

ANCIENT TRANSLATIONS OF THE BIBLE

This is taken from **Genesis Lesson #174**.

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I mentioned the targums and a number of ancient translation. Here is a brief background of each.

Ancient Translations of the Bible

Translation	Background
The Targums	<p>The Jews were removed from the Land of Promise in 586 B.C. under the fifth stage of national discipline and taken to Babylon. When the Jews returned to the land 70 years later, they spoke Chaldean (western Aramaic) rather than Hebrew. So that the Scriptures could be understood when read in the synagogue, there was a loose translation given of them in Aramaic. This was eventually written down as the Onkelos Targum and as the Targum of Jonathan ben Uzziel. These targums date back to the century before the birth of Christ, although the earliest copies of them which we have only date back to A.D. 500. Furthermore, these are paraphrases rather than translations, so there is some interpretation thrown in, and a lot of extra explanatory text. The two named are the most well-known of the ancient targums.</p> <p>It is only recently that this translation is becoming available on the internet.</p>

Ancient Translations of the Bible

Translation

Background

The Greek Septuagint

This is generally a careful translation from the Hebrew into the Greek done around 200–100 B.C., supposedly done by 70 scholars (for this reason, it is also called the LXX, which means *the Seventy*). This translation would have been based upon Hebrew manuscripts dating as far back as 400 B.C. and even before. This is particularly helpful in 3 ways: (1) some difficult Hebrew words are translated into the Greek, so that we have a better idea as to what these words mean; (2) some portions of the LXX contain portions of verses which appear to have been dropped out of later Hebrew text; and (3) this mostly confirms to us the great accuracy of the Hebrew text, from which many modern translations are made. Let me add one more important function of the LXX: the Greek translation reveals that the Bible has stood essentially unchanged for centuries. No theological group ever got a hold of the Bible and made it conform to their doctrines. There is a clear bias in some modern translations; but the text upon which they are based has stood firm going back to around 400 B.C. at least (which is when the Old Testament had been completed).

The Septuagint became the “Christian Bible” in the ancient world. Many early Christians spoke Greek, so it is only natural that they would gravitate towards this version of the Old Testament.

The oldest Greek translations that we have today are the Chester Beatty Papyri, which contains 9 Old Testament Books in the Greek Septuagint and which dates back to between A.D. 100-400; and the Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus each contain almost the entire Old Testament of the Greek Septuagint and they both dated around A.D. 350.

It should be noted that the Septuagint was not the only Greek translation of the Old Testament. In fact, Origen, in A.D. 240–250, developed *Origen's Hexapla*, which was a 6 parallel column text of the Old Testament. In the first column was the original Hebrew text; in the second was the Hebrew text transliterated into Greek letters; in the third was the literal translation of Aquila (a Greek translation of the Old Testament, circa A.D. 130); in the fourth was the idiomatic revision of Symmachus (a Greek paraphrase of the Old Testament, where the overall meaning was key); in the fifth was Origen's own revision of the LXX; and in the sixth was the Greek revision by Theodotion. So, the idea of a parallel Bible goes back to around A.D. 250. Unfortunately, we have no copies of Origen's Hexapla today. This would have been a huge manuscript and not easy to produce or sell.

