

How We Got the Bible

Lesson 5 - Ancient Versions of the New Testament

INTRODUCTION

1. Aim: To explain how the New Testament was translated into other languages at a very early time.
2. We have been studying about the New Testament text which was in Greek. Now we will study the early versions or translations.
3. The versions are translations: hence the English translations called KJV[ersion], ASV[ersion], RSV[ersion], NIV[ersion], ESV[ersion]
4. "Something is always lost by way of translation"
5. However, they are very important as secondary witnesses to the text of the New Testament
6. The gospel needed to be proclaimed in different languages. Some people did not know Greek and spoke in another language.
7. As the church expanded throughout the world, Christians (whether skilled or not) began translating the Scriptures into the local languages
8. The three early translations were Syriac, Coptic [Egyptian] and Latin. They can be traced back to sometime in the 2nd century.
9. Thus, the versions are an independent line of evidence to the text of the New Testament

Discussion

I. Syriac Versions

- A. The Syriac language was spoken in the regions of Syria and Mesopotamia
 1. It is very much like Aramaic.
 2. It would have been one of the earliest translations to be made.

B. The Diatessaron - the earliest form of a Syriac version

1. From a Greek term, meaning "through four," i.e., the Four Gospels
 - a. The term "diatessaron" is from Middle English ("interval of a fourth") by way of Latin, diatessaron ("made of four [ingredients]"), and ultimately Greek, (dia tessaron) ("out of four"; i.e., dia, "at intervals of" and tessaron [genitive of, tessares], "four").
 - b. Tatian combined the four gospels — Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John — into a single narrative. Harmony of the Gospels

2. Compiled about A.D. 170 by Tatian, a disciple of Justin Martyr
 - a. A native of Mesopotamia and resident of Rome
 - b. Unknown whether the Diatessaron was compiled in Rome or Syria, in Greek or Syriac
 - c. From Syriac the work was translated into such other Eastern tongues as Arabic and Armenian.

3. Widely used in Syria
 - a. In the West the book was condemned almost from the beginning.
 - b. The problem was that the people wanted to read this rather than the four Gospels.
 - c. Removed in the 5th century.
 - d. The Syrian bishop Theodoretus of Kyros [420-457 a.d.], by his own admission, destroyed over 200 copies of the Diatessaron to make way for the canonical Gospels.
 - e. No copies remain except in secondary sources, i.e., sources quoting excerpts

4. A significance of the Diatessaron's existence
 - a. Mid-19th cent. German scholars, rejecting the traditional dates of the Four Gospels (A.D. 65-95), also rejected the existence of the Diatessaron (ca. A.D. 170): such an acknowledgment would demand an early date for the Gospels
 - b. However, Ephraem of Syria (4th cent. church father, cf. Codex Ephraemi Rescripti) wrote a commentary on the Diatessaron. An Armenian translation of the commentary was in print in the 19th cent.
 - c. A few lines of the Diatessaron in Greek found in Dura-Europas, a Roman outpost on the banks of the Euphrates River, conquered by the Persians in A.D. 256

5. Tatian altered both text and message of the scriptures. He often paraphrased and even re-wrote various verses of Paul's epistles to improve their expression and to change their means. Here are a few examples:
 - a. The visit of the wise men [Matthew 2] is described as taking place in Nazareth, not Bethlehem.
 - b. The account of Christ's baptism contains a strange element because he relates that after the baptism the Jordan was suddenly illuminated by a mysterious light.
 - c. The Genealogies of Jesus are omitted. [Matt. 1 and Luke 3]
 - d. Matt. 19:4-6 is different. It says: "And Jesus answered them thus: 'Have you not read that in the beginning, when God had made male and female, he joined them together; and Adam said, "Because of this bond shall a man leave father and mother, and shall remain with his wife, and the two of them shall be joined in one flesh"?"

- e. Luke 2:36 is made to read as though Mary remained a virgin for seven years with her husband instead of Anna the prophetess.
 - f. Tatian founded a sect or group called "Encratites".
 - (1) The word means "The abstinent" or the "self-controlled"
 - (2) They rejected marriage as adulterous
 - (3) They condemned all use of meat and the slaughter of animals.
 - (4) Tatian is quoted as saying that marriage is "whoredom and corruption"
 - g. In Luke 15 when the prodigal son returns home, his father kisses him on the mouth.
6. The early fathers were vigorously opposed to Tatians Harmony.
- a. His version of the four Gospels was distorted and unreliable.
 - b. He earned his niche in church history as a false apostle.
7. The only value of the Diatessaron is that it proves there were four gospels in use in the early years after they were written.

