

Bibles That Changed the World

The Bodmer Psalms



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The Bodmer Psalms

INTRODUCTION

If you were to ask people what their favorite part of the Old Testament is, inevitably many will say, “The Psalms.” The Psalms are a guide for those who worship the God of the Bible when they desire to praise him, to petition him, to cry out to him, to thank him, even to question him. They offer a vast array of human emotions in poems, songs, and prayers for both personal and corporate worship. The book of Psalms — also called the Psalter — reminds its readers that all of life is to be lived *coram Deo*, “before the face of God.” It invites those who sing its songs and pray its prayers to a life of honest and wise relationship with God, with themselves, and with their community.

Like nearly all books of the Old Testament, the Psalms were originally written in Hebrew. But a Greek translation of the Old Testament, sometimes called the Septuagint, brought them to life for a whole new audience. And today, we can experience these beautiful words in the ancient Greek manuscript known as the Bodmer Psalms.

EXAMINING THE ARTIFACT

As we examine the Bodmer Psalms, we’ll consider four related topics starting with the artifact itself. What do we know about this manuscript and its use in antiquity?

The *Bodmer Psalms* was named for Swiss collector Martin Bodmer, who purchased the artifact in 1952. It was produced somewhere in Egypt in either the 3rd or early 4th century A.D. Unfortunately, it was not from an official archaeological dig, so we know very little of its discovery. One credible theory, based on other manuscripts associated with it, is that the *Bodmer Psalms* was once part of the collection of a monastery in Pabau, Egypt, near Dishna — a settlement on the bank of the Nile. In 1952, an antiquities dealer is said to have bought the collection from Egyptian peasants and then sold it — at a great profit — to Martin Bodmer.

The manuscript remained under the care of the Bodmer Library until 2010. At that time, the document was privately purchased by the Green Collection in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. And in 2012, the Green family donated it to Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C., where we can see it today.

The *Bodmer Psalms* is an ancient book of Psalms, written on papyrus in Old Greek. Biblical scholars often use the term “Old Greek” to refer to the earliest Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible. Of course, the translation of different books of the Bible into Greek was done over many centuries by different translators, so there’s a lot of variety in Old Greek.

As was common for scriptural books used by Christians in the 3rd or early 4th century, the *Bodmer Psalms* is a codex — a folded book — instead of a scroll. It initially

had 168 pages of Psalms, with some material on the front and back acting as guard pages to prevent wear, and a protective cover.

Being a book of Psalms in the Greek tradition, this manuscript originally contained 151 psalms, not the 150 we're accustomed to seeing. Psalm 151 gives details of David's life and claims to be written by David himself. However, it isn't found in the Hebrew Masoretic text — the text from which the majority of our modern English and Hebrew Bibles have been translated. So, most Christian and Jewish scholars don't consider it part of the biblical canon. Still, based on the type of Greek used, this additional psalm almost certainly would have been included in this manuscript.

Today, the *Bodmer Psalms* manuscript is fragmentary, but still in remarkable condition. Of the original 42 folios — or folded sheets of papyrus — 34 remain in varying degrees of preservation. These surviving folios contain text from Psalms 18 through 119. Some pages are almost entirely complete, while others are so fragmentary that only a few words are legible. As a general rule, the closer a page was to the center of the book, the better preserved it is, although there are some exceptions. Most of the damage likely came from having been in the ground for centuries, while some deterioration could have come through its use in antiquity.

If, as many scholars believe, this manuscript came from the collection of the monastery at Pabau, it's likely that it would have been used regularly in worship services. And while we can't know for certain, there's evidence in its punctuation and headings of specific ways this Psalter may have facilitated public worship.

First, most Greek texts in antiquity were written in what we would think of today as all capital letters, with no spaces or punctuation marks between words. Naturally, this made new or unknown texts difficult to read. And for a book of songs and poetry, like the Psalms, this made it especially tricky. One solution was to write the psalms in poetic form with line breaks, but that took up a lot of space and was expensive. We don't see this method used in the *Bodmer Psalms*. Instead, the scribes added colon-shaped punctuation where line breaks would have gone. This punctuation suggests that the scribes who copied the *Bodmer Psalms* had some concern for making the psalms easier to sing. Beyond this, we see additional punctuation marks which, as far as we can tell, don't correspond to any line breaks or grammatical divisions. But some scholars believe these seemingly random marks might reflect pauses in the traditional chanting.

