

REGENT COLLEGE

THE SAINT AND THE SEPTUAGINT: AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO'S PERSPECTIVE ON
THE GREEK OLD TESTAMENT TRANSLATED BY THE SEVENTY

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Introduction

Augustine of Hippo stands as a giant in the history of the Church and his influence remains incalculable. Indeed, over a millennium after his death, Augustine's impact is clearly seen in the Reformation, exemplified by John Calvin's many references to him throughout the *Institutes*. He is also unique in his appeal to both Protestants and Roman Catholics.¹ Perhaps the simplest description we can give of this great man is that he is "significant" – the term used for him in the introduction to an entire encyclopedia dedicated to tracing his life, thought and influence.²

Likewise, many have recognized the importance of the Septuagint (LXX), especially in the early church. This work derives its name from the supposed "seventy" Jewish men who translated the Pentateuch from Hebrew into Greek in the third century BC. However, the term is usually used in a broader sense to refer to a particular collection of the entire Greek Old Testament (including certain apocryphal books).³ Its importance lies in the fact that it was "the Bible of most Christians during the first centuries of the church."⁴ Indeed, Law believes that "Christianity is indebted to the Septuagint," not least because early Christian theology was so heavily influenced by it, even in comparison to the Hebrew text.⁵

Thus, a noteworthy study reveals itself in asking how these two remarkable features of the early church relate to one another. Considering Augustine's innumerable quotations, citations,

¹ Timothy Michael Law, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 161.

² Allan D. Fitzgerald, "Introduction", in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*.

³ Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵ Law, *When God Spoke Greek*, 5-6.

and allusions to the Old Testament Scriptures, understanding his beliefs about the LXX is essential to understanding the man himself and his historical context.

In light of this, this study will begin by determining what exactly Augustine's beliefs about the LXX were, and how they developed, before seeking to understand what caused or influenced these beliefs, and will finish by seeking to reflect upon the significance this holds.

The Content of Augustine's Beliefs About the LXX

The earliest explicit reference Augustine makes to the LXX is in a letter written to Jerome in 394 or 395 AD.⁶ (Although, even before this, his use of the LXX is seen in the form of his Old Testament quotations.)⁷ The contents of this letter demonstrate that Augustine had a high regard for the LXX, stating that its "authority is worthy of highest esteem" (*Epistulae* 28.2.2). Again, he asserts that "beyond question, very high authority" must be attributed to the seventy translators (*Ep.* 28.2.2). The first reason he gives for this is that the translators knew the Hebrew language well, indicating he followed the commonly held belief that the LXX aligned closely with the Hebrew text.⁸ The second reason for his confidence in its authority is that the seventy had a "harmony in mind and spirit, surpassing that which is found in even one man" (*Ep.* 28.2.2). This possibly alludes to the story of the production of the LXX found in the *Letter of Aristeas*, which describes the seventy translating the work individually and then, after coming back together,

⁶ Dates and quotations throughout this paper are taken from: Philip Schaff, ed., *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, 14 vols. (Buffalo: Christian Literature Company, 1886-1889).

⁷ See footnotes throughout: Schaff, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*.

⁸ Edmon L. Gallagher, "Augustine on the Hebrew Bible," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 67, no.1 (April 2016): 101.

discovering that all of their translations were identical. In light of this, Augustine questions the usefulness of Jerome translating from the Hebrew and appeals to him not to forget the authority of the LXX. Thus begins Augustine's correspondence to Jerome, which in all likelihood was never intended to be private but the start of a form of public discourse for others to read.⁹