C. **Old Syriac:**

1. Translation unknown until the 19th century - two main manuscripts
2. **Curetonian**
 - a. Gospels - 5th cent. A.D. - 80 leaves
 - b. Obtained by the British Museum in 1842 from a monastery in the desert west of Cairo
 - c. Named for Dr. William Cureton, keeper of manuscripts at the British Museum, who demonstrated that the version was older than the common Syriac version (A.D. 1848)
 - d. Note: Includes Mark 16:9-20 - Long Ending

3. Sinaitic Syriac

- a. Discovered by Mrs. Agnes Smith Lewis and Mrs. Margaret Dunlop Gibson in 1892
- b. Widowed twin sisters
 - (1) Cambridge ladies
 - (2) "Wealthy, eccentric, and intellectual"
- c. Came to St. Catherine's Monastery at Sinai in a search for other manuscripts, like Constantin von Tischendorf did fifty years earlier
 - (1) Examined number of a number of documents, including an old palimpsest, identified by Mrs. Lewis as a Syriac copy of the Gospels
 - (2) The earliest known copy of the Old Syriac (4th-5th cent. A.D.)
 - (3) Note on the text
 - (a) Mixed textual character, many Alexandrian type readings with more Western
 - (b) Does not include Mark 16:9-20 - Long Ending.

D. Peshitta

1. Dates from about 5th century A.D.
2. Means, "simple"
3. The standard Syriac version
4. More than 350 copies available
5. Text Byzantine in character

II. Coptic versions

- A. An ancient Egyptian language, eventually written in Greek characters
 - 1. The word Coptic is a distorted version of the word Aigypt or Egypt.
 - 2. It is Egyptian written in an alphabet based on the Greek.
 - 3. There were many dialects and there New Testament translations found in all of them but the main two are Sahidic and Bohairic.

- B. Two most important Coptic versions
 - 1. **Sahidic Version**
 - a. Written in the dialect of Upper (Southern) Egypt [Thebes was main city]
 - b. Known from fragments until the 20th century, when many documents dating back to the 3rd and 4th century came to light
 - c. There are dozens of these manuscripts

 - 2. **Bohairic Version**
 - a. Written in the dialect of Lower (Northern) Egypt [Alexandria and delta region]
 - b. Extant documents from the 4th and 5th century
 - c. There are hundreds of these manuscripts.

- C. Value: preserve an ancient form of the text of the same type as Vaticanus and Sinaiticus (Alexandrian text-type)
 - 1. Christianity entered Egypt very early
 - 2. Egyptian climate is very favorable to preservation of ancient documents

III. Latin Versions

- A. Introduction: the first English translation of the Bible (John Wycliffe in 1382) was made from the Latin - That is one reason the Latin versions are of special interest to us English speaking people.
1. There are about 8,000 Latin Bible manuscripts known.
 2. But there are only about 6,000 Greek Bible manuscripts
- B. Old Latin
1. The earliest evidence of what was a Latin translation was during the persecution of 180, Speratus, a Christian in the Latin community of Scillium, Numidia of North Africa was asked what he carried in the chest. He answered that it contained "books and letters of Paul, a just man".
 2. So if he had the Letters of Paul then it is very likely he had the Gospels as well.
 3. Early need in the Roman Empire for the Bible in Latin, possibly as early as A.D. 160
 4. Apparently, the many variant readings in the Old Latin texts probably resulted from many independent translations.
- C. The Latin Vulgate
1. 4th-5th century A.D.
 2. From the Latin, vulgatus, meaning "common" or "commonly accepted"
 3. Bible or translation
 4. Jerome
 - a. His youth
 - (1) Eusebius Hieronymus was born about 345 in Strido, Dalmatia (modern Croatia)
 - (2) Born to a well-to-do family

(3) At age 12, he was sent to Rome to study Latin and Greek, especially the Latin classics; higher education focused on rhetoric, the career path of a politician or a lawyer

b. His transformation

(1) As a young adult, he became an ascetic, though he never gave up his love for classical literature

