

Bibles That Changed the World

The Latin Vulgate



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INTRODUCTION

For well over a thousand years, all Christian Bibles were copied and produced by hand. And as a result, every physical book of Scripture from that time is unique. The materials used to make the book, the size of the book, the size of the letters, the spacing of the words and lines, the scribe's handwriting, the notes and illustrations, even the book's content, was subject to variety. As a result, there are all sorts of differences between manuscripts. And these differences often reveal interesting facts about who read them, when they read them, and even why they read them.

As a case in point, we'll consider a particular New Testament manuscript that was created in the early 13th century, probably in the city of Verona in northern Italy. This manuscript is significant for at least three reasons. First, it's a complete New Testament. Second, it's illuminated, or decorated with illustrations, borders, and fancy script. Third, and most significantly, it's in Latin — the language used in a translation of the Bible commonly known as the "Vulgate."

EXAMINING THE ARTIFACT

As we consider this 13th-century illuminated New Testament in Latin, we'll look at four related subjects, beginning with the artifact itself. What makes it special, and why is it in Latin?

In the modern world, a complete New Testament isn't surprising. Many people have pocket-sized New Testaments. Sometimes we even see them bound together with Psalms and Proverbs. If anything, the only surprising thing about a complete New Testament today is that it isn't bound together with the Old Testament. But before roughly the 1200s, it was uncommon for large sections of the Bible to be bound together.

When an entire Old or New Testament was bound together, it usually produced an enormous volume. It was a monumental work of scribal patience and skill. So, it was far more common to find subsections of Scripture bound together. A volume might contain the four gospels, or Paul's letters, or Acts and the general epistles, or perhaps the book of Revelation. These divisions roughly corresponded to how these portions of Scripture were used in liturgy. There might be a gospel reading, or a reading from Paul, and so on. In addition, limiting volumes in this way allowed the text to be large enough to be read easily in public worship while keeping the overall size of the volume manageable.

The 13th-century illuminated Latin New Testament that we're considering is unusual for both its content and size. It's an entire New Testament, rather than just a subsection, and it's relatively small — only 7³/₅ inches high and 4½ inches wide. Both of these facts suggest that this volume was designed for private, individual reading rather than for public worship.

This 13th-century Latin New Testament is also illuminated. That is, the text is adorned with flourishes on certain letters, often using colored inks, and it's decorated with images. Some of these features served practical purposes, such as large letters marking the beginning of books, chapters and significant passages, or images illustrating the content of the book. Others were primarily decorative, such as vines and flowers that form borders and stylized large letters. In addition to using colored inks and paints, illuminators sometimes also employed precious metals like gold and silver.

This particular New Testament is adorned with pigmented drawings and elaborate initial letters. The most striking illumination in the manuscript is a full-page illustration of the crucifixion, immediately facing the beginning of the Book of Acts. This illumination is somewhat representative of many such scenes in medieval manuscripts, so it's worth identifying its various features.

In the center, as the focal point, Jesus is portrayed on the cross with blood flowing from his five wounds: both hands, both feet, and his right side. More elaborate representations found in other manuscripts might include things like a chalice collecting the blood, and a representation of Adam — either coming out of a tomb or as a skull — at the foot of the cross. To the right and left of Jesus are his mother Mary and the apostle John. This is a reference to John 19:26, 27, where Jesus entrusted care of Mary to John. As is common, John is depicted as a young, beardless man holding a book that represented the gospel that he was to write. Above Jesus is a placard with the Greek *nomen sacrum*, or sacred name, representing “Jesus Christ.” These same Greek letters continued to be used in the Latin tradition because of their role in art — even when Greek itself was unknown by the artists and scribes who worked on the book. To the right and left of the top of the crucifix are the sun and the moon, personified with faces, witnessing the crucifixion.

Finally, around the border in four roundels, are the symbols of the four gospel writers: lion, eagle, man, and bull. Here, each of the beings is winged and holding a book, representing the written gospel. These images are drawn from the descriptions of angelic beings in the books of Ezekiel and Revelation. Traditionally, the man corresponds to Matthew, the Lion represents Mark, the bull represents Luke, and the Eagle is John.