A few years later, at around 397, Augustine wrote the first three books of *On Christian Doctrine*. Here, Augustine states that the Old Testament canon of Scripture includes books found in the LXX (*De doctrina Christiana* 2.8.13). He then states that knowledge of Greek and Hebrew is necessary to help understand ambiguities (*De doct. Christ.* 2.11.16) and later gives an example of the importance of knowing the languages by appealing to the Greek of the LXX to correct a Latin mistranslation of Psalm 139:16 (*De doct. Christ.* 3.3.7). However, the Hebrew, which Augustine does not acknowledge, has a different reading than both the Latin and the LXX. Thus, in practice, Augustine demonstrates a preference for the LXX over the Hebrew text. He then goes on to state that "if" any differences were found between the LXX and the Hebrew, it would be the result of the Holy Spirit preparing the way for Christ by providing a translation suitable for the gentiles (*De doct. Christ.* 2.15.22). He makes explicit reference to the story of the LXX's production found in the *Letter of Aristeas* and seems to believe it, though Gallagher rightly notes that he does not seem as confident about this as in later writings.¹⁰ Once again he insists that "the authority of the Septuagint is pre-eminent" and that the preferred Latin translation is the *Itala*, which is based on the LXX¹¹ (*De doct. Christ.* 2.15.22).

⁹ Law, *When God Spoke Greek*, 163.

¹⁰ Gallagher, "Augustine on the Hebrew Bible," 100-101.

¹¹ Law, *When God Spoke Greek*, 163.

In 403, Augustine and Jerome's correspondence finally progresses, and Augustine remarks that it would be more beneficial to translate the LXX, rather than the Hebrew, into Latin (*Epistulae* 71.2.4). He then states that the LXX has great authority because it was used by many people, most importantly the New Testament authors ("apostles").

In Augustine's final letter to Jerome, in 405, he is now convinced of the usefulness of translating from the Hebrew (*Epistulae* 82.5.34). Despite this, Augustine believes it is necessary to reject the public reading of a Hebrew translation if it risks causing some to oppose the authority of the LXX, since the authority of the LXX is demonstrated by the apostles approval of it (*Ep.* 82.5.35).

In 409, Augustine admits he has no knowledge of Hebrew, despite his insistence of its importance (*Epistulae* 101.3).

Around 426, Augustine finishes the fourth book of *On Christian Doctrine*. Here, he states that he believes the LXX translators, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, changed the plain meaning of the Hebrew text to a more "spiritual" reading (*De doctrina Christiana* 4.7.15). He now also speaks highly of Jerome.

At around the same time, Augustine writes certain chapters of the *City of God*, which includes his most extensive discussion on the LXX. Importantly, his understanding of the differences between the Hebrew and LXX texts has matured. He states that the seventy translators "received the Spirit of prophecy" and therefore any alterations from the Hebrew were "divinely dictated" (*De civitate Dei* 15.23.3). He is also now completely confident in the story found in the *Letter of Aristeas*.¹² He describes the authority of the LXX "not as human but

¹² Annemaré Kotzé, "Augustine, Jerome and The Septuagint," in *Septuagint and Reception*, ed. Johann Cook (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 250.

divine” and believes it was willed by God “for the benefit of the nations who should at some time believe, as we now see them doing” (*De civ. D.* 18.42.1). Additionally, the authority of LXX is shown by its widespread acceptance in the Church (*De civ. D.* 18.43.1). He then claims that the differences found between the Hebrew and LXX can be harmonized, even if only allegorically, and since the New Testament authors quoted the Hebrew and the LXX then both should be regarded as authoritative (*De civ. D.* 18.44.1). In light of this, Kato is incorrect when he states Augustine believed the LXX was more authoritative than the Hebrew text.¹³ Even Jobes may have failed to take into account the extent of Augustine’s development when she comments that the Hebrew seems to have had only secondary relevance for him.¹⁴

In summary, Augustine’s high confidence in the authority of the LXX remained consistent over his life. Nevertheless, his thought did develop in a couple of areas. First, he grew to understand how extensively the Hebrew and LXX texts differed to one another, and responded by developing a complex theology that centred around both texts being equally authoritative and inspired but intended for different purposes. Second, Augustine has more confidence that the story of the LXX’s production found in the *Letter of Aristeas* is true.

The Causes of Augustine’s Beliefs About the LXX

Augustine states his conviction that the LXX is authoritative is based upon three reasons.

These are his beliefs that: the New Testament authors’s use of the LXX indicated they accepted

¹³ Teppei Kato, “Greek or Hebrew? Augustine and Jerome on Biblical Translation,” in *Studia Patristica XCVIII: Papers presented at the Seventeenth International Conference on Patristic Studies held in Oxford 2015, Volume 24: St. Augustine and His Opponents*, ed. M. Vincent (Leuven: Peeters, 2017) 116.

