

IMPORTANT EARLY TRANSLATIONS OF THE BIBLE*

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It is commonly known, the Bible has been translated into more languages than any other piece of literature. What is not generally appreciated, however, is the great increase in the number of different translations that have been produced relatively recently, that is, during the 19th and 20th centuries. Before this period the church was slow in providing renderings of the Scriptures in other languages.

According to a recent calculation, there are 6,170 living languages in the world.¹ However, by the year A.D. 600 the four Gospels had been translated into only eight of these languages. These were Latin and Gothic in the West, and Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, and Sogdian in the East. One might have expected that Augustine and other Christian leaders in North Africa would have provided a translation of the Gospels in Berber or Punic, or that Irenaeus and his successors would have made a translation into the Celtic dialect used in Gaul. But there is no evidence of the existence of such versions in antiquity, despite the presence of Christian communities in these areas.

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¹The most recent information is provided by Barbara F. Grimes, *Ethnologies, Languages of the World*, 11th ed. (Dallas, TX: International Academic Bookstore, 1988), 741. Estimates of the number of languages differ because judgments differ as to whether a particular form of speech should be called a separate language or even a distinct dialect. In certain instances, local government decree has given language status to a dialect. In other instances, what are really distinct languages have been regarded as mere dialects, as is the case of many of the so-called dialects of Chinese. Linguistically they are quite distinct languages, but because of their orthographic dependence on Mandarin Chinese, they have generally been considered dialects.

When printing with movable type was invented by Johannes Gutenberg in 1456, only 33 languages had any part of the Bible. Even when the Bible society movement began some two centuries ago, parts of the Scriptures had been rendered into only 67 languages. During the 19th century, however, more than 400 languages received some part of the Scriptures, and within the first half of the 20th century some part of the Bible was published in more than 500 languages. This rapid increase in the preparation of many versions of the Bible is due to the role played by the Bible societies, by Wycliffe Bible Translators, and similar organizations. At the close of 1991, the entire Bible had been made available in 318 languages and dialects, and portions of the Bible in 1,946 languages and dialects. Because many of these languages are used by great numbers of people, it is estimated that today four out of five people in the world, or 80 percent, have at least one book of the Bible in their mother tongue.²

The history of the translation of the Bible can be divided into four major periods. The first period includes the efforts to translate the Scriptures into the dominant languages of the ancient world. The second important period of Bible translating was related to the Reformation, when renderings were no longer made from the Latin Vulgate but from the original Hebrew and Greek into the vernaculars of Europe. The third period may be called the great "missionary endeavor," when pioneer translators undertook the preparation of renderings into the hundreds of languages in which there was often not even an alphabet before these men and women undertook to reduce such languages to written form. Such work is still going on, while a fourth period has already begun. This is characterized primarily by translations being produced in the newly developing nations, not by missionaries but by, trained nationals of these countries. Properly trained people can always translate much more effectively into their own mother tongue than into a foreign language.

This article traces the early history of the process of translating the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures into other languages.

ANCIENT VERSIONS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT MADE FOR THE USE OF JEWS

THE SEPTUAGINT

The first translation of the Scriptures into another language is the Greek Septuagint, dating from the third and second cen-

² *The Book of a Thousand Tongues*, 2d ed. (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972), viii.

turies B.C. Not only is it the oldest, but it is also one of the most valuable of the translations from antiquity. Whether one considers its fidelity to the original, its influence over the Jews for whom it was prepared, its relationship to the New Testament Greek, or its place in the Christian church, it stands preeminent in the light it casts on the study of the Scriptures.

The story of the origin of this version is given in a document of uncertain date called the *Letter of Aristeas*.³ This letter purports to be a contemporary record by a certain Aristeas, an official at the court of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285-246 B.C.), who claims to have personal knowledge as an eyewitness of the following details. Ptolemy wished to include in the royal library at Alexandria copies of all the books known to the world. On the suggestion of his librarian, Demetrius of Phalerum, that the laws of the Jews (presumably, the Pentateuch) deserved a place in the library, the king ordered that a letter be written to Eleazar, the Jewish high priest in Jerusalem, requesting that he send six elders from each of the 12 tribes who were well versed in the Jewish Law and able to translate it into Greek (§§ 9-11 and 28-34).

