

Lecture Fourteen

The Renaissance, Printing, and the Bible

Scope: The rebirth of classical learning in Europe in the 15th century gained much of its impact from the invention of printing, which made available to all interested parties the wealth of learning from Greece that challenged the Latin synthesis of the medieval period. It is not surprising to find that the publication of the Gutenberg Bible was the great achievement of printing with movable type. Nor is it shocking, given the central role of the Bible in shaping European culture, to find Humanists, such as Erasmus, rushing to put into print the Greek version of the New Testament (the *Textus Receptus*) that would challenge the hegemony of Jerome's Latin Vulgate and thereby elevate the learning of the scholar who knew Greek over the authority of the priest who had only Latin. Erasmus was not alone: The Complutensian Polyglot (1502–1522) was a massive example of Humanistic learning.

Outline

- I. The European Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries represented both a recovery of a certain kind of learning and a change in the view of the world.
 - A. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 meant an emigration of scholars and of Greek and Arabic manuscripts to the West, advancing the recovery of knowledge of Greek language, religion, and philosophy.
 - B. Such new knowledge challenged the medieval synthesis, which had relied on a unified view of Church and state, of philosophy and theology.
 - C. With an altered sense of the past came a sense of history and, with a sense of history, the sense of the possibility of change.
 1. An appreciation for the human place in the world is reflected in art and literature (Humanism).
 2. A sense of possibility and control in the world is seen in the growth in science and technology (Leonardo da Vinci, 1452–1519).

3. The development of Italian states was accompanied by theories of politics removed from divine rights (Niccolo Machiavelli, 1469–1527).
- II.** The invention of the printing press in Europe revolutionized the publication and reading of the Bible.
- A. Block printing had been invented in China in 888 (the *Diamond Sutra*), as had movable clay type (1041); the first iron printing press was used in China in 1234. Europeans had used *xylography* (engraving on wood, block printing) by 1423.
 - B. Johannes Gutenberg (c. 1398–1468) is credited with the fundamental contributions to printing in the West.
 1. Beginning in 1436, he developed movable metal type, oil-based inks, a mould for casting type accurately, and a new kind of printing press, based on presses used in wine-making.
 2. In 1450, Gutenberg began work on printing the Bible and published a two-volume version of the Vulgate in 1455, producing 180 copies, of which 45 were on vellum and 135 were on paper. The Bibles were first printed, then illuminated by hand. Some 60 complete or partial copies are extant.
 3. The first printed Bibles resembled manuscripts, lacking pagination, word spacing, indentation, or paragraph breaks.
 4. Chapter and verse divisions had been introduced (by Stephen Langton) into manuscripts of the Vulgate in 1205 and to some Greek manuscripts by 1400. These did not appear in printed versions of the Bible, however, until added by the Robert Stephanus (Étienne) family of printers, appearing in the New Testament in 1565 and the Old Testament in 1571.
 - C. The art of printing, which spread rapidly and made books (and Bibles) less and less expensive, had several consequences.
 1. Just as writing created a more stable text than oral tradition, printing offered the theoretical possibility of an absolutely stable and infinitely replicable Bible.
 2. The availability of relatively inexpensive books to many meant the possibility of individual ownership and individual reading.
 3. The ready accessibility of the printed text meant that “reading the Bible” could become primarily a visual rather than an oral/aural experience.

- III.** The invention of printing combined with the recovery of ancient learning to stimulate the quest for a “better Bible.”
- A.** The availability of manuscripts of the New Testament in Greek had much the same effect as the Greek writings of Plato.
 - 1. The Greek was the earliest and original version, whereas the Latin, however fine, was later and secondary.
 - 2. The expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492 also opened up the possibility for conversation between Christian and Jewish Humanists concerning the Hebrew text.
 - B.** Scholars sought to make available a version of the Bible that was more “scientific” than the Vulgate in ordinary use.
 - 1. In Spain, Cardinal Ximenes organized a group of scholars at the University of Alcalá (Latin: Complutum) to publish the Bible in six folio volumes between 1514 and 1522, the Complutensian Polyglot. The New Testament in Greek appeared in print in 1514, and the entire Bible (with Old Testament having parallel columns of Hebrew, LXX, and a Latin interlinear) appeared in 1522.
 - 2. One of the greatest of Christian Humanists, Erasmus of Rotterdam (1469?–1536), produced—on the basis of a handful of late and mediocre manuscripts—an edition of the Greek New Testament with his own translation into classical Latin in 1516.
 - 3. The Textus Receptus (“received text”) that underlay the King James Bible was based on the versions of Erasmus and the Complutensian scholars, as well as the contributions of the reformer Theodore Beza (1519–1605) and the printer/editor Robert Stephanus.
- IV.** These developments began a tension between scholar and priest, university and Church, that has never adequately been resolved.
- A.** In the life of the Church, the Vulgate held sway and corresponded to the use of Latin in the liturgy. An undereducated clergy could work only in this version.
 - B.** In the academy, the scholar had access to versions of Scripture earlier (and perhaps superior) to the one used in the Church: The Hebrew and Greek called into question the absolute authority of the Vulgate.

- C. Soon, there would be an increased demand for Scripture to be available, through the means of printing, in the language of the people.

Essential Reading:

D. K. Shuger, *The Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity*.

Supplementary Reading:

R. Griffiths, ed., *The Bible in the Renaissance: Essays on Biblical Commentary and Translation in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries*.

Questions to Consider:

1. How is the law of unintended consequences illustrated respectively by the fall of Constantinople to the Muslims and the invention of printing in the same decade?
2. How does the notion of a “scholar’s Bible” challenge ideas of ecclesiastical authority?