While the Hebrew Psalms were originally recited and sung in the style of ancient Israelite worship, the Greek translation of the Bodmer Psalms was to be chanted, recited, even sung in the style of worship in the 3rd or 4th century A.D. And for this reason, a number of special markings or punctuations appear in the Bodmer Psalms that were probably designed to guide the leader of worship as he chanted or sang the Psalms himself or as he led others in singing and chanting of the Psalms in worship.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Second, certain psalms in this manuscript are given a significant amount of introductory space. The normal concern of a scribe, unless being paid lavishly, was

economy of space. And yet, contrary to normal scribal practices, at certain points in the manuscript, a comparatively large amount of space is left between psalms. At times we might explain this extra space by the length of the psalm's superscription, or title, such as "A Psalm of David" in Psalms 23, 29, 101 and others. However, at other times this can't be the case. Instead, it's possible that these generously spaced headings may have drawn attention to the songs that were used most frequently or on particular holy days, making them easier to find when leafing through the manuscript.

Although we don't fully know the liturgical calendar or practices of the Egyptian church in the 3rd or 4th centuries, the *Bodmer Psalms* offers a glimpse into the worship and practices of the community that possessed it. And, beyond this, it offers a glimpse into the Greek translation of the whole Hebrew Bible.

THE SEPTUAGINT

We've seen that the Bodmer Psalms is a manuscript of the Greek Psalms, which are sometimes called the "Septuagint Psalms." So, we should take some time to consider the Septuagint. What is it, and how did it get its name?

Sometime between the mid-3rd and the mid-to-late-2nd century B.C., Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek. Nearly all accounts of this translation mention only the first five books, known collectively as the Torah or the Pentateuch. So, the details of how and when the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, including the Psalms, were translated into Greek are not as clear as we might hope. However, scholars generally agree that the remaining biblical books were translated at different times by a variety of translators or groups of translators. Certainly, the entire Old Testament was available in Greek by the time of the New Testament.

Today, the early Greek translations of the Old Testament are commonly referred to as the "Septuagint." This name comes from the Latin word *septuaginta*, or "seventy," and refers to a legend about the Torah's translation into Greek by 70 or 72 Jewish scholars.

The Septuagint gets name from a story that the Egyptian king in the 3rd century B.C. wanted to add to his collection, so he sent to Jerusalem and requested that some people come and translate the Bible. So, they sent 72 scholars — six from each tribe — who met in Egypt to translate the Hebrew into Greek for this Egyptian king. The story is a bit of a legend. We know that if only because of the details it includes about 72 scholars each translating on their own and comparing their work at the end of the day. And it all agreed with one another. I know if you put two translators, you're liable to get three options at the end of the day and certainly not agreement all the way through. So, we know it's legendary, but it is the source of the name and does give us some idea of the value that the people felt for the Septuagint, they wanted to kind of authorize why it had the important

role it did for them. And so, the legend was a little bit of a way of building a backstory for the creation of the Septuagint.

— Dr. Michael William Holmes

Based on the story of the Jewish scholars, the name “Septuagint” technically does not apply to biblical books other than the Torah. Still, scholars and publishers commonly use the name to refer to the Greek translation of the whole Old Testament. But no matter what we call it, this translation dramatically transformed the way people read and studied the Bible.

By the 3rd century B.C., many Jews in the Diaspora — those who had lived outside Israel for generations — were no longer able to speak or read Hebrew fluently. Even highly educated Jews in the centers of Hellenistic Jewish life, like Philo of Alexandria, often had a weak grasp of Hebrew. But many of these displaced Jews still wanted to understand their Scriptures and to preserve their unique identity. So, when the Greek translation appeared, it spread throughout the Mediterranean world. Eventually, it became the most commonly used version of the Scriptures among Jews outside Israel. It also became popular among Jews *in* Israel, and it was the most commonly used Bible version in the early Christian church.

As with Bible translations today, some people in antiquity found the Septuagint either too literal or not literal enough, either too close to the Hebrew to be good Greek, or too Greek to be a good reflection of the Hebrew. Because of this, some scholars, such as Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion, made their own translations of the Hebrew Bible to suit their own standards and preferences. In most cases, these competing translations were lost, and are preserved today only in the fragmentary remains of an ancient scholarly work called the *Hexapla*. Although, Theodotion’s translation of Daniel was the version incorporated into Christian Bibles. Nevertheless, the Septuagint remained the most widely used version by both Jews and Christians.