Arriving in Alexandria, the 72 translators were conducted to a restful spot on the island of Pharos, where every provision was made for their needs in well-appointed quarters. So they set to work; as they completed their several tasks, they would reach an agreement on each by comparing versions. Whatever was agreed upon was suitably copied out under the direction of Demetrius (§ 302). By happy coincidence the task of translation was completed in 72 days (§ 307). The work was done in such a way that the entire Jewish community of Alexandria accepted the translation as an accurate rendering (§ 310). A curse was invoked on any who would alter the rendering by any addition, transposition, or deletion (§ 311).

Most scholars who have analyzed the letter have concluded that the author of this story cannot have been the man he represented himself to be, but was a Jew who wrote a fictitious account in order to enhance the importance of the Hebrew Scriptures by suggesting that a pagan king had recognized their significance and therefore arranged for their translation into Greek. The real reason for undertaking the work, it is now generally agreed,

³ This letter has survived in 23 manuscripts, which have been collated by André Pelletier, S.J., for the series "Sources chrétiennes" (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1962). The most recent English translation is by R. J. H. Shutt in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 7-34. For a full discussion of problems connected with the letter, see Moses Hadas, *Aristeas to Philocrates* (Letter of Aristeas) (New York: Harper, 1951) and Sidney Jellicoe, *The Septuagint and Modern Study* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

arose from the liturgical and educational needs of the large Jewish community in Alexandria, many of whom had forgotten their Hebrew or let it grow rusty and spoke only the common Greek of the Mediterranean world. But they remained Jews and wanted to understand the ancient Scriptures, on which their faith and life depended. This, then, was the real reason for making the Greek Septuagint, the first translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.

From internal considerations the date of the letter may be assigned to about 150-100 B.C. It was known to Josephus, who paraphrased portions in his *Antiquities of the Jews* (12.12-118). Philo's account of the origin of the Septuagint (*On Moses*, 2.25-44) reproduces certain features of Aristeas, but there are also divergences. For example Aristeas (§ 302) represents the translators as comparing their work as they wrote it and producing an agreed-on version, whereas according to Philo each of the translators, working under divine inspiration, arrived at identical phraseology as though dictated by an invisible prompter.

In the following centuries Christian authors further embellished the narrative of Aristeas. The scope of the translators' work embraced not just the Law but the entire Old Testament, according to Justin Martyr, at the middle of the second Christian century.⁴ Later that century Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, stated that Ptolemy, fearing that the Jewish translators might conspire to conceal the truth found in their sacred books, put each one in a separate cubicle and commanded them each to write a translation. They did so, and when their translations were read before the king, they were found to give the same words and the same names from beginning to end "so that even the pagans who were present recognized that the scriptures had been translated through the inspiration of God."⁵

Underneath the accretions and behind the story as told by Aristeas, modern scholars are generally in agreement on the following points.⁶ (1) The Pentateuch was translated first as a whole, and it has a unity of style that distinguishes it from the later translations of the Prophets and the Writings. (2) The ho-

⁴ In Justin Martyr's *Dialogue with Trypho* (68. 7) the mention of the "translation of the 70 elders" relates not to a Pentateuchal passage but to Isaiah.

⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.21.2 (apud Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.8.11-15). For an account of still further elaborations in the third and fourth centuries, see Sidney Jellicoe, *The Septuagint and Modern Study*, 44-47, and Hadas, *Aristeas to Philocrates*, 73-80.

⁶ For these several points on which there is general agreement among scholars, see W. F. Howard's succinct account in *The Bible in Its Ancient and English Versions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 43-44.

mogeneity of the translation makes it improbable that so large a number as 70 were at work on the Pentateuch. A rabbinic version of the story mentions five as the number of translators.⁷ (3) The Hebrew scrolls were possibly imported from Palestine. (4) The language of the version is similar to the Greek used in vernacular papyri found in Egypt and contains Egyptian words. This suggests that the translators were Alexandrian and not Palestinian Jews.

