

How the Bible Came to Us - #7

Two Latin Bibles Compete

1. While the official language of Rome—used by soldiers and merchants—was always Latin, the scholarly language of the Roman Empire—and the language of early Christianity—was almost universally Greek.
2. As we have noted, the growth of Christianity in the early centuries after Christ was almost explosive. Since Christianity was based on a “message,” which later was written out in the form of the Bible, each believer wanted to hear it read—or read it himself—in his own language.
3. When Constantine moved from Rome to Constantinople around A.D. 325, he left a power vacuum in Rome. In Constantinople, the cooperation between the emperor and the patriarch of the Eastern Orthodox Church (Greek Orthodox Church) cemented the use of the Septuagint translation of the Old Testament in Greek and the New Testament written in *Koine* Greek as the Bible they would use for more than a thousand years.
4. Back in Rome, however, changes were taking place. All the early Christian books written to or from Rome were in Greek. It was not until around A.D. 200 that Christian scholars began to write significant works in Latin. There are some hints that the first Latin translations of portions of the Bible were made in the eastern Mediterranean. But it was not long before the center of Latin Christianity was in North Africa, around Carthage.
5. Many people spoke both Latin and Greek. Thus, the early stages of Latin translations were undertaken probably by a number of ordinary people who translated for themselves. Just before A.D. 200, the New Testament was available in North Africa in Latin. Probably by A.D. 250, the entire Bible was available in Latin. There is good evidence that some of the earliest Latin translations were from a version of the Greek that was prior to the days of Origen. (The earliest Latin Bibles were thus translations of translations.)
6. But in contrast to the Greek of Constantinople, Rome was becoming increasingly Latinized.
7. It is not that Latin was not already a major language. The writings of Cicero, Caesar, Virgil, Avid, and others demonstrate that great scholars were using Latin. But among Christians, even the earliest recognized bishops of Rome all had Greek names. Finally, around A.D. 190, Pope Victor I (if we can really call him a pope) began writing theological treatises in Latin. One of the earliest Christian documents in Latin was *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs*. It is a first-hand account of an actual trial of seven Christian men and five women before a Roman procurator in the town of Scili. Those twelve were forced to choose either to recognize an image of Caesar as a “god” by offering incense to it, or death. They chose death. The story was written entirely in Latin.
8. Not long thereafter, Tertullian, of Carthage, wrote his voluminous *Apologies* in Latin. He was clearly using a Latin translation of the Bible as he sought to refute heretics.
9. Soon, there were so many different translations (versions) of the Latin Bible that it became confusing. Some versions contained passages which others did not. Unfortunately, no complete manuscript of the old Latin Bible is in existence today. We have the old Latin version of the apocryphal books of Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and Maccabees. They are preserved in the Vulgate because Jerome refused to recognize them as inspired and refused to translate them but the older translations were included in the Latin Vulgate. We

also have the old Latin translations of Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges (up to chapter 20), Ruth, Esther, Tobit, the Psalms (only slightly revised), and considerable portions of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and of “*the Prophets*,” but only portions of Samuel, Kings, Ecclesiastes, Job, and Proverbs.

