

The First Versions of the Bible [ONE]

1. If you look at Bibles in a bookstore or online you will see that we have a lot of versions of them. This can be confusing but some people aren't just confused – they are upset! Why can't we just have one version – the real version? (KJV jokes)
2. Translators and scholars have a saying: [TWO] “The Hebrew and Greek scriptures ARE the scriptures. All else is translation.” What does that mean? It means that only the original scriptures, written or edited and gathered a long time ago, are the scriptures. When we translate them – as we must – into different languages or into different versions of one language) they are, of necessity, modified. That doesn't give me any heartburn because I believe that Jesus is the Word of God and the Bible is the narrative that leads us to him. If you think that we must have the absolute first words written down...you are in trouble (no autographs remain and they are unlikely to ever be found).
3. **[the story of the Eastern European missionary and the Bible tossed on the tracks]** [THREE] For most of the history of the church, hand copying a manuscript was the only way to possess a portion of scripture. Early believers copied scripture extensively – if they were literate and if they had the wealth to possess writing materials and time to write. As books and portions of books were copied, some changes crept in. By the time of Augustine (354-430 AD), [FOUR] he was complaining that there were extraordinary numbers of copies out there and he feared that they weren't of the highest quality.
4. This was a problem for the church and for the greater society. By that time, Christianity had become the dominant and official religion of the Roman Empire. As the Empire flagged and tired, starting its long fall, it was very important that it be replaced by a single, unified force: [FIVE] the church (and the Holy Roman Empire would rise eventually). Constantine and his government demanded unity among the Christians so Pope Damasus called the greatest living scholar of his day to bring the text back to its original state – or as close to original as it could be taken.
5. There was no question who to entrust this task to: Sophronius Eusebius Hieronymus known to us, gratefully, as Jerome. [SIX] By this time, the late 300s, most could no longer read Hebrew or Greek. The language of the common people was Latin so it was decided that that would be the language of this new translation. Because Latin was the common language, Jerome's version would be known as the Vulgate (vulgar=common).
6. Jerome was born around 345 AD in Dalmatia (NW of modern Greece). [SEVEN] When he was twelve it was already obvious that he was exceptionally bright so his parents sent him off to Rome where he studied advanced Latin grammar, Greek, and Latin literature. Mastering those, he went on to study and excel in rhetoric. He was only a nominal Christian at this time and loved reading secular and pagan literature (often seen as one and the same).

7. Falling ill with a terrible fever, he had a dream in which he was taken up before the throne of God. When asked who he was, Jerome said he was a Christian. God replied, "You lie. You are a Ciceronian" (one who studied Cicero, a Roman poet). This rattled him so severely that he swore he would spend the rest of his life studying scripture only. He went into the Syrian desert to study with the hermits there. One of the hermits was a Jew who had converted to Christianity. He taught Jerome Hebrew.
8. Jerome left the desert when he had no more manuscripts to study there and returned to Rome. In Rome, he quickly became the personal translator, secretary, and advisor to Pope Damasus [EIGHT]. So, when Augustine and others demanded a better translation of scripture be made, all eyes looked to Jerome. He was humbled and somewhat fearful of the task laid before him. He knew that he would be tempted to make the words say what he wanted them to say...and he knew that others would attack him for his decisions. [NINE]
 - a. "You urge me to revise the Old Latin version...The labor is one of love, but at the same time both perilous and presumptuous...Is there a man, learned or unlearned, who will not, when he takes the volume in his hands, and perceives that what he reads does not suit his settled tastes, break out immediately into violent language and call me a forger and a profane person for having had the audacity to add anything to the ancient books, or to make any changes or corrections therein." (from the introduction to Jerome's version of the Gospels)
9. Jerome's life is a fascinating one. He would live in Constantinople and Jerusalem. He would attract a large number of women who were tired of the lascivious and wanton life common in Rome. [TEN] He helped them live an ascetic life – and that won him no favors among the Roman Church leaders or the population (one popular, lively young woman died within four months of following his instructions). He also listened to Jewish authorities who by that time rejected the Septuagint as polluted by Christians. This made Augustine upset at him for Augustine was certain the Septuagint was inspired. Modern scholarship has cast some doubt on Jerome's mastery of Hebrew, as well. Still, his version – the Vulgate – was the standard for hundreds of years...actually, for most believers it was THE Bible until the 1500s, 1200 years later. (some of that was because of the actions of the Roman Church)
10. He was, of course, attacked by those who wanted other versions, other readings (NIV issues with John 3:16, etc.). He could be harsh and sarcastic in reply, [ELEVEN] saying to some "If they dislike water drawn from the clear spring, let them drink of the muddy streamlet." Knowing he would be attacked for his version of Kings, he wrote a "helmeted preface" and he called his critics "barking critics."
11. The Vulgate version was spread all over Christendom. We have 10,000 copies of it today, more than any other book since Jesus walked the earth. But it was imperfect.

[TWELVE] Jerome did check early Greek manuscripts but his was primarily a revision of Latin manuscripts. He seems to have referenced the Greek when there was a question of wording (and his version is quite close to the Vatican and Sinaitic manuscripts). His work is not a translation from the original languages but a translation of a translation...and it remains the official bible of the Roman Catholic Church to this day. He was a creature of his time so he found meanings in things that wouldn't matter much to us. For example, there are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet so he accepted only 22 books (our 29), rejecting what we would call the Apocrypha for that reason – and because his Jewish friends didn't accept them, thinking them too Christianized. Still, Rome kept the books.

12. Rome aggressively policed the scriptures after Jerome. [THIRTEEN] Copies of the Vulgate were chained to podiums and guarded. The common people soon quit speaking Latin and so the Common Version became lost to them...but Rome refused to allow it to be translated into the tongues of the day. They feared its misuse – the same reason you do not touch the communion wafer (though recently that has changed).
13. Still, some people tried. The earliest English version of scripture is really less than that: it is a series of Bible stories told in verse in the ancient Anglo-Saxon that would eventually become English. Those were by a monk named Caedmon. [FOURTEEN] A generation later, another English monk named Aldhelm (d.709) translated the Psalms into Anglo-Saxon. The Venerable Bede (d. 735) is said to have finished a translation of the Book of John but that has not survived. One of the last purely English (Anglo-Saxon/British) kings, Alfred, instituted religious reforms, part of which were translations of the Psalms and some sections of scripture into the common tongue. Fifty years later, an Abbot named Aelfric translated some more portions into English.
14. At that time, [FIFTEEN] the churches in Britain were somewhat separate from Rome. Rome was certainly the authority but there was the Celtic Church – the Culdee or Keledei – who had some independence from Rome and were, therefore, able to get away with translating some portions of scripture. Then came the conference on Easter (Synod of Whitbey, 664 AD) and then the Norman Invasion of 1066. The Bible in English became a distant, forgotten dream for the next three hundred years.