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

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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.

Once Christianity gained legal status under Emperor Constantine 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 Damascus (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. Damascus 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 conflations 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-

¹1 John 5:7-8 NRSV: “7 There are three that testify:⁴ 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.”

⁴ 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 Sxtine 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 Sxtine Vulgate, but upon realizing the sorry manuscript
The Latin Vulgate

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<th>The Latin Vulgate</th>
<th>NRSV</th>
<th>Greek New Testament</th>
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<td>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 Ioannes 7 hic venit in testimonium ut testimonium peribetere de lumine ut omnes crederent per illum 8 non erat ille lux sed ut testimonium peribetere de lumine 9 erat lux vera quae inulminat omnem hominem venientem in mundum 10 in mundo erat 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 quibus credunt in nomine eius 13 qui non ex sanguinebus 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 Ioannes testimonium peribetere de ipso et clamat dicens hic erat quem dixit vobis qui post me venturus est ante me factus est quia prior me erat 16 et de plenitudine eius nos omnes accepirimus et gratiam pro gratia 17 quia lex per Mosen data est gratia et veritas per Iesum Christum facta est 18 Deum nemo vidit umquam unigenitus Filius qui est in sinu Patris ipse enarravit</td>
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| 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 in 4 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 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 has made him known. |

| 1.1 Εν αρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος. 1.2 οὗτος ἦν ἐν αρχῇ πρὸς τὸν θεόν. 1.3 πάντα δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ χωρίς αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο οὐδὲ ἕν. ὁ γέγονεν 1.4 εἰς αὐτὸν ἦσαν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἡ ἥμαρτον ἦν τοῦ φῶς τῶν ἁγίων· 1.5 καὶ τὸ φῶς ἐν τῇ σκωτίᾳ φαίνει, καὶ ἡ σκοτία αὐτοῦ οὐ κατέλαβεν. 1.6 Ἐγένετο ἀνθρώπου ἀπεσταλμένος παρὰ θεοῦ, ὁνόμα αὐτοῦ Ἰωάννης· 1.7 οὗτος ἦθελεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν, ἵνα μαρτυρήσῃ περὶ τοῦ φῶτος, ἵνα πάντες πιστεύσουσιν δι’ αὐτοῦ. 1.8 οὗ τις ἐκεῖνος τὸ φῶς, ἀλλὰ ἡ μαρτυρία περὶ τοῦ φῶτος. 1.9 Ἡν τὸ φῶς τοῦ ἀληθοῦς, ὁ φωτίζει πάντα ἀνθρώπους, ἐφόρχόμενοι εἰς τὸν κόσμον. 1.10 εἰς τὸν κόσμον ἦν, καὶ ὁ κόσμος δὲ αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο, καὶ ὁ κόσμος αὐτοῦ οὐκ ἔγνω. 1.11 εἰς τὰ ίδια ἦθελεν, καὶ οἱ ίδιοι αὐτοῦ οὐ παρελάβοντο. 1.12 ὦς ἄλλο ἐλάβοντο αὐτῶν, ἐδώκει αὐτοῖς ἑξοπλισθεὶς τέκνα θεοῦ γενέσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύοντες εἰς τὸ οἴκωμα αὐτοῦ. 1.13 οἱ οὐκ εἰς αἰματάν οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος σαρκὸς οὐδὲ ἐκ θελήματος ἥρας ἀλλ’ εἰς θεοῦ εὐγενεσθαι. 1.14 Καὶ ὁ λόγος σάρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐκείσασθέν τινί δόθην αὐτῷ δόθην ὡς μοιογενῖς παρὰ πατρός, πληρὴς χάριτος καὶ αληθείας. 1.15 Ἰωάννης μαρτυρεῖ περὶ αὐτοῦ καὶ κέρκηγαν λέγων, Οὗτος ἦν ὁ εἰς τὸν πλήρωμα αὐτοῦ ἤμειν πάντες ἐλάβομεν καὶ χάριν αὐτῷ χάριν. 1.17 οὕτω εἰς τὸ πλήρωμα αὐτοῦ ἤμειν πάντες ἐλάβομεν καὶ χάριν αὐτῷ χάριν. 1.18 θεοὶ οὐδέσεις ἐδώκατε πᾶστε μοιογενὴς θεοῦ ὁ ὁ ως εἰς τὸν κόσμον τοῦ πατρὸς ἐκείνου εξηγήσατο. |

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.
3.3.2 The challenges to the Vulgate in the Protestant Reformation

When Martin Luther began his “protests” against the abuses of the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church in the early 1500s, one of his driving motives was the life-changing experience he had undergone through intensive study of the Bible, and in particular, the letters of Romans and Galatians.

From 1510 to 1520, Luther lectured on the Psalms, the books of Hebrews, Romans and Galatians. As he studied these portions of the Bible, he came to understand terms such as penance and righteousness in new ways. He began to teach that salvation is a gift of God’s grace through Christ received by faith alone.[23] The first and chief article is this, Luther wrote, “Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins and was raised again for our justification ... Therefore, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us...Nothing of this article can be yielded or surrendered, even though heaven and earth and everything else falls.”[24] (“Martin Luther,” Wikipedia Encyclopedia)

As a university lecturer on biblical materials, he found himself immersed in the study of the Bible. Also, haunted by his personal uncertainty about his own salvation, this study -- at the advice of his superior, Johann von Staupitz -- focused on the theme of Christ. This study and the teaching, especially of Romans and Galatians, brought him to a conversion experience. Increasingly, Luther realized the church’s teachings and practices were contradicted by scripture. He began lecturing about this and came increasingly into trouble with the Vatican. When Luther finally broke completely with the Catholic Church in the 1520s after being excommunicated, one of the ways Luther determined to use for spreading his teachings was through translating the Bible into the everyday German language of that day. The complete Luther Bibel was released in 1534.

But his translation, although helping to greatly diminish the use of the Vulgate in the emerging Lutheran churches in central and northern Europe, was none the less dependent on the Vulgate. For example, Luther had depended on the Greek Textus Receptus that had come from Erasmus, but he also was careful to not depart too far from the Vulgate as well. He consulted the Vulgate heavily in doing his German translation. This “love/hate” relationship with the Vulgate by Protestants would continue well into the 1800s. Long after the Vulgate -- in public eyes -- had become the Bible of Roman Catholics and Protestants had their own Bible in their particular native language, the influence of the Vulgate would continue to be felt in these translations.

Over time he developed the idea of the central role of scripture as the sole foundation for determining what Christians should believe and how they should live. Called in the Latin sola scriptura, this principle gradually became adopted by all the Protestant reformers, and has served as a central stance among Protestants until this day. Thus Luther’s renewed emphasis upon the Bible both through translation and about its importance presented a growing challenge to the Latin Vulgate. The translation of the scriptures into the “vernacular” language of that time and region shifted the emphasis to the people having a Bible in their own language so that they could read and understand it for themselves. Increasingly, the Vulgate was associated with the Roman Catholic Church. Protestants in general did what ever they could to distance themselves from the Roman Church. Bible translation helped accomplish that.

The other early reformers such as John Calvin (left) and Huldrych Zwingli (right) followed Luther’s example with a strong emphasis upon the scriptures and interpreting them to the masses of the people. Consequently, the Protestant Reformation began the path to the identification of the Vulgate solely with the
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 Johanes 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).