

How We Got the Bible

By Neil R. Lightfoot

Ancient Versions of The New Testament

Syriac Versions

Syriac was the main language spoken in the regions of Syria and Mesopotamia and is almost identical to Aramaic. It was one of the earliest translations made. It could be used by the Jews who did not know Greek and natives of Mesopotamia.

1. The Diatessaron
 - a. Earliest Syriac translated version of the NT
 - b. Tatian compiled the four gospels into one harmonious account of the life of Christ in 170 A.D.
 - c. Greek for "through four" (referring to the 'harmony arrangement' of the 4 gospels)
 - d. No copy of it remains though in 1933 a few lines from it were identified on a piece of vellum found at a fortress excavated on the bank of the Euphrates.
2. The Old Syriac
 - a. Not known until the 19th century, it may be older than the diatessaron, but that is not the general consensus.
 - b. 2 chief manuscripts of this version:
 - i. Curetonian Syriac - 5th century copy of the Gospels.
 - ii. Sinaitic Syriac - Discovered by widowed twin sisters at St. Catherine's Monastery on an old palimpsest (layer underneath was found to be an old syriac manuscript dating to the 4th or 5th century.
3. The Peshitta
 - a. Means "simple" because it is a revision of Old Syriac based on Greek manuscripts.
 - b. There are more than 350 manuscripts of this kind. Their testimony is not as fundamental as that of the Old Syriac.

Coptic Versions

Coptic was the latest phase of development of the ancient Egyptian language, which eventually came to be written in Greek characters.

1. Sahidic Versions
 - a. Written in the dialect of Upper Egypt (Southern)
 - b. In the 20th century extensive manuscripts have come to light dating to the 3rd and 4th centuries
2. Bohairic Versions
 - a. Written in the dialect of Lower Egypt (Northern)

The type of text matches that of the Vatican and Sinaitic Manuscripts

The Latin Versions

Old Latin (Vetus Latina)

Latin versions should be of particular interest to us because the first translation of the English Bible was made from Latin. In A.D 180 persecution broke out against the church in Numidia of North Africa. In a small town there named Scillium, the records of their court trials and decapitations survive. There is one account of Speratus who was asked what he had in a chest he carried with him. He replied "Books and letters of Paul a just man." These copies of the gospels were most likely Latin as Greek was not well known in Scillium. Early Latin versions were done unofficially by missionaries.

The Latin Vulgate

This is a very important translation of the Bible for us. Historically speaking it ranks next to the Septuagint in importance.

1. It was translated by a man named Jerome who was commissioned by the Bishop Damasus of Rome in A.D. 382-83 to revise the Old Latin translation of the Bible.
2. Jerome was sent by his parents to study in Rome at a young age. He studied advanced Latin grammar, greek and later focused on rhetoric in order to prepare for the career of being a lawyer or civil servant.
3. After having a dream while super sick with a fever and near death, he went off to live with Syrian hermits in the desert for 4 or 5 years where he learned Hebrew under the guidance of a converted Jew.
4. Jerome's goal was to create a Latin copy of the Bible that was true to the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. While he did use the Latin versions he used the original language manuscripts as a source of truth for his revisions.
5. The Council of Trent in 1546 actually gave his translation the title of Vulgate
6. In the 13th century Stephen Langton arranged the Vulgate into the modern chapter divisions still in use today.

Important facts about the Vulgate:

1. Now has over 10,000 manuscripts and has been copied more than any other book in the Christian era.
2. We know he used Greek manuscripts when revising the Old Latin, but not which ones. The text matches the Vatican and Sinaitic Manuscripts
3. The Vulgate reigned as the Bible of Western Europe for 1,000 years. It was the first translated into the languages of the people.
4. It was the first book of importance to be printed and was printed in 1456 in German by Johann Gutenberg.

5. Eventually this became the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church and it remains so today.

The Text of the New Testament

Textual Criticism

We have talked a little about scribes and the amazing tradition of copying sacred text as well as mass producing books with great care and detail. While this feat is incredible, it is not exempt from human error. Even today with modern printing we see from time to time, errors or mistakes in our modern books, this is not an unusual thing. Some of the greatest mistakes in the history of the Bible have occurred since the invention of printing. More than 400 errors in the 1st edition of the KJV were corrected in a subsequent edition 2 years later.

1. The presence of these errors has given rise to a highly advanced science known as textual criticism.
2. This is referred to as 'lower criticism' which is concerned only with the form of words, whereas 'higher criticism' devotes itself to authorship, date of composition and historical value.
3. The goal: by comparison and study of the available evidence, to recover the exact words of the authors original composition.

Mistakes of Copyists

1. Unintentional Errors
 - a. Mistakes of the hand, eye and ear.
 - i. Fairly common in manuscripts but usually pose no problem because they are so easy to pick out.
 - ii. Often a scribe could confuse one word for another with a similar sound like "affect" and "effect" in English.
 - iii. Romans 5:1 "let us have peace with God" or "we have peace with God". The difference is simply whether the *O* is long or not in Greek (*echomen*)
 - iv. It's not too hard to see how these scribal mistakes could take place. Most recent translations will footnote such differences.
 - b. Errors of omission
 - i. Sometimes words are omitted by the copyist for no apparent reason or simply by mistake.
 - ii. More often they are due the similar appearance of words at a corresponding point, the scribes eye may skip from the end of line 6 to line 10 because it ends in the same word.
 - iii. We can sympathize that this was especially tough when using uncial manuscripts

- iv. The textual critic, by comparison of the many manuscripts we have, can detect and explain these errors with hesitation.

2. Intentional Errors

- a. While we may be quick to think these errors were made by a dishonest scribe or with some kind of malice intent, that is probably never the case.
- b. Scribes had a duty to improve the text they copied if they found errors, misspelled words, or a form doesn't correspond with the classical idiom.
- c. Ex: John 7:39, literal text reads "for not yet was the Spirit". Because this could be taken to mean that the Spirit was not in existence at that time some manuscripts and version add the word "given" so that it reads "the Spirit was not yet given"
- d. Ex: KJV Matthew 11:19 "But the wisdom is justified of her children" to parallel Luke 7:25, however more recent translations have "works" instead of children in agreement with our earliest manuscript authorities.

Basic Rules of Textual Criticism

1. Generally, the more difficult reading is preferred because of the scribes tendency to simplify the text.
2. Quality of the witness is more important than the quantity. Textual authorities must be weighed rather than counted. Thousands of manuscripts and versions may support a certain reading but if they are of late date and opposed to the early uncials their witness should be rejected (Mathew 11:19 'works' is found in Vatican and Sinaitic manuscripts)
3. In the event of parallels, the different readings are preferred.

Significance of Textual Variations

Number of Variations

"Your New Testament has over 200,000 errors, how do you know it says what it originally did?"

What would your response be?

1. Saying there are 200,000 errors is misleading and untrue. The correct term is 'textual variations'. This large number is gained by counting ALL the variations in ALL of the manuscripts (over 5,300). So if one slight variant occurred in 4,000 different manuscripts, this would be 4,000 'errors'.
2. There are far more copies of the New Testament than of any other book from the ancient world.

Consequences of Variations

1. Trivial Variations

- a. These variations are of no consequence to the text. The great majority of variant readings in the manuscripts are trivial, many of them so minute they cannot be represented in translation.
 - b. Ex: going back to Matthew 11, looking at verses 10-23 there are nine variants to be found in these 14 verses, which at first sounds alarming but are all words like 'and', 'for' and 'the'. Others are different forms of the same words. Ex: 'to hear' "the one who has ears " or "the one who has ears to hear".
2. Substantial Variations
- a. While not trivial in nature, their variations do not impact us because they are not supported by textual authorities used in our present text.
 - b. Ex: The story of the adulterous woman found in John 7:53 - 8:11 clearly represents a substantial variation. Almost all recent translations separate it or include it in brackets with footnotes explaining why.
 - c. No early manuscript, except one, has this story. That one manuscript is the Codex Bezae.

Restoring the New Testament Text

Authorities for Restoring the Text

1. Manuscripts
2. Versions of the Bible
3. Early Christian Writers

The Greek New Testament in Print

1. Erasmus of Rotterdam published the first printed Greek New Testament in 1516 . His focus was Greek and Latin and even had his own Latin translation of the Bible.
2. It was prepared using later Greek manuscripts that were available at the time; it was rushed to try to get out before Spain's Complutensian Polyglot.
3. It became known as the "Received Text"
4. Nevertheless, Erasmus was the one who led the way in valuing the Greek manuscripts over Latin.
5. Later Robert Estienne, who Latinized his name to Stephenus in 1546-51 brought out several editions of the greek text. In 1551 he is the one who divided the text into verses that are used today.
6. This was the type of text used by the translators of the King James Version.

The Westcott-Hort Text

1. In 1881 Cambridge scholars Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort published a revised Greek New Testament.

2. Armed with many more manuscripts than Erasmus had, including the Vatican and Sinaitic, they published a marvelous copy of the Greek New Testament which heavily adheres to the Vatican (and Sinaitic) manuscripts.
3. Their work is held in the highest regard and is the result of 30 years of labor. They left no stone unturned considering every single manuscript and piece of evidence there was.
4. The Westcott-Hort text is heavily depended on for almost all new translations.

Restoring the New Testament Text

The most important thing to note from this section is that Oxford scholars, Grenfell and Hunt pioneered a scientific search for papyri in Egypt. We now have nearly 100 papyri of the New Testament, 50 of which go back to the 4th and 5th century. Some are 150 years older than the Vatican and Sinaitic manuscripts. These papyri also confirm the Westcott-Hort Text.