

# THE Latin Vulgate

by C.P. Hallihan

*This material is intended to supply a general historical background, and not to enter into the realm of evaluation, textual criticism, or discussion of the Canon.*

## Greek First

The Latin language, though predominant in the Western Churches from mid-3rd century to the Reformation, was not so before about AD 250. The Gospel was first proclaimed through the Roman Empire by preachers whose language was Greek, and who continued to use Greek in their writings. At Lyons Irenaeus (c. AD 130-200) preached in Latin and in some local Celtic vernacular, but he argued about heresies in Greek, and the *Letter of the Church of Lyons* about its martyrs is in Greek. When Clement wrote from Rome to the Corinthians (AD 95), he did so in Greek. *The Shepherd of Hermas* was written in Greek. Justin and Tatian wrote in Greek at Rome in the 3rd century. Greek is the language of Roman Christian inscriptions down to the 3rd century—even the original epitaphs of the bishops! The few remains of the early Christian literature of Rome are in Greek, and for two centuries the need for a Latin ver-

sion was not evident in Rome, or in Italy generally.

## Africa and Old Latin

It was in Africa, not Rome, that Latin was the primary literary language of Christianity. This Roman province covered what we now know as Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, and Latin was the official, but never indigenous, language.<sup>1</sup> Augustine gives the impression that the Gospel was relatively late in coming to North Africa, but certainly by the end of the 2nd century Christians were found throughout that region and throughout that society.

The history of the earliest Latin version of the Bible is lost in obscurity, but Carthage, caught up in Roman Latin culture, was perhaps where the first crude renderings of the Gospels into a stilted Latin were made. Tertullian of Carthage, the first of the Latin fathers, distinctly recognises a Latin version of the New Testament



in general use, though not necessarily with every book now included in the canon.

Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, martyred in 258, quotes abundantly from a Latin text which must have been a complete Bible, considering the range of the quotes. Old Latin versions began to circulate through North Africa, Italy, Gaul and Spain—most of them quite distinct and divergent from each other, leading later to Jerome's much quoted remark to the effect that there were as many versions as there were manuscripts of the Old Latin.<sup>2</sup>

In the various regions there would be a popular Latin version of the Bible, or more particularly of the Gospels and New Testament, current from the beginning of the 3rd century. From that time a distinctive of the Latin Scriptures also begins to appear: words which are either plain transliterations of Greek words or gratingly literal translations of Greek forms are scattered throughout. The picture for the Latin Old Testament is even less clear, and the one plain fact would be that all such efforts had been derived from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. No surprise then that the Latin contained the Apocryphal books usually found in the Septuagint, and added to these was 2 Esdras. In the New Testament it seems certain that the Epistle to the Hebrews, James, and 2 Peter did not form part of the original African (Latin) version.

## Italy

The early Latin version continued in use generally unchanged in North Africa.



*A monk at work in a scriptorium*

Not so in Italy, where the 'provincial' awkwardness of the version was inevitably more apparent and offensive. The Italian bishops were also familiar with the Greek texts, and saw the need for revision of the Latin for more acceptable use in their congregations. By this time Latin was in general, though not exclusive, use in Christian writings, and in the 4th century a definite revision of the Old Latin appears to have been made in North Italy, with church needs in view, using Greek manuscripts. This attracted the name *Itala*. Augustine recommended it strongly as being accurate and clear, but other revisions were made for individual and local use, and more changes were introduced. Perhaps this was what caused Augustine to say, 'any one in the first ages of Christianity who gained possession of a Greek manuscript, and fancied that he had a fair knowledge of Greek and Latin, ventured to translate it.'<sup>3</sup> Scribes also inserted additional details in the narrative from parallel passages, and changed forms of expression back to those with which they had first been familiar. Next came the mingling of these