Ancient Translations of the Bible

Translation	Background
The Latin Vulgate	<p>Even as Rome conquered much of the known world, they held onto the Greek culture and the Greek language. However, after awhile, more and more people in the Roman empire began to speak Latin. Therefore, a translation was needed into the Latin, and that was done by St. Jerome. There already were a variety of texts and translations at that time, such as the Old Latin version of the Old Testament. Between A.D. 390–405, Jerome did a new Latin translation of the Old Testament, which appears to have been based on Hebrew manuscripts, but he apparently used the Greek LXX and other ancient translations as well. The history is more complex than this, but this is a reasonable summary.</p> <p>The Latin Vulgate is often used as the basic text for many Catholic versions of the Bible although it is more common for modern English translations approved by the Catholic church use the extent Hebrew manuscripts as well.</p> <p>Jerome apparently translated portions of the apocrypha (the books written in between the Old and New Testaments), but it is not clear that he translated all of them and it appears as if he treated them as separate works from the Old Testament (that is, he did not consider them inspired).</p> <p>Jerome's Latin translation is excellent and very dependable. I have yet to come across any passage in Jerome's Latin translation which is decidedly Catholic. I am not saying there is no bias in the Latin Vulgate; I am simply stating that I have never come across any (most of my work is in the Old Testament).</p>
The Peshitta (the Syriac text)	<p>Syriac is a dialect or collection of dialects from the eastern Aramaic language. We do not know for certain who made this translation into Syriac and there are even some who claim it is the original language for the New Testament. It appears possible that the Syriac version of the Old Testament was done in the first or second centuries A.D. Geisler and Nix place this time period as late as the 3rd century (or even later) and that it is the work of many unnamed people. It appears as though our earliest manuscript of the Old Testament in Syriac dates back to the 9th century A.D.</p>

Of these ancient translations, the Greek and the Latin are the closest to the Masoretic text (the Hebrew). The Peshitta varies slightly more than the Greek and the Latin, but I have come across many instances where the Syriac and Latin agree and are at variance with the Greek. The targums are not very reliable with entire new sentences and phrases thrown in.

However, when it comes to the Greek, Syriac and Latin, the ways in which they differ from the Hebrew text are quite trivial and often represent the constraints of the language. For instance, in the Hebrew, the word *face* is always in the plural. However, it sounds goofy to us in the English to translate this literally to *his faces*; so it is translated *his face*. Because this is just the way it is, no English translation has a footnote telling you, *literally, from the Hebrew, this reads "his faces."* Therefore, many of the differences which we find are simply grammatical nuances in one language which are not found in the other language.

What I personally do not find is, some sort of theological bias slipping in. I don't see a difference in Latin and Hebrew, and then think to myself, "There is that old Catholic bias slipping in again." Several modern English translations show much more of an intentional bias than can be found in the differences between the Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Syriac manuscripts.

We have nearly complete Hebrew manuscripts, but they are dated later than you might think: the Aleppo Codex: contains the complete Old Testament and is dated around A.D. 950. However, more than a quarter of this Codex was destroyed in anti-Jewish riots in 1947.¹ There is also the Codex Leningradensis, which is the complete Old Testament in Hebrew copied by the last member of the Ben Asher family in A.D. 1008. There are slightly earlier fragments of manuscripts which are still in existence, as well as the Dead Sea Scrolls, which are dated back to 200 B.C. to A.D. 70 and contain the entire book of Isaiah and portions of every other Old Testament book except Esther. It is the Dead Sea Scrolls which have confirmed to us the accuracy of the Hebrew texts which we depend upon today.

These ancient translations can be found online:

The Targum	http://targum.info/targumic-texts/pentateuchal-targumim/
The Hebrew	http://qbible.com/hebrew-old-testament/
The Greek	http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/gopher/text/religion/biblical/lxxmorph/
The Latin	http://www.latinvulgate.com/verse.aspx?t=0&b=1
The Syriac	http://www.studylight.org/desk/?l=en&query=Genesis+1&section=0&translation=pes&oq=Genesis&new=1

¹ Even though I find nearly this exact phrasing in a dozen places on the internet, none of these sites indicate where these riots took place. There were apparently anti-Jewish riots in Britain in 1947, but it appears as though the Aleppo Codex was originally smuggled from Syria to Israel. Geisler and Nix, whom I trust more than information on the internet, write that it was *reported* to have been destroyed, but added that it would be the basis for the *New Hebrew Bible produced* by the Hebrew University. Based on the description in Amazon, there does not appear to be a problem with the Aleppo Codex.

Sources:

<http://www.bible-history.com/isbe/T/TARGUM/> accessed February 20, 2012.

<http://mb-soft.com/believe/txx/targum.htm> accessed February 20, 2012.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vulgate> accessed February 20, 2012.

<http://www.godandscience.org/apologetics/bibleorigin.html> accessