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The Foundations of Early Translation Approaches

Examining the intellectual evolution of translation from secular cultural exchange in Antiquity to the complex theological dilemmas of St. Jerome.

TRANSLATIO STUDI
VERBUM E VERB
SENSUM DE SENSU

Marcus Tullius Cicero

ROMAN PHILOSOPHER & ORATOR
(c. 106–43 BC)

Advocated for "sense-for-sense" over "word-for-word" in rendering Greek into Latin.

St. Jerome

PATRON SAINT OF TRANSLATORS
(c. 347–420 AD)

Responsible for the Vulgate, the Latin Bible, grappling with fidelity versus cultural adaptation.

Scholars of the Septuagint

ALEXANDRIAN TRANSLATION
(c. 3rd-2nd Century BC)

Collaborative Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, a landmark in early textual transmission.

NotebookL

Translation drove cultural exchange in Antiquity

TRANSLATION AS A BRIDGE: Translation served as a primary bridge across civilizations, most notably transferring knowledge from Greek to Roman culture.

PHILOSOPHICAL KNOWLEDGE

Adapting abstract thought across linguistic borders.

LITERARY WORKS

Transporting narrative and poetic structures.

SCIENTIFIC DISCOVERIES

Sharing empirical and mathematical advancements.

Religious texts introduced unprecedented stakes to translation

The Divine Word

The imperative to preserve the exactness of the original text.

The core fear: Altering the word of God.

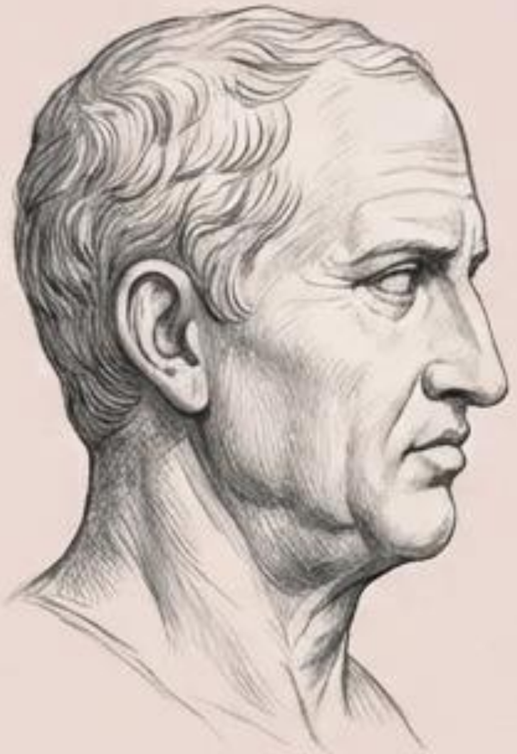
This specific tension laid the permanent groundwork for early theoretical debates on translation methods.

The Target Audience

The necessity of comprehensibility.

The core need: Making the text accessible and understandable to believers who do not speak the original language.

Cicero formalized the foundational debate of translation



Marcus Tullius Cicero
(106-43 BCE)

Core Text: *De Optimo Genere Oratorum* (The Best Kind of Orator - 46 BCE).

The Dichotomy

Word-for-Word

The literal approach to translating a text.

Sense-for-Sense

The free approach to adapting a text.

The translator must act as an orator rather than a mere interpreter

Context: Cicero developed his theory while translating Greek speeches into Latin.

ut interpres

- ✓ Acting as a literal interpreter.
- ✓ Strict adherence to the source mechanics.

ut orator

- ✓ Acting as an orator.
- ✓ Cicero’s chosen method. Prioritizing rhetorical impact and persuasion.

