



The History of the Bible
Session 14: Topic 3.3
The Latin Vulgate

Study by
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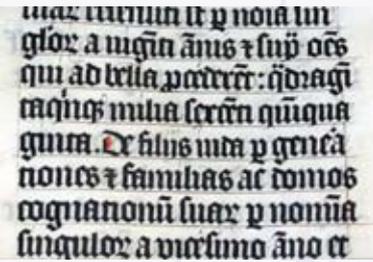
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- 3.3.3 How Gutenberg changed the Bible
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Detailed Study

3.3 The importance of the Latin Vulgate: What Bible have Christians mostly used over the centuries?

One of the first languages that the New Testament documents were translated into was Latin. This language was spoken first on the Italian peninsula and then with the establishment of the Roman Empire just before the beginning of the Christian era it became the official language of the Roman government all over the Mediterranean world. This meant that all official Roman government documents were written in Latin. Most of the correspondence between people, especially of an official nature, was in Latin. In the eastern Mediterranean world, Koine Greek was so well established that both Greek and Latin would be commonly used in both speaking and writing. In the western Mediterranean world, however, Latin was the dominant language outside the local or region languages spoken by the people. Most all written documents in this region of the Empire were in Latin.



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was the dominant language outside the local or region languages spoken by the people. Most all written documents in this region of the Empire were in Latin.

Once Christianity gained legal status under Emperor Constantine I in the 313 with the Edict of Milan, the need for a uniform Latin translation developed rapidly. With the release of the Vulgate by Jerome at the beginning of the fifth century, the Latin Bible quickly became the Bible for western or emerging Roman Catholic Christianity.



In this history of the English Bible study, one must keep in mind the developing patterns that preceded the English translation of the Bible. They can be charted out as follows:

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| 45 - 100 AD | Writing of the 27 documents of the New Testament |
| 100 - 800 AD | Copying of the Greek Text of the New Testament |
| 400 ca - 1550 ca | Dominance of the Latin Vulgate over western Christianity |
| 1550 ca - 1880 ca | The beginnings of the English Bible |
| 1880 ca - present | Modern translations of the English Bible |

One cannot understand clearly or accurately the existence of the English Bible, the German Bible, the French Bible etc. without some awareness of the pivotal role that the Latin Vulgate has played. For over a thousand years Christianity in the western world knew only one Bible, the Latin Vulgate. Only a small segment of highly trained church leaders read or understood either Greek or Hebrew. The vast majority of church leaders appealed solely to the Vulgate when the need for scripture was present in their work. Since Latin was the everyday language of the western world, the people could only understand readings from the Vulgate when they went to church. Almost none of the laity of the church possessed a copy of scripture for themselves. Not all of the Christian churches even possessed a copy. In those that did, the Bible was often chained to a lectern near the altar to protect it from thief.

Communication of the basic stories found in the Bible was done primarily through art work in the frescos, paintings etc. that decorated the church buildings. A high percentage of the laity could neither read nor write. Thus teaching the ideas of scripture gravitated to art as the primary vehicle of communication. The effect was the flourishing of artistic endeavor. This was the positive impact, but the negative impact was to distance the Bible from the people and make them totally dependent on the priests and artists for understanding the Bible. This opened the door for twisted and false interpretation of biblical concepts. Gradual realization of this is what prompted efforts to translate the Bible into the vernacular language of the people by the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. With the Protestant Reformation on the European continent beginning in the 1500s, the Bible was translated first into German, then English, French etc. so that people could read it for themselves or hear it read in their own language, and then judge whether their church was teaching them the truth of God or not. This impetus created great controversy and tension between the clergy and laity.

