Christian readers are often puzzled when they read a quotation from the Old Testament in the New Testament and then, in looking up the actual Old Testament text, discover that it is somewhat different from the cited quotation. Often, this difference is based on the fact that the Old Testament was translated from the standard version of the Hebrew Bible (the Masoretic text), whereas the New Testament is citing the same passage as it appears in the early Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint.

The Septuagint was used by Hellenistic Jews and by the early church. Most scholars believe that the Greek translation of the Pentateuch was produced by Jewish scholars in the mid-third century B.C. in Alexandria, Egypt. The rest of the Old Testament (along with some other books, including the Apocrypha) was completed during the following century or two. Some parts of the Septuagint reflect a more literal approach to translation, while others provide a freer rendition. Some portions are also more skillfully translated than others. Sometimes the Septuagint translators began with a Hebrew text that differed slightly from the standard, Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible.

The Septuagint is the version of the Old Testament with which early Greek-speaking Christians would have been familiar. Naturally, then, most of the Old Testament quotations found in the New Testament reflect its influence. In the vast majority of instances the Septuagint agrees with the Masoretic text—if not word-for-word, at least in basic thrust. In a few cases the Septuagint may even reflect the original Hebrew text better than the Masoretic text does. The Masoretic text may, for instance, contain a copyist’s error, so that it does not at a given point accurately reflect the original Hebrew text. Sometimes in such cases the Greek reading in the Septuagint allows scholars to reconstruct what was in the original Hebrew manuscript (most modern translations of the Old Testament are based on the Masoretic text, with occasional emendations drawn from the Septuagint).

When a New Testament author followed the Septuagint, the validity of his argument is not usually dependent upon peculiarities of the Septuagint rendering as over against the Masoretic text. In other words, the New Testament writers did not cite the Septuagint
because it said what they wanted it to say, while the Hebrew text did not, nor were they implying that the Septuagint is superior to the Hebrew. Rather, they cited the Septuagint because their readers were familiar with it—as well as, in general, with the Greek language. It was important to bear in mind that the Septuagint was prepared not by Christians but by Jewish scholars before the coming of Christ. Therefore, when the authors of the New Testament quoted the Septuagint, they could not be accused of using a translation that was prepared with their vested interests in mind.

When Hebrews 11:21 states that “by faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff,” the last clause agrees perfectly with the Septuagint rendering of Genesis 47:31. The Masoretic text, on the other hand, states that Jacob worshiped “on the top of his bed.” The author of Hebrews quoted the version of Scripture known to his readers to make the point that Jacob was a man of faith and that, even as he lay dying, his faith led him to bless his sons (trusting that God would fulfill the blessing). Whether Jacob was leaning on his staff or lying on his bed is not essential to the argument in Hebrews. Citing the text in the form known to the author’s contemporary readership would not have diminished its validity but rather would have made it easier for the audience to recognize a Scriptural citation.