Words should be weighed out to the reader, not simply counted

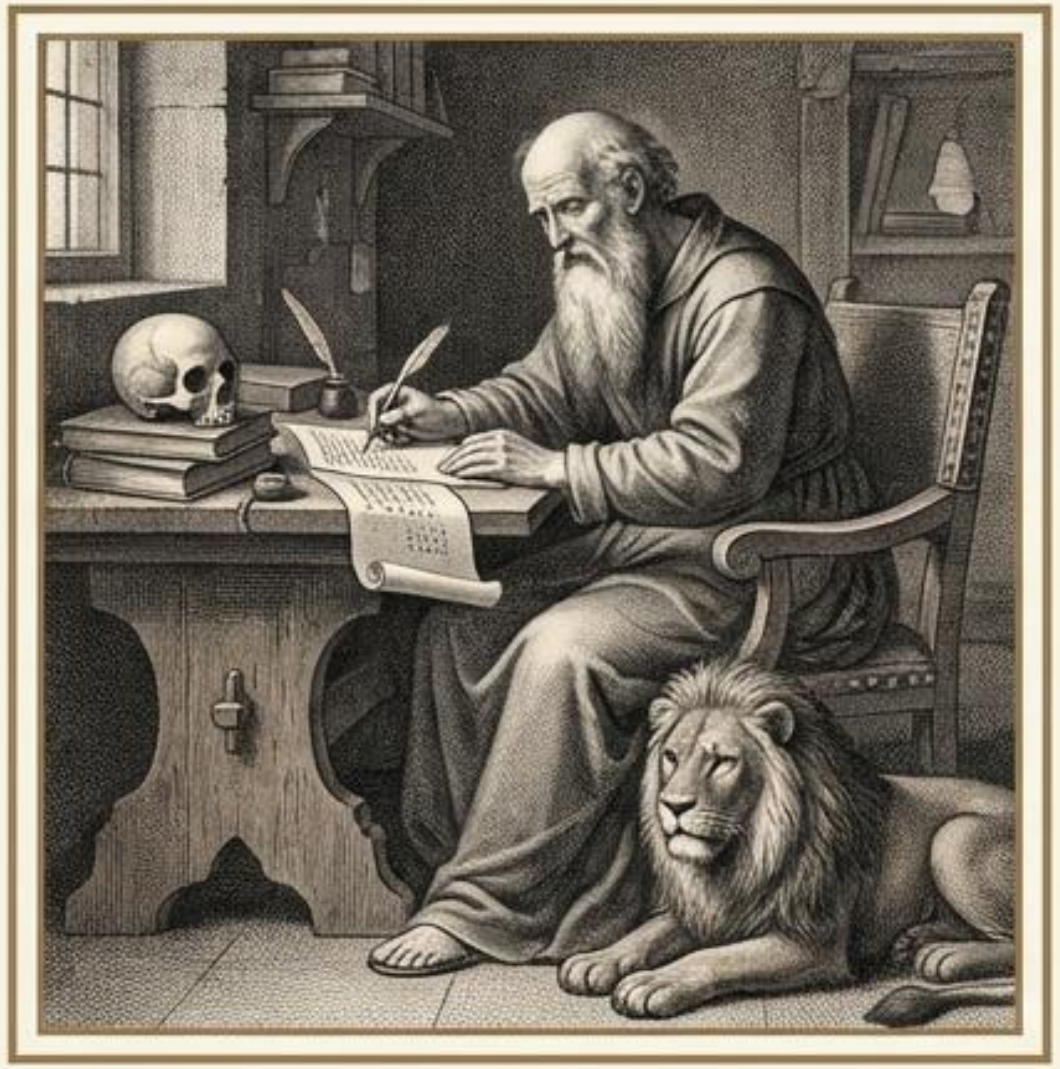
Cicero argued fiercely against translating word for word, prioritizing meaning over strict linguistic equivalence.

genus omne verborum vimque

The imperative to preserve the general style and force of the language.

A translator should not count out words as if they were identical coins, but rather weigh them out to capture their true rhetorical impact.

St. Jerome redefined sacred translation with the Vulgate



St. Jerome
Hieronymus (c. 347-420 CE)

Key Contribution

The creation of The Vulgate, which became the official and definitive Latin text of the Catholic Church.

Methodological Shift

Jerome made the crucial decision to bypass existing translations and return directly to the original Hebrew source material (the Hebraica veritas), rather than relying solely on the Greek Septuagint.

St. Jerome codified the sense-for-sense methodology

Core Text: *Letter to Pammachius (De Optimo Interpretandi* - c. 395 CE).