Before making handwritten copies of the Bible gave way to printing Bibles on presses, monks often decorated or illuminated the Bibles they produced, and their efforts appear in smaller published portions of the Scriptures that they made into books as well as large complete Bibles. Many illuminated Bibles that exist today contain magnificent themes of events like the creation, humanity's expulsion from the Garden of Eden, the annunciation of Christ's birth, Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, the crucifixion, and the resurrection of Christ.

— Dr. Richard L. Pratt, Jr.

Of course, creating an illuminated New Testament involved greater time, effort, expertise and expense than a simple text. Given the cost involved in producing a volume like this, it seems likely that this New Testament was made for a wealthy lay person or even a confraternity. A confraternity was a religious association for laypeople who did

not enter into formal religious life. Often, they would adopt a common rule of life and would come together to socialize, celebrate religious occasions, and engage in charitable works.

As we mentioned earlier, this particular New Testament is not only illuminated, but it's also in Latin. By the 13th century, Latin was no longer the common language of the people in any part of the world, including in Verona where this manuscript was made. So, why would anyone at that time have wanted a New Testament in Latin?

Well, in keeping with many centuries of tradition, Latin was still the language used in worship services in the Western or Roman Catholic Church. It had also become a primary language of scholarship throughout the world. So, the Latin translation of the Bible — referred to as the Vulgate — remained meaningful and accessible to many Christians, including the person or group that commissioned this New Testament.

This illuminated New Testament in Latin gives us a glimpse into how important the Latin translation of the Bible was to the church for many centuries. And it reminds us how important it is for all people of faith to have their Scriptures in a language that they can understand.

LATIN TRANSLATION

This illuminated New Testament is a beautiful example of a 13th-century Latin text. Now, let's consider why a Latin translation of the Bible was created in the first place.

The Old Testament was written mostly in Hebrew, with some portions from the Books of Daniel and Ezra written in Aramaic after the exile. However, after the conquests of Alexander the Great, Greek language and culture spread throughout the Mediterranean basin. So, for almost 200 years before Christ, Greek-speaking Jews widely used Greek translations of the Old Testament. All these biblical texts, whether in Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek, were known and used by Jews and Christians in the first three centuries of the common era. Of course, the books of the New Testament were written in the first few decades after Christ's ministry by his first followers in Greek — the common language in that part of the Roman Empire where Christianity began, and in the surrounding areas to which it would spread. But despite how prevalent these languages were, not everyone knew them. So, just as the Old Testament had been translated for Greek speakers, both the Old and New Testaments were translated into the more common language — Latin.

The most famous of these Latin translations was made in the late fourth and early fifth centuries by Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus, or "Jerome" as he's known in English. Jerome worked for about two decades to produce and compile a reliable, high-quality translation of the whole Bible in Latin. The final product of his work is known to us as the Vulgate. The word "vulgate" comes from a Latin word meaning "common" or "generally known." At the time of Jerome's translation, Latin was the common language of many parts of the world. Over the centuries, Jerome's work was copied and edited many times. But it remained the basis of all major Latin manuscripts after him.

Although Jerome's Vulgate came to be widely accepted, it wasn't the first translation of the Bible into Latin. Before the late fourth century, when Jerome began his work, many Latin translations of Scripture had already been made. These translations — now known collectively as *Vetus Latina* or the “Old Latin Bible” — were created by different people as the need arose, so the quality varied. Moreover, these translations weren't always shared broadly, and people unknowingly created translations of the same books.

In addition, these translations were made almost entirely from the Greek text. So, in the case of Old Testament books, the *Vetus Latina* was a translation of a translation. Needless to say, these translations weren't perfect. Translators sometimes made mistakes. Nevertheless, these Latin translations served the general needs of Latin-speaking churches in North Africa and Western Europe.

