

LOST IN TRANSLATION?

Greek Christianity vs English Christianity



A 5-Page Orthodox Study Guide on Language, Scripture, Tradition, and the Septuagint

Executive Summary

The lecture asks a deceptively simple question: *Are modern Christians reading the faith through the same language and worldview as the Apostles?* The answer has consequences far beyond academic interest. When Greek is translated into English, something is often lost — not accidentally, but structurally. Greek is a language built for **participation, mystery, and encounter**. English, shaped by the Reformation and Enlightenment, often pulls toward **analysis, definition, and information**.

The argument runs like this: The Apostles wrote in Greek. The early Church read, worshipped, and preached in Greek. The Old Testament the Apostles most often quoted was the Greek Septuagint (LXX). When Martin Luther formed his Protestant Bible, he bypassed the Septuagint in favor of a Hebrew text tradition consolidated by Rabbinic Judaism after the Temple's destruction — a tradition that did not include the Deuterocanonical books the early Church had received. Every English Bible since has inherited that decision.

Core claims of this guide: (1) Greek theological words carry meanings English translations flatten or lose. (2) The Eastern and Western Christian minds approach knowledge differently. (3) The Apostles used the Septuagint. (4) Luther's canon choices were not neutral. (5) The Orthodox Church retains the textual tradition of the early Church.

1. East vs West: Two Ways of Knowing



Left: The Cathedral of the Spilled Blood, St. Petersburg — a church designed as total immersion in sacred imagery. Right: The Good Shepherd — encounter and tenderness, not doctrine as proposition.

The Nine-Dot Problem and Hidden Assumptions

The lecture opens with a classic puzzle: nine dots arranged in a 3×3 grid. The challenge is to connect all nine dots with four straight lines without lifting your pen. Almost no one solves it on the first try — because people unconsciously assume the lines must stay inside the square. But the problem never said that. The square was an **assumed constraint** that was never stated.

This is how most Western Christians approach the Bible. They assume their framework is simply "what the Bible says" — but the framework itself was never examined. The Reformation, the Enlightenment, the invention of print, the English language, and the privatization of religion are all invisible boxes shaping how the text is read. Orthodoxy argues that before discussing what the Bible says, we must ask: *through whose eyes are we reading it?*

"Those inside a system cannot see the system they are in."

The Indiana Jones Analogy

The second analogy from the lecture is Indiana Jones entering a room full of traps. He knows the traps are there because he has read the ancient texts. But his **assumptions about how the room should work** nearly kill him every time. His prior knowledge becomes a liability when the system works differently than he expected.

This is how Western Christians often approach Orthodoxy or the Greek New Testament. They have read the Bible extensively — but have assumed that the English word "church" captures *ekklesia*, that "repentance" captures *metanoia*, that "hell" captures *Hades*, and that their personal reading is the normal and obvious one. The Orthodox claim is that this confidence is the very trap.

EASTERN (GREEK) MIND	WESTERN (LATIN/ENGLISH) MIND
Participation in mystery	Analysis of doctrine
Encounter with God as Person	Definition of God in propositions
Communion before comprehension	Comprehension before commitment
The Church as organism, not organization	The Church as gathered believers
Icons as presence, not illustration	Images as teaching tools only
Salvation as theosis (divinization)	Salvation as legal justification

The Eucharist as real participation in Christ

The Lord's Supper as memorial only

Church Father Witness — St. Basil the Great (4th c.): *"The aim of our philosophy is to become like God." Note: not "know the correct propositions about God," but become like God — a distinction impossible in post-Reformation English theological vocabulary, but perfectly natural in Greek.*

Reflection

- Do you read the Bible through a framework you've never examined?
- What if "repentance," "church," and "salvation" mean more in Greek than in your English Bible?
- Is your Christianity shaped more by the Apostles or by Reformation-era English vocabulary?

2. Greek Words That Changed Christianity



Christ Pantocrator ("Ruler of All") surrounded by angels — the Greek word *Pantocrator* has no adequate English equivalent. He is not merely "almighty" in a legal sense; He sustains all existence in every moment.