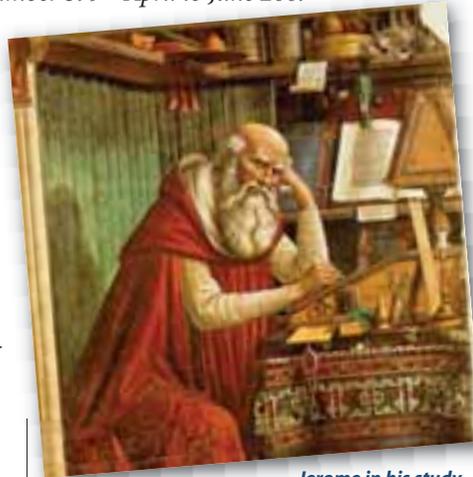
various revisions, with further deterioration of the text. At the close of the 4th century the Latin Scriptures, Gospels particularly, were in such a state as to call for serious attention to this version of the Scripture.

## Jerome

In 382 the bishop of Rome, already styled pope, was Damasus, and his secretary was Eusebius Sofronis Hieronymus, usually referred to as Jerome. This name more than any other is associated with the Latin Bible, and particularly the title Latin Vulgate. The word vulgate is simply the Latin word *vulgatus*, meaning common or generally known, and in reference to the Scriptures always referred to the generally received or accepted text. The phrase Latin Vulgate is locked in historic usage, but I find it ironic that whenever Jerome used the word vulgate he referred to the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, and that it was the Council of Trent 1,200 years later which, mistaking Jerome's usage, attached the word inextricably to the Latin Bible.

Opinions of and attitudes to Jerome were as different and difficult for those in his own days as for all later writers. He was born in Dalmatia of a Christian family in 347 (some say 329) and educated at Rome. Extensive travelling and diligent classical learning followed, probably the beginnings of a knowledge of Hebrew and Aramaic, too. When he returned to Rome he received their baptism, turned resolutely from all classical learn-

*A monastery set into the mountains near the Jordan Valley provides a setting akin to that in which Jerome would have pursued his work on the Vulgate.*



*Jerome in his study*

ing, and committed himself to a rigorously ascetic life. Damasus, distressed at the confused and uncertain state of the Latin Scriptures, commissioned Jerome to the task of revising and editing the manuscripts. It was always going to be a thankless task, with much opposition, some informed, more not so. In some ways Jerome with his learning and dedication might seem the ideal man for the work; his abrasive and virulent nature, his hostility to all that was not of Rome,<sup>4</sup> his zeal for and ardent promulgation of monasticism, mariolatry, relics and departed saints, give a different view.



## Jerome's Latin Bible

Inevitably the work was begun in the Gospels, and between 382–4 Jerome produced a new Latin version of the four Gospels,<sup>5</sup> and also a revision of the Psalms styled the 'Roman Psalter' and reputedly still in use in St. Peter's, Rome. When Damasus died in 384 Jerome left Rome for good, but not the charge that he had received. After two years' pilgrim wanderings he founded a monastery in Bethlehem, and settled there for the rest of his life. Planning to go on revising the Old Testament he produced another version of the Psalms, using the Septuagint and Origen's *Hexapla*. This 'Gallican Psalter' is still used in the Vulgate of today. In doing this Jerome became convinced that he must turn aside from the Septuagint version and work from the Hebrew texts. He may have been the first to use the expression 'Hebrew Verity' for this return to the original language.

Jerome's complete Hebrew- and Greek-based Latin Bible was completed in 405, including another Psalter, this one always referred to as the 'Hebrew Psalter'. His enlargement of his Hebrew fluency with the help of Jewish scholars aroused an unease, amounting at times to downright hostility and accusation of being a Judaizer, and his turning from the Greek Septuagint as the Old Testament source

was held to be almost unforgivable. Even Augustine struggled to come to terms with this, but, as the younger man, he conducted himself with humility under the scorching and abusive reproofs of the older scholar. Nevertheless Augustine, whilst acknowledging and commending the value of the new work (as did Pelagius!), seems to have kept to the Italic Text. Jerome himself admitted haste, even errors in his work, and in later writings quoted portions differently.

This was to be the Bible of Western Christianity for almost 1,000 years, and most attempts to produce versions in other languages were derived from this uneven version, making them at best 'a version of a version'. In itself though, it was a rendering from the original, and affords a glimpse, for careful and principled use, into the witness of textual and canonical history.