The Septuagint differs from the Hebrew Bible both in the order of the biblical books and in the fact that it includes more books. The threefold division into the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings is abandoned, and the books are grouped in the sequence of law, history, wisdom literature, and prophets. Some of the books not included in the Hebrew Scriptures are Greek translations of Hebrew originals (Tobit, 1 Maccabees, and Ecclesiasticus, also known as the Wisdom of Jesus the Son of Sirach), and others are of Greek composition (Wisdom of Solomon; 2, 3, and 4 Maccabees; and others). Apart from these additional books, the Septuagint also differs from the Hebrew Bible in the supplemental matter contained in certain books that are common to both. The Greek form of the Book of Esther, which in Hebrew contains 163 verses, is increased by the insertion of six sections embracing an additional 107 verses. The Book of Daniel receives three supplements; in the English Apocrypha of the King James Version these are called the History of Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, and the Song of the Three Holy Children. On the other hand, in the Septuagint the Book of Job is about one-sixth shorter than the Hebrew text, and the Book of Jeremiah lacks about one-eighth of the material in the Hebrew text. In both of these cases it may well be that the translators were working with a sharply different Hebrew text from what later became the traditional Masoretic text. The translation of the Book of Daniel was so deficient that it was wholly rejected by the Christian church, and a translation made in the second century A.D. by Theodotion was used from the fourth century onward in its place.

The importance of the Septuagint as a translation is obvious. Besides being the first translation ever made of the Hebrew Scriptures, it was the medium through which the religious ideas of the Hebrews were brought to the attention of the world. It was the Bible of the early Christian church, and the New Testament writers usually quoted the Septuagint. Its subsequent influence was immense. In the third century Origen incorporated the Septuagint

⁷ *Masechet Soferim*, ed. Joel Miller (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1878), i. 8.

text into his Hexapla, an elaborate scholarly edition of the Old Testament prepared with great care and industry. This huge work presented in six narrow columns the Hebrew text, the Hebrew text transliterated into Greek characters, the Septuagint text, and the text of three other Greek versions prepared in the second century A.D. by Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion. Other Christian recensions of the fourth century, attributed to Lucian and Hesychius, were primarily stylistic in character.

Over the centuries the Septuagint has had a wide influence. It became the basis for daughter versions of the Old Testament in many languages, including Old Latin, Coptic, Gothic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Christian Palestinian Aramaic, Syriac (in Paul of Tella's translation around 616 of Origen's Hexaplaric text), Arabic, and Slavonic. Finally the importance of the Septuagint can be judged from the circumstance that it remains to this day the authoritative biblical text of the Old Testament for the Greek Orthodox Church.

THE JEWISH TARGUMS

The Targums are interpretive renderings of the books of the Hebrew Scriptures (with the exception of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Daniel) into Aramaic. Such versions were needed when Hebrew ceased to be the normal medium of communication among the Jews. In synagogue services the reading of the Scriptures was followed by a translation into the Aramaic vernacular of the populace. For a reading from the Pentateuch the Aramaic translation followed each verse of the Hebrew; for a reading from the Prophets three verses were followed by the Aramaic translation.

At first the oral Targum was a simple paraphrase in Aramaic, but eventually it became more elaborate and incorporated explanatory details inserted here and there into the translation of the Hebrew text. To make the rendering more authoritative as an interpretation, it was finally reduced to writing. Two officially sanctioned Targums, produced first in Palestine and later revised in Babylonia, are the Targum of Onkelos⁸ on the Pentateuch and the Targum of Jonathan on the Prophets, both of which were in use in the third century of the Christian era.

During the same period the Targum tradition continued to flourish in Palestine. In addition to fragments and citations that have been collected, the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch is found, primarily, in three forms. The two that have been the most studied are the Pseudo-Jonathan Targum and the Fragmentary

⁸ Though the name Onkelus corresponds to Aquila, there is no reason to ascribe this Targum to the Aquila who made a literalistic Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures in the second century.

Targum, which contains renderings of only approximately 850 biblical verses, phrases, or words. In the mid-20th century a neglected manuscript in the Vatican library, identified as Neofiti 1, was discovered to be a nearly complete copy of the Palestinian Targum to the Pentateuch. Though copied in the 16th century, its text has the distinction of being the earliest form of the Palestinian Targum. It is somewhat less paraphrastic than Pseudo-Jonathan in that its explanatory additions are fewer in number and more terse in expression. The wide divergences among these Targums clearly indicate that, they are "unofficial," in that their text was never fixed. There are no reliable data as to who the authors and compilers were, under what circumstances and for what specific purposes they labored, and how literary transmission was achieved.