3.3.1 Establishing the Vulgate



There were many efforts to translate the Greek original documents into “old Latin” but from the available Latin translations it is clear that the majority of these were of very poor quality. The situation deteriorated to the point that “in 382 that Pope Damasus (366-384) called upon Jerome (Sophronius Eusebius Hieronymus) to remedy the situation. Jerome was the greatest scholar of his generation, and the Pope asked him to make an official Latin version -- both to remedy the poor quality of the existing translations and to give one standard reference for future copies. Damasus also called upon Jerome to use the best possible Greek texts -- even while giving him the contradictory command to stay as close to the existing versions as possible” (“Vulgate,” Encyclopedia of Textual Criticism).

It would take him until well into the 400s to complete this project since he did a substantial amount of comparing available Greek and Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament and Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. The mandate was to use the best manuscripts but to stay close to the existing Latin translations. This necessitated careful translation work in trying to strike a balance. Jerome faced what modern Bible translators have often faced. In the beginning, his work was soundly criticized because it departed in places from accepted wording found in both some popular old Latin versions and, even more, from the very popular Greek Septuagint. But Jerome based his deviations on solid analysis of available manuscripts in both Latin and Greek. Gradually, those criticisms faded.

The copying of Jerome’s Vulgate took place from the 400s to the 1500s and resulted in lines or families of texts in the many generations of copies. Unfortunately, the quality of the copying process tended to become increasingly inferior and thus the quality of the Vulgate text deteriorated substantially over time. Numerous variations of readings of the Vulgate surfaced, so that the situation by the 1500s became pretty much the same as that which had prompted the creation of the Vulgate in the late 300s with the Old Latin texts of the Bible.

The Encyclopedia of Textual Criticism offers a summary of the various “families” of Vulgate texts that developed:

With that firmly in mind, let us turn to the various types of Vulgate text which evolved over the centuries. As with the Greek manuscripts, the various parts of Christendom developed their own “local” text.

The best “local” text is considered to be the **Italian type**, as represented e.g. by *am* and *ful*. This text also endured for a long time in England (indeed, Wordsworth and White call this group “Northumbrian”). It has formed the basis for most recent Vulgate revisions.

Believed to be as old as the Italian, but less reputable, is the **Spanish text-type**, represented by *cav* and *tol*. Jerome himself is said to have supervised the work of the first Spanish scribes to copy the Vulgate (398), but by the time of our earliest manuscripts the type had developed many peculiarities (some of them perhaps under the influence of the Priscillians, who for instance produced the “three heavenly witnesses” text of 1 John 5:7-8).¹

The **Irish text** is marked by beautiful manuscripts (the Book of Kells and the Lichfield Gospels, both beautiful illuminated manuscripts, are of this type, and even unilluminated manuscripts such as the Rushworth Gospels and the Book of Armagh are beautiful examples of calligraphy). Sadly, these manuscripts are often marred by confections and inversions of word order. Some of the manuscripts are thought to have been corrected from the Greek -- though the number of Greek scholars in the Celtic church must have been few indeed. Lemuel J. Hopkins-James, editor of *The Celtic Gospels* (essentially a critical edition of codex *Lichfeldensis*) offers another theory: that this sort of text (which he calls “Celtic” rather than Irish) is descended not from a pure Vulgate manuscript but from an Old Latin source corrected against a Vulgate. (It should be noted, however, that Hopkins-James uses statistical comparisons to support this result, and the best word I can think of for his method is “ludicrous.”)

The **“French” text** has been described as a mixture of Spanish and Irish readings. The **text of Gaul** (France) has been called “unquestionably” the worst of the local texts.

The wide variety of Vulgate readings in Charlemagne’s time caused that monarch to order Alcuin to attempt to create a uniform version (the exact date is unknown, but he was working on it in 800). Un-

¹ 1 John 5:7-8 NRSV: “7 There are three that testify:^{F24} 8 the Spirit and the water and the blood, and these three agree. 9 If we receive human testimony, the testimony of God is greater; for this is the testimony of God that he has testified to his Son.”