## From Jerome to Printing

Acceptance of Jerome's work was very slow, and the old and the new Latin were together in the Western Churches for 300 years. In the east other things were happening. Jerome's work was adopted in Gaul by the 5th century, but the Old Latin prevailed in Britain and Africa. By the 6th century only Africa held plainly

*The Ashburnham Pentateuch: A fine example of an illuminated Latin manuscript dating from around the early 7th century. It originally contained all the Pentateuch, but Deuteronomy is now missing.*



by the Old Latin. The most important remaining manuscript of Jerome's Latin text, Codex Amiatinus in Florence, was actually copied either at Wearmouth or Jarrow in the north-east of England very early in the 8th century, and Bede refers to Jerome's Bible as the familiar one in 731. But the text-stream of the Latin Bible was again in rapid decline. The simultaneous use of the old and new versions led to



Facsimile of Gutenberg's 1455 bible

great corruptions of both, and various 'merged' texts were formed according to the taste or judgment of scribes; and the rent was made worse! Textual instability is a great hindrance. By the mid 8th century the Latin Bible called the Vulgate was in use in handwritten copies through Western Europe; Jerome's they called it, but few if any copies would agree with the 405 Bethlehem copy. Some attempts to tidy the text did stand out—Cassiodorus in 6th century south Italy, Alcuin of York with Charlemagne's patronage in 800, Theodolph of Orleans about the same time. A group of Paris scholars effected a revision in the 13th century—the one which first divided the Bible into chapters—which was to be the basis of the early printed editions. For us,

the outstanding fruit of the Medieval Latin Bible tradition is the use that Wycliffe made of it to produce an English language Bible, still a version of an uneven version, but hastening the Reformation and its outstanding Bible work in England.

The first great work from the process of printing was, of course, the Latin Bible of 1455—the Gutenberg Bible from the printer's name, or the Mazarin Bible from the famous copy in the library of Cardinal Mazarin. It took six years to do the typesetting of 1,300 pages of type, issued in two volumes and two impressions. It was almost a replica of the two-column per page manuscript style that had been honed in handwritten copies over past centuries. Would the printed text bring stability?

### The Printed Latin Text

Cardinal Ximenes (1502–17) was the first to present a seriously revised Latin text, giving it the middle place of honour in his Complutensian<sup>6</sup> Polyglot, between the Hebrew and Greek text (a strange 'honour' to place a version between the Biblical languages!). This Complutensian text is said to be more correct than most before it, but still very far from being pure. Many familiar names now became involved with Latin editions—Erasmus, Stephens, Coverdale, Beza and so on. Theirs is a different path, and tending

Gutenberg's Press



towards the settling and proper use of a true Greek text, and will not be followed now. 'But by the yellow Tiber, Was tumult and affright...'<sup>7</sup> the challenge of the Reformers to the Church of Rome involved clear appeal to the Scriptures, and the confusion of differences in text and interpretation of the Vulgate called for some remedy. An authorised Latin edition became a necessity for the Roman Church.

The first session of the Council of Trent, the instrument of Counter-Reformation, was held on December 13, 1545. The Nicene Creed was formally set forth on February 4, 1546, and then the council proceeded to the question of the authority, text, and interpretation of Holy Scripture. There was considerable variety of opinion as to the relative value of the original languages and the Latin texts. The unique authority of the ancient and vulgate (Latin) version was affirmed, but no ground for its authority given, and no clear text was provided. There was, however, provision for a clear, revised edition of the Vulgate to be printed.

Forty years passed and the difficulties of such a revision had not been overcome. At that point Pope Sixtus V, a man acknowledged by all to be no mean scholar, took matters into his own hands,



Aldus Manutius

and issued his own true, lawful, authoritative edition of the Vulgate in 1590. His scholarship seems to have been abandoned, and the most arbitrary and unskillful alterations had been

made, as many as three thousand by some counts. Sixtus died a few months later, and everything ground to a halt.

