capital of Egypt.

The lighthouse, which sat at the tip of the Alexandrian island of Pharos, was one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. But wonders do not last for ever; everyone knew that the lighthouse was an impermanent edifice – in time it would crumble and fall. The Macedonian general Ptolemy I, King of Egypt and ruler of Alexandria, believed that his city deserved more than this. The majesty of Greek culture was worthy of an enduring testament, an eternal monument unshackled by the transient world. The monument would contain that which men craved but could never destroy; a sanctuary for the ephemeral virtue of Wisdom.

Demetrius of Phalerum was an adviser to Ptolemy. A renowned public speaker and former pupil of Aristotle, Demetrius had spent ten years as the governor of Athens. There, among other things, he had supervised the erection of countless statues to himself. His authority in Athens had been prematurely

ruptured when the city was besieged and conquered by his enemies. Demetrius fled, first to Thebes, near the modern Egyptian town of Luxor, and from there to Alexandria where he joined King Ptolemy's court.¹ According to the Greek historian Plutarch, it was he who advised the king to 'collect together books on kingship and the exercise of power, and to read them.'² The king accepted Demetrius's counsel, and, round about 288 BCE, the Library of Alexandria was born. It would serve as a testament to the supremacy of Greek culture, to demonstrate that even here on the northern shores of Africa, at the mouth of the River Nile, the Greeks could contemplate no better use of their wealth than the acquisition of knowledge and learning.

Ptolemy gave the order to build the library within Alexandria's magnificent royal complex, a vast, palatial area of the city, just a little way inland from the lighthouse. Unlike a modern library, it was not housed within a room, nor did it contain books in the form we know. Instead the Library was woven into the fabric of the Temple to the Muses, hence its name, Museum, a vast scholarly establishment where Euclid wrote his *Elements of Geometry* and, almost two millennia before Copernicus, Aristarchus proved that the earth revolved around the sun. The library itself seems to have been a vast bookshelf that ran along one side of a long, covered walkway, snaking and slithering into recesses and cubicles as it progressed.

Papyrus scrolls from every corner of the world were stacked in lidded boxes on the shelf. They included lists of names, catalogues of gods, heroes and adventurers, chronologies of great events. But the subject that dominated, the one which every Alexandrian librarian and reader gravitated towards whenever they had the opportunity, was Greek drama; the plays of Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides and all those whose names have no longer survived.³ Ptolemy had sent letters throughout the world, to every known king, prince, baron and demagogue, asking them to send him copies of the books in their possession. Few dared to disobey. The king had further ordered that every ship which docked in Alexandria's harbour was to surrender for copying any books that it carried. The library would keep the originals; the copies were to be returned to the mariners. When finished, the library would contain works by every conceivable manner of author; 'poets and prose-writers, rhetoricians and sophists, doctors and soothsayers and historians, and all the others too.'⁴

The library differed in another way from our modern, rather tame image of a place where books are stored and quietly read. According to Peter Stothard's entertaining book *Alexandria: The Last Nights of Cleopatra*, the concepts of library and laboratory were, in those ancient times, closely related. A place of learning was just that, whether the learning came about through the use of books or whether by practical experimentation. The royal palaces, which sat on the eastern flank of the Great Harbour, were well endowed with dungeons. Some of the unhappy captives, who no doubt thought their lives could get no worse, found themselves at the mercy of librarians keen to advance the cause of Ptolemaic science through the practice of live dissection.⁵

According to the earliest version of the legend, Ptolemy's adviser, Demetrius of Phalerum, was awarded the position of founding librarian, charged with compiling the fledgling library's ambitious collection. He thought his work was well in hand, and he had already amassed two hundred thousand books, when he was summoned by a disgruntled Ptolemy. The king, who had placed every conceivable resource at his librarian's disposal, was concerned that the acquisition programme was not moving fast enough. He was impatient to hear Demetrius's plans to increase the library's holdings to an acceptable level.

The king had set Demetrius a target for the finished library of half a million books. The two hundred thousand in his vault when the monarch summoned him was clearly nothing like enough. Demetrius assured Ptolemy that he was taking urgent steps to expand the library's stock. He reminded the king that neither of them would be satisfied with merely the largest library in the world. Size wasn't everything. Quality was essential too. As was the imperative that every book be rendered into Greek. After all, the library was a testament to Greek culture; it would be unthinkable for it to contain works written in a foreign language.