The following words appear throughout the New Testament. In most English translations, they are rendered with familiar Protestant vocabulary. But when the Greek is examined carefully, a different — and often richer — meaning emerges. These are not trivial translation choices. They shape what Christians believe about repentance, salvation, the Church, and God Himself.

■ΚΚΛΗΣΙΑ (Ekklesia) (Church)

English translations say "church," implying a building or voluntary religious organization. The Greek *ekklesia* means "the called-out assembly" — those summoned by God out of the world. It implies urgency, community, and divine initiative. It is not a club you join. It is a people you are called into. The Orthodox Church claims to be *the* *ekklesia*, not *a* church among many options.

MET■ΝΟΙΑ (Metanoia) (Repentance)

English "repentance" implies feeling sorry and resolving to do better — a moral decision. The Greek *metanoia* means a **complete transformation of the mind and nous (inner perception)**. The prefix *meta* means "beyond" or "after" — and *noia* comes from *nous* (mind, spirit, inner eye). Repentance in the Greek sense is not behavior modification. It is a reorientation of the entire self toward God. Luther's translation into Latin as *poenitentia* (do penance) contributed to the theology that triggered the Reformation.

ΘΕΩΣΙΣ (Theosis) (Divinization / Union with God)

This word barely exists in Western Christianity. In Eastern Orthodoxy it is central: the goal of the Christian life is *theosis* — participation in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). This is not becoming God in essence, but being transformed by grace into the likeness of Christ. St. Athanasius: "God became man so that man might become god." This is not heresy in the Eastern tradition — it is the Gospel.

ΠΑΡ■ΔΟΣΙΣ (Paradosis) (Tradition / That Which Is Handed Down)

In English, "tradition" often means human custom or outdated ritual. The Greek *paradosis* is a technical term meaning "the apostolic deposit" — what is delivered and received. Paul uses it for both the Eucharist (1 Cor. 11) and the Resurrection (1 Cor. 15). 2 Thessalonians 2:15 commands the Church to hold the *paradoseis* — both oral and written. This is not optional human tradition. It is the living apostolic inheritance.

Λ■ΓΟΣ (Logos) (Word)

John 1:1 says "In the beginning was the Word." The English "word" suggests speech or text — something written or spoken. The Greek *Logos* means reason, order, the rational principle sustaining all existence, divine speech made real. The Stoics used it for the rational principle underlying the cosmos. John claims Christ *is* this Logos — not just a word spoken by God, but the very reason for existence itself, become flesh. The translation "Word" is not wrong — but it is flat.

■ΑΗΣ (Hades) (Hell)

The New Testament uses *Hades* — the Greek realm of the dead — not the English "hell" (which implies the fiery place of eternal punishment). When English translators render *Hades* as "hell," they import an entire theological framework (eternal conscious torment by fire) that the Greek word does not carry. *Hades* in the New Testament is the place of the dead. *Gehenna* is the word translated "hell" from the Aramaic. These are distinct concepts collapsed into one English word.

ΠΙΣΤΕ■Ω (Pisteuo) (Believe / Faith)

English "believe" is largely intellectual — assent to a proposition. The Greek *pisteuo* carries the sense of **trust, commitment, and loyalty to a person**. John 3:16 does not merely say "intellectually assent that Jesus is divine." It says entrust yourself to Him. The Orthodox understand faith as a living relationship, not a doctrinal checklist. When faith is reduced to "believing the correct things," *pisteuo* loses its relational, participatory power.

3. The Septuagint, the Apostles, and Martin Luther



Left: Early Christian catacomb fresco, 2nd–3rd c. AD — the Church existed and read Scripture long before Luther. Right: Christ the Good Shepherd — the image the early Church used before Constantine, drawn from the Greek Old Testament tradition.

What Is the Septuagint (LXX)?

The Septuagint (abbreviated LXX, meaning "seventy") is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, produced in Alexandria, Egypt, beginning around **250 BC**. According to tradition, seventy-two Jewish scholars produced it at the request of Ptolemy II. It became the **standard Old Testament of the Hellenistic Jewish world** — and by extension, of the early Christian Church.

