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The Greek Old Testament as Christian Scripture

Review of T.M. Law's When God Spoke

Citation for published version:

Adams, S 2014, 'The Greek Old Testament as Christian Scripture: Review of T.M. Law's When God Spoke', *Expository Times*, vol. 125, no. 9, pp. 440-441. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524614524146>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/0014524614524146](https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524614524146)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Expository Times

Publisher Rights Statement:

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Timothy Michael Law, *When God Spoke Greek: The Septuagint and the Making of the Christian Bible*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. iv + 216. Hardcover. £64.00. ISBN 9780199781713.

Although the Septuagint (henceforth LXX) has long been recognised as an important element of Old and New Testament scholarship, it has only recently begun to be understood on its own terms and not merely as a tool for Hebrew Bible textual criticism or studies of the use of Old Testament texts in New Testament documents. Timothy Michael Law is an emerging voice in this field, and his book, *When God Spoke Greek*, implores his readers to adopt a new perspective on the LXX and to see it as an integral component of the early church and as the scriptural text of New Testament authors.

The book commences with an explanatory plea that outlines its rationale and identifies four important reasons for reading the work (pp. 4-7). First, the LXX sheds light on the development of Jewish thought between the third century BCE and the first century CE; second, the form of scripture used by the New Testament authors and the early church was most often the LXX; third, not only did most of the earliest Christians use the LXX, but their theology was explicitly shaped by it and not the Hebrew Bible; and fourth, the LXX often preserves a witness to an alternate, sometimes older, form of the Hebrew text. These reasons are unpacked and accompanied by needed definitional discussions.

The first part of the work provides a general introduction to the topic of the LXX. Chapter two supplies an overview of Greek history, focusing on the conquests of Alexander and the corresponding spread of the Greek language. Chapter three argues that there were many forms of the Hebrew Scriptures, as is witnessed by the multiple versions of several biblical books at Qumran. The differences between these versions, moreover, are significant, particularly for the books of 1 Samuel, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. The next chapter introduces the reader to the many theories attempting to explain why the LXX came into being and discusses the content and influence of the ancient Jewish work, *The Letter of Aristeas*. Chapters five and six provide an overview of notable LXX translation differences from the Hebrew and apocryphal texts, respectively. This is followed by a chapter that wrestles with the concept of canon in light of the diversity of Hebrew text forms and the variety of Greek recensions.

Chapters eight and nine look at the Septuagint's influence on and use in the New Testament documents. In the former chapter Law looks at the LXX behind the New Testament, identifying phrases and words—'son of man', 'virgin', 'Lord', and 'Christ'—that shaped the theology of New Testament writers. In the latter chapter Law focuses on Old Testament citations and the debate over which source text (Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic) was used. Here Law presents the dominant scholarly view that the Greek versions, and not the Hebrew, were the primary texts from which New Testament authors took their citations.

In Chapters ten to thirteen Law leaves the world of the New Testament behind and discusses the role of the LXX in the early church. This section opens with a look at the differences between the concepts of 'scripture' and 'canon'. This is arguably the best chapter of the book and provides an interesting and needed discussion of the gradual development of the canon, the value and weaknesses of canon lists, and the place of so-called 'fringe' books within the early church. The subsequent three chapters outline the role of the LXX in the first four centuries of the church by focusing on how key theologians (e.g., Origen, Eusebius, Jerome, among others) used the LXX and were influenced by it. The work concludes with a brief postscript and is followed by a list of suggested further readings and a subject index.

Turning now to the evaluation of the work, it is clear that this book is not written primarily for biblical scholars, but rather addresses the perceived needs of the educated lay person, pastor, student, or interested non-specialist. This is exemplified by the basic content

of most of the chapters that provide foundational material that could readily be assumed for more advanced readers (e.g., the brief overview of Greek history in chapter two). Law's stated aim—'to take what is already known and to explain it more clearly to those who are interested in the history of the Bible and in its use in the early centuries of the Christian Church but who may never have considered the Septuagint's role in that story' (p. 4)—is laudable in that he seeks to make the findings of scholarship accessible to the wider public. In light of this aim the nuances of scholarly discussion have been generalised so as to not overwhelm the reader and the material is presented clearly with the avoidance of jargon.

Although unstated for a majority of the work, Law finally shows his hand in the postscript regarding which group(s) he was primarily directing his message. Specifically calling out conservative institutions of Christian learning (both church and academy), Law laments the clear bias shown for the Hebrew Bible and the relegating of the LXX to 'a secondary or tertiary subject' (pp. 168-69). This is not to say that Law does not see value in the study of the Hebrew Bible (on the contrary); rather, Law seeks to help his readers recognise that, as the Scriptures for the earliest Christian writers, the LXX needs to be a vital component of theological education.

Law associates this emphasis on the Hebrew text with the fixation of some modern Christians on the 'original text', something he calls a 'distinctively modern theological anxiety' (p. 168). To combat this perspective Law stresses the diversity of manuscripts and text-forms in the Hellenistic and early Roman eras throughout his work. This is an important point to highlight, particularly to those who might not be aware of this perspective within the scholarly guild. This emphasis is a real strength of the book, though occasionally Law appears to downplay the amount of consistency among manuscripts (particularly those that would later become the Masoretic text) often asserting that there are likely many more versions of which we are not aware. For example, Law imagines 'numerous revisions happening all over Palestine and maybe all around the Mediterranean world, wherever Jews were reading the Greek Scriptures' (p. 78) or the 'dizzying variety of textual forms' (p. 86). Law is no doubt correct when he claims that there were more revisions than we are currently aware of; however, Law does not fully define what he means specifically by 'revisions' or 'text forms'. The context of the above statements suggests that they are comparable to those of Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion. If this is what is being suggested, I think that Law exaggerates, possibly to underline his point.

Overall, this book highlights an important field of study, one that is often underappreciated in both the academy and in religious institutions. It is easy to read, and could readily be used as an introductory text to outline the importance and role of the LXX. Its message, moreover, is an important one and warrants wide consideration.

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