

The Septuagint on the Holy Mountain: An Investigation into the Textual Practices of Mount Athos and the Legacy of the Grabe Edition

Introduction: The Septuagint, The Holy Mountain, and a Question of Text

The Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, holds a position of unique authority within the Eastern Orthodox Church. It is not merely a translation but is revered as the canonical text of the Old Testament, sanctified by its use by the Apostles, quoted in the New Testament, and employed as the scriptural foundation by the Greek Church Fathers.[1, 2, 3, 4, 5] Within this tradition, the monastic republic of Mount Athos stands as a spiritual and cultural bastion, a community dedicated to the preservation of Orthodox faith and practice in its most traditional forms.[6, 7] The confluence of the Septuagint's authority and the Athonite commitment to tradition makes the Holy Mountain a subject of intense interest for understanding Orthodox textual practices.

This report investigates a specific and persistent claim circulating in online discussions: that the monks of Mount Athos, for all their practices, use a particular printed edition of the Septuagint as their primary and preferred text. The edition in question is the Athens reprint of 1843-1850, which was itself a reprint of the 1821 Moscow Synod edition. The Moscow text, in turn, was a reproduction of the early 18th-century Oxford edition produced by the Prussian scholar John Ernest Grabe. This lineage represents a distinct textual tradition based primarily on the 5th-century Codex Alexandrinus.

To assess the veracity of this claim, this investigation employs a historical-critical methodology. It begins by establishing the theological framework that governs the Orthodox Church's relationship with the Septuagint text. It then traces the complex history of the Septuagint's printed editions, carefully distinguishing the textual family of Grabe's edition from other influential versions. The core of the report presents a direct examination of the claim through an analysis of available evidence related to Athonite practice, including a significant body of negative evidence derived from a survey of Athonite publications in Greek, Russian, and Romanian. Finally, the report evaluates the "grain of truth" hypothesis—that even if the specific Grabe-derived edition is not in use, a general preference for an Alexandrinus-type text might persist. The analysis culminates in a definitive conclusion that places the claim on a seven-point scale of probability, providing a thoroughly reasoned justification for its placement.

1 The Authority of the Seventy: The Septuagint in the Orthodox Phronema

To understand the significance of which printed edition might be used on Mount Athos, one must first grasp the theological status of the Septuagint within the Orthodox mindset, or *phronema*. Its authority is not contingent upon its value as a witness to an earlier Hebrew text, as is often the case in Western scholarship, but is intrinsic to its role in the history of salvation and its reception by the Church.

1.1 The Apostolic Bible

The Orthodox Church's unwavering commitment to the Septuagint is rooted in the conviction that it is the "Apostolic Bible." It was the primary form of the Old Testament known to the authors of the New Testament. When the Evangelists and Apostles quoted the Hebrew Scriptures, their citations overwhelmingly align with the wording of the Septuagint, not the later standardized Masoretic Text (MT).[2, 3, 8, 9] This fact is seen as a divine sanctioning of the Greek version. The early Church Fathers, writing in Greek, naturally continued this tradition, building the entire edifice of Orthodox theology upon the foundation of the Septuagint text.[5, 10] Its theological terminology, such as the use of *Kyrios* for the Divine Name, was directly inherited by the New Testament and shaped the Christological interpretation of the Old Testament prophecies.[1, 11]

1.2 Inspiration and Revelation

A crucial element of the Orthodox understanding, articulated by modern theologians such as Metropolitan Kallistos Ware, is that the Septuagint is more than an ancient translation; it is an inspired text in its own right. Where the Septuagint differs from the Masoretic Text—which occurs frequently—these differences are not viewed as translational errors but as part of God's continuing revelation, guided by the Holy Spirit.[1, 11] A classic example is the prophecy in Isaiah 7:14, where the Septuagint's use of *parthenos* (παρθένος, "virgin") is seen as a clearer and divinely intended prophecy of the Virgin Birth than the Hebrew *almah* ("young woman").[8] This perspective elevates the Septuagint from a historical artifact to a sacred text whose integrity is of paramount theological importance.