A swarm of scholars had been hired and set to work, translating the swelling pile of foreign books. They'd breezed their way through complicated, alien works like the two million verses attributed to the Persian philosopher Zoroaster (a work which would later be indexed in its entirety by Hermippus, the pupil of one of Demetrius's successors). But Demetrius had a problem, one which threatened to undermine the library's status as the unchallenged repository for the whole of the world's literature. According to the earliest

source of our legend, a letter sent in the second century BCE by Aristeas, an Alexandrian Jew, to his brother Philocrates, one text in particular stumped the translators. It was the Hebrew Bible, the sacred literature of the Jews.

This is just the first of several instances which lead us to suspect there is something not quite right about Aristeas's account. He wants us to believe that nobody in Alexandria could understand Hebrew. Yet there was a large Jewish community in Alexandria, probably the world's most numerous outside of the land of Israel. Even if none of Alexandria's Jews were able to read and understand Hebrew, which is highly improbable, Egypt and Israel shared a border; traders and merchants went back and forth all the time. And yet Aristeas implies that nobody in Alexandria was literate in Hebrew; none could decipher the strange characters in which the language was written, nor understand the words the characters formed. Demetrius was insistent that the Hebrew Bible be included in his library. Aristeas tells us that there was nobody among his impressive body of scholars who could translate it.

The king didn't think that Alexandria's lack of Hebrew translators was much of a problem. Visionary thinking was his forte; that's why he had risen to be King of Egypt while Demetrius was a sad, failed ruler of Athens. To Ptolemy the answer was quite clear. He instructed Demetrius to despatch a delegation across the border, to the Temple in Jerusalem. The envoys were to carry gifts; silver and gold for the Temple treasury, first fruits to be presented upon the altar. They were instructed to seek out Eleazar, the High Priest of the Jews. He would be presented with a letter in the king's name, requesting him to send a delegation of Jewish scholars. This delegation would be treated with honour and highly rewarded. In return their task was to be no more than to translate their holy writings into Greek. They would write the first translation of the Bible.

This is the point at which Aristeas, whose letter was written a century or so after the events he purports to recount,⁶ chooses to write himself into the story. He tells us that he advised Ptolemy of the presence in Egypt of one hundred thousand Jewish slaves, whom the king's father had taken into forced labour during a campaign he had waged in Judea. Aristeas claims to have suggested to the king that the slaves be freed, and that Demetrius should make mention of this benevolent, selfless and gracious act when making his request to the

High Priest in Jerusalem. Ptolemy, we are assured, duly followed suit. He also appointed the yet-to-be-born Aristeas as one of the envoys despatched to Jerusalem.

The letter begins to sound even more contrived when Aristeas describes the delegation that the High Priest sent from Jerusalem. He tells us that the delegation of translators consisted of seventy-two men, six from each Israelite tribe. It sounds neat but it was too tidy. The ancient, Israelite tribal system had long since broken down; most people no longer knew which clan their ancestors had belonged to, and they certainly didn't identify themselves by tribal affiliation. Only the priestly caste had retained its distinctive identity.

Aristeas's account, and his predilection for the number seventy-two, becomes even more fanciful when he describes a week-long banquet that Ptolemy allegedly held in the delegation's honour. Over the course of the feast the king posed seventy-two, profound, metaphysical and philosophical questions to the delegates. Aristeas ponderously records each and every question, along with the delegates' responses. The account of this symposium takes up far more room in Aristeas's letter than anything else.

Finally, when all the questions are turgidly disposed of, Aristeas returns to his original theme. He recounts how the delegation was conducted to well-appointed quarters on the seashore of the island of Pharos.⁷ The Jerusalem scholars were given all the materials they needed to collaborate on their translation and, exactly seventy-two days later, the seventy-two men proudly presented Demetrius with a copy of their work.

Demetrius summoned the Jews who lived in Alexandria and, despite its great length, read the translation to them. It must have taken hours. The crowd, whom we had been given to understand had no knowledge of Hebrew, gave an ovation to the translators and to Demetrius, voicing their uncritical approval of the new work. Their enthusiasm was so great that all agreed this magnificent translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek should become an official, unalterable version. Great curses would descend upon anyone who dared tamper with it.

Aristeas's letter is considered by most scholars to be a fanciful account of how the Bible was translated into Greek.⁸ It's not just that it contains fantastical elements like the recurring number seventy-two. It is also historically

inaccurate; Aristeas has Demetrius working for Ptolemy II whereas he actually worked for his father, Ptolemy I. Indeed, Demetrius was no friend of Ptolemy II. He had badly miscalculated when caught up in a political intrigue that had sought to prevent Ptolemy's accession to the throne. Demetrius backed the wrong side, the intrigue failed and one of Ptolemy II's first acts when crowned king was to arrange for his assassination, poisoned by the bite of an asp.⁹ It is inconceivable that Demetrius would have been Ptolemy II's librarian.