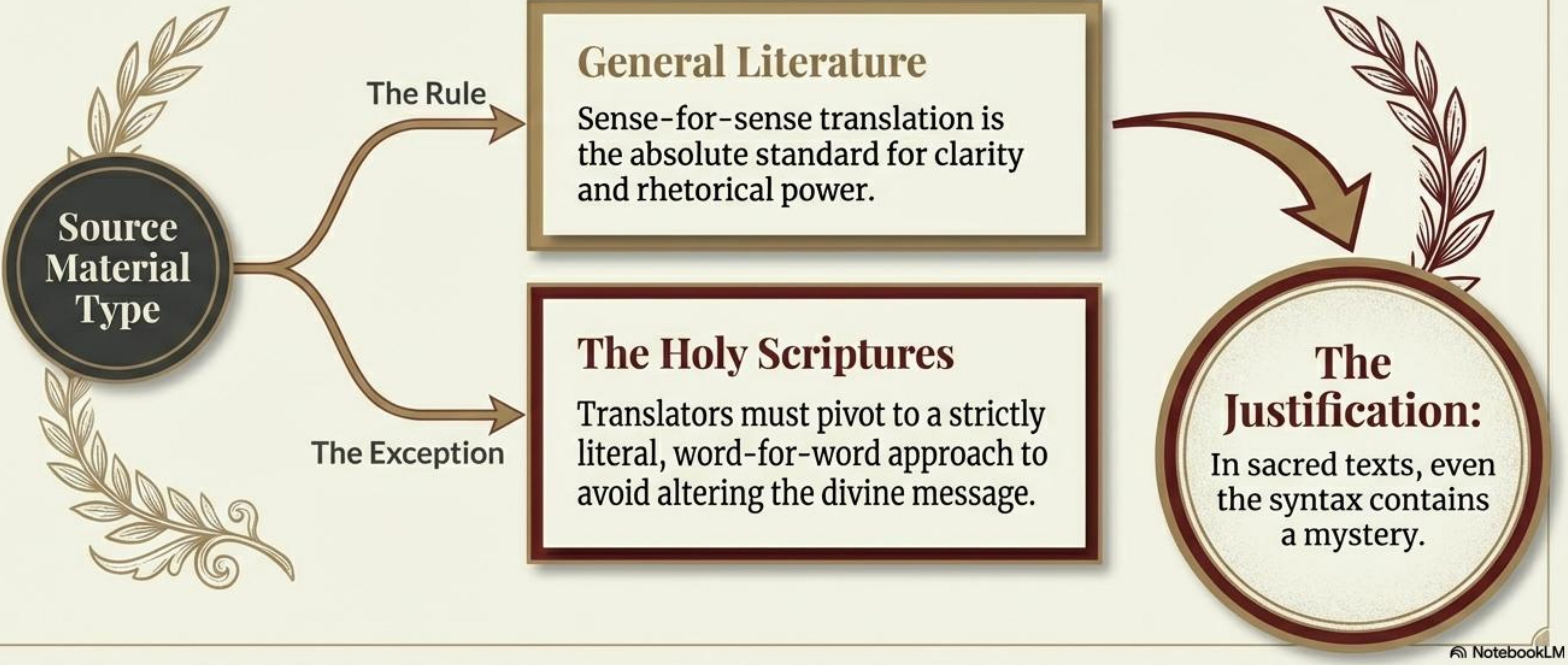
Recognized as one of the ultimate founding texts of translation theory.

> *“Non verbum e verbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu.”*

I RENDER NOT WORD FOR WORD, BUT SENSE FOR SENSE.

Analysis: Jerome successfully formalized and defended the exact rhetorical approach originally formulated by Cicero.

Sacred texts demand strict literalism because their syntax contains mysteries



Source Material Type

The Rule

General Literature

Sense-for-sense translation is the absolute standard for clarity and rhetorical power.

The Exception

The Holy Scriptures

Translators must pivot to a strictly literal, word-for-word approach to avoid altering the divine message.

The Justification:

In sacred texts, even the syntax contains a mystery.

The Septuagint illustrates the absolute highest stakes of sacred translation

MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Alexandria, Egypt
EGYPT
AFRIC.

What is it?

The Septuagint (LXX) is the earliest extant Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament).