Now, in the wake of the wars with Rome in the 1st and early 2nd centuries A.D., Jewish communities within Israel began to abandon the Septuagint. But it continued to be widely used by Greek-speaking Jews in other parts of the world and by Christians.

IMPACT

Now that we’ve looked at the Septuagint, let’s consider its impact on both Jews and Christians in the early centuries A.D.

The creation of the Septuagint meant that direct access to the Hebrew Bible was no longer restricted to the shrinking number of people who spoke and read biblical Hebrew. Now, Greek-speaking Jews and Christians could understand the Scriptures and use them in their worship. They could study the Scriptures in depth. Jews outside Palestine could establish and strengthen synagogues, and early Christians could start and grow churches throughout the Greek-speaking Roman empire.

The Septuagint's influence can be seen clearly in the New Testament itself. On many occasions, New Testament figures and authors quoted from it directly. Some scholars have estimated that of the almost 300 Old Testament quotations and paraphrases in the New Testament, approximately two-thirds come from the Septuagint.

The Septuagint was the Bible of the writers of the New Testament and the readers of the Scriptures in the New Testament. It was the form in which they knew Scripture. Those who knew Hebrew could use the Hebrew Bible, but for those who only knew Greek, the Septuagint was it. And the New Testament, written entirely in Greek by Greek-speaking authors, and Greek-speaking readers, the Septuagint was their Bible. Even in the case of the apostle Paul, who certainly knew Hebrew, most of his quotations agree with the Septuagint more often than they do with the Hebrew. So, he was writing using the Greek Bible, the Septuagint, and that was their Scripture. It was the form in which they knew it, and was the only access they had to Scripture.

— Dr. Michael William Holmes

Since we're considering the impact of the Septuagint in light of the *Bodmer Psalms*, let's look at just a few places where the New Testament quotes the Old Greek Psalter word for word. Acts 4:25, 26 directly quotes Psalm 2:1, 2 to describe the violent opposition of both Jews and Gentiles to Jesus and his followers.

Matthew 21:9 directly quotes Psalm 118:26 to record Jesus' entry into Jerusalem to celebrate his last Passover feast with his disciples. There, Matthew wrote that the crowds followed Jesus, shouting, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" — a phrase often associated with the Messiah.

In Matthew 21:42, Jesus himself quoted Psalm 118:22, 23 when he confronted the religious leaders who were plotting his death. Jesus told the Jewish leaders: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; this is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes."

One of the most-quoted verses in the New Testament is Psalm 110:1. In Luke 20:42, 43, Jesus quoted the *Greek* translation of this Psalm to confront the Pharisees about the identity of the Christ, insisting that the Christ must be superior to David. Listen to this quote in context in Luke 20:41-44:

He said to them, "How can they say that the Christ is David's son? For David himself says in the Book of Psalms,
 "The Lord said to my Lord,
 "Sit at my right hand,
 until I make your enemies your footstool."
 David thus calls him Lord, so how is he his son?" (Luke 20:41-44).

After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, Psalm 110 became crucial to the development of New Testament Christology — the study of the identity, nature and work of the Christ or Messiah. For example, in Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost, Peter

quoted the Septuagint version of Psalm 110:1 in Acts 2:34, 35. He did this to make it clear that the risen Jesus had been declared both Christ and Lord. In a similar way, the author of Hebrews quoted this same verse in Hebrews 1:13 to argue that Jesus is superior to the angels.

The New Testament authors and characters, including Jesus himself, received and used the Septuagint as Scripture. And they did so in part because the Jewish communities before them did the same. This is a remarkably encouraging fact for all those who use translations of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures. It's a confirmation that the Bible retains its truthfulness and authority even when translated into new languages — including the ones we speak today. And the historical preservation of the Septuagint in ancient artifacts like the *Bodmer Psalms* gives us assurance that the Scriptures we have in our modern translations are reliable representations of the originals.

MODERN INFLUENCE

The impact of the Septuagint on ancient Jewish and Christian communities was profound. Next, we'll look at its modern influence on communities of faith.

Many people find it surprising to learn that most of the oldest copies of the Hebrew Bible are actually Old Greek texts rather than Hebrew texts. In fact, before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, none of the oldest extant manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible were actually in Hebrew. This reflects the reality that in the early centuries A.D., the Septuagint was even more influential than the Hebrew text in shaping theology, practice and worship in communities of faith. And this use of the Septuagint paved the way for modern faith communities to continue to use translations as their primary access to God's Word.

