ANCIENT TRANSLATIONS

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We perhaps unconsciously assume that Bible translating is a modern concern. We link it with the heroic days of Wyclif and Tyndale, with the foundation of the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1804, or with the development of the United Bible Societies' translation programme in more recent years. We are liable to omit from our reckoning the fact that the urge to possess God's word in one's mother tongue is deep-seated and primitive. It cannot wait for Wyclif, Mary Jones, or the techniques of modern linguistics.

We have massive evidence of that urge, going back to pre-Christian days. The Jews of Alexandria had forgotten their Hebrew or let it grow very rusty. They spoke only the common Greek of the Mediterranean world. But they remained Jews, and they wanted to understand their ancient scriptures, on which their faith and life were based. This was the motive behind the making of the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, with the addition of the deuterocanonical books. Many of the variants from the Hebrew are important because they probably give us the original sense, reflecting a text older than the standard Massoretic. Sir Godfrey Driver's introduction to the Old Testament in the New English Bible discusses this in some detail.[1] Many of the "probable readings" indicated in NEB footnotes are indebted to the Septuagint. The demand for scripture translation thus goes back three centuries before the first translation of the New Testament, since the Septuagint is commonly dated to about 132 B.C.

Translations of the Christian scriptures then come thick and fast. Three are of special importance.

1. Syriac. The need for this translation seems to have been felt from early times. Paul's Greek would have been widely understood in Antioch, the cosmopolitan third city of the Roman Empire, which acted as a bridgehead into the Roman world from the east; but Edessa (now Urfa), 150 miles inland, was a different matter. A lingua franca may be generally understood in the major coastal towns, but in the hinterland you need the local language. Moreover, in worship you do not want to interpret your praises and prayers to God, even though you may be your own excellent interpreter. It has been said that there are two fundamental things one always does in one's mother tongue: to count and to pray. So Syrian Christians, whose language was akin to Hebrew and Aramaic, though using a different script, soon began to put the Greek New Testament, or most of it, into their own language. Early evidence is not very plentiful, and we have to do our best with limited material, but more has survived than perhaps we have a right to expect.

[1] See also Frederic G. Kenyon, *The text of the Greek Bible*, 3rd. edition revised and augmented by A. W. Adams. London: Duckworth 1975.

It is not necessary to discuss in detail the various early Syriac versions, since our present concern is with the impetus of translation, not with the minutiae of textual criticism[2]. Certain features reveal the absorbing demand for translated scriptures even in the distant past. A Syrian called Tatian went to Rome and was converted there. He got hold of copies of the four gospels, probably in Greek, though Latin has been suggested. This acquisition in itself is most interesting, because at that time the canon of the New Testament had not yet been fixed. Yet even by the time of Tatian (c. 170 A.D.), our four gospels seem to have won their way over other early accounts of the life and teaching of Jesus. Tatian took them over without question, and made a painstaking harmony of them all, apparently omitting very little. His harmony is called the Diatessaron (Greek for 'through the Four'). All that remains of it is quotations from some church fathers, fragments of translation, and one twentieth-century discovery of the account of Jesus' burial. That has been examined clause by clause, revealing first a clause from Matthew, then a word from Mark, then two bits from Luke, then back to Matthew, and later a phrase from John. Tatian was a pioneer of exact work on the scriptures. How we wish we had even one copy of his work!

There is, however, a reason for this lack, apart from the passage of time. Tatian's harmony was the standard Syriac version of the gospels for two centuries or more, but its author became suspect as a heretic, and early in the fifth century a zealous bishop ordered the destruction of all the copies of his work that could be found, apparently about two hundred. In their place, Bishop Theodoret substituted the Syriac translation of the four separate gospels, much as we have them today. This translation was called Evangelion Da-Mepharreshe ("Separated", from the same root as "Pharisee").

The Syriac New Testament was completed in the Peshitta, the Syriac Vulgate, probably before 431 AD. "Peshitta" means "simple" or "common": it is not known whether the term refers to the simple, non-archaic language which it uses (which makes the Peshitta a predecessor of modern common language translations), or to its unifying of different existing translations.