^{F24}: A few other authorities read (with variations) V7 [*There are three that testify in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, and these three are one.* +V8 *And there are three that testify on earth.*]

fortunately, Alcuin had no critical sense, and the result was not a particularly good text. Still, his revision was issued in the form of many beautiful codices.

Another scholar who tried to improve the Vulgate was Theodulf, who also undertook his task near the beginning of the ninth century. Some have accused Theodulf of contaminating the French Vulgate with Spanish readings, but it appears that Theodulf really was a better scholar than Alcuin, and produced a better edition than Alcuin's which also included information about the sources of variant readings. Unfortunately, such a revision is hard to copy, and it seems to have degraded and disappeared quickly (though manuscripts such as *theo*, which are effectively contemporary with the edition, preserve it fairly well).

Other revisions were undertaken in the following centuries, but they really accomplished little; even if someone took notice of the revisors' efforts, the results were not particularly good. When it finally came time to produce an official Vulgate (which the *Council of Trent* declared an urgent need), the number of texts in circulation was high, but few were of any quality. The result was that the "official" Vulgate editions (the *Sistine* of 1590, and its replacement the *Clementine* of 1592) were very bad. Although good manuscripts such as Amiatinus were consulted, they made little impression on the editors. The Clementine edition shows an amazing ability to combine all the faults of the earlier texts. Unfortunately, it was to be nearly three centuries before John Wordsworth undertook a truly critical edition of the Vulgate, and another century after that before the Catholic Church finally accepted the need for revised texts.

Despite all that has been said, the Vulgate remains an important version for criticism, and both its "true" text and the variants can help us understand the history of the text. We need merely keep in mind the personalities of our witnesses.

At the Council of Trent in 1545, the Roman Catholic Church declared the Vulgate to be the official Bible of the church. This was in reaction to Protestants placing increasing stress on the original language texts of the Bible. In 1590, the Catholic Church published the *Sistine Vulgate*, but upon realizing the sorry manuscript



basis it quickly released a revision in 1592 known as *Clementine Vulgate*. Unfortunately, the quality of the manuscript basis for this revision wasn't very much better than for the *Sistine Vulgate*. John Wadsworth, Bishop of Salisbury (1885-1911), and H.J. White, at the end of the 1800s produced a revision in 1889. This edition, the Wadsworth-White edition of the Vulgate, had better manuscript evaluation underneath it. The *Nova Vulgata*, released initially in 1979 for the entire Bible, is the current official version of the Vulgate for the Roman Catholic Church. This current edition is the product of a commission appointed in 1965 by Pope John Paul VI at the end of the Second Vatican Council. This edition is based on careful analysis of the many manuscripts housed in Rome at the Vatican library.

Below is a copy of the *Nova Vulgata* translation of John 1:1-18. I've included in the right hand column the New Revised Standard Version translation of the same scripture passage in contemporary English.