Still, some people in Jerome's day worried that the precise meaning of the Hebrew and Aramaic might have been obscured. Precision was important because small differences in translation could lead to large differences in theology. And these theological differences sometimes led to discipline by, or even *expulsion* from, the church. For this reason, when Christians needed to analyze Scripture closely, they sought the most reliable translations possible. Unfortunately, the inconsistent *Vetus Latina* manuscripts didn't sufficiently meet their needs.

In response to this problem, Pope Damasus I wanted the Old Latin translations revised to improve their precision. According to Jerome, Pope Damasus asked him to make revisions. Jerome began by revising the four gospels to bring them into better accord with the original Greek. Around this same time, he also revised the Latin translation of the Greek Psalter.

Sometime after 385, Jerome again revised the Latin Psalter. This version is often known as the Gallican Psalter because it was first used widely in Gaul, in modern-day France. According to prefaces Jerome wrote for his published manuscripts, he also translated Chronicles, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs into Latin from Greek.

In the 380s, Jerome lived in Jerusalem and Bethlehem and became more familiar with both the Hebrew language and contemporary Judaism. This experience prepared him for his work of translating the Old Testament from the original Hebrew into Latin. He began his work around 390 or 391 and finished it around 404. Interestingly, his translation of the Psalms into Latin from Hebrew didn't gain the same popularity as his earlier Gallican Psalter. So, the Gallican version appeared more commonly in later Latin manuscripts.

It's not entirely clear who produced the Latin translations of some New Testament books. We know that Jerome revised the gospels' translation, and he appears to have claimed to have translated the whole New Testament from Greek. But we don't have any published New Testament manuscripts that contain prefaces or other notes indicating his work as translator. Some think that a student of Jerome, Rufinus, may have completed the work.

Jerome never claimed that his translations were perfect. He knew that every translation has its strengths and weaknesses, and he revised and even retranslated his own work. He also understood that every act of translation includes an element of interpretation. The full range of meaning possessed by words and phrases in one language

rarely precisely corresponds to those in another language. For this reason, all translation involves choices and judgments that aren't required when simply reproducing a copy of the original language.

Translation is always interpretation. In fact, the Greek word for “translate” is also “interpret.” The same word is used because going from one language to another, you’re entering into different thought worlds, different word usage, concepts are different, even verb tenses are different. And you see this in Jerome’s translation specifically. He’s going from Hebrew to Latin. Very different kinds of languages, different structure, different verb systems. And even in the Greek of the New Testament, Greek and Latin are very similar. But even there you have verb tenses that don’t match up, so what do you do with those things, and how do you match those up? So, there’s always interpretation. But what’s remarkable about Jerome’s work is it was quite good, if I could say that. He had excellent facility with the Hebrew, spent fifteen years on that project, so it’s not just a sit down and go through it really quickly, worked in Bethlehem so he was immersed in that context, the Hebrew language and people in that environment, and he had access both to, of course, Hebrew and to Greek and Latin manuscripts at the time. So, he was able to produce both a very, in a sense, scholarly accurate translation but also one that was good Latin, readable, understandable. I mean it was called Vulgate because it was common, right? Not a high Latin but a Latin that anyone could understand.

— Dr. Jeffrey Kloha

Now, it’s important to realize that before the age of printing, there was no such thing as a standard version or manuscript of the Bible. Multiple Vulgate collections existed, and not all of them used the same translations. Nevertheless, by directly translating from the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, Jerome did a great service to the church. In general, his Latin reproduced the sense of the originals, while remaining readable. Moreover, it created language that affected the prayers and praises of both private and public worship for many generations after him.

CONTROVERSIES

Jerome’s Latin translation was extremely valuable to the church, but it was not always well-received. Let’s look at some of the controversies that surrounded the Vulgate.

For all its benefits, Jerome’s translation was hotly debated at the time. We know this partly because in many of the prefaces to his published volumes, he defended himself against his detractors and critics. One major controversy involved his choice to translate the Old Testament from the original Hebrew instead of from the Greek.