As one example, think about the historical impact of the Protestant Reformation that began in 1517. The Reformation was undeniably one of the most influential movements in European history, and its consequences have been felt throughout the world since that time. Students of history will recognize Martin Luther as the key figure who accidentally started the Reformation by posting his 95 Theses for debate on the church door in Wittenberg, Germany.

At that time, most Christians in the West were not permitted to possess a Bible in their native language. But Luther was determined to give literate Germans direct access to Scripture. So, he organized a project to translate the Bible into German. And one of the resources he and his team used to accomplish this translation was the Septuagint.

Like Luther, modern Old Testament translators also regularly consult the Septuagint — even when translating from Hebrew. The Septuagint provides an important ancient understanding of the original Hebrew meaning and can also shed light on passages where there are textual differences between ancient Hebrew texts. In many ways throughout history, the Septuagint has played a key role in ensuring that modern faith communities possess and benefit from the Scriptures in their own languages.

As we mentioned earlier, the *Bodmer Psalms* were likely used in worship at various points in history and may also have been used in study. While this single

manuscript probably did not change the course of history, the translation of the Psalter into Greek very likely did. For most of Christian history, the Psalms were the common worship book of all Christians. And although Christians have nearly always written and sung other songs, too, the Psalter could be found in every church. Even in the present, where hymns and worship songs dominate public worship in many churches, the Psalms still provide much of the material and imagery used by songwriters.

The centrality and universality of the Psalms in worship have united the church in the words, emotions, and images of the Psalms. They've provided a common stock of devotion and thought for all Christians. With the regular singing and praying of the psalms, Christian spirituality throughout the ages has often been expressed in the language of the Psalms.

CONCLUSION

The *Bodmer Psalms* offer us an exceptional glimpse into the importance of the Septuagint in the transmission and use of the Bible throughout history. As a book of Psalms, it exemplifies the ways that those who worship the God of the Bible have prayed, sung, chanted and studied the Psalms for millennia, across theological differences and sharp disputes. Through the divides of politics and language, faith communities have maintained a shared vision of prayer and worship, in large part because of the Psalms. And, because of the impact of the Septuagint, we can be assured that the words that we are singing in different languages today echo and extend words the psalmist sang in Hebrew long ago.

CONTRIBUTORS

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GLOSSARY

Bodmer, Martin – (1899-1971) Swiss scholar and collector who acquired more than 150,000 books, manuscripts and other documents; founder of the *Bibliotheca Bodmeriana* (Bodmer Library)

Christology – The study and doctrine of the person and work of Jesus Christ

codex – A manuscript in book form made up of folded sheets called folios

coram Deo – Latin phrase meaning “before the face of God”

Dead Sea Scrolls – Collection of ancient scrolls, first discovered in caves at Qumran in 1947, that includes Old Testament texts and extra-biblical writings documenting the distinct teachings of an ancient Jewish community

Diaspora – The population of Jews who were dispersed from the land of Israel and settled in other regions

Hellenistic – Of or relating to Greek civilization, culture, or language, after the time of Alexander the Great

Hexapla – A work of 50 volumes written by Origen of Alexandria comparing the words of various Hebrew and Greek versions of the Old Testament

Judeo-Christian – Term referring to the foundational writings, traditions, values and ethics shared by both Judaism and Christianity

Luther, Martin – (1483-1546) Sixteenth century German monk and Protestant reformer who initiated the Reformation when he posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Wittenberg church in 1517

Masoretic Text – Traditional text of the Hebrew Bible produced by the Masoretes between the 6th and 10th centuries; considered authoritative by most Jews and Protestants

papyrus – Material from a reedy water plant that was cut, soaked, flattened and dried to be used as a writing surface; water plant from which an ancient writing surface was derived

Philo of Alexandria – (ca. 30 B.C.-ca. A.D. 50) Hellenistic Jewish philosopher and writer; considered to be the originator of the allegorical approach to interpreting Scripture

Protestant Reformation – A sixteenth-century religious movement that attempted to reform the Roman Catholic Church, but eventually broke away, forming the Protestant church

psalm – A sacred song or poem of worship or praise to God

Psalter – Another name for the book of Psalms in the Bible

Septuagint – Greek translation of the Old Testament

Theodotion – 2nd-century Hellenistic Jewish scholar who translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek

Torah – The books of Moses or the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, often referred to as “the Law”; known in Christianity as “the Pentateuch”