¹⁴ Karen H. Jobes, “When God Spoke Greek: The Place of the Greek Bible in Evangelical Theology,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 16, no.2 (2006): 227.

its complete authority, the LXX had become widely accepted in the Church as being authoritative, and the LXX was produced under the guidance of the Holy Spirit as demonstrated by the supernatural means of its composition.¹⁵

However, a more pertinent historical study is to uncover other possible reasons for Augustine's views, which he does not explicitly discuss, including influences by others and his contemporary situation. When we take such an approach, we find that three likely influences are: Ambrose of Milan, Jerome, and Augustine's own concern for unity, in light of heresies and possible divisions among the churches. (Noteworthy, despite much attention given to the second of these influences, little attention has been given to the first and third regarding their influence on Augustine's beliefs about the LXX.)

First, Ambrose, Bishop of Milan, was of utmost importance in Augustine's life and spiritual development, as demonstrated by Augustine's own references to him. He states in his *Confessions* that Ambrose received him like a son and that he, in turn, came to love the Bishop (*Confessions* 5.13.23). He also recounts how he learned the true Christian faith from listening to Ambrose and following his directions to read Scripture (*Conf.* 6). Additionally, in a letter to Casulanus, Augustine even recollects how Ambrose was the one to baptize him (*Epistulae* 36.14.32). Therefore, the influence of Ambrose on Augustine cannot be overlooked or underestimated. When we draw our attention to the subject of analysis at hand several of Ambrose's practices and beliefs are notable. These include his attempts to harmonize the LXX

¹⁵ These three reasons are also correctly identified by Gallagher, in: Gallagher, "Augustine on the Hebrew Bible," 108.

with the Hebrew,¹⁶ neglect of the Hebrew language,¹⁷ belief that the LXX is more in line with Church doctrine,¹⁸ and his preference for Greek manuscripts.¹⁹ In turn, each of these has parallels in Augustine's own approach and work, as noted above. Despite this, there are points of divergence as Augustine's views seem to have developed. One example is demonstrated by his explicit remarks on the LXX's authority *in contrast* to other Greek translations (*De civitate Dei* 18.43.1), whose readings Ambrose occasionally preferred over the LXX.²⁰ However, this does not diminish the significance of the aforementioned parallels.

Second, Jerome, best known for his work in translating the Latin *Vulgate*, can be understood to have influenced Augustine's perspective on the LXX as demonstrated through their correspondence. As shown above, Augustine and Jerome significantly disagreed at first. However, in his third letter, Augustine states he now understands the benefits to translating from the Hebrew, specifically stating that Jerome himself has convinced him (*Epistulae* 82.5.34). Jerome's main contribution seems to be that he forced Augustine to grapple with the extent, in both quantity and quality, of the differences between the Hebrew and LXX texts. Before this, Augustine seems to have believed that the LXX translation adheres closely to the Hebrew text.²¹ However, as a result of Jerome's challenges, Augustine had to develop his understanding of the type of translation the LXX was. This explains his complex theology of the LXX as laid out in

¹⁶ Vít Hušek, "The True Text: Ambrose, Jerome, and Ambrosiaster on the Variety of Biblical Versions," in *The Process of Authority: The Dynamics in Transmission and Reception of Canonical Texts*, eds. Jan Dušek and Jan Roskovec (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 320.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 319.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 321.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 323.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 320.

²¹ Gallagher, "Augustine on the Hebrew Bible," 101.

the *City of God* chapter 18. Despite this, Augustine was not convinced of certain aspects of Jerome's arguments. For example, contrary to Jerome's contempt for the supposed origin of the LXX as found in the *Letter of Aristeas*,²² Augustine becomes even more convinced of this story's truthfulness. Furthermore, Augustine still retains his belief in the authority of the LXX throughout his life. Thus, Jerome's influence on Augustine seems to have been limited to instilling a greater respect for the Hebrew and a better understanding of the relationship between the Hebrew and LXX texts.