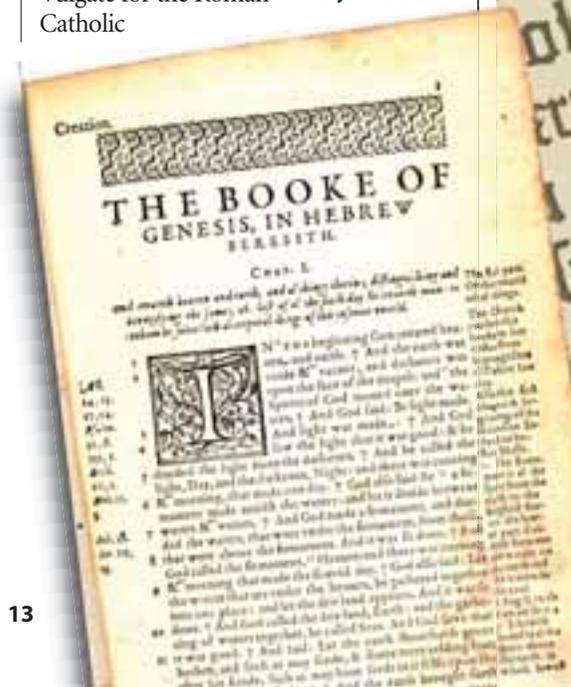


Clement VIII. This was the same pope who refused to grant Henry VIII a divorce from Catherine of Aragon

In the reign of the next pope but one, Clement VIII, a drastic revision of the Sixtus text was effected and published, printed by Aldus Manutius, grandson of the famous founder of the Aldine Press. This Sixto-Clementine Vulgate became the standard Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. Cardinal Bellarmine in the 1592 preface suggests that the Sixtus edition had needed such extensive correction because of printers' errors; in fact there were very few, less than in the Clement issue!

The Rheims New Testament, the English language version of the Vulgate for the Roman Catholic

Genesis 1 from an early Douai Bible



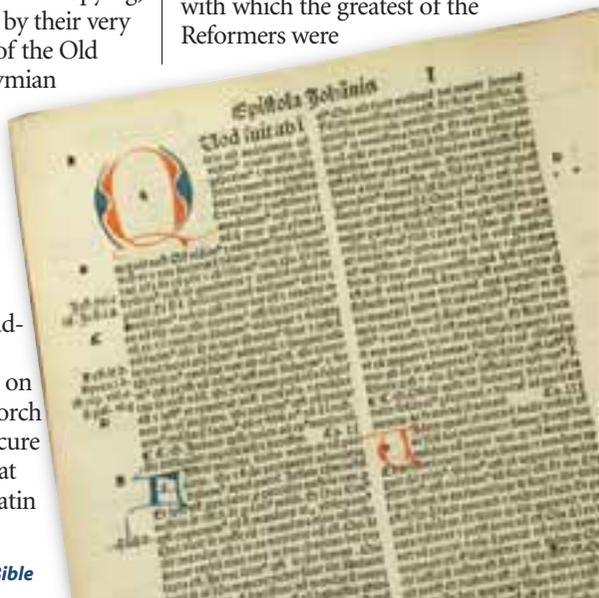
Church, was published in 1582, well before the Sixtus-Clement text. The Old Testament of that version was printed at Douai in 1609, and may have used the 1592 Aldus printing as a source. This Bible was altered and modernised by Bishop Challoner in 1749, and the text properly conformed to that of the Clementine edition. This was the English translation of the Vulgate in use for the next two hundred years.

## Review

There can be no doubt nor denying of the massive influence of the Latin Scriptures in the Western World, where for over a thousand years it was 'The Bible'. But it was only ever a version; the Latin language has no standing over against the Hebrew and Greek, so that all translations made from it are doubly at fault. It is true that all Bible texts before the general use of the printing presses are subject to the problems of hand-copying, but the Latin texts more so by their very popularity. Textbooks talk of the Old Latin, the Itala, the Hieronymian (Jerome's 405) and the Vulgate as if there were only a single text of each, but none of these were in any way stable, always begging the question, 'Which particular one?'