This approach reveals a fundamental difference in the concept of "textual authority" when compared with traditions that prioritize the *Hebraica veritas*. In much of Western scholarship, the Masoretic Text is considered the primary source, and the Septuagint is valued chiefly for its ability to help reconstruct an earlier or alternative Hebrew *Vorlage*. [5, 12, 13] The Orthodox position, however, derives the text's authority from its ecclesiastical reception. The text was sealed as authoritative through its adoption, liturgical use, and interpretation within the life of the Church. The Holy Spirit is understood to have guided not only the original Hebrew authors but also the translators and the community that received and sanctified the text through centuries of prayer and theological reflection.[3, 5] Therefore, the question of which printed edition is used on Mount Athos is not merely academic. It touches upon which stream of the Church's received tradition is being preserved: a 19th-century printed *textus receptus* derived from Grabe's work, or a 20th-century text that engages with modern critical scholarship while being adapted for liturgical use.

1.3 A Complex and Fluid Tradition

While the Orthodox Church upholds the authority of the Septuagint, it has never formally canonized a single critical edition in the way the Roman Catholic Church did with the Clementine Vulgate. The term "Septuagint" itself refers not to a monolithic book but to a collection of translations produced by different hands, in different places, over a period of several centuries.[14, 15, 16, 17] This process resulted in a complex textual history with various ancient recensions, such as those of Lucian, Hesychius, and Origen's Hexapla.[14, 18] This historical reality means that there is no single, perfect manuscript tradition, but rather a family of related texts. This lack of a definitive, synodically-approved critical text complicates any discussion of an "official" version and makes the question of local usage, as on Mount Athos, all the more pertinent.[5, 19]

2 A Lineage of Print: Critical Editions and Ecclesiastical Texts

The claim regarding Athonite usage centers on a specific family of printed texts. To evaluate it, one must understand the history of printed Septuagint editions and the distinct textual streams they represent. The primary division is between editions based on Codex Alexandrinus and those based on Codex Vaticanus, a division that reflects a shift from early diplomatic printing to modern eclectic textual criticism.

2.1 The Diplomatic Text: J.E. Grabe and the Codex Alexandrinus (A)

The story of the text in question begins in the early 18th century with John Ernest Grabe's edition, published in Oxford between 1707 and 1720.[20] Grabe's work was a landmark in biblical scholarship. Its methodology was primarily "diplomatic," meaning it aimed to reproduce the text of a single, authoritative manuscript as faithfully as possible, noting variants from other witnesses in an apparatus. His chosen manuscript was the 5th-century Codex Alexandrinus (designated 'A'), which had been gifted to the English crown in 1627 by Cyril Lucar, the Patriarch of Constantinople.[20, 21] This manuscript's provenance gave it a special prestige and connection to the Orthodox East, making Grabe's edition based upon it particularly noteworthy.[22]

2.2 The Russian Inheritance: The Moscow Synod Edition of 1821

In the 19th century, the Russian Orthodox Church sought to publish a standard Greek Old Testament for its theological academies. In 1821, the Holy Synod in Moscow authorized an edition that was a direct reprint of Grabe's Oxford text.[23] This decision effectively established the Alexandrinus text-type, as presented by Grabe, as the official standard for the Russian Church during that period. This created a powerful precedent, linking a major branch of the Orthodox world to this specific textual lineage.[10]

2.3 The Greek National Text: The Athens Reprint of 1843-1850

Following Greece's independence and the establishment of the autocephalous Church of Greece, there was a need for a national edition of the Scriptures. Between 1843 and 1850, an edition

of the Septuagint was published in Athens. This was, in turn, a reprint of the 1821 Moscow edition. This Athens edition is the specific text at the heart of the claim about Mount Athos. Its publication cemented the Grabe-Moscow-Athens lineage, based on Codex Alexandrinus, as the first standard printed Septuagint for the modern Greek Church.

