

## GOD'S LANGUAGE

The Orthodox Christian Scriptures — Part Seven

By Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

We have written about the differences between today's Masoretic text of the Old Testament and the ancient Septuagint translation of the Old Testament. Actually, since the Septuagint translation was finished about 290 years *before* Christ, and the contemporary Hebrew Masoretic text was only completed a millennium *after* Christ, the Septuagint version is almost 1,300 years older than the current Masoretic edition!

The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in the middle of the last century, sometimes favor the Septuagint text and sometimes the Masoretic text. As far as the Septuagint is concerned, it is important to remember that it was done by scholars of the Jewish faith almost 300 years before Christ. So it cannot possibly be argued that it has a pro-Christian bias. In the case of the Masoretic text, however, it was done in the centuries *after* Christ, so there are always suspicions about an anti-Christian bias in the choice of the variant Hebrew texts that were picked in order to create the Masoretic edition. These suspicions are especially strong when passages in the Septuagint which lend themselves readily to a Christian interpretation are substantially different, or even disappear entirely, in the Masoretic text.

But, the truth be told, and to be fair, there are passages in the Masoretic text that really are very beautiful and more eloquent than the Septuagint version. And, the fact of the matter is that the Septuagint is, after all, a translation of the Hebrew text. As we know, every translation from one language into another is, in reality, an interpretation. Every language has words whose full range of nuances and implications cannot possibly be translated accurately into another language.

This is especially true when we are talking about God's language. What language does God speak? Well, it would be helpful for us to know, first of all, that God speaks in a very very, *very* ancient language. This language is known by the name "Uncreated Divine Grace." This language does not translate well into our Semitic or Indo-European languages, or, for that fact, into any man-made languages. Many fine men and women have thrown up their hands in despair trying to translate God's language (and yet, oddly, children sometimes have no problem at all understanding it). Furthermore, nobody can duplicate the sounds of God's language; it seems to have no vowels or consonants that human beings can articulate.

In the article, "Rationalism and Fundamentalism," we quoted what some Saints of the Church had to say about conveying God's language into ours.

In his work, *The Hexaemeron*, St. Basil the Great says the following:

It must be well understood that when we speak of the voice, of the word, of the command of God, this divine language does not mean to us a sound which escapes from the organs of speech, a collision of air struck by the tongue; it is a simple sign of the will of God, and, if we give it the form of an order, *it is only the better to impress the souls whom we instruct.*

(*Hexaemeron* II: 7)

St. Gregory of Nyssa, on his part, has this to say:

...human speech finds it impossible to express the reality which transcends all thought and all concept; and he who obstinately tries to express it in words, unconsciously offends God.

(*Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, Homily 7)

And, again, he writes:

Lifted out of himself by the Spirit, (the Prophet David) glimpsed in that blessed ecstasy God's infinity and incomprehensible beauty. He saw as much as a mere mortal can see, leaving the covering of the flesh, and by thought alone entering into the divine vision of that immaterial and spiritual realm. And though yearning to say something which would do justice to his vision, he can only cry out (in words that all can echo after him): *I said in mine ecstasy, every man is a liar* (Psalm 115.2). And this I take to mean that anyone who attempts to portray that ineffable Light in language *is truly a liar* — not because of any abhorrence of the truth, but merely because of the infirmity of his explanation.

(From the *Homily on Virginity*)

What does all this have to do with the Septuagint and the Masoretic texts? Simply this: as feeble attempts to translate God's language into our man-made languages, *both* versions fall short. Each one has its own strong points, and its weak points. Except for the fact that there was some open tampering with the Old Testament texts in the Masoretic (for more information on this, go to: [cnmail@fidnet.com](mailto:cnmail@fidnet.com)), both versions, with certain qualifications, simply represent different textual traditions of the Hebrew Old Testament.

Having in mind what the Saints of the Church have said about the limitations of our language in dealing with divine revelation (see above), it is no surprise that Orthodox Christians do not get bent out of shape, as Roman Catholic or Protestant textual critics seem to do, about textual differences and variations in the Holy Scriptures.

However, the reason why Orthodox Christians *prefer* the Septuagint is simply because it represents an ancient, authentic and *unbiased* text of the Old Testament, translated and embraced by the Jewish people themselves for almost 400 years. Since we hold ourselves to be the New Israel, we feel pretty strongly about upholding this tradition of the God of our Fathers. Amen. So be it.