10. Perhaps the most important use of these old Latin translations for scholars today is to give us a window on the original Septuagint since they were translated before the days of Origen.
11. Then came Jerome. Jerome was born into a relatively wealthy family and received a great education. He was born at Stridon on the border of Dalmatia and Pannonia around A.D. 340. Later, he traveled through the east for about four years, spent five years in self-discipline in the desert of Chalcis, and finally undertook a thorough study of the Hebrew language under a former Jewish rabbi who had been converted to Christianity.
12. During those years, by letter, he maintained a close contact with Pope Damasus. In A.D. 379, he moved to Antioch where he was ordained. Then, while spending time at Constantinople, he became familiar with the scholars who were there. Finally in A.D. 382, he went to Rome where he spent more than two years in close association with Pope Damasus.
13. Pope Damasus recognized the great scholarly abilities of Jerome. He officially asked Jerome to undertake a thorough new translation of the entire Bible into Latin.
14. Jerome began—as almost all new translators do—with a revision of the Gospels. That appeared in A.D. 383. That was followed in the next few years by the book of Acts and a revision of the rest of the New Testament—probably done by others but closely supervised by Jerome. The latter part of the New Testament grew increasingly close to the Old Latin—revisions only being made to the Old Latin where required by the Greek text.
15. Then Jerome turned to the Old Testament. For the Old Testament, he translated from the Septuagint—revising it only slightly from older Latin translations—and produced what came to be known as the *Roman Psalter*. This Latin version of the Psalms is still used as the official version at St. Peter’s in Rome and is also the official version in Milan.
16. Pope Damasus died around A.D. 384, and Jerome left Rome for Palestine. He spent about five years touring Palestine and Egypt and then established two religious houses at Bethlehem, one for monks and one for nuns.
17. During that time, probably around A.D. 387, Jerome again revised the book of Psalms. This time he used the Septuagint while carefully considering some of Origen’s critical marks and produced the *Gallican Psalter* which got its name because it was first adopted in Gaul. This translation, made from the Greek manuscripts available to Jerome at the time, was adopted by the Roman Catholic Church and remains the official translation of the book of Psalms. It is included in the Latin Vulgate.
18. Jerome soon realized that when discussing the Old Testament with Jews, it did no good to appeal to the readings of the Septuagint since the Jews did not recognize the Septuagint as being authentic. So he began to translate the Old Testament, one book at a time, from the original Hebrew into Latin, sending copies to his friends. He began with the easier historical books of the Old Testament, Samuel and Kings. That was about A.D. 390. Then he decided to translate the Psalms once more, this time, from the original Hebrew. The “Major Prophets” and the “Minor Prophets” were next, followed by Job, Ezra, and Chronicles. By A. D. 398, he

had translated Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs. Then he took up the real challenge, the Pentateuch. Finally, in A.D. 404, he translated Joshua, Judges, Ruth, and Esther.

19. As a final appendix to his work, he translated the additional apocryphal portions of Daniel and Esther from the Aramaic. He also translated the apocryphal books of Tobit and Judith. But he refused to translate Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Maccabees, and Baruch.
20. One might have thought that he would be praised for his long, arduous task. But instead, he received criticism from almost every side because his new translation was different from what people were used to. He got tired of responding to critics and developed a very sharp pen and a hot temper in his responses. The conservative Christians and pastors of his day—like others in more recent times—wanted to “hang on to” the “old versions” because they were familiar and somehow seemed to be more “holy” than the new translation.
21. Jerome himself finally died in A.D. 420. He never seemed to get past the criticisms during his lifetime. But the excellent quality of his work, translating into very idiomatic Latin, eventually “won the day.” Jerome’s Latin Vulgate became the Bible of the western world for over a thousand years. In all the long history of translations into various languages, only the Septuagint has been more influential than Jerome’s Latin Vulgate.
22. But as you might guess, the old Latin continued to be used, side by side, with Jerome’s new translation. That led to corruption of one by the other and vice versa.
23. One important fact sticks out regarding the Latin Vulgate by Jerome. Because a single man was the primary contributor to the entire Bible, it has consistency throughout. He made sure that the prophecies from the Old Testament had the same wording as the fulfillments in the New Testament. For example, Isaiah 7:14 says “virgin,” to accord with the fulfillment in Matthew, rather than “young woman,” like the Hebrew original.
24. Efforts are under way to produce a “critical edition” of the Old Latin and the Vulgate but that is a real challenge because there are no less than 8000 copies of various kinds in libraries in Europe. The earliest copy that we have available today of Jerome’s Latin Vulgate comes from the 6th century.
25. The Latin Bible, mostly Jerome’s Latin Vulgate translation, was the first book ever to be printed by movable type. The Gutenberg Bible was printed between 1452 and 1456. It was an incredible achievement. But, as a presentation of the Latin Bible, it had many errors! Gutenberg had his hands full producing a new technology without doing a critical study of the Latin text!
26. When Protestants began to challenge the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century, Catholics responded in turn by declaring the Latin Vulgate to be the authoritative Bible of the Roman Catholic Church.

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