

Lecture Nine

Old Latin and the Vulgate

Scope: The translation of the Christian Bible into Latin is of particular importance because of its religious and cultural influence. This presentation considers, first, the Old Latin, which shows how Christianity spread throughout North Africa and other Latin-speaking areas of the empire. Then, it takes up the pivotal production of the Vulgate by Saint Jerome: the reasons why it was undertaken; the resistance it met from Saint Augustine; the stages through which it passed; and finally, the way in which this translation helped enable a Western Christendom distinct from the Byzantine Empire—thus becoming the source and shaper of European culture for a millennium.

Outline

- I. Of all the ancient versions of the Christian Bible, the Latin has had the greatest influence because of its historical role.
 - A. When Constantine shifted his capital to Constantinople, the Church in the East remained Greek speaking, continuing to read the LXX as the Old Testament and the New Testament in Greek.
 - B. The bishop of Rome exercised supreme ecclesiastical (and, increasingly, political) authority in the Western Empire—a dominance that continued through the medieval period.
 - C. As the East became exclusively Greek, so the West became increasingly Latin, and the adoption of Latin as the official biblical language was of fundamental importance for the shape of Christianity in Europe.
 - D. This lecture considers the stages leading to Saint Jerome’s great translation of the Bible (the Vulgate) and some of its features; because it is part of “imperial history,” we know more about this version than any other.
- II. The beginning stages of the use of a Latin Bible are obscure both in date and in location.

- A. Latin is the ancestral language of Rome and had already developed a great literature during the time of the republic and early empire (with the writings of Cicero, Caesar, Virgil, Horace, and others).
- B. During the first centuries of the Christian era, however, it was the second language of the empire; Greek was the first.
- C. It is not clear where the first Latin versions began, but Rome is an unlikely candidate.
 - 1. The first Christian writings connected to Rome (Paul's Letters, 1 Clement, Hermas) are all written in Greek rather than Latin.
 - 2. The names of all the first Roman bishops are also Greek rather than Latin, and as late as 230, we find Christian authors in Rome writing in Greek (Justin, Hippolytus).
 - 3. Pope Victor I (190) wrote theological treatises in Latin, and some Latin writings of Novatian (mid-3rd century) are extant.
 - 4. Rome would experience the need for a Latin translation by the late 2nd or early 3rd century.
- D. The Christian communities in North Africa seem a more likely place for the origin of Latin translations.
 - 1. Rome had many military colonies in North Africa, which would use Latin more than Greek, and had many Roman merchants whose language was Latin.
 - 2. The *Acts of the Scillitan Martyrs* (180) was composed in Latin, and Tertullian of Carthage (160–225) wrote in Latin, probably using a Latin translation of the Bible in his refutations of heretics.

III. The need for a standard translation into Latin was based on the proliferation of Old Latin versions and their inferior quality, as well as a concern for Church unity.

- A. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) bears witness both to the number and haphazard character of Old Latin versions, a view echoed by Jerome.
- B. In response to these concerns, Pope Damasus (304–384), a vigorous champion of orthodoxy, assigned his secretary, Jerome of Aquileia (c. 342–420), the task of translating the Bible into a standard version (the Vulgate).

- C. Damasus could hardly have picked a better person for the task, because Jerome was, with Origen, the greatest Christian scholar of the Bible in antiquity.
1. After his baptism as an adult, he committed himself to asceticism and ended his days as leader of a monastery in Bethlehem.
 2. He was a superb linguist, thoroughly versed in Latin and Greek, and he learned Hebrew when living as a hermit in Syria; he also consulted with rabbis in Palestine concerning the meaning of the Hebrew.
 3. He wrote many biblical commentaries filled with linguistic and topographical information based on his “firsthand” research.
- D. The translation (revision) of the Latin Bible was Jerome’s greatest and most enduring accomplishment as a scholar.
1. Jerome began with a revision of the Gospels in 382–384, using an excellent manuscript of the Greek text. The remainder of the New Testament was revised by unknown translators.
 2. The translation of the Old Testament began with the Psalms, based on the LXX, the *Gallican Psalter*; Jerome later translated the Psalms from the Hebrew, but his first translation was more widely used in liturgy and became standard in later printed texts.
 3. Jerome increasingly became convinced that the Hebrew text was superior to the LXX and began a fresh translation independent of the LXX. Jerome also preferred the shorter Hebrew canon to the longer one (derived from the LXX used in the Church).
 4. The earliest form of the complete Vulgate we have is from the 6th century, and it contains Jerome’s translation of all the Hebrew canonical books and the Gallican Psalter, plus his translations of Tobit and Judith (from the LXX), Jerome’s translation of the Gospels, and a revised version of Acts, Letters, and Revelation.
- E. Jerome’s translation took some time to become standard, and manuscripts of the Vulgate developed as many variants as the manuscripts of the Greek.

1. Augustine complained to Jerome concerning the abandonment of the LXX for theological and pastoral reasons.
 2. Scribes “corrected” Old Latin versions on the basis of Jerome’s work and “corrected” Jerome on the basis of other readings.
- IV. Jerome’s translation won its way through ecclesial approbation to be sure, but especially through its intrinsic excellence. Jerome was simply an amazing translator.
- A. Jerome showed deep insight into the meaning both of the Greek and the Hebrew and rendered them in a vigorous and idiomatic Latin that had genuine literary merit.
 1. Although he translated from the Hebrew, he rendered key “prophetic” texts in such fashion as to retain the “prophecy/fulfillment” found in the LXX and Greek New Testament (as in the translation of *almah* by *virgo* in Isaiah 7:14).
 2. His personal translations and his oversight of other revisions led to a single seamless Scripture that captured the “imaginative world of the Bible” from beginning to end.
 - B. Together with Augustine’s *On Christian Doctrine*, Jerome’s Vulgate became the source and shaper of liturgy, literature, and learning during the Middle Ages in the West.

Essential Reading:

Augustine, *Letters* 28 and 71.

Supplementary Reading:

H. von Campenhausen, “Jerome” and “Augustine,” in *The Fathers of the Church*, pp. 129–182, 183–276.

B. M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament*, pp. 285–374.

Questions to Consider:

1. Consider the influence wielded by a single person through the shaping of a text or translation that becomes the font of literature for a civilization; what parallels come to mind?
2. What potential issues for Christian theology did Jerome pose by his preference for the Hebrew over the Greek Old Testament?