We have 350 manuscripts of the Peshitta of various dates. All of them omit 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude and Revelation. It was not until the sixth century that a Syriac manuscript is known to have included these. In fact, it was not until 1920 that a complete Syriac New Testament was published.[3] The Peshitta is still used to some extent by the "Syrian" church in South India, which traces its history by tradition back to the Apostle Thomas, certainly to Syrian contacts in the sixth century, and probably in the fourth.

2. Egypt. The ancient world cannot, of course, rival the present (1976) figure of 1603 languages into which at least one book of the Bible has been published, but the list of ancient translations is not insignificant. Alexandria, the second city in the Roman Empire and the home of the Septuagint, was a great centre of Greek culture. The destruction of its library by fire (either in 391 or 641 AD) was an irreparable loss, since it is said to have contained half

[2] E. Nestle, "Syriac versions", in Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible*, IV, 645-652. Cf. B. M. Metzger, *The early versions of the New Testament*. Oxford: Clarendon Press 1977.

[3] London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1905–1920.

a million scrolls and codices. However, as in Syria, Greek was not widely spoken "up country", and Egyptians, like Syrians, wanted the scriptures in their mother tongue. This was generally *Coptic*, but was spoken in various dialects. The UBS Greek New Testament gives us readings in five of them, of which the most important were Bohairic in the north, and Sahidic in the south. These used Greek letters, with some additions, not the old Egyptian hieroglyphs. The Sahidic version is somewhat earlier than the Bohairic: it goes back to the third or fourth century, and we have Sahidic manuscripts dating from the sixth or seventh century. Greek may have been better known in northern Egypt, round Alexandria, and the need for the mother tongue may not have been so strongly felt. The Bohairic version may go back to the fourth century, though extant manuscripts are quite late, and the first complete New Testament manuscript which has survived is dated 1174. The text of the Bohairic version is fairly close to that of the great Alexandrian manuscripts, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. Coptic is another example of the influence of geographical factors: the Sahidic comes first because it is further from Alexandria, the Bohairic is closer to the Alexandrian text because it is nearer to that city.

3. Latin. The best-known Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, was commissioned by Pope Damasus in 382, and was made by Jerome. It was to be perhaps the most influential of all versions of the Bible, and it reigned supreme for a thousand years; but it was far from being the first Latin translation. Speakers of Latin were not going to wait till 382 for scriptures in their own tongue. Greek, it is true, was widely known in Rome. The Jew Paul could quite naturally write to Roman Christians in Greek, because Greek held the same position in the Mediterranean world as English does in many countries today where it is not the mother tongue. Business, politics and higher education are often, for various reasons, conducted in a world language. Yet the soul needs the mother tongue.

Latin translation probably began in North Africa, which had become thoroughly Romanised, and a Christian centre which gave birth to such leaders as Tertullian, Cyprian, and Augustine. There were two slightly different forms of Latin text, the African, used by Augustine, and the Italian, dating from perhaps the middle of the fourth century. Not many pre-Jerome manuscripts survive. Metzger[4] mentions about 32 mutilated copies of the gospels and a number of fragments. Of the other books there are naturally fewer, since people wanted the gospels most. Particularly interesting are the bilingual manuscripts or diglots, which have Greek on one page and Latin opposite, or Latin between the lines of the Greek. The most famous such manuscript is Codex Bezae, which can be dated to the fifth century[5]. The Greek and Latin texts do not always correspond, since the scribe did not always work from the Greek, but had his eye on another Latin version. There has been quite a lot of cross-correction, and there are other peculiarities.

[4] *The text of the New Testament: its transmission, corruption and restoration.* Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, p. 72.

[5] The Codex Bezae is named after the reformer Beza (Théodore de Bèze) who presented it to Cambridge University Library in 1581.

The most famous is the addition, on both sides, in Luke 6:

> On the same day, seeing a man working on the Sabbath, Jesus said to him, 'Man, if you know what you are doing, you are blessed; but if not, you are accursed and a transgressor of the law'.

This comes in no other manuscript, but has been considered authentic. Codex Bezae, like some other manuscripts of the western Mediterranean, has the gospels in the order: Matthew, John, Luke, Mark. This order may reflect the view that Mark was inferior to the others: even Augustine describes him as Matthew's abbreviator and lackey.