The account written by Aristeas is the first, but not the only source to suggest that a translation of the Hebrew Bible was undertaken in Alexandria in the second or third century BCE. It is possible that the underlying facts are true, that the translation was commissioned, or at least endorsed, by one of the Greek-Egyptian monarchs. The general view today is that the translation was conceived and carried out by a Greek-speaking Jew, for members of the large and flourishing Alexandrian, Jewish community whose grasp of their ancestral Hebrew tongue was diminishing. One reason for this theory is the dialect of Greek used in the translation. Known as *koine*, it is similar to that found in other Egyptian documents from the same period. The translation even contains a few Egyptian words. All this suggests that the translation was made by Greek-speaking Egyptians. Not by Hebrew-speaking foreigners from Jerusalem.¹⁰

The legend was popular in its day. It crops up a second time in the writings of Philo,¹¹ a Jewish philosopher who lived in Alexandria from about 25 BCE to 50 CE. Aristeas had neglected to mention which books of the Hebrew Bible had been translated in Alexandria. But Philo tells us. He declares that the translation commissioned by Ptolemy was just the first part of the Hebrew Bible; the Five Books of Moses, known in Greek as the Pentateuch and in the language of the Jews as the Torah. Modern scholars agree. Although the translation was eventually expanded to include the whole Hebrew Bible, the style in which the Pentateuch has been translated is noticeably different from, and considerably earlier than, that of the later books.¹²

Philo doesn't agree with every detail of Aristeas's account. He still believes that the translation was commissioned by Ptolemy II and he relates the arrival of envoys from Jerusalem, the lavish banquet and the symposium instigated

by the king.¹³ He doesn't mention Demetrius, and there is no reference to the ancient tribes of Israel, nor the recurring number seventy-two. However he does add new information. Whereas Aristeas has his seventy-two translators collaborating to produce the best possible version, Philo's delegates (he doesn't tell us how many there were) each produce their own version. And every version they produce is identical, each translation corresponds with the other, word for word, 'as if guided by an unseen prompter'.¹⁴ In Philo's version a miracle seems to have taken place.

The miracle that Philo hints at becomes more pronounced as the legend develops over the coming centuries. In later versions, the translators do not simply produce identical Greek versions of the Pentateuch; they do so despite being locked into separate cells, unable to communicate with each other. Towards the end of the second century, the Church Father, Irenaeus of Lyons, wrote that Ptolemy 'wishing to test (the translators) individually, and fearing lest they might perchance, by taking counsel together, conceal the truth in the Scriptures . . . separated them from each other'.¹⁵ In making this statement, Irenaeus is not just naively alerting us to a slightly different version of the legend that he has heard. For reasons which will become clear, he wants to emphasize the miraculous, ineffable nature of this translation, and to stress that even if the translators had wanted to 'conceal the truth' they were not able to do so. In Irenaeus's eyes, the miracle stopped the Jewish translators from falsifying the Bible, from eliminating prophecies which he believed foretold the coming of Jesus. The legend was evolving into polemic. And the translated Bible was on the brink of its first foray into religious politics.

Jewish sources of the same period agree that the translators, although separated, produced identical works. Their reasons for stressing this are different. The Jews were not afraid that the translators might conceal doctrinal truths. Their concern was about possible ambiguities, ways of translating the text that might give rise to theological problems. What was miraculous for the Jews was that in the version the translators produced, passages which were potentially ambiguous or misleading had been elucidated. The Talmud cites several amendments to verses which might otherwise have been misunderstood. One occurs in the Creation narrative when, in the Hebrew text, God states 'Let us make man in our image'.¹⁶ This could suggest that God

collaborated with others in the world's creation. The Jewish sources tell us that the translators all came up with the far more straightforward, 'I shall make man in an image.' Similarly, in the account of the Tower of Babel, God's 'We will go down and confuse their speech'¹⁷ becomes 'I will go down...'¹⁸

By the second century CE, the legend that Aristeas composed had become a miraculous fable. It told of a team of scholars, each shut away incommunicado in his own cell, each working on his own, and each translating the Five Books of Moses in identical fashion. The legend had become a miracle and the Greek translation of the Bible was turning into a battleground.

Although both the Jewish and Christian sources affirmed the miraculous nature of the translation, they did so for very different reasons. Irenaeus had said that it was so the Jewish translators couldn't collude and falsify the Bible. The Jewish sources claimed it was to eliminate the possibility of people reading ideas into the Hebrew text that weren't there. It was these two different ways of interpreting the legend and its miracle which generated the first Bible translation controversy. It would be the first of many, and they would grow more violent with time.