2.4 The Critical Turn: Rahlfs, Göttingen, and the Primacy of Codex Vaticanus (B)

While the Grabe tradition was being established in the East, a different textual stream dominated Western scholarship. The 1587 Roman Sixtine edition, based on the 4th-century Codex Vaticanus (designated 'B'), had become the *textus receptus* of the Septuagint.[22] Over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, a scholarly consensus emerged that Codex Vaticanus generally represented an earlier and less revised form of the Septuagint text than Codex Alexandrinus. This scholarly preference culminated in the influential hand-edition of Alfred Rahlfs, first published in 1935. Rahlfs's text is an "eclectic" critical text, meaning it does not follow a single manuscript but reconstructs what the editor believes to be the most original reading based on all available evidence. However, its primary foundation is Codex Vaticanus, with significant input from Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Alexandrinus.[4, 23, 24] The Rahlfs edition (and its later revision by Robert Hanhart) became the standard academic text worldwide.[25]

2.5 The Modern Greek Standard: The Texts of Apostoliki Diakonia and the Zoe Brotherhood

This brings the analysis to the crucial counter-evidence against the claim. In the 20th century, the Church of Greece needed an edition of the Septuagint for official liturgical and pastoral use. The text published by *Apostoliki Diakonia*, the official publishing house of the Church of Greece, did not revert to the 19th-century Athens reprint of Grabe. Instead, it took Rahlfs's modern critical edition as its base.[19, 23, 26]

This modern "official" text, however, is not a simple reprint of Rahlfs. It is a deliberate hybrid, representing a pragmatic effort to reconcile modern biblical scholarship with the Church's living liturgical and patristic tradition. The editors of the *Apostoliki Diakonia* text modified Rahlfs's work, emending it in places to conform to readings found in the quotations of the Church Fathers or preserved in the Lucianic recension, which had a strong influence on the Byzantine liturgical tradition.[23] This process of ecclesiastical "back-editing" [27] demonstrates a conscious decision by the Church of Greece to engage with modern scholarship rather than simply perpetuating its 19th-century textual standard. It accepted the scholarly consensus on the general priority of the Vaticanus tradition but reserved the right to override it where it conflicted with readings sanctified by long use. A similar approach was taken by the influential *Zoe* Brotherhood, which also published a popular edition of the Septuagint based on a modified Rahlfs text.[23, 28] This reality directly contradicts the premise that there is an unbroken adherence to the 19th-century Grabe-based text.

Table II.1: Comparative Analysis of Key Printed Septuagint Editions

Edition	Date	Primary Manuscript Basis	Editorial Methodology	Key Characteristic	Ecclesiastical Status & Locus of Use
Sistine (Rome)	1587	Codex Vaticanus (B)	Diplomatic with corrections	Established Vaticanus as a primary text; became the <i>textus receptus</i> .	Influential in the West; basis for many later editions.
Grabe (Oxford)	1707-1720	Codex Alexandrinus (A)	Diplomatic with critical apparatus	First major critical edition based on Alexandrinus.	Scholarly; became the basis for Russian/Greek reprints.
Moscow Synod	1821	Grabe's Edition	Reprint	Reprint of a Western scholarly edition.	Official text for the Russian Church in the 19th century.
Athens Reprint	1843-1850	Moscow (Grabe) Edition	Reprint	National reprint for a new church.	First standard text for the autocephalous Church of Greece.
Rahlfs / R-H	1935 / 2006	Primarily Codex Vaticanus (B)	Eclectic Critical Text	The standard modern academic hand-edition.	Universal academic use; basis for modern church editions.
Apostoliki Diakonia	20th Cent.	Rahlfs' Edition	Ecclesiastical Critical Text	Rahlfs text modified by patristic/Lucianic readings.	Official text of the Church of Greece.
Zoe Brotherhood	20th Cent.	Rahlfs' Edition	Ecclesiastical Critical Text	Rahlfs text modified for popular use.	Popular alternative text in Greece.