In time, the variety of Latin translations became rather confusing. Their quality varied, and there was an inborn Roman inclination to uniformity. Hence the need was felt for something like Jerome's Vulgate. Jerome was a quick and thorough worker. He had the text of the gospels ready within a year. There is still some doubt as to whether he worked alone or with helpers. He explained his procedures in a letter to the Pope. He used a good Old Latin text, compared it with some Greek manuscripts, and perhaps wisely did not make too many changes in the existing translation. His work on the rest of the New Testament was not quite so thorough. It has been supposed that it was done by someone else. The Old Testament followed, and at last there was a uniform version for everyone who would accept it. Not surprisingly, it took some time to win general approval. Augustine, who was himself not too happy with it, tells the story of a North African congregation who had to listen to the new translation speaking of Jonah sheltering from the sun under some ivy (*hedera*). With one accord, says Augustine, the people shouted out "Gourd, gourd" (*cucurbita*), until the reader reinstated the old wold to prevent a walk-out.

The Vulgate in its turn, like its predecessors, became elevated beyond its deserts. As late as 1945, the Roman Catholic Ronald Knox was obliged to base his English translation on the Vulgate, though Greek readings were always considered, and sometimes noted. Later Roman Catholic translations, such as the Jerusalem Bible, have been based, not on the Vulgate, but on the original texts.

In its time, however, the Vulgate marked a great step forward, though it is open to criticism in many details today. In John 1.29, Jerome rightly translates " . . . who takes away the *sin* of the world", not "sins", as in the Roman Mass and the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. Jerome clearly saw that John is speaking of sin as a whole, not of individual sins.

The Vulgate held its position in the western church for the next millennium. We have 8,000 manuscripts of it, all made before the days of printing. Not all are identical by any means. Careless or deliberate modifications are to be found everywhere. Metzger speaks of "the grossest cross-contamination of textual types".[6] Something had to be done to improve the situation, and something was done, three times over. First, Pope Sixtus V authorised a definitive edition in 1590, threatening excommunication if any further

[6] Metzger, *The text of the New Testament* . . ., p. 76.

modifications were made. After his death, Pope Clement VIII in 1592 called in all the copies he could find, and issued another authentic edition, differing from the previous one in about 4,900 places. This remains the official version, though a critical edition by Wordsworth and White was published in sections between 1889 and 1954[7]. At a time when Latin had become the lingua franca of western Europe, and Greek had shrunk within the confines of Byzantium, the Vulgate, whatever its defects, offered the scriptures in translation in a language widely known and used.

4. Several less widely used but not unimportant early versions may be briefly mentioned.

Gothic. Ulfilas (311–383), called the "apostle of the Goths", translated for the Goths in Moesia (roughly equivalent to modern Bulgaria). His first task, like that of many modern pioneers, was to create an alphabet and reduce the language to writing. Tradition has it that he did not translate the books of Kings, because he thought they would not be good for such a warlike people as the Goths.

Armenian. Most of ancient Armenia is now part of Turkey, but some regions are in the southern USSR, where there are many Armenian Christians. The ancient Armenian version of the Bible is a fine translation, sometimes described as "the Queen of the versions". There are almost 2,000 manuscripts of it still in existence. Its translator was one Mesrop, who died in 439, a prototype of the soldier turned missionary. Like Ulfilas and many others, he had to create an alphabet. It is not certain whether he translated from Greek or Syriac.

Slavonic. This version, too, called for the invention of a new alphabet. It was the work of St. Cyril (826–869). With his brother Methodius, he was sent as a missionary to Moravia, now in Czechoslovakia, not far from the Russian border. The Cyrillic alphabet, still used with some modification in Russia, is named after him. It owes much to Greek. Here, as elsewhere, Bible translation lies at the root of a literary tradition in one of the major languages of the world.

Other ancient versions mentioned in the UBS Greek New Testament[8] include Ethiopic, Georgian, Nubian, Arabic, Old High German, Persian and Provençal.

All this detail points to a common urge, from the very beginning, that people everywhere should have the scriptures in their mother tongue. Translators are the heirs of an age-old tradition. To a far greater extent than we sometimes realise, we follow where the saints have trod.

[7] A commission was appointed by Pope Pius X to prepare a new critical edition of Jerome's text. The first volume appeared in 1926; the work is still incomplete.

[8] See pages xxxi–xxxvi, especially xxi–xxxii.