The Septuagint Controversies

Four hundred years or more after the original translation, the Greek Bible was complete. The Alexandrian translation of the Pentateuch had been supplemented by Greek renditions of the other Old Testament books. The translation had also acquired a name. The versions of the legend now in circulation had deducted a couple of translators from Aristeas's mythical seventy-two, and the work had become known as the Septuagint, meaning seventy in Latin.

The Septuagint's impact on history has been colossal. It is far more than just an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament. Alexander the Great's conquests had led to the dialect of Greek known as *koine* becoming the language of trade, law and culture throughout the ancient Middle East and Asia Minor. The completion of the Septuagint meant that, for the first time, everybody in the Greek-speaking world had access to the foundational

texts both of the Jews and of the new, rapidly expanding Christian faith, which were also circulating in Greek. The Septuagint brought Hebrew ideas and beliefs to the attention of the world.¹⁹ It explained the background to Christianity. It even introduced the one word which has probably changed the course of human history more than any other. It gave the world the word Christ, which is Greek for Messiah. And by extension, the terms Christian and Christianity.²⁰ Without the Septuagint, London and Rome would still be heathen and the scriptures would be no better known than the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.²¹

Aristeas's account of how the Septuagint came into being is nothing more than a fable. But it is still of value. Even if there were not six men from each of twelve tribes, even if the delegation didn't consist of seventy-two envoys, even if there was no delegation from Jerusalem at all, the legend nevertheless provides several important pieces of information. It establishes the probability that the earliest translation of the Bible was made in Alexandria. It implies that this particular translation of the Bible was of such cultural significance that, even a century later, Aristeas felt it worthy of glorification.²² Perhaps most importantly, for the future history of the translated Bible, it tells us that, even in the earliest days, there were important differences between the Hebrew and Greek versions.²³ It was these differences which the account of the miracle attempted to explain away.

By the second century the details of the miracle were no longer able to account for all the differences between the Hebrew and Greek texts. The Septuagint's popularity meant that there were now many copies in existence. They had all been written by hand; this was long before the invention of printing. But scribes can, and do, make mistakes. When a manuscript is copied, so are its errors. And the copying scribe may well introduce further errors of his own. So the inaccuracies multiply. Once the manuscript leaves the scriptorium it falls upon the mercy of assiduous scholars, who may decide to erase and replace something they suspect is incorrect or with which they disagree. Other readers may scribble notes in the margin, which the next copyist can easily mistake for the main body of text. It is not hard to see how hand-written documents, once they have been copied a few times, can end up very different from the original.

Like all frequently copied manuscripts, the Septuagint went through this process of continual corruption. The result was that the Hebrew and Greek bibles diverged ever more widely from each other. The Jews, who had access to the Hebrew text as well as the Greek version, would have spotted the differences sooner; the Christians, who in the main didn't speak Hebrew, had no base text to assess their manuscripts against. It was the differences between the two versions that caused the first round of Septuagint controversies.

For the Jews the Septuagint would always be a translation, an adjunct to the Hebrew original. To the emerging Church, however, the Septuagint represented the essential text of the Old Testament. It was written in a familiar tongue, the very language in which the New Testament had been transcribed. It was natural for the Church to vest the same degree of sanctity in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament, as they did in the New.

Significantly, the Church's adoption of the Septuagint underlined the essential difference, in those early days, between Christianity and the Jewish faith out of which it had been born. Judaism had become an inward-looking religion, demoralized by centuries of Roman occupation, declining economic fortunes and ongoing emigration. Paul's Christianity, in contrast, had a universal ambition; it aspired to bring salvation to the world. It made absolute sense for Christianity to reject the old representation of Scripture, written in the obscure, provincial tongue that only the Jews spoke, and to proclaim the universality of the miraculous new revelation that was the Septuagint, the eternal Bible reincarnated into a language that everyone understood. Throughout history the translated Bible has found itself tangled up in the politics of religion.

One theological dispute in particular cemented the Jews' rejection of the Septuagint and confirmed its authoritative status within the Church. It concerned Isaiah's prophecy about the birth of a child to be named Immanuel.²⁴ Isaiah had described the child's mother using a Hebrew word, *almah*, which is usually translated as 'young woman.' The Septuagint translated it as *parthenos*, or 'virgin'.²⁵ Of course, the Septuagint, written two or three hundred years before Jesus's birth was completely oblivious to the implications of its choice of word. Nevertheless, the apostle Matthew took it as proof that Isaiah had foreseen that a virgin would give birth and that the child she bore would turn out to be the Messiah.²⁶ Matthew, when he quotes this prophecy from

Isaiah, delivers the Septuagint translation, not the original Hebrew. The Jewish religious leaders, who paid little attention to the Septuagint, knew nothing of this. Until they were confronted by Christians seeking to prove that the Hebrew Bible foretold the birth of Jesus. The Septuagint's translation of Isaiah's prophecy led to possibly the most contentious of all interpretative disputes between Christianity and Judaism, one which still reverberates today.