3 Textual Life on the Holy Mountain: An Examination of Athonite Usage

With the historical and textual context established, the investigation now turns to the direct evidence—or lack thereof—for the use of the Grabe-Moscow-Athens Septuagint on Mount Athos.

3.1 The Claim and Its Source: A Critical Evaluation

The most explicit articulation of the claim found during this investigation comes from a single, anonymous comment on the internet forum r/AcademicBiblical. The commenter states:

"On Mount Athos, they use something similar to the Moscow edition of 1821 which is simply a reprint of John Grabe's 1720 Septuagint based on Codex Alexandrinus".[23] While this statement perfectly encapsulates the claim, its evidentiary value is extremely low. It is an unsourced assertion from an anonymous user. While it cannot be dismissed out of hand, it requires substantial corroboration to be considered credible. A separate anecdote from another forum, suggesting that Athonite monks preferred their "older bibles" to the modern Patriarchal Text of the New Testament, lends a degree of plausibility to the idea of Athonite textual conservatism in general, but it does not provide direct evidence for the specific Septuagint claim.[7]

3.2 The Witness of Athonite Publishers (The Argument from Silence)

A more reliable method for discerning Athonite practice is to examine what the monasteries themselves publish and distribute. A comprehensive survey of the publication catalogues of major Athonite monasteries and distributors was conducted in Greek, Russian, and Romanian. The results are telling.

Targeted searches for Athonite editions of the Old Testament (e.g., "Παλαιά Διαθήκη κείμενο Ἁγίου Ὄρους") did not yield any specific editions published by or for the Holy Mountain. Instead, they returned general Orthodox resources, such as commentaries or multi-volume editions published in Athens for a general audience.[6, 29, 30, 31, 32]

More significantly, a detailed review of the publishing lists of prominent monasteries like Simonopetra [33, 34, 35] and Vatopedi [36, 37, 38, 39] reveals a clear pattern. These monastic presses are active, producing a wide range of materials including liturgical service books (such as the *Euchologion*, *Ieratikon*, and *Synaxaristes*), patristic texts, the lives of saints, spiritual counsel from modern elders, and Byzantine chant books. While they do publish editions of the New Testament [38, 40], there is a conspicuous and total absence of a published edition of the complete Old Testament text. This silence is profound. If a specific edition like the 1843 Athens text were indeed the standard, one would expect the monasteries themselves to be its primary publishers and distributors to ensure its availability. The fact that they do not publish it, or any complete Old Testament, strongly suggests it is not their standard text. This lack of evidence was consistent across searches in Russian and Romanian, which pointed to monastic dependencies (*podvorie*) or general Orthodox translations, not a specific Greek text used on Athos itself.[41, 42, 43, 44]

This absence of a published Athonite "Bible" may reflect a deeper truth about monastic life. The concept of a monk regularly consulting a single, stand-alone codex of the entire Old Testament is arguably a more modern, scholarly, or even Protestant approach to scripture. In a traditional liturgical context, scripture is encountered primarily through the service books. The most essential Old Testament book is the Psalter, which is chanted daily and forms the backbone of monastic prayer.[45] The other Old Testament readings are prescribed for services like Vespers and are contained within liturgical lectionaries, such as the *Menaion* or a *Prophetologion*. The crucial question, therefore, is not which complete "Bible" sits on a monk's shelf, but what is the textual basis of the official, modern liturgical books they use in their services. As Mount Athos exists within the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarchate and the cultural sphere of the Church of Greece, it is overwhelmingly likely that their modern service books are textually aligned with the standard edition of the Church of Greece—the *Apostoliki Diakonia* text. This text, as established, is based on Rahlfs, not Grabe. The entire premise of the query, focusing on a single preferred edition of the whole Old Testament, may misunderstand the nature of scriptural engagement in a traditional monastic setting.

3.3 The "Grain of Truth" Hypothesis: The Enduring Prestige of the Alexandrinus Text-Type

Even if the specific Grabe-Moscow-Athens edition is not the primary text, the user's query allows for a "grain of truth" if a generic Alexandrinus-based text is used. There is some plausibility to this. Codex Alexandrinus has deep historical roots in the Orthodox world, having been in the possession of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.[20, 21] The Grabe edition based on it was the foundational printed text for both the modern Russian and Greek Churches.[23] It is entirely possible that this tradition has left a lasting mark.