Though the several Targums display certain common features, there are also many differences of rendering among them, ranging from literalistic to paraphrastic, incorporating a variety of kinds of explanatory comments. Sometimes an anthropomorphic expression in the Hebrew concerning God is softened or eliminated in the Targum. In speaking of the relationship of God to the world, reverence for the God of Israel led the Targumist to employ surrogates for the Deity, such as "Word" (*Memra*), "Glory" (*Yeqara*, *Iqar*), or "Presence" (*Shekinah*, Aramaic *Shekinta*). Thus in Genesis 1:16-17 Targum Neofiti reads, "The *Word of the Lord* created the two large luminaries . . . and the *Glory of the Lord* set them in the firmament," and in Genesis 2:2-3 it reads, "On the seventh day the *Word of the Lord* completed the work which he had created . . . and the *Glory of the Lord* blessed the seventh day."

As was mentioned earlier, besides providing an Aramaic rendering of the Scripture text, the Targumist also sometimes provided interpretive expansions. Typical of such interpolations are the following:

"And whatever Adam called *in the language of the sanctuary* a living creature, that was its name" (Palestinian Targum, Gen. 2:19)

"Behold, I have granted them a hundred and twenty years *in case they might repent, but they failed to do so*" (Palestinian Targum, Gen. 6:3).

"And he [Moses] reached the mount over *which the glory of the Shekinah of the Lord was revealed Horeb*" (Targum Neofiti, Exod. 3:1).

"Let Reuben live *in this world and not die in the second death, in which death the wicked die in the world to come*" (Palestinian Targum, Deut. 33:6).

Despite their self-professed purpose to be a translation and/or explanatory paraphrase of Scripture, here and there the Targums also present instances of what is termed converse translation,⁹ in which the Aramaic text contradicts what is said in the Hebrew. This modification is accomplished through a variety of devices, including the addition or deletion of the negative particle, or the replacement of the original biblical verb with another of opposite meaning. Neofiti on Exodus 33:3 reads, "I will not remove my presence from among you," whereas the Hebrew text reads, "I will not go up among you." Cain's cry in the Hebrew text, "Behold, you have driven me this day from the land, and from your face I shall be hidden" (Gen. 4:14), is changed to read, "Behold, you have driven me this day from upon the land, but it is not possible to be hidden from you" (Targums Onkelos and Neofiti). In both these instances the Targumist was unwilling to accept the implication that God's presence and power could be circumscribed or limited. In the Targum on Genesis 4:23 Lamech boasted, "I have slain a man for wounding me, a young man on account of which my progeny would be destroyed." Here the Targumist changed a bloodthirsty song of triumph into an affirmation of divine justice.

In passing through the territory of the descendants of Esau, the Israelites were instructed in Deuteronomy 2:6, "You shall buy water from them, so that you may drink." Since this verse is followed by the observation that "these forty years the Lord your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing," the buying of food and water appeared to be inappropriate to the Targumist. So he contradicted the biblical text and the Targum reads, "You need not buy food from them for money, since manna from heaven descends for you; neither need you buy water from them, since the well of water ascends with you, up to the mountain tops and down into the valleys" (Targum Neofiti).

All translations of the Bible are necessarily interpretive to some extent, but the Targums differ in that they are interpretive as a matter of policy, and often to an extent that far exceeds the bounds of translation or even paraphrase. It is perhaps against such license that Rabbi Judah (2nd century A.D.) declared with paradoxical vehemence, "He who translates a biblical verse literally is a liar, but he who elaborates on it is a blasphemer."¹⁰

⁹ See Michael Klein, "Converse Translation: A Targumic Technique," *Biblica* 57 (1976), 515-37, and Etan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of the Bible* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988), 33-36 and 151-66.

¹⁰ *Tosephta*, Megillah 4:41, ed. M. S. Zuckermann (Jerusalem: Bamberger & Wahrman, 1937), 228.

ANCIENT TRANSLATIONS OF PART OR ALL OF THE BIBLE, INTENDED CHIEFLY FOR CHRISTIANS

Of the several ancient translations of both Old and New Testaments, the Syriac versions and the Latin versions are generally considered the most important, both for their own sake and for their having become the basis of many daughter translations.¹¹ It has been disputed whether the Scriptures were first translated into Syriac or into Latin.

SYRIAC VERSIONS

At Antioch of Syria, the third largest city of the Roman Empire, the followers of Jesus were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). Though most of the mixed population of Antioch were acquainted with Greek, when the new faith spread elsewhere in Syria during the second half of the second century, the need was felt for a rendering of the Scriptures into the mother tongue of the populace. So Syrian Christians, whose language was akin to Hebrew and Aramaic, though using a different script, soon began to put the New Testament, or most of it, into their own language. Early evidence is not very plentiful and the material is limited, but more has survived than perhaps one might have expected.