Challenging the Septuagint

From the second century onwards both Jews and Christians became increasingly aware of the discrepancies between the Septuagint and the Hebrew text. Even though each faith regarded its own version as sacred, nobody denied that the Old Testament had originally been written in Hebrew. The Jewish Bible was rooted in antiquity; in debates over authenticity the Septuagint was naturally at a disadvantage. When the Jews challenged its accuracy, the Church robustly rose to its defence. When defence proved ineffective, they went on the attack.

Leading the charge was the Church Father Justin. Writing a century or so after Jesus, Justin was the first to claim the superiority of the Septuagint over the Hebrew version.²⁷ In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, a polemical work in which he disputes Christianity with an imaginary Jewish opponent,²⁸ Justin argues that the discrepancies between the two versions were the result of the Jews doctoring the Hebrew text. He would place no reliance, he insisted, on Trypho's teachers, who had 'taken away many Scriptures from the translations effected by those seventy elders who were with Ptolemy'.²⁹ Justin's attack was a seminal moment, the first occasion in which the still-developing Church expressly distanced itself from the Hebrew Old Testament. Justin's argument set a precedent for theologians of the early Church to maintain that, in all cases of conflict with the Hebrew, it was the Septuagint that ought to be followed.³⁰

Justin was aiming far higher than simply making a point about the mechanics of textual transmission. His argument was that the Jews had 'taken away' scriptures because they had deliberately set out to refute Christianity. Denying the accuracy of the Septuagint was, in Justin's eyes, a Jewish tactic

to undermine Christian belief. As far as he was concerned, the Septuagint was the authentic translation of the original Bible, while the Hebrew version that the Jews of his day were using had been tampered with, so as to erase evidence that supported the Christian view. The 'miracle' which resulted in all seventy translators producing identical versions restored the Bible to its primitive state, eliminating all the errors and falsifications that, so he claimed, the Jews had inserted into the Hebrew text. Justin was so persuaded of this view that he even asserted that when he was in Alexandria he saw the very cells in which the translators carried out their work.³¹

The Jews rejected Justin's allegations, but they too believed the legend of the miracle. Nevertheless, as their theological disputes with Christianity became more strident, their attitude towards the alleged events in Alexandria changed. Jewish sources began to describe the moment that the Septuagint was completed as an occurrence as tragic 'as the day the golden calf was made,'³² a misfortune which caused darkness to fall upon the earth for three days.³³ This rejection of a translation that had in all likelihood been carried out for Jews, by Jews, was, at least in some part, the consequence of what the twentieth-century Anglican theologian, C. F. D. Moule, called 'one of the most remarkable takeover bids in history.'³⁴ When Christianity adopted the Jewish Septuagint as the authoritative text of the Old Testament, the Jews turned their backs on it.

Abandoning the Septuagint was not an option for the many Jews who were unable to read the Hebrew Bible. Greece may have ceased to be a world power but the Greek language was still widely spoken across the Eastern Roman Empire. A Greek Bible was still needed and, if the Septuagint was not up to the task, an alternative would have to be composed, one which reflected more accurately the meaning of the Hebrew text. During the second century, at least three, maybe more, of these works were made.³⁵

The best known of these new translations, although the least well preserved, was made by Aquila. We know very little about him; he lived during the first or second century and some of the early Jewish sources describe him as a convert to Judaism. His name in Hebrew is Aquilas, which frequently led him to become confused with the similar-sounding Onkelos, another Jewish convert who also translated the Bible, but into Aramaic. The early Jewish sources tended to muddle the two of them up, sometimes treating them as the same person,

sometimes not.³⁶ The Christian sources are no more helpful; they either assume that Aquila was a relative of the emperor Hadrian or they equate him with the Aquila in the Acts of the Apostles who was married to Priscilla. There doesn't seem to be any basis for either of these views.