In Jerome's day, many Christians had come to believe that the Greek translation of the Old Testament was inspired, and that, where it differed from the Hebrew, it was superior. Some Christians even accused non-believing Jews of altering the original Hebrew to obscure the connections between the Old Testament and Jesus as the Messiah. They claimed that the Greek text made these connections more obvious. However, there doesn't seem to be any credible evidence to support the claim that Jewish scribes intentionally altered the Hebrew text. Nevertheless, it does appear that Judaism refined its understanding of the Old Testament in light of Christianity's departure from the Jewish community and tradition. That's to say, those Jews who thought the Old Testament pointed to Jesus as the Christ were no longer represented in Jewish communities. So, the development of Jewish theology was directed by those who denied these connections.

Jerome's detractors also argued that Jerome could not possibly have understood biblical Hebrew as well as the translators of the Septuagint. Jerome had honed his Hebrew skills by interacting with Jews around Jerusalem. And based, to a degree, on their input, he became convinced that the Greek translation contained errors and was less than faithfully translated in parts. His critics, however, maintained that the Hebrew spoken by contemporary Jews had evolved since the time of the Septuagint. In their view, the Septuagint translators, and not Jerome's Jewish contemporaries, had a better understanding of the original Hebrew, and therefore, the Septuagint more accurately reflected the original meaning. Regardless of these objections, Jerome found the input of his Jewish contemporaries valuable and used their insights to improve his Latin translations.

The quality of Jerome's translation, in many ways, is quite good. He was trying to correct some problems that were present in the old Latin. So, if you look at his translation, the Vulgate, and compare it to an old Latin translation, such as the Codex Palatinus, you can find that in certain places there were grammatical errors that he corrected.

— Mr. Brian Hyland

His translation was used for a thousand years, so it means it's a pretty darn good translation, right? It worked; it replaced previous translations that were not as careful, not as readable, not as accurate. So, in its context, it was an extremely successful translation... And his choices. You know, the Greek and Latin do not always match up perfectly even though they're very close sometimes. But he knew what he was doing, he knew what he was reading and was able to bring things through clearly, rendering things in a way that was readable, if not exactly word by word, from the Greek.

— Dr. Jeffrey Kloha

Other controversies over Jerome's work had to do with particular translation choices he made. For example, Augustine, the famous bishop of Hippo, said this in a letter to Jerome:

A certain bishop, one of our brethren, having introduced in the church over which he presides the reading of your version, came upon a word in the book of the prophet Jonah, of which you have given a very different rendering from that which had been of old familiar to the senses and memory of all the worshippers, and had been chanted for so many generations in the church. Thereupon arose such a tumult in the congregation, especially among the Greeks, correcting what had been read, and denouncing the translation as false... The [bishop] was compelled to correct your version in that passage as if it had been falsely translated, as he desired not to be left without a congregation — a calamity which he narrowly escaped. From this case we also are led to think that you may be occasionally mistaken.

The translation in question, which set off a riot in church, was whether the plant in Jonah 4:6 was a “gourd” or an “ivy.” In Jerome's day, translation of the Bible was serious business, not to be entered into lightly or without controversy.

IMPACT OF THE VULGATE

Having considered the controversies surrounding Jerome's translation, we should look at the impact Jerome's work had on the Latin-speaking world and beyond.

Our illuminated New Testament is proof that the Vulgate remained influential for centuries. By the time it was created in the 13th century, the Western church had long been unified around Rome. The Latin Vulgate was its Bible, and every liturgy in the churches — including things like prayers and masses — was in Latin and influenced by the language of the Vulgate. This approach was not without its critics. But it also held together aspects of society that otherwise might have collapsed, especially after the fall of the western Roman empire.

After the collapse of the Roman empire, one of the most significant things that happened was that the Franks became Catholic. They accepted the Latin tradition. And so, they brought that into France, and over time, when you have the rise of the Carolingian empire under Charlemagne, the Vulgate becomes the Bible text for western Europe. And he even set about correcting the text, having Alcuin of York make better copies of it so that the text remained pure.