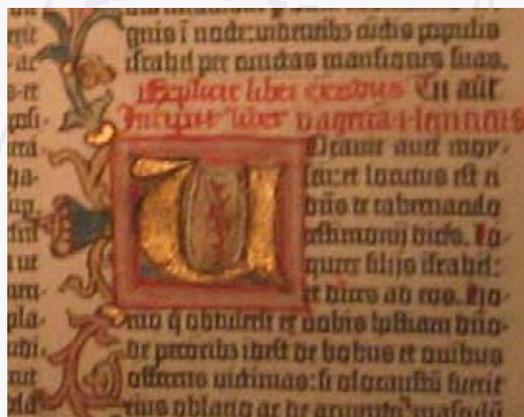
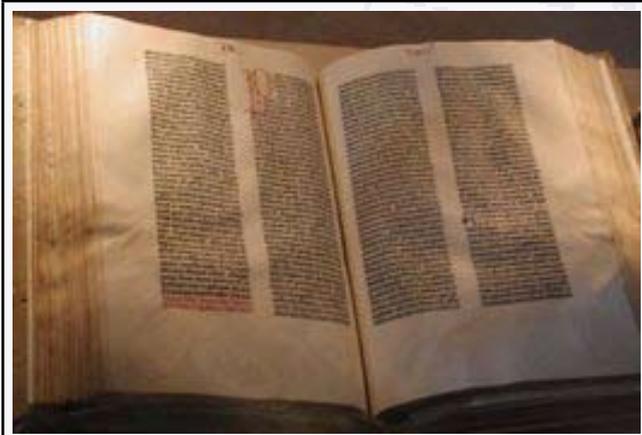
The Latin Vulgate	NRSV	Greek New Testament
<p>1 in principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum 2 hoc erat in principio apud Deum 3 omnia per ipsum facta sunt et sine ipso factum est nihil quod factum est 4 in ipso vita erat et vita erat lux hominum 5 et lux in tenebris lucet et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt 6 fuit homo missus a Deo cui nomen erat Iohannes 7 hic venit in testimonium ut testimonium perhiberet de lumine ut omnes crederent per illum 8 non erat ille lux sed ut testimonium perhiberet de lumine 9 erat lux vera quae inluminat omnem hominem venientem in mundum 10 in mundo erat et mundus per ipsum factus est et mundus eum non cognovit 11 in propria venit et sui eum non receperunt 12 quotquot autem receperunt eum dedit eis potestatem filios Dei fieri his qui credunt in nomine eius 13 qui non ex sanguinibus neque ex voluntate carnis neque ex voluntate viri sed ex Deo nati sunt 14 et Verbum caro factum est et habitavit in nobis et vidimus gloriam eius gloriam quasi unigeniti a Patre plenum gratiae et veritatis 15 Iohannes testimonium perhibet de ipso et clamat dicens hic erat quem dixi vobis qui post me venturus est ante me factus est quia prior me erat 16 et de plenitudine eius nos omnes accepimus et gratiam pro gratia 17 quia lex per Moysen data est gratia et veritas per Iesum Christum facta est 18 Deum nemo vidit umquam unigenitus Filius qui est in sinu Patris ipse enarravit</p>	<p>1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4 in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. 6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. 15 (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.") 16 From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17 The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18 No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.</p>	<p>1.1 Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. 1.2 οὗτος ἦν ἐν ἀρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. 1.3 πάντα δι' αὐτοὺς ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρὶς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἓν. ὃ γέγονεν 1.4 ἐν αὐτῷ ζωὴ ἦν, καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἦν τὸ φῶς τῶν ἀνθρώπων· 1.5 καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκοτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτὸ οὐ κατέλαβεν. 1.6 Ἐγένετο ἄνθρωπος ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὄνομα αὐτῷ Ἰωάννης· 1.7 οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν, ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσωσιν δι' αὐτοῦ. 1.8 οὐκ ἦν ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλ' ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φωτός. 1.9 Ἦν τὸ φῶς τὸ ἀληθινόν, ὃ φωτίζει πάντα ἄνθρωπον, ἐρχόμενον εἰς τὸν κόσμον. 1.10 ἐν τῷ κόσμῳ ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δι' αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτὸν οὐκ ἔγνω. 1.11 εἰς τὰ ἴδια ἦλθεν, καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι αὐτὸν οὐ παρέλαβον. 1.12 ὅσοι δὲ ἔλαβον αὐτόν, ἔδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐξουσίαν τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν εἰς τὸ ὄνομα αὐτοῦ, 1.13 οἱ οὐκ ἐξ αἱμάτων οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἀνδρὸς ἀλλ' ἐκ θεοῦ ἐγεννήθησαν. 1.14 Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας. 1.15 Ἰωάννης μαρτυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ κέκραγεν λέγων, Οὗτος ἦν ὃν εἶπον, Ὁ ὀπίσω μου ἐρχόμενος ἔμπροσθέν μου γέγονεν, ὅτι πρῶτός μου ἦν. 1.16 ὅτι ἐκ τοῦ πληρώματος αὐτοῦ ἡμεῖς πάντες ἐλάβομεν καὶ χάριν ἀντὶ χάριτος· 1.17 ὅτι ὁ νόμος διὰ Μωϋσέως ἐδόθη, ἡ χάρις καὶ ἡ ἀλήθεια διὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐγένετο. 1.18 θεὸν οὐδεὶς ἑώρακεν πώποτε· μονογενὴς θεὸς ὃς ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκεῖνος ἐξηγήσατο.</p>