The Source

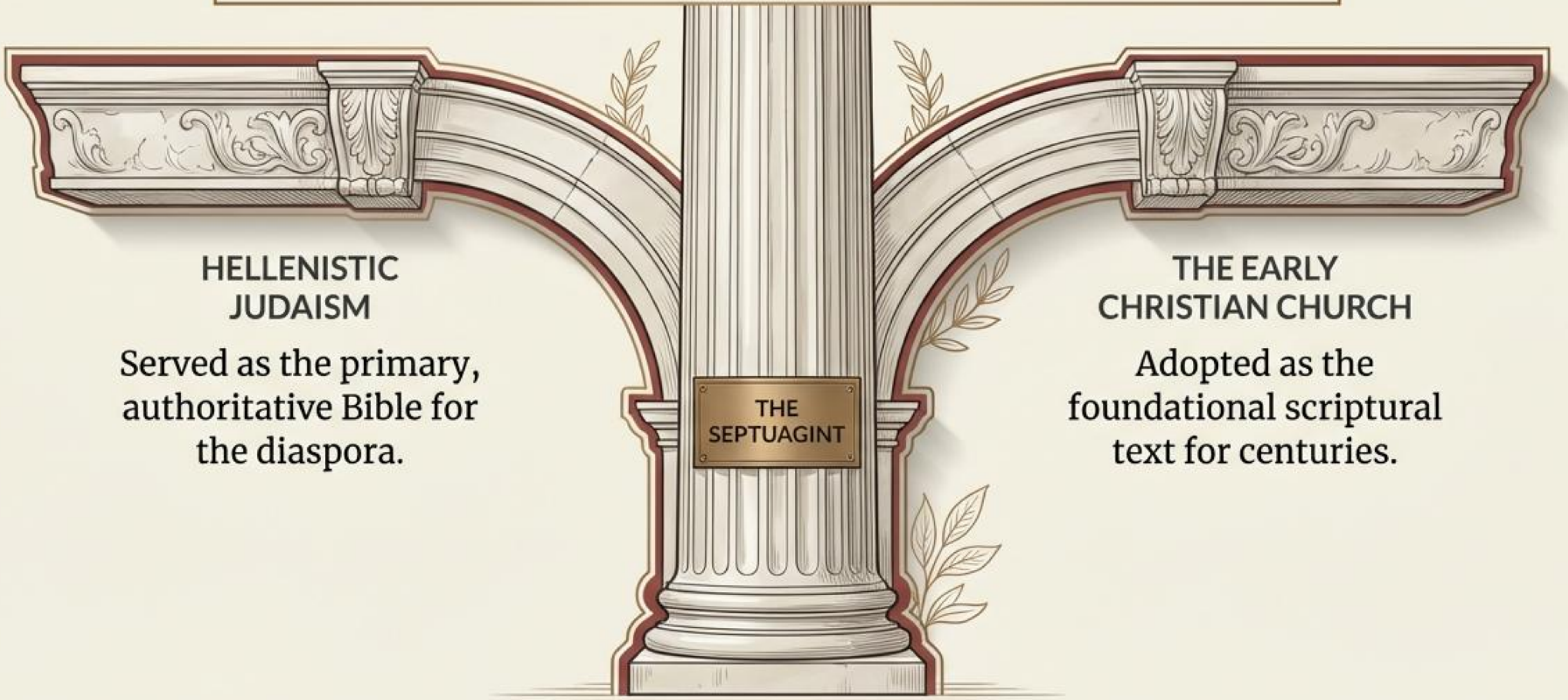
Translated directly from the original Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic.

The Origin Point

The translation process began in Alexandria, Egypt, during the 3rd century BCE.

The Septuagint bridged the Hebrew and Greek-speaking worlds

The Practical Need: It made the scriptures accessible to the vast Greek-speaking world that could no longer read Hebrew.



