

Lecture Ten

Other Ancient Versions

Scope: There were many other translations of the Bible in antiquity, each of which points to the spread of Christianity to another region and suggests something of the religious and cultural influence exercised by the Bible. In the East, the Armenian, Georgian, and Ethiopic versions represent major streams of Christian culture, while other minor translations (Arabic, Nubian, Persian, Sogdian, and Albanian) testify to the influence of the Bible well beyond the boundaries of the empire. Despite the dominance of the Latin Vulgate in the West, other translations (the Gothic, Slavonic, Anglo-Saxon, and Old High German) show the endurance of other cultural realities and anticipate later European developments.

Outline

- I. Although the Greek and Latin versions of the Christian Bible dominated in imperial territories, other ancient versions reveal the spread of Christianity into new geographical and linguistic areas and the importance of the Bible to those populations.
 - A. We have already seen the complex histories of the Syriac version in East Syria and the Coptic version in Upper Egypt. The number of distinct versions in each language shows that interest was not momentary or casual.
 - B. Other major and minor translations of the Christian Bible show how the story of the Bible became part of the history of diverse populations. For some, the writing of the Bible was the start of a written language and of an ethnic literature.
- II. In the East, three versions of the Bible have a special significance: the Armenian, Georgian, and Ethiopian.
 - A. The ancient realm of Armenia was the first kingdom to officially welcome Christianity.
 1. Gregory the Illuminator (240–332) baptized King Tiridates III around 300 C.E., and Christianity was made the state religion.
 2. Armenian Christians were influenced by both Syriac and Greek traditions but tended toward Monophysitism.

3. Translation of the Bible is the birth of Armenian literature, through the work of Bishop Mesrob. He devised an alphabet of 36 letters and oversaw the translation of the Bible, based on the Syriac version (410), with himself translating the New Testament and Proverbs.
 4. In 433, Mesrob oversaw the revision of the Armenian Bible on the basis of Greek manuscripts.
 5. The Armenian Old Testament is distinctive for its inclusion of the History of Joseph and Aseneth and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, while the New Testament adds the (spurious) Epistle of the Corinthians to Paul and the (spurious) Third Corinthians; some 1,244 manuscripts of the Armenian New Testament are extant.
- B.** The origins of Christianity in Georgia (also Iberia) in the south Caucasus region go back to the 4th century, through the evangelizing of a slave woman named Nina.
1. The church in Georgia may have been influenced by Jewish Christianity but was thoroughly Orthodox, except for a period in the 6th century when it was influenced by Monophysitism.
 2. Bishop Mesrob also developed an alphabet for the Georgian language before the 5th century, and a translation was made of the Gospels and other parts of the New Testament before the middle of the 5th century.
 3. The basis of the translation is disputed, with arguments being made for Greek and Armenian and for traces of Syriac influence.
- C.** The church in Ethiopia (Abyssinia) got its firm grounding in the 4th century by two missionaries (Frumentius and Edesius of Tyre) sent there as prisoners.
1. Ethiopian Christianity has a long history but one marked by its geographical isolation (“the ends of the Earth”).
 2. The Bible was translated into the Ethiopian language (Ge’ez), probably from the Greek, in the 5th or 6th century; the oldest extant manuscript is from the 14th century and shows the influence of Coptic and Arabic.
- D.** Other minor versions from the East testify to the missionary success of Christianity outside the boundaries of empire.
1. Efforts to bring Christianity to Arabia began before the 3rd century, and there are a bewildering number of distinct Arabic

translations whose precise origin is a matter of speculation; the earliest speculative date is the 7th century.

2. Christianity may have reached Nubia (three kingdoms, with Egypt to the north and Ethiopia to the south) as early as the 3rd century, though formal missionary work began in the 6th. We have only manuscript fragments of a Nubian version dating from the 8th to the 10th century.
3. Christianity was well established in Persia by the 3rd–4th century, and although some Christians read the Bible in Syriac, a translation into Middle Persian was undertaken; only fragments of a few pages of the Psalms are extant.
4. In East Turkestan and Central Asia, the Sogdian language was used as a *lingua franca* for Central Asia in the way Greek was in the West, and fragments of a Sogdian translation of the New Testament have been found, probably dependent on the Syriac.
5. There are traditions stating that Bishop Mesrob also created an alphabet for the Albanians (present-day Azerbaijan), and a Bishop Jeremiah was reputed to have translated the Bible into that language, but no textual evidence of such a translation is extant.

III. In addition to the Latin Vulgate, other versions of the Bible appeared in the West in native languages.

- A. The Gothic language was the vernacular of a large portion of Europe. Between the Danube and the Black Sea, two great tribes dominated, the Visigoths and the Ostrogoths.
 1. Successful missionary work was done among the Goths already by the 3rd century, but the “Apostle of the Goths” was Ulfilas (311–383), who was trained in Constantinople.
 2. He invented a Gothic alphabet out of Greek and Latin characters, as well as Gothic runes, and translated the Bible, leaving out only the books of Kings.
- B. The Christian mission among the Slavic peoples may have been undertaken in the 6th century, but our earliest certain knowledge is of the work of the brothers Saints Methodius (826–885) and Cyril (827–869).

1. Greeks of a senatorial class in Macedonia, they were educated in Constantinople and became missionaries to Moravia, where they taught in the vernacular.
 2. Before his death, Cyril invented a Slavic alphabet called Glagolitic (the Cyrillic alphabet is later) and began to write liturgical works in Slavonic.
 3. After Cyril's death, Methodius oversaw the translation of the entire Bible into Old Church Slavonic, omitting only the books of the Maccabees.
- C. Christianity reached Great Britain by the 4th century and, in the 5th and 6th centuries, received both Celtic and Roman missionaries.
1. The very earliest efforts at translating into Anglo-Saxon in the 7th and 8th centuries have been lost, except for an interlinear gloss of a Latin text.
 2. More extensive translations were undertaken during the 10th-century Benedictine reform; among the extant manuscripts of the Gospels, it is not clear what version of the Latin was used for translation.
- D. Christianity began among the Franks along the middle and lower courses of the Rhine with the baptism of King Clovis I in 496, but only small remnants of either Old High or Low German translations of the Gospels are extant.

Essential Reading:

B. M. Metzger, *The Early Versions of the New Testament*, pp. 153–281, 375–460.

Supplementary Reading:

B. D. Ehrman and M. W. Holmes, eds., *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research*, pp. 142–187.

Questions to Consider:

1. In what sense can the translation of the Bible in antiquity be seen as cultural hegemony and in what sense can it be regarded as an affirmation of ethnic identity?
2. Why is it legitimate to speak of a distinct “story of the Bible” for each translation in which it has appeared?