The *Nova Vulgata* represents a critical text for the Vulgate. That is, the wording of the text is based upon the implementation of modern principles of text critical studies of the Vulgate manuscript tradition that also compares closely the original language texts of both the Old [Hebrew] and New [Greek] Testaments. As such it represents a much higher quality Latin translation of the Bible, than the previous versions of the Vulgate.

Roman Catholic Church. For Protestantism, the study of the scriptures increasingly in the original biblical languages and then translating them into the vernacular language has become one of the distinguishing marks of this movement.

3.3.3 How Gutenberg changed the Bible

Another factor helping to place greater emphasis upon the Bible and its importance for Christians generally was the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1447. He produced the first printed copy of the Vulgate in 1455, and subsequently it is known as the Gutenberg Bible.



Of the appx. 180 copies first printed, several still exist in libraries scattered around the world. The mass production of the Bible for a fraction of the cost of the hand copied scriptures forever changed not only western culture but the use of the Christian Bible as well. Books could now be produced in large quantities and at very reasonable prices for that era. Consequently, the distribution of the Bible expanded dramatically all across Europe. When Luther released his translation of the Bible in German half a century later, he took advantage of the printing press and mass produced it for rapid distribution all across the German speaking sections of Europe. Thus, before the Vatican could have time to stamp out Luther's movement, it spread dramatically through the use of the printing press. Subsequently when other translations of the Bible would be produced as time passed, the printing press made it possible to print large quantities for wide distribution. Increasingly, this made it possible for individuals to own their own copy of the Bible. Previously, a single copy of the Bible could be found at most of the churches. But only rarely would individuals own their own copy. The printing press forever changed that. The Protestant emphasis on the central role of scripture for Christian belief and practice was enhanced by the availability of the scriptures for personal study.

3.3.4 What can we learn from this?

From learning about the history and the role of the Latin Vulgate we can gain increased knowledge of the origin of the English Bible. As we will see in the next study, the Vulgate was the basis for the translation of the Bible into the English language from the beginning all the way through the King James Version. This amounts to the first several centuries of the English Bible in the modern era, approximately 1575 to 1880 AD. Thus, one can never grasp the origin of the English Bible without some awareness of the Latin Vulgate.

Second, the development of the Vulgate from Jerome (400s) to the Nova Vulgata (1979) reflects the strengthening of critical study of ancient manuscripts and texts in the modern era. The early Vulgate texts mirrored the limitations of their time with dependence on less than desirable manuscript sources. In the modern era, advancements in reaching back to the original wording of the biblical language texts are enabling us as Bible students to be more confident in the accuracy of our Bible today than ever before.

Third, the way the Vulgate replaced the study of the biblical language texts by the late ancient period stands as a warning to Christians today. The Bible came to mean only a translation -- and even a questionable one at that. Sight of the original language texts was lost for over a thousand years. With this came emerging theology and supposed biblical understanding that had no connection to or basis in scripture. Christian dogma and tradition became more important than God's Word. Spiritual degradation of the church resulted. Not until the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s was there a rediscovery of the central role of the scriptures as the Word of God.

Fourth, the Bible became the exclusive domain of the clergy and left the laity in the church at the mercy of the clergy for spiritual understanding. This proved disastrous. Such must never be allowed to repeat itself again. "Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb. 4:12).