Aquila set out to translate the Hebrew text into Greek as literally as he could. When he finished his translation he made a revised version, to improve its accuracy.³⁷ He'd intended it as a simple Greek alternative to the Septuagint, an everyday Bible for Greek-speaking Jews, but in the febrile religious environment which marked the divergence of Christianity from Judaism, an alternative to the Septuagint could be nothing other than controversial. Aquila's translation offered too easy a way to spot errors in the Septuagint, to give its Jewish critics an opportunity to condemn the accuracy and validity of the Alexandrian text. It became even more controversial in the fourth century when the Christian theologian and Bible commentator Jerome harnessed it to argue for the supremacy of the Hebrew text.³⁸

The second of the three translations was attributed to a man with the relatively common name of Symmachus. Again, his biography is obscure. One theory is that he was based in Caesarea, a cosmopolitan, Roman garrison town on the Mediterranean coast of Israel. The city was populated by Christians, Samaritans and a hellenized Jewish community. Alison Salvesen, in a rigorous and thorough study of the work of this man of whom we know virtually nothing, suggests that his translation may have been made for the benefit of the Greek-speaking Jewish community of that city.³⁹

The third translation is attributed to a man named Theodotion, of whom we know still less, to the point that we are not sure if he really existed.⁴⁰ Like Symmachus, Theodotion was a common name, which has led to a jumble of theories about who he may or may not be. The translation attributed to Theodotion may even have been the work of more than one person. We just don't know.

All three of these translations were made by Jews for Jews, but that didn't stop one senior Christian theologian from feeling deeply offended by them. Epiphanius, the fourth-century Bishop of Salamis in Cyprus, attacked them with as much ire as he could muster. He was convinced that each of the three

translators had wanted to supersede the Septuagint out of nothing more than spite and personal ambition.⁴¹ He attacked the character and integrity of the individual translators personally; he may well have known more about them than we do now. Or he may simply have made up his pejoratives.

Epiphanius described Aquila as a convert to Christianity who was unable to let go of his former idolatrous leanings. Expelled by the Church he became a Jew and wrote his translation with the intention of distorting the words of the Septuagint. As for Symmachus, he had a different, yet equally disruptive agenda. Born and circumcised as a Samaritan, he lusted for power and was enraged by his failure to succeed. He reversed his circumcision (Epiphanius furnishes us with the technical details of how this was done), converted to Judaism, and was re-circumcised. He decided to write his translation in order to pervert the version of the Bible the Samaritans used.⁴² Theodotion on the other hand had been a follower of Marcion, a heretical quasi-Christian. Theodotion eventually grew angry with Marcion's heretical views but instead of turning to Christianity, had himself circumcised and became a Jew.

With the translators' reputations abased, Epiphanius constructed a slippery argument to play what he imagined to be his trump card. Implying that the three translators were collaborating (an assertion for which he had no evidence), he pointed out that each of them came up with a different translation. How, he asked, can their versions be regarded as accurate, when there were only three of them yet they couldn't even agree among themselves? Compare this, he demanded, with the seventy-two Septuagint translators, all of whom came up with identical versions. As far as Epiphanius was concerned, the three Jewish translations offered nothing of value when compared to the Septuagint. Their work was nothing more than the consequence of personal vendettas; hardly even worth bothering about.

Epiphanius lived long after the new Greek translations had been completed. They had been challenging the Septuagint even before he was born. His concern was not whether or not the new translations were accurate; his only interest was to restore the reputation of the Septuagint, to reassert its inerrancy and protect its sanctity. In the eyes of the emerging Church, the Septuagint surpassed the Hebrew original as the truly inspired word of God. Its supremacy

over the three Jewish translations was, for Epiphanius, never in doubt. That did not prevent him from considering the alternative translations offensive.

There was a second factor, nothing at all to do with their theological differences with Christianity, which led the Jews to reject the Septuagint. It is easy for us, living at a time in which the demarcation lines between different religions are more or less clear, to overlook the complexity of a world still struggling to differentiate between the competing claims of different, and not yet fully formed, beliefs. The Jews had a separate complaint against the Septuagint, nothing at all to do with Christianity. It was an internal matter, a difference of outlook between different types of Jews. The argument was a direct consequence of the relationship, or lack of it, between Jewish and Greek society, and consequently, between rabbinic and hellenized Jews.

Once, Greek thought and culture had been instrumental in shaping the way Jews saw the world. It even influenced parts of the Bible itself. The inclusion in the Bible of the so-called 'Wisdom' books, which include Ecclesiastes and Proverbs, is attributed to Hellenistic influences flowing from Alexandria to Jerusalem. But when the Jerusalem Temple was destroyed by the Romans in the year 70, the character of Judaism changed. The priests who had run the Sanctuary were now redundant, and it was the rabbis who were laying the foundations of the new, post-Temple Jewish faith. For them the whole purpose of existence was to obey the divine commandments through closely prescribed modes of behaviour. They took a dim view of Hellenistic life, with its emphasis on art and physical beauty. The Talmud rebukes those Jews who reversed their circumcision in order to compete naked in competitions in the gymnasium.⁴³ Such acts represented the antithesis of everything the rabbis stood for. The Alexandrian Septuagint, created by and for such Greek Jews, was an affront, a perpetual reminder of the Hellenism which rabbinic Judaism was desperate to erase. That is another reason why, as far as the rabbis were concerned, the moment of the Septuagint's composition was a tragedy as great as the day the golden calf was made.