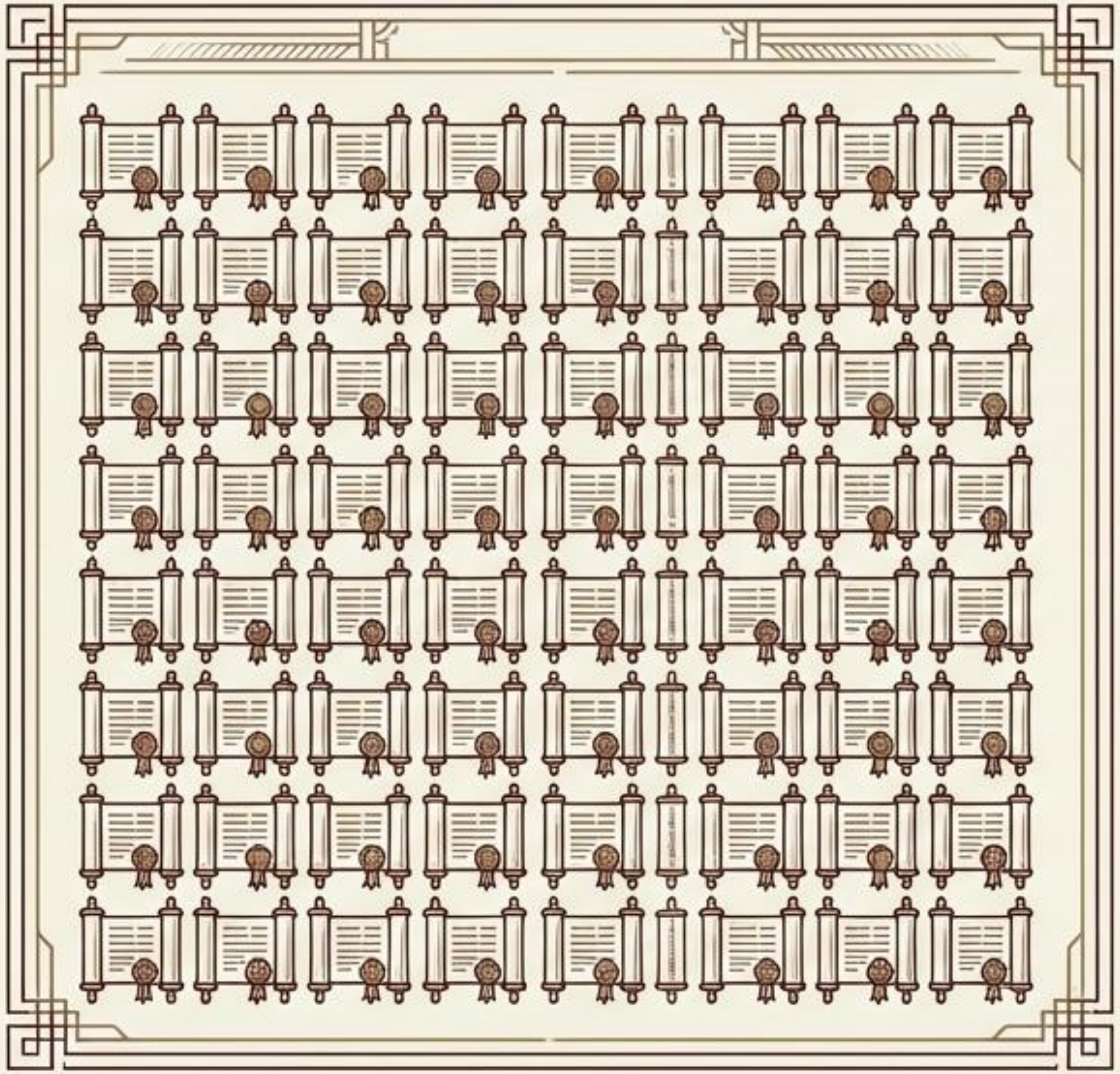
HELLENISTIC JUDAISM

Served as the primary, authoritative Bible for the diaspora.

THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Adopted as the foundational scriptural text for centuries.

Mythological origins granted the Greek translation pure divine authority



THE 72 SCHOLARS

The Legend

According to the Letter of Aristeas, 72 scholars worked completely independently in isolation.

The Miracle

They miraculously produced 72 perfectly identical Greek translations of the Hebrew text.