The first part of the New Testament to be translated, as would be expected, was the four Gospels. Two ancient manuscripts, copied in the fourth or fifth century and preserving forms of this rendering, have been identified, the Curetonian and the Sinaitic Syriac manuscripts. These are valuable witnesses to the Old Syriac version. There was also current at the close of the second century a harmony of the Gospels, the work of a Christian scholar named Tatian, who wove into one narrative the material of all four Gospels. Whether his work was first published in Greek at Rome about A.D. 170, or in Syriac in his native land, has not been determined with finality. In any case for the next several centuries Christian congregations throughout the Middle East made use of this harmony, known by its Greek name, the Diatessaron (Greek for "through the Four"). Unfortunately the witnesses to the Diatessaron that are extant today are, with the exception of one imperfect leaf of Greek text, secondary and tertiary witnesses.

The form of the Syriac Bible that came to prevail in Eastern churches is called the Peshitta, meaning "simple" or "common." It is not known whether the term refers to the simple, nonarchaic language the version uses, or to its unifying of different existing

¹¹ For information concerning other ancient translations, reference may be made to the present writer's volume, *The Ancient Versions of the New Testament: Their Origin, Transmission, and Limitations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

translations. The Old Testament translation, it appears, was made directly from the Hebrew, probably in the second or third century. At a later date it was revised by comparison with the Greek Septuagint, and the additional books present in Septuagint manuscripts were translated into Syriac.

The process of producing the New Testament in Syriac from the Old Syriac version probably began before the end of the fourth century and seems to have been completed by Rabbula, bishop of Edessa (411-435). Since the Syrian church did not (and does not) accept as canonical the four lesser Catholic Epistles (2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude) and the Book of Revelation, the Peshitta New Testament contains only 22 books.

Subsequently two other Syriac versions of the New Testament were made. At the beginning of the sixth century Philoxenus, the Jacobite bishop of Hierapolis in eastern Syria, commissioned Polycarp, a chorepiscopus, to revise the Peshitta version on the basis of Greek manuscripts. Now, seemingly for the first time in Syriac, to the 22 books included in the Peshitta New Testament the other five books were added. This work was completed in 507-508. Since the Philoxenian version had been sponsored by Jacobite ecclesiastics, it was used only by the Monophysite branch of Syriac-speaking Christendom.

In 616 the Philoxenian version of the New Testament was drastically revised throughout by Thomas of Harkel. The chief characteristic of the Harklean version is its slavish adaptation to the Greek, to such an extent that here and there even clarity is sacrificed. Occasionally, instead of a native Syriac word the Harklean uses a Greek loan-word, transliterated into Syriac.

About the same time (616-617) Paul, the Jacobite bishop of Tella in Mesopotamia, made a translation of the Greek text of the Septuagint as contained in Origen's Hexapla. It was produced with great care and accuracy, and is an important witness to the Old Testament.

Finally, to round out this account of Syriac versions, reference should be made to yet another Syriac version, the Christian-Palestinian-Aramaic version. This was used by Melchite Christians in Palestine and Egypt during the sixth, seventh, and following centuries.

From the foregoing sketch of half a dozen ancient Syriac translations, one recognizes the vitality and scholarship of Syrian church leaders in antiquity. The significance of these Syriac versions can be appreciated from the circumstance that they became the basis, at least in part, of translations in other languages. The early Armenian rendering of the Gospels, made in the fifth century, shows influence from the Old Syriac text, while

the Old Testament, as would be expected, generally follows the Hexaplaric recension of the Septuagint. The Georgian Bible, completed, it seems, by the end of the sixth century, had an Armenian-Syriac foundation. The Peshitta Syriac version was also the basis of the Sogdian, Persian, and Arabic versions.

The Peshitta version remains today the authoritative Bible text of the Syrian Churches (Syrian Orthodox, Jacobite, Church of the East).

LATIN VERSIONS

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of the influence exerted by the Latin versions of the Bible, and particularly by Jerome's Latin Vulgate. Whether one considers the Vulgate from a purely secular point of view, with its pervasive influence on the development of Latin into Romance languages,¹² or whether one has in view only the specifically religious influence, the extent of its penetration into all areas of Western culture is almost beyond calculation. The theology and the devotional language typical of the Roman Catholic Church were either created or transmitted by the Vulgate. Both Protestants and Roman Catholics are heirs of terminology that Jerome either coined anew or baptized with fresh significance—words such as salvation, regeneration, justification, sanctification, propitiation, reconciliation, inspiration, Scripture, sacrament, and many others.