There is yet a third reason, nothing to do with Hellenism; the alleged falsification of texts or the accuracy of translations, which led the Jewish religious authorities to reject the Septuagint. The rise of the rabbis had been the consequence of the first-century victory of the populist Pharisees over the aristocratic, patrician Sadducees. But although acknowledged by the majority

of the Jewish population as their legitimate religious authority, the rabbis feared what might happen should their sacred texts be democratized through translation into other languages. They were concerned at the possibility of the Jews in foreign lands, away from centres of rabbinic teaching, studying the Bible in their own language, not understanding it properly and introducing new, possibly heretical ideas. They worried even more about new, poorly educated translators emerging, who didn't have the skills or knowledge to make accurate translations. Because they hadn't yet come to terms with the idea of the Bible being translated into foreign languages, the rabbis were insistent that, if it was to happen, it was only to take place under their control. That's why there are so few references to the Greek Bible in rabbinic writings. The rabbis' concern was one which surfaces time and again in the controversies over Bible translation; a fear that seizes all ideologues when they sense a threat to their grip on doctrine. It is equally a paranoia that can easily grip autocrats and unelected leaders.

As we will see time and again, religious establishments, which tend to be conservative by nature, dread losing control of the educational agenda, fearing that they will not be able to maintain correct forms of belief and practice as the masses gain access to, and understanding of, the sacred texts.

The First Bible Critic

Epiphanius was not the only one to rise to the Septuagint's defence. As the Church grew in size and influence, the vulnerability of the ancient Alexandrian translation to its new Greek rivals became a matter of concern. By the fourth century, the works of 'the Three'; Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion; were subjected to attack by some of the most prominent Christian thinkers of the age.

John, Archbishop of Constantinople, was nicknamed Chrysostom, or Golden Mouth, because of his formidable and outspoken oratory. He was not the only person of his era to be awarded the sobriquet⁴⁴ but, as the foremost exponent of macrologia or long-winded rhetoric, it is he to whom the name has stuck. John Chrysostom cast scorn upon the 'Three', comparing what he considered to be their impure intentions with the integrity of the earlier translators in Alexandria. The Septuagint, he argued, had been written before

Christianity; it therefore was, of necessity, free from anti-Christian bias. On the other hand, Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion had all produced their translations after the birth of Christianity, and they had done so as a reaction to the alleged inadequacies of the Septuagint. They had set out, said Chrysostom, to deliberately discredit Christianity.⁴⁵

At the other end of the Mediterranean, in the town of Hippo in Algeria, the theologian Augustine was advancing similar views. St Augustine, as he would become, felt that the translators' isolation from each other in Alexandria was sufficient proof of the Septuagint's infallibility. He asserted that the Jews had falsified their Hebrew original to prevent the truth being known to other nations. However, he claimed, they didn't get away with it because the Spirit which rested on the seventy translators restored the text to its original meaning, to the sense it had been imbued with before the Jews tampered with it.⁴⁶ This, Augustine asserted, had happened in order to offer salvation to the nations.⁴⁷

We have seen that the Jews' rejection of the Septuagint was not exclusively due to Christian accusations. Similarly, the robustness with which Augustine and Chrysostom defended it was not solely because of the Jews. A debate was hotting up within the Church itself, between those who upheld the inerrancy of the Septuagint and those who were prepared to accept the argument that it had indeed become corrupted over time.

The argument had started a century earlier, shortly after the year 230. Once again, the seeds were sown in Alexandria where the Roman emperor Severus had launched a wave of persecution against Christians. On hearing that his father had been captured and imprisoned, Origen, a pious, teenage ascetic, decided that his only viable recourse was to consecrate himself as a martyr. We don't know what heroics he had in mind, we only have the story from the fourth-century historian Eusebius of Caesarea. We do know that his plans were thwarted when his mother hid his clothes. The prospect of naked self-sacrifice brought Origen to his senses. But not for long. When he read the verse in Matthew about 'those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven'⁴⁸ his religious zeal got the better of him. He castrated himself, or at least that is what Eusebius tells us he did.⁴⁹

The local bishop, Demetrius, heard about the pious young ascetic and took him under his wing. But as Origen's reputation and popularity grew, Demetrius,

a man of far lesser status, grew ever more jealous. Matters came to a head when Origen was invited to preach in Caesarea, the Roman garrison town in Judea. While he was there the local bishop ordained him into the priesthood. This further piqued Demetrius, who considered that Caesarea had hijacked his own local talent. He rounded on Origen, accused him of heretical preaching and had him condemned by a synod, fatally damaging his career prospects in Alexandria. Fortunately for Origen the condemnation fell on deaf ears everywhere else. He gave up any hope of returning home and continued his career in Caesarea.

