

How the Bible Came to Us - #8

Christianity Expands into New Languages and Cultures

1. We have already mentioned the fact that the Greek Septuagint of the Old Testament and the *Koine* Greek of the New Testament were the dominant Scriptures in the eastern Mediterranean for a millennium. In the west, the Latin Vulgate was dominant.
2. But there were many other areas where Christianity spread and they had other languages. Translations of the Bible were made for them in their own languages. Toward the northeast, there were the Armenian and the Georgian languages while on the African continent, it was the Ethiopic language. In between were language groups we know very little about but which were also blessed by having the Bible in their own language: Arabic, Nubian, Persian, Sogdian, and Albanian.
3. We know very little about the spread of Christianity in those areas except for fragments of biblical translations and what we have discovered about their stories.
4. In central and western Europe, there were also translations made into Gothic, Slavonic, Anglo-Saxon, "Old High" German, and "Low" German.
5. For several of those languages, an alphabet had to be invented and the Christian Bible was the very first thing written in that new language.
6. Armenia was much larger in those days than it is today. Through some unusual circumstances, Gregory the Illuminator, who lived from A.D. 242-332, baptized King Tiridates III about A.D. 300 and Christianity became the national religion of Armenia at a time when Christians were still being severely persecuted in the west.
7. A Christian missionary by the name of Bishop Mesrob (some spell his name Mesrop) devised an alphabet of 36 letters and translated—or oversaw the translation of—the Bible into the Armenian language about A.D. 410. It was probably originally translated from the Syriac. Later, around A.D. 433, he oversaw the revision of the Armenian Bible based on available Greek manuscripts. The Armenian Bible is unusual in that it includes several apocryphal works including *The Death of Jeremiah*, *The Death of Ezekiel*, *The Hymn of Asenath*, and *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*. In the New Testament, the Armenian Bible includes *The Epistle of the Corinthians to Paul* and *3 Corinthians*. Furthermore, each book of the Old Testament has a preface containing an introduction and summary of its contents. The Armenian translation, being in a language close to the Greek, is beautifully done and very accurately reflects the original Greek.
8. Also, in the Caucasus region was the country of Georgia. Christianity reached Georgia through the efforts of a slave woman named Nina. There is some evidence that she may have been a convert from Judaism. Bishop Mesrob devised a new alphabet for the Georgians. Using that alphabet, the Bible was translated around A.D. 450.
9. To the people from western European civilizations, the country of Ethiopia was usually thought of as being "the end of the world." During the 4th century, two missionaries known as

Frumentius and Edesius from Tyre introduced Christianity to Ethiopia. Sometime in the 5th or 6th century, the Bible was translated into the ancient Ethiopian language of Ge'ez, probably from the Greek.

10. There is good evidence that Christianity became a state religion in Ethiopia as early as the 5th century. The earliest translations into Ethiopic were probably done under the auspices of the newly converted king. The Ethiopic Bible omitted Ezra and Nehemiah as well as Maccabees. But it did include the book of *Enoch* and the *third book of Baruch*, both of which have hardly been preserved in other languages.
11. Christianity continued to grow in Egypt as well. The fact that the Nile River Valley had desert on both sides provided an easy hiding place for Christians to escape from Roman persecution. Two important names remain from that time: Antony and Pachum. These two began to organize ascetic communities which were probably the earliest stages of the monastic movement.
12. We know that Christianity made inroads into Arabia during apostolic times. Arabian people were present at Pentecost. (Acts 2:11) And later, Paul spent up to three years in the Arabian desert. (Galatians 1:17) There is some evidence that there were Arabic translations of the Bible as early as the 3rd century. There seem to have been a large number of different translations of portions of Scripture into Arabic.
13. In Arabic, a translation from the Coptic still exists. There are other Arabic manuscripts apparently translated from the Samaritan Pentateuch. Later, a translation was made from the original Hebrew by Saadya, the Gaon, a Jew born in Upper Egypt around A.D. 892 and who moved to Babylon and became the most famous Jew of his time. But, interestingly enough, while the Pentateuch and the book of Joshua were translated from the Hebrew, many other portions of the Old Testament were translated from the Aramaic Peshitta, and some portions—including Psalms, Proverbs, and some of “*the Prophets*”—were translated from the Greek Septuagint.
14. Missionaries also reached Nubia (present-day Sudan) sometime in the 3rd century. There are small fragments of a Nubian Bible translated between the 8th and 10th century.
15. Christianity moved further east into Persia by the 3rd or 4th century. Many Persians could probably read the Syriac, but a true Persian translation of Scripture was made. Only a few fragments remain. Further east, along the silk road into East Turkestan and Central Asia, the spread of Christianity resulted in a Bible translated into the *lingua franca* of that area, Sogdian.
16. Incredible as it may seem, there is a tradition suggesting that Bishop Mesrob also created an alphabet for the Albanians (present-day Azerbaijan). Later, Bishop Jeremiah translated the Bible into that language. Unfortunately, we have not yet found any trace of the actual biblical text.
17. Turning now to central and western Europe, in the area between the Danube and the Black Sea, two large tribes were dominant. These tribes were influenced by Arianism. They were known as the Visigoths and the Ostrogoths and they spoke a Gothic language. An important

missionary by the name of Ulfilas (or Wulfila) went there between A.D. 311 and 383. In order to produce a Bible in their language, he had to invent a Gothic alphabet. He used characters from the Greek and the Latin as well as other characters. Interestingly enough, he translated the entire Bible but left out the book of Kings—apparently because he thought it was too violent!

18. Further north and east, the Slavic peoples were also reached by two brothers—Methodius and Cyril. They were of Greek nobility from Macedonia. After being educated in Constantinople, they moved to Moravia in what is now the Czech Republic. Before his death in A.D. 869, Cyril invented an alphabet known as Glagolytic. After his death, his brother Methodius oversaw the translation of the entire Bible into what is now known as Old Church Slavonic. He chose to leave out the books of Maccabees, apparently because he thought they were too violent.
19. Christianity also reached Great Britain. There are traces of Christianity there as early as the 4th century. Later, considerable missionary work was done there by Celtic and Roman missionaries. We have only traces of an Anglo-Saxon translation of the Bible done sometime between the 7th and 8th centuries. It was probably translated from the Latin Vulgate.
20. In western Europe, Christianity was carried to the Franks along the lower Rhine River as evidenced by the baptism of King Clovis I in A.D. 496. Only very small fragments of the ancient German translation made at that time are extant.

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Last modified: December 9, 2007

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