The historian of the Latin versions of the Bible is confronted with difficult and disputed problems, not least of which are the questions when, where, and by whom the earliest Latin rendering was made. Because the language used by the church at Rome was Greek until the mid-third century, the Old Latin versions would not have originated there, but within those early Christian communities that used Latin. Probably by the end of the second century A.D. Old Latin versions of the Scriptures were in circulation in north Africa. In Carthage, Tertullian (ca. 150-ca. 220) and Cyprian (ca. 200-258) quoted long sections of both Testaments in Latin. Since one finds numerous and far-reaching differences between quotations of the same passages, it is obvious that there was not one uniform rendering; some books were apparently translated a number of times, and no single translator worked on all 27 books. The Old Testament was not translated from the He-

¹² One example of the influence of the Vulgate on the development of vernacular languages among the Romance peoples is the suppression of everyday derivatives from the common Latin word *verbum*, meaning "word." The forms do indeed occur in the religious, technical sense, meaning "the Word," but in the popular speech of the people they are replaced by derivatives from the late Latin word *parabola*; for example, French, *parole*; Spanish, *palabra*; Portuguese, *palavra*; Italian, *parole*.

brew, but was based, it appears, on a pre-Hexaplaric form of the Greek Septuagint. In this way Western churches became familiar with the deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament.

The New Testament books in Old Latin manuscripts rest on a fluid Greek text commonly known today as the 'Western' text. The roots of the Old Latin versions are doubtless to be found in the practice of the double reading of Holy Scripture during divine services, first in the Greek text and then in the vernacular tongue. In the written form, the translation would at times have been interlinear; later on, manuscripts were prepared with two columns of text, sometimes arranged in cola and commata for ease of phrasing during the public reading of the lessons. All in all, it appears that the process of preparing Latin renderings of the Scriptures was gradual and to some extent haphazard, conditioned by local needs.

The pre-Jerome translations in general lack polish and are painfully literal. The Gospels stand in the sequence of Matthew, John, Luke, and Mark (mss. *a, b, d, e, ff², q, r*). Here and there one finds noteworthy additions to the text. For example in Matthew 3:16, the Old Latin manuscript *a* adds that when Jesus was baptized "a tremendous light flashed forth from the water,"¹³ so that all who were present feared." The Old Latin manuscripts give various names to the two robbers who were crucified with Jesus,¹⁴ and Mark's account of Jesus' resurrection is expanded in Old Latin manuscript *k* at 16:4 with the following: "But suddenly at the third hour of the day there was darkness over the whole circle of the earth, and angels descended from the heavens, and as he [the Lord] was rising in the glory of the living God, at the same time they ascended with him; and immediately it was light."

By the close of the fourth century there was such a confusing diversity among Old Latin manuscripts of the New Testament that Augustine lamented, "Those who translated the Scriptures from Hebrew into Greek can be counted, but the Latin translators are out of all number. For in the early days of the faith, everyone who chanced upon a Greek codex [of the New Testament] and thought he had a little aptitude in both languages attempted to make a translation. it."¹⁵

As a consequence there grew up a welter of diverse Latin

¹³ Perhaps this is meant to suggest that when "the heavens were opened" God's resplendent light was reflected from the water of the Jordan.

¹⁴ For these diverse names see the chapter, "Names for the Nameless in the New Testament," in the present writer's volume, *New Testament Studies: Philological, Versional, and Patristic* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 33-38.

¹⁵ *De doctrines Christiana*, 2.16.

translations. Among them three types or families of texts gradually developed; Cyprian represents the African text, Irenaeus (ca. 130-ca. 200) of southern Gaul represents the European, and Augustine the Italian. Characteristic of each family are certain renderings; for example as a translation of the Greek word **φως** the African family prefers *lumen*, the European *lux*; for **δοξαζειν** the African prefers *clarificare*, the European *glorificare*.

