B OR NOT B? THE PLACE OF CODEX VATICANUS IN TEXTUAL HISTORY AND IN SEPTUAGINT RESEARCH

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most basic facts in Septuagint studies is the primary text used for analysis or comparison. This statement will hardly be challenged. Yet it is a fact which needs to be reflected upon. For most studies on the Septuagint, but also in studies on the biblical quotations in the New Testament or even in comparisons with the daughter translations, the Göttingen edition or Rahlfs’s so-called Handausgabe is often simply taken as the starting point.1

Now, there is a reason for this approach: in his critical edition Rahlfs wanted to reconstruct the Old Greek and the Göttingen edition maintains that same goal. Yet it is and remains a goal only, and how this goal is pursued and perhaps achieved depends on the methods and presuppositions of the editor; and that’s exactly where Codex Vaticanus comes into play. The critical editions use different manuscripts for their reconstructions, yet Codex Vaticanus takes pride of place and dominates the editions. Rahlfs states in his Handausgabe that he mostly relies on the Majuscules B, S and A; among them—with a few exceptions as in the book of Judges—he basically followed Manuscript B, the Codex Vaticanus. The same holds true for most of the volumes in the Göttingen edition.

1.1. The Importance of B for the Editions

Since the 16th century Codex Vaticanus has remained the most important, i.e. the most highly esteemed, manuscript for Septuagint editions and research. With the exception of the Aldina from 1518 and the Complutensian Polyglot from 1514–1717, and starting with the Sixtina (1587),

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almost all editions of the Septuagint were more or less based on Codex Vaticanus.

The first printed version of the Septuagint appeared in Venice in 1518 from the printer Aldine and is therefore called the Aldina. It used manuscripts which were available in the city at that time. At about the same time the famous Complutensian Polyglot was prepared at the Alcala University in Complutum, near Madrid. For this edition manuscripts from Rome and other cities were collected or borrowed. After about two generations the later Pope Sixtus V initiated and published a new edition; manuscripts were sought and Codex Vaticanus became the basis of the new edition, not only because it was available in Rome, but also because of its excellent state of preservation and legibility.

Basically all Septuagint editions from the 17th through to the 19th centuries, and even into the first half of the 20th century, have been based on the Codex Vaticanus. More or less the only exception was Johannes Ernestus Grabe’s edition of 1709–1720, which was based on Codex Alexandrinus. Practically all other editions are diplomatic editions of Codex Vaticanus with an ever expanding critical apparatus, i.e. with the readings of other manuscripts as they became available. This holds true also for the editions of Holmes-Parsons, of Swete, and of Brooke-McLean. Even the critical edition by Rahlfs and, to a large extent, the Göttingen edition rely heavily on Codex “B.”


3 H. B. Swete (An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1900], 182) counts at least 21 editions of that kind, deriving directly or indirectly from MS B. Swete himself based his edition on a new collation of MS B.


6 A. E. Brooke and N. McLean, eds., The Old Testament in Greek according to the Text of Codex Vaticanus supplemented from Other Uncia Manuscripts with a Critical Apparatus Containing the Variants of the Chief Ancient Authorities for the Text of the LXX (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1906–1940).