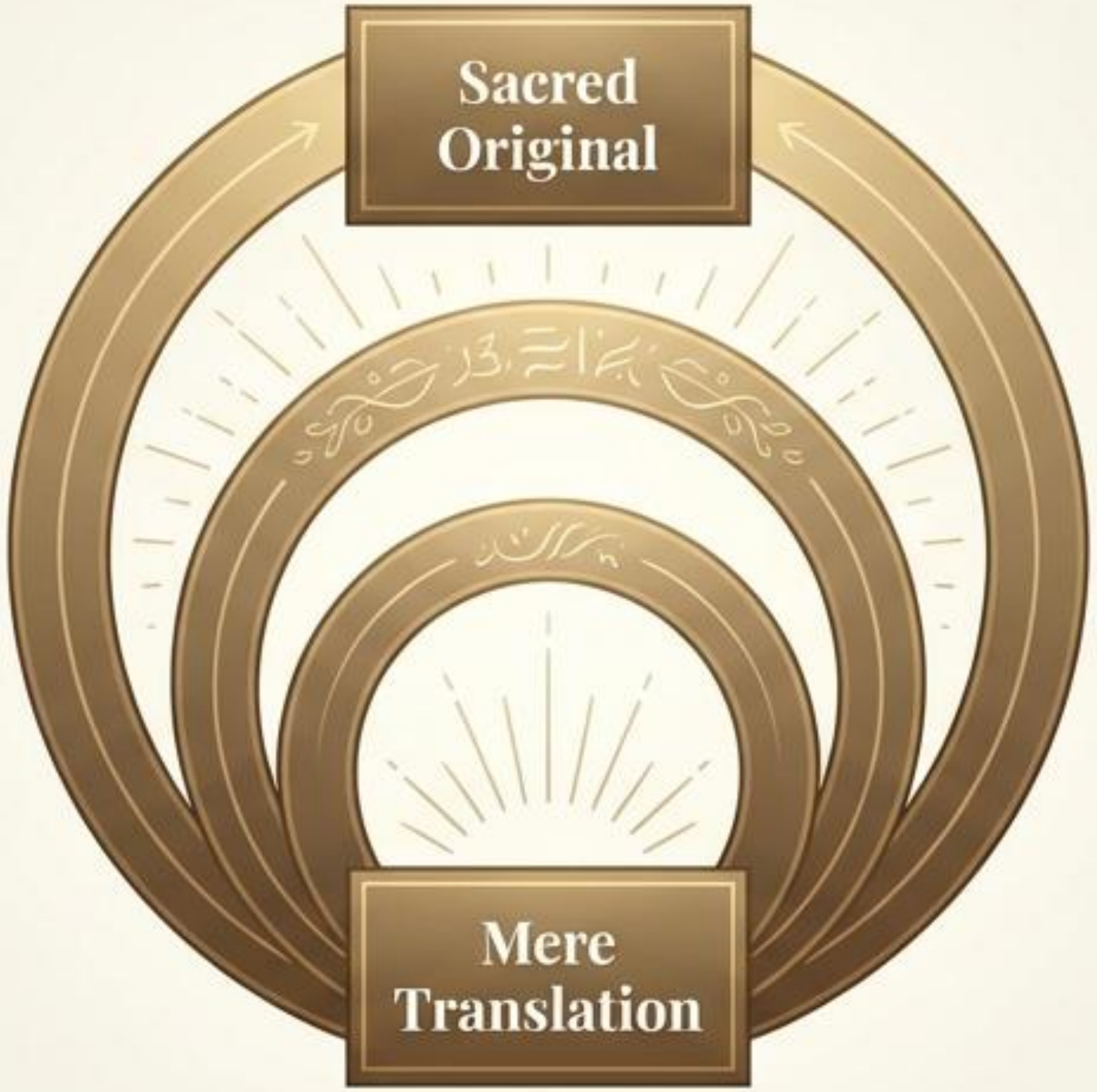
The Purpose of the Myth

This story was historically deployed to argue that the translation process itself was divinely guided, neutralizing the fear of human error.

Ideological validation can elevate translations to the status of source texts

THE ULTIMATE IMPACT ON THEORY

The Septuagint proves that a translation does not have to remain subordinate to its original.



THE TRANSFORMATION

Through religious validation and the myth of divine inspiration, the translated Greek text was granted the exact same sacred authority as the Hebrew original.

Final Takeaway: In the history of translation, ideological belief can ultimately erase the boundary between source text and interpretation.