Origen's great passion was the Bible. He wrote commentaries on much of it and, although most of what he wrote is now lost, we know that he occasionally wrote more than one commentary on certain books. Unusually for his time, he didn't cocoon himself in his own religious environment; third-century Caesarea was a centre of vibrant Jewish as well as Christian scholarship and Origen was more than willing to engage with rabbinic scholars, even incorporating some of their ideas into his own thinking. He even learned Hebrew, although perhaps not as successfully as he may have wished. He spotted differences between the Septuagint and the Hebrew text. He also noticed discrepancies between the various Septuagint manuscripts that he had.⁵⁰ But although he was aware of the new translations by the 'Three' he was not prepared to reject the Septuagint in favour of any one of them. Discrepancies or not, he was an orthodox thinker who accepted the Septuagint as the Church's authoritative text. He was also an Alexandrian. Unlike his bishop, he wouldn't turn his back on the product of his home town. He wasn't prepared to abandon the Septuagint. He did, however, want to get rid of its errors.

Origen embarked on a major project of literary analysis. Nowadays, when scholars try to get back to the original version of an ancient text that exists in various recensions, they reproduce the edition they consider the most reliable and at the bottom of the page they note the variations found in other manuscripts. Origen went one better than this. He drew six vertical columns and placed a version of the Old Testament in each. The left-hand column contained the original Hebrew text. The next was the same, written in Greek characters rather than Hebrew. In the adjoining two columns he inscribed the translations of Aquila and Symmachus. The Septuagint was in the fifth column and finally the translation attributed to Theodotion. He devised a series of

symbols which he added to the Septuagint column, highlighting where it differed from the Hebrew original. Origen called his whole work the *Hexapla*.

The *Hexapla*'s structure made it easy to use. Its six columns were arranged so that each horizontal line contained only one or two Hebrew words together with their various Greek equivalents. This made cross-referencing very easy. Anyone who wanted to clarify the reading in the Septuagint, or to find the best Greek word to represent the Hebrew, could scan across the columns to compare the different versions.

The *Hexapla* was a phenomenal work. It had one serious drawback. The Old Testament is a lengthy document. The *Hexapla* was six times as long. Origen's work was so vast that it could only realistically be used as a reference work in a library. The idea of having a personal copy, even for those few people who could both read and afford one, was completely unrealistic. Origen did make a smaller, four-column version containing the versions most likely to be used by Christians. But the complete *Hexapla* itself was hardly ever copied, indeed it may never even have been copied at all.

Origen's original manuscript was stored in the library of Pamphilus in Caesarea. It was destroyed in 638 when the city fell to Saracen invaders. Only a few fragments have survived.⁵¹

Origen was a controversial theologian; he was condemned as a heretic long after his death. Even before then, while his reputation remained relatively intact, Origen's rigorous scholarship was not universally appreciated. Those who believed that the Septuagint was a divinely inspired text resented his attempts to compare or harmonize it with the Hebrew. Both John Chrysostom and Augustine, each born a century after Origen had carried out his work, continued to defend the Septuagint. Despite its academic value, the *Hexapla* never seriously challenged the status of the Alexandrian translation as the Church's official text. But the version of the Septuagint which Origen placed in his first column was used as the master copy when the emperor Constantine commissioned his scribes to provide fifty major churches in the Roman Empire with their own copy of the Bible.⁵²

In the end it wasn't so much scholarship that did for the Septuagint, rather the vagaries of passing time. Greek's dominance as an international language was drawing to an end; in the Western Empire Latin had taken over as the new

standard. The Septuagint may have been revered, but it was used less and less. By the time Christianity had spread across Europe the Septuagint was, in all but name, effectively redundant. No Christian denied its divine inspiration. Still, they preferred to read the Bible in a language they understood: Latin.

But the Latin Bible was not yet on the stage. While the Septuagint was declining in popularity, the belief in one God was nevertheless spreading rapidly. Across the East, both Christianity and Judaism were putting down roots in locations where neither Greek, Hebrew nor even Latin were the vernacular. New translations of the Bible were appearing in these places. Unlike the Septuagint they were not the cause of controversy. Yet, when we look at them carefully we can see that they often emerged from communities which were deeply split and traumatized.

The new levantine translations symbolized the essential differences between East and West. They mark the moment when monotheistic belief began to evolve separately in Europe and Asia along divergent trajectories.