The Septuagint includes books not found in later Protestant Old Testaments: **Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), Baruch, and 1–2 Maccabees**, along with additions to Daniel and Esther. These are known in Catholic and Orthodox tradition as the Deuterocanonical books. Protestants call them the Apocrypha — a word meaning "hidden," often implying "not authoritative."

The New Testament Writers Used the Septuagint

This is one of the most significant and underappreciated facts in biblical scholarship: **when the New Testament quotes the Old Testament, it overwhelmingly follows the Septuagint text** — not the Hebrew text Protestant Bibles translate. This is not a minor detail. It means that Matthew, Paul, Luke, Peter, and the author of Hebrews were reading and citing the Greek Old Testament.

Isaiah 7:14 — A Critical Example: The Hebrew Masoretic Text says "a young woman (almah) shall conceive." The Septuagint translates this as "a **virgin** (parthenos) shall conceive." Matthew 1:23 quotes the **Septuagint version** to establish the Virgin Birth. If Luther's Masoretic Text is authoritative, the Hebrew does not say "virgin." Matthew's argument rests on the Septuagint.

Martin Luther and the Masoretic Text

When Martin Luther translated the Bible into German in the 1520s–1530s, he made several crucial choices. For the Old Testament, he turned primarily to the **Hebrew Masoretic Text** — a tradition codified by Rabbinic scholars after 90 AD, following the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD and the consolidation of Rabbinic Judaism at Jamnia.

This is the Orthodox critique: The Masoretic text was finalized **after** the New Testament was written, **after** the split between synagogue and Church, and **by scholars who rejected Jesus as Messiah**. The Septuagint, by contrast, was the text in use when Jesus walked the earth, when the Apostles preached, and when the early Church formed. It is the Old Testament Jesus and Paul quoted.

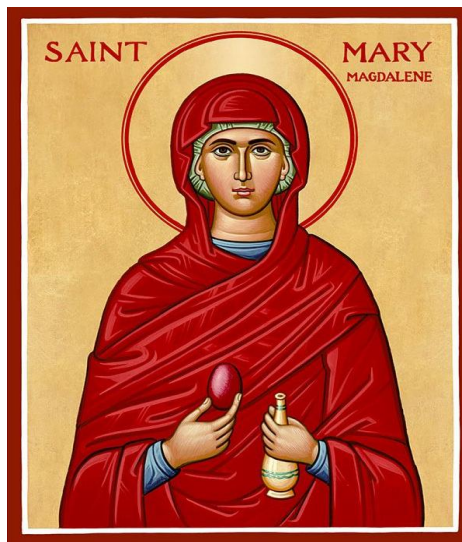
DATE	EVENT
~250 BC	Septuagint (LXX) produced in Alexandria — Greek Old Testament
30–95 AD	New Testament written — quotes LXX extensively

70 AD	Temple in Jerusalem destroyed — Rabbinic Judaism consolidates
~90 AD	Jamnia discussions — Rabbinic canon begins to exclude Deuterocanonicals
2nd–4th c.	Church Fathers (Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius) use and defend the LXX
1516–1534	Luther translates Bible — uses Hebrew Masoretic Text for Old Testament
1546	Council of Trent reaffirms Catholic Deuterocanonical books
Today	Orthodox Church retains the Septuagint tradition and Deuterocanon

Books Luther Removed

Book	Orthodox/Catholic Status	Key Content
Tobit	Deuterocanonical	Prayer, Angels (Raphael), Family faithfulness
Judith	Deuterocanonical	Courage and deliverance by a faithful woman
Wisdom of Solomon	Deuterocanonical	Prefigures Logos theology; quoted by Church Fathers
Sirach (Ecclesiasticus)	Deuterocanonical	Wisdom literature; cited by early Church
Baruch + Letter of Jeremiah	Deuterocanonical	Post-exile prophecy; quoted in early liturgy
1 Maccabees	Deuterocanonical	Historical record of the Maccabean revolt (Hanukkah)
2 Maccabees	Deuterocanonical	Contains resurrection theology; early Church used it

4. The Orthodox Challenge — Mary Magdalene and the Apostolic Witness



Left: St. Mary Magdalene — Equal-to-the-Apostles. She holds the red Paschal egg, symbol of Resurrection. Right: The Ascension — the Apostles and Theotokos witness Christ's return to the Father, the event that preceded Pentecost and the birth of the Church.