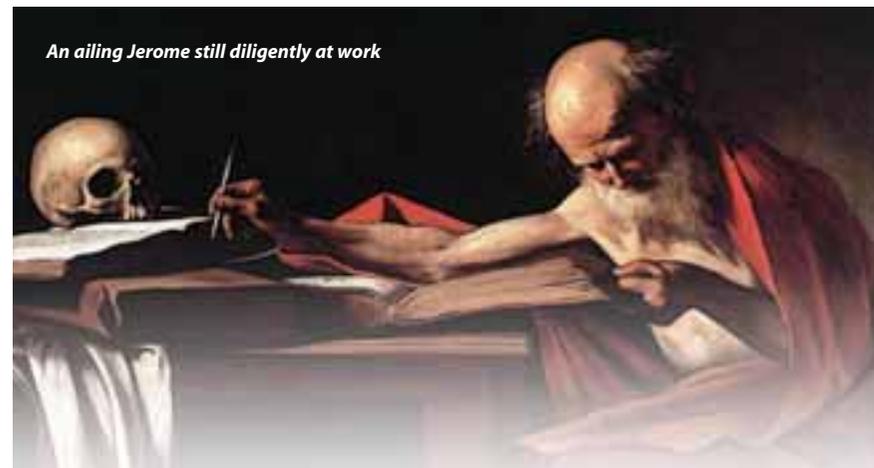
Sometimes, attending a road-side breakdown, a car mechanic will put a mirror on a rod and with that and a torch can sometimes find an obscure problem underneath. At that level the whole stream of Latin texts, judiciously used, can

1 John 1 from a Vulgate Bible



sometimes afford a glimpse into some unlikely corners of textual history to which we have no other access; and glad we are of it. Overall, for instance, the Bethlehem Bible gives us a reassuring 'mirror-look' at the 4th-century Hebrew text, but is not an authority for it nor for the correct translation of it. But just as the mechanic will not be at ease until he has the car in a well-equipped workshop, so will we always look for more and better help, such as we believe the Lord to have granted in the bringing to light of the Masoretic and Received texts of the Old and New Testaments to seal the Reformation. As we saw in the last paragraph, even the printing era brought no short-term stability to the Latin text!

Beyond the matters of text and canon, however, we can never close our minds to the fact that the Latin versions made their mark both upon our language and upon our thoughts and the way we put those into words. It was these versions with which the greatest of the Reformers were



An ailing Jerome still diligently at work

most familiar, and from which they had drawn their earliest knowledge of divine truth. Directly or indirectly, it was the source of all the vernacular versions of Western Europe until the Reformation. The Latin Scriptures, despite their obscure past and obvious problems, were used by God in the preservation of the Word of God and even the transmission of the Gospel, until He provided for us some better thing. ■

## Endnotes

1. F.F. Bruce has an interesting aside: there was never a vernacular Bible in the Berber tongues of North Africa—was this a factor in the almost complete disappearance of the Gospel there? See F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, 3rd ed. (Old Tappan, NJ, USA: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1984), p. 202.
2. Jerome, *Preface to the Four Gospels*, addressed to Damasus, AD 383.
3. *De Doctr. Christ.* 2, 16 [11], 'Qui scripturas ex Hebraea lingua in Graecam verterunt numerari possunt, Latini

antem interpretes nullo, modo, Ut enim cuius primis fidei temporibus in manus venit codex Graecus et aliquantulum facultatis sibi utriusque linguae habers videbatur, ausus est interpretari.' Quoted in 'Vulgate', *McClintock and Strong* (AGES Library, MSE\_1008.pdf).

4. East and West were clearly dividing by this time, and in remote parts of the waning Western Empire there were still 'independent' Christian communities. Jerome had no time for them and was not slow to condemn.
5. He is thought to have used a popular European 'Western Text,' with 'Alexandrian' corrections. Discussion of this is for another time and place.
6. From Complutum in Spain.
7. Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'Horatius', *Lays of Ancient Rome*, XIII (Englishverse.com, www.englishverse.com/poems/horatius, accessed 19 February 2007).