(2) Until he had a dream of standing before the Judgment Seat of God. He answered that he was a Christian. The voice responded, "You lie; you are a Ciceronian [i.e., a "follower" of the Latin orator Cicero], not a Christian"

(3) With that he devoted his life to the study of the Scriptures

(4) Initially, living among Syrian hermits for four or five years where he studied the Scriptures and learned Hebrew

c. Translating the Vulgate

(1) In 382-383, he was asked by Bishop Damasus of Rome to bring together the various Old Latin translations into one standardized version

(2) In 384, he finished the Four Gospels with this dedication to Damasus: "You urge me to revise the Old Latin version... The labor is one of love, but at the same time both perilous and presumptuous... Is there a man, learned or unlearned, who will not, when he takes the volume in his hands, and perceives that what he reads does not suit his settled tastes, break out immediately into violent language and call me a forger and a profane person for having had the audacity to add anything to the ancient books, or to make any changes or corrections therein" (Jerome, Preface to the Four Gospels)

- (3) With the death of Damasus in 384, Jerome was forced to leave Rome; moved to Bethlehem where he completed the Old Testament
- (4) The impact of the Vulgate
 - (a) To his initial detractors, Jerome said that none of the Lord's words were "in need of correction" or were less than "divinely inspired," but that he attempted to bring the Latin translation into agreement with the original Greek; he sarcastically said, "If they dislike water drawn from the clear spring, let them drink of the muddy streamlet" (Jerome, Letter 27.1)
 - (b) The Vulgate became the Bible of Western Europe for over 1,000 years

5. After Jerome

- a. For Jerome's time, the term "Vulgate" was used for the Old Latin translations or the Septuagint (i.e., the Greek translation of the Old Testament)
- b. "Vulgate" was used of Jerome's translation only after it was "commonly accepted"
- c. Jerome's version was officially recognized by the Council of Trent (1546) as the Vulgate

D. Value of Latin versions

1. The Old Latin was the first to be made in the Latin tongue, important for Latin-speaking Christians and important wherever they carried the gospel. As for its kind of text, the Old Latin is typically "Western."
2. The Vulgate now numbers 10,000 or more manuscripts. It has been copied more than any other book in the Christian era. Historically speaking, it ranks next to the Septuagint as the most important translation ever made

3. The Vulgate New Testament was not based on the Greek. It was Jerome's assignment to revise the existing Old Latin, but thankfully he did check the Greek manuscripts. We do not know what these manuscripts were, but in the Gospels, for example, he seems to rely mainly on a text similar to that of the Vatican and Sinaitic Manuscripts
4. The Vulgate reigned as the Bible of Western Europe for a thousand years. When at the end of the Middle Ages demand for the knowledge of Scripture increased dramatically, it was the Vulgate that was first translated into the languages of the people
5. The Vulgate was the first book of importance to be printed. About 1450 Johann Gutenberg of Mainz, Germany, perfected the use of movable type. In 1456 the "Gutenberg Bible" was issued. It was a beautiful Latin Bible, whose appearance marked a new epoch
6. The Vulgate for English-speaking people remains of special interest.
 - a. Many words used in English translations are due to the Latin Vulgate.
 - b. A short list of such terms includes
 - (1) "congregation," "consecration," "conversion," "exhortation,"
 - (2) "justification," "ministry," "sanctification," "testament,"
 - (3) even "Olivet" and "Calvary"
7. Eventually the Vulgate was made the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church, and so it remains today. The result is that the Roman Catholic Bible in English is a translation of a translation and is not a translation from the original languages

E. Additional notes:

1. Other ancient versions of the Bible: Armenian, Gothic, Ethiopic, Georgian
2. Early Christian writers preserved most of the New Testament by quoting it throughout their works

Conclusion

1. These ancient translations are valuable for the study of the Text of the New Testament.
 2. The main three are the:
 - a. Syriac
 - b. Coptic and
 - c. Latin
 3. In the Syriac language the writing by Tatian called the Diatessaron, a harmony of the Gospels, may be the earliest form of a Syriac translation.
 4. In the Coptic language the Sahidic and Bohairic translations exhibit a good quality type of text that was current in Egypt early in the Christian era.
 5. Jerome gave us the Latin Vulgate which has had a great influence on the Western civilization. It was the standard Bible translation for a thousand years.
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Sources Consulted

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 2. Rocky Whitely Oldham Lane church of Christ Abilene, TX
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