Why St. Mary Magdalene Belongs in This Discussion

Orthodoxy honors Mary Magdalene as **Equal-to-the-Apostles (Isapostolos)** because she was the first witness of the Resurrection and proclaimed "Christ is risen!" before the written Gospels existed. This is important for the translation debate: **the Resurrection was first proclaimed by a living witness in spoken Greek — not by a text.** Christianity did not begin as a book religion. It began as an apostolic witness carried in living persons.

The red egg she holds in Orthodox iconography represents the Resurrection. According to Eastern tradition, she presented this egg to the Emperor Tiberius, saying "Christ is risen" — the egg turned red as a sign. Whether historical legend or not, the symbolism is profound: the Resurrection transforms ordinary things. And it was first proclaimed in Greek, by a woman, before any New Testament canon existed.

"Before the canon was written, the Resurrection was proclaimed in Greek by living witnesses."

The Orthodox Claim in Summary

The cumulative argument of this study guide is not anti-Protestant in spirit. It is a serious invitation to examine assumptions. The Orthodox Church does not claim the Bible is unimportant. It claims the opposite: the Bible is so important that it must be read in its original language, within the worshipping community that received it, through the interpretive tradition the Apostles passed down.

CRITICAL QUESTION	ORTHODOX ANSWER
Which Old Testament did the Apostles use?	The Septuagint (LXX) — Greek Old Testament used by Paul, Matthew, Peter, Hebrews
Why does Isaiah 7:14 say "virgin" in Matthew but "young woman" in Protestant OT?	Because Matthew quotes the LXX, which says <i>parthenos</i> (virgin)
Why does 2 Maccabees contain resurrection theology if it is not Scripture?	The early Church read it as Scripture — and Luther removed it
If Tradition is suspect, who decided which books belong in the Bible?	The Church recognized the canon — the same Church Luther rejected

Can "repentance" convey metanoia? Can "church" convey ekklesia?	No — both flatten meanings that require Greek to express fully
What did theosis mean, and why did the Western Church lose this word?	The Western Church replaced participation-language with legal-language
Why should Christians prefer a Rabbinic canon over the Apostolic Septuagint?	The Orthodox Church has not changed its canon since the Apostles

Church Father Witness — St. Irenaeus of Lyons (2nd c.): *Against the Gnostics, Irenaeus cited not only the written Gospels but the apostolic preaching preserved in the churches. His argument was never "I have the correct private interpretation." It was: "The apostolic churches have received and guarded this faith — and the Septuagint is the Scripture the Apostles themselves used."*

Reflection

- Are we even reading the same Bible the Apostles read?
- What happens to the Virgin Birth argument if you use a Masoretic Old Testament?
- Why did Luther's translation of metanoia as "do penance" trigger the Reformation?
- If the early Church used the Septuagint, why did Protestantism abandon it?
- What would Christianity look like if it had never been filtered through Latin and English?
- If the Orthodox Church preserved the Septuagint, what else might it have preserved?

Study Aim: *This guide is written for a Protestant reader who loves Jesus and Scripture, but is willing to ask whether the language we read Scripture in — and the canon we read from — was shaped by forces outside the Apostolic Church. The question is not "is the Bible true?" The question is: which Bible, in which language, interpreted by whom?*

Artwork Note: All images are original Orthodox icons provided for this study guide. Icons used: Ascension of Christ, Saint Mary Magdalene Equal-to-the-Apostles, Christ the Good Shepherd (two traditions), Christ Pantocrator Surrounded by Angels, Early Christian Catacomb Fresco (Rome, 3rd c.), Cathedral of the Spilled Blood Interior (St. Petersburg).