Third, Augustine's concern for the unity of the Church could have played a part in forming his perspective on the LXX. Throughout his life he engaged in polemics with three major groups: the Manichees, the Pelagians, and the Donatists.²³ Thus, through his many writings, he demonstrated continual concern with heresy and schism as well as a desire for the unity of the Church.²⁴ Particularly notable is the Manichean heresy, since Augustine was intimately aware of this danger, being himself a Manichean earlier in life (*Confessions* 3-5). Significantly, a major belief of this heresy was its rejection of the Old Testament as "crude and repulsive".²⁵ Thus, after converting to orthodoxy and realizing the importance of the Old Testament Scriptures, Augustine would have understood how crucial it was for other believers to accept these texts and knew what could happen when the Church became detached from them. This correlates well with Augustine's concerns as shown in his writings. He writes to Jerome that his objection to his

²² Philip Burton, "Augustine and Language," in *A Companion to Augustine*, eds. Mark Vessey and Shelley Reid (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 117.

²³ G. R. Evans, "Heresy, Schism," in *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 425.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 424.

²⁵ T. Kermit Scott, *Augustine: His Thought in Context* (New York: Paulist Press, 1995), 75.

Hebrew translation being read in the churches was in case “we should trouble by serious cause of offence the flocks of Christ” (*Epistulae* 82.5.35). Even earlier than this, he recounts a story to Jerome about a Bishop reading to his church from his translation and, when it disagreed with the LXX, it causing great distress among the congregation (*Ep.* 71.3.5). Therefore, Augustine could have believed that since the LXX was already widely accepted among the churches it would be beneficial to have this as a standard text among all. This would avoid the danger of confusion among believers, which another translation could cause and which in turn could lead to the churches neglecting the Old Testament. Another danger faced was the possibility that not having the LXX as the standard text might fuel further division between the Eastern and Western parts of the Church.²⁶ Whereas by advocating the authority and universal acceptance of the LXX Augustine could hope to avoid this. As Ziegler rightly summarizes, Augustine desired “theological unity [among] the fractious churches of the Ancient Mediterranean world.”²⁷ In short, Augustine displays a deep concern for the unity of the Church in the face of heresies and divisions which, in turn, displayed itself in his strong appeal for the universal use of the LXX.

The Significance of Augustine’s Beliefs About the LXX

Finally, we may conclude by reflecting upon the significance of Augustine’s beliefs about the LXX. Two observations that arise from this are that Augustine was both a man of his times as well as an incredibly unique individual.

²⁶ Gallagher, “Augustine on the Hebrew Bible,” 112; Kotzé, “Augustine, Jerome and The Septuagint,” 257.

²⁷ Robert A. Ziegler, “Augustine of Hippo’s Doctrine of Scripture: Christian Exegesis in Late Antiquity,” *Primary Source* 5, no.2 (Spring 2015): 34.

As demonstrated, Augustine was clearly influenced by the figures and situations of the period in which he lived, and in preferring the LXX he followed the common pattern among the Latin-speaking Church Fathers.²⁸ Likewise, his concern for the unity of the Church took into account the particular dangers of his time, such as the proliferation of heresies. In contrast to heterodox groups, Augustine stands in the tradition of orthodoxy through his recognition of the Old Testament as “sacred Scripture”,²⁹ demonstrated by the high value he places on the LXX.

However, Augustine was not simply the sum total of his experiences. His correspondence with Jerome shows his ability to learn from others but then form his own theology. It is this creativity which is demonstrated throughout much of Augustine’s writings and has, in turn, led to his lasting influence throughout the history of the Church.

We may disagree with Augustine’s particular understanding of the LXX but there is still much to learn from him. His concern for unity echoes the Apostle Paul’s own words as he appeals to the Corinthian church to have “no divisions” among themselves and instead to be “perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Cor 1:10, NIV). This was Augustine’s hope for the universal Church and the goal toward which he strived.

²⁸ Kotzé, "Augustine, Jerome and The Septuagint," 246.

²⁹ Larry W. Hurtado, *The Earliest Christian Artifacts: Manuscripts and Christian Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 29.

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