In these circumstances the stage was set for the most decisive series of events in the whole history of the Latin Bible. In the year 383 Pope Damasus urged Jerome (ca. 340-420), the most learned Christian scholar of his day, to produce a uniform and dependable text of the Latin Scriptures; he was not to make a totally new version, but to revise the texts that were in circulation, using for this purpose the Hebrew and Greek originals. Jerome's first inclination was to say "No, thank you" to the Pope's invitation. He wrote:

You urge me to revise the Old Latin version, and, as it were, to sit in judgment on copies of the Scriptures that are now scattered throughout the world; and, inasmuch as they differ from one another, you would have me decide which of them agrees with the original. The labor is one of love, but at the same time it is both perilous and presumptuous—for in judging others I must be content to be judged by all. Is there anyone learned or unlearned, who, when he takes the volume in his hands and perceives that what he reads does not suit his settled tastes, will not break out immediately into violent language and call me a forger and profane person for having the audacity to add anything to the ancient books, or to make any changes or corrections in them?¹⁶

Two factors, however, prompted Jerome to incur such an amount of opprobrium. The first factor, as he proceeded to tell in a dedicatory epistle to Damasus setting forth the occasion and scope of the undertaking, was the command laid upon him by the supreme pontiff. The second was the shocking diversity among the Old Latin manuscripts, there being, as he wrote, "almost as many forms of texts as there are manuscripts."

Jerome was a rapid and thorough worker. Within a year he finished his version of the Gospels. There is still some doubt as to whether he worked alone or with helpers. In a letter to the Pope he explained his procedure. He used, he said, a good Old Latin text, compared it with some Greek manuscripts in order to correct gross errors, perhaps wisely not making too many changes in the existing translation. His work on the rest of the New Testament was not quite so thorough; several scholars, in fact, have supposed that it was done by someone else.

¹⁶ *Epistula ad Damasum*.

Among the Old Testament books, Jerome turned his attention first to the Psalter. He made two versions of the Old Latin version of the Psalms by comparing it with the Greek Septuagint. These are known as the Roman (384) and Gallican (387-390) Psalters, because they were introduced into Rome and Gaul respectively.¹⁷ Jerome's final revision of the Psalter was made from the Hebrew, but it never attained general use or popularity. About the time Jerome produced his Gallican Psalter, he also revised the Latin text of some of the other books of the Old Testament with reference to the Septuagint text as provided in Origen's Hexapla. This work, however, did not satisfy Jerome's scholarly standards, and he resolved to undertake a more thorough revision on the basis of the Hebrew original. This great work occupied him from about the year 390 to 404, and separate books or groups of books were published as they were completed. Whether he managed to complete the entire Old Testament is not clear; at any rate, what is known as the Vulgate translation is far from being a uniform piece of work throughout.

Of course the Old Latin rendering, made from the Septuagint, contained the additional books that had been over the years incorporated in the Greek version of the Old Testament. Jerome's high regard, however, for the *Hebraica veritas* led him to set the books that found a place in the Hebrew canon on a higher level than those that did not. In this way he anticipated the Reformers' distinction between "canonical" and "apocryphal." Jerome's work on the latter books was by no means as thorough as on the others. Tobit he translated in one day, Judith in one night, both of which Jerome dictated to a scribe in Latin. Other deuterocanonical books remain "untranslated," that is, without revision of the Old Latin text.

The apprehension Jerome expressed to Pope Damasus that he would be castigated for tampering with Holy Writ was not unfounded. His revision of the Latin Bible provoked both criticism and anger, sometimes with extraordinary vehemence. Augustine, who was himself not too happy with Jerome's preference for the Hebrew original of the Old Testament rather than the Greek Septuagint (which Augustine regarded as an inspired version), reports (*Epist.* 71) an account of tumult that erupted in a North African congregation at Oea (modern Tripoli) during the reading of a Scripture lesson from the Book of Jonah in Jerome's un-

¹⁷ Jerome's Roman Psalter is still in use in services at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome; the Gallican Psalter is the version of the Psalms included in modern printed editions of the Latin Vulgate Bible—this in spite of the superior accuracy of Jerome's subsequent revision of the Psalter on the basis of the Hebrew text.

familiar rendering. When they heard that Jonah took shelter from the sun under some ivy (*hedera*), with one accord they shouted, "Gourd, gourd" (*cucurbita*), until the reader reinstated the old word lest there be a general exodus of the congregation!

Because of its general excellence, however, eventually Jerome's Vulgate text replaced the variety of Old Latin translations and for nearly a thousand years was used as the recognized text of Scripture throughout western Europe. It also became the basis of pre-Reformation vernacular Scriptures, such as Wycliffe's English translation in the 14th century, as well as the first printed Bibles in German (1466), Italian (1471), Catalan (1478), Czech (1488), and French (1530).

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