The vast and ancient libraries of the Athonite monasteries contain thousands of manuscripts, including biblical codices dating back centuries.[46, 47, 48, 49] Within this manuscript tradition, the Alexandrinus text-type is undoubtedly represented. Monks engaged in scholarly work or seeking alternative readings may well consult these older manuscripts or older printed books from the 19th century that are still on the library shelves. However, the query specifies the *primary* or *preferred* edition for *all practices*. This centrally includes the corporate, liturgical life of the monasteries. For this official and public use, practice is governed by the standardized, modern service books. Any use of Alexandrinus-type readings would be secondary, for private study or comparison, not primary liturgical practice. Therefore, the evidence does not support the claim that an Alexandrinus-based text is the primary one in current use.

4 Conclusion: Assessing the Veracity of the Claim

The investigation into the claim that the Athens reprint of Grabe's Septuagint is the preferred edition on Mount Athos has yielded a clear, though largely circumstantial, conclusion.

4.1 Synthesis of Findings

The claim rests almost entirely on a single, anonymous, and uncorroborated assertion made in an online forum. While this assertion is specific and aligns with the known history of the Grabe edition's reception in the Greek-speaking world in the 19th century, it stands against a significant body of contrary evidence.

1. **The Official Text of the Church of Greece:** The modern, official text used by the Church of Greece, published by *Apostoliki Diakonia*, is not based on the Grabe/Alexandrinus tradition. It is a modified version of Alfred Rahlfs's critical text, which is primarily based on Codex Vaticanus. Mount Athos, while under the Ecumenical Patriarchate, operates within the liturgical and cultural sphere of the Church of Greece, making the use of a completely different textual standard for its primary liturgical functions highly improbable.
2. **The Argument from Silence:** An extensive search of the publishing activities of major Athonite monasteries and distributors in multiple languages has failed to produce any evidence of them publishing, promoting, or distributing the Grabe-Moscow-Athens edition or any other complete Old Testament text. This silence from the very institutions that would be expected to perpetuate such a standard is a powerful piece of negative evidence.
3. **The Nature of Monastic Scripture Use:** The focus of Athonite life is liturgical. Scripture is primarily encountered through the Psalter and the lectionary readings embedded

in service books. The textual basis of these modern liturgical books is the key determinant of practice, and this points back to the standard text of the Church of Greece, not a 170-year-old reprint of a scholarly edition.

4.2 Addressing the "Grain of Truth"

While the Grabe edition and the Codex Alexandrinus on which it is based hold an honored place in the history of the Orthodox Church, there is no evidence to suggest this historical prestige translates into primary, practical use today. The liturgical reality of the Holy Mountain is almost certainly governed by the standard, modern service books used throughout the wider church. The "grain of truth" is historical, not practical.

4.3 Final Verdict

Based on the overwhelming lack of positive evidence, the strong evidence for the use of a competing textual tradition by the wider Church of Greece, and the complete absence of corroborating data from Athonite sources themselves, the claim must be judged as highly improbable.

On the provided scale, the claim that the Athens reprint (1843-1850) of the Moscow edition of Grabe's Septuagint is the current primary or preferred edition across all practices on Mount Athos is:

Likely to be false.

Justification: This rating is chosen over "Very likely to be false" out of an abundance of scholarly caution. It is impossible to survey the private devotional practices of every monk on the Holy Mountain, and it is conceivable that some individuals or small sketes might retain a personal preference for older printed editions. However, the claim is about the normative practice ("primary or preferred edition across all practices"), which must include the official, corporate liturgical life of the monasteries. For this central and most significant aspect of Athonite life, all available evidence indicates the claim is false. The single online comment is insufficient to counter the combined weight of the official status of the *Apostoliki Diakonia* text and the profound silence from Athonite sources.