— Mr. Brian Hyland

Wherever western Christianity went, from England to North Africa to Spain to the Black Sea, it carried a common form of prayer, a common form of worship, and a

common Bible — the Vulgate. This all reinforced the notion of a *single church* with a single structure running through the various kingdoms and realms of medieval Europe.

The Vulgate was also critical for Christian scholarship. Theologians consistently depended on the Vulgate as their Bible. This allowed scholars throughout the Western church to communicate clearly with each other regarding the content, interpretation, and application of Scripture. Passages from the Vulgate also found their way into art, music, literature and many other aspects of culture and life.

Now, historians and linguists all know that languages change over time. A common Latin of the late western empire gradually shifted differently in different places, and the Romance languages were born. Further, in areas of the former empire that were never fully Latinized, like the Germanic speaking peoples in north-central Europe, as well as the various peoples of the British Isles, it's questionable how much Latin the common people would have known. Ironically, the Vulgate — a translation that had specifically been made to give people access to the Scriptures in their own language — gradually became inaccessible to most people in the western church. Latin, once a language that united an empire and a church, became a language that divided between ethnic groups and even social classes. The educated, usually from the upper classes, still learned Latin as the language not only of religion, but of law, of science, and of politics. The further down the social ladder people were, the less knowledge of Latin they were likely to have.

This situation did not sit well with everyone. Many were concerned that the poor and the less educated had little direct access to the Bible. Sermons were often in the local language, and there were hosts of retellings, plays, sculptures, and other images that explained the stories of the Bible to the common people. But they were still excluded from the full life of Scripture and the church. Because of this and other social factors, there were many movements throughout the Middle Ages in which popular preachers and vernacular translations brought the Word of God to the people beyond the walls of the parish church.

Nevertheless, it's undeniable that Jerome's Vulgate brought Scripture to vast numbers of people in their own language, and that it impacted religious life and scholarship for well over a thousand years.

CONCLUSION

The fact that we have an illuminated New Testament in Latin from the 13th century tells us how impactful the Vulgate translation was in the church. In fact, much of our theological vocabulary today can be traced to the Latin Vulgate. For more than a thousand years, people continued to read and study the Bible in Latin, and Jerome's Vulgate served as the standard.

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GLOSSARY

Alexander the Great – (356-323 B.C.) King of Macedonia and military general who conquered the Persian Empire and initiated the Hellenistic period

Augustine – (A.D. 354-430) Bishop of Hippo who believed in the Scriptures as our final authority in doctrine and considered the creeds of the church to be helpful summaries of scriptural teaching; wrote numerous works that continue to influence the church today

epistle – A long, formal letter; a book of the New Testament written in the form of a letter to individuals or churches

Jerome – (ca. 345-420) Born Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus; church father who produced a translation of the Bible into the language of the common people known as the Latin Vulgate

medieval period – Era also called the “Middle Ages” or the “Dark Ages” which began with the Fall of Rome and lasted approximately 1000 years

nomen sacrum (singular *nomen sacrum*) – Latin phrase meaning “sacred names”; a set of Greek abbreviations for divine names or titles used in early Christian manuscripts

Pope Damasus – (ca. 304-384) Pope from 366-384 who asked Jerome to create a standardized Latin translation of the Bible that became known as the Vulgate

Psalter – Another name for the book of Psalms in the Bible

Roman Empire – Ancient territory encompassing much of modern-day Europe and the Mediterranean countries, ruled by the emperor and senate in the capital city of Rome; generally considered to have lasted from 27 B.C. until the Western half of the empire was defeated in A.D. 476

Rufinus – (ca. A.D. 345- ca. 410) Roman monk, theologian and historian who translated numerous Greek patristic writings into Latin, including the work of Origen

Septuagint – Greek translation of the Old Testament

Vetus Latina – Also called the “Old Latin Bible”; collective name given to Latin translations of Scripture produced by a variety of people prior to the late fourth century

Vulgate – Latin version of the Bible, translated primarily by Jerome in the late 4th and early 5th centuries, that was later used by the Roman Catholic Church as its authorized biblical text; from a Latin term meaning “common” or “generally known”