

From Greek To Latin

As we have seen, Christianity initially spread using Greek language copies of the New Testament. Similarly, as the church became more Gentile in number, the Greek Septuagint translation of the Old Testament was most widely used. By the end of the fourth century (AD 300s) as the Roman Empire continued to endure, it became evident that a new Latin translation was needed. There were several Latin translations in circulation, but they were of fairly poor quality. A better “standard” work was needed to offer unity and agreement in the Roman Church.

In AD 383 Pope Damasus asked Jerome, who was the best scholar of his day as well as the Pope’s private secretary, to revise the existing Latin translations. Jerome worked hard to examine the different manuscripts and copies that were available to him. He removed much of the crude grammar and dubious interpretations that had crept into the various Latin translations. Within a year, he had completed the four gospels and had worked on a little of the remaining New Testament. But, he then began to focus his efforts on the Old Testament. He at first used the Greek Septuagint to translate Job, Chronicles, and Solomon. After Pope Damasus died, Jerome felt free to work on his own initiative, and he now felt that the Septuagint was insufficient. He thought a true, correct translation of the Old Testament would have to be based on the Hebrew original.

When he began consulting with Jewish Rabbis and other Hebrew scholars, he came under great criticism from his peers, including Augustine. Nevertheless, by 405 Jerome had finished everything

he deemed part of the Old Testament Canon. There was much resistance to Jerome’s new and different sounding Old Testament. But, the high quality of his work ensured that people would eventually come to respect his translation. Jerome never finished a complete translation of the entire Bible, but his efforts formed the core of a new version that was far better than the other Latin versions available at the time.

Over time Jerome’s work came to be known as the *editio vulgata* or “common edition.” It would come to be the standard Bible translation used by the Roman Catholic Church for 1000 years. Jerome’s Latin Bible was the very first book ever printed by Gutenberg on the printing press in 1439. Today we simply call it The Vulgate.

One last point—a very important point! It can be argued that no book had a greater impact on Western European history than the Vulgate translation of the Holy Bible. The language it introduced affected the vocabulary of every country. The ideas and interpretations it forwarded affected culture, politics, philosophy, and religion from the late Roman age until the modern era, when other translations began to flourish in various languages.

Jerome diligently worked for twenty years trying to make sure that God’s Holy Word was passed along to future generations as accurately and true to the original as possible. Along with other ancient copies of Greek and Hebrew manuscripts, Jerome’s Vulgate played an important role in the Bible finally coming to be copied into other European languages and eventually into English.

We need to be thankful for all the men who worked so hard and gave their lives in order that we may be able to read God’s Word today.

“All Scripture is God-breathed....” (2 Timothy 3:16)

Scott

Remember: “The best translation of the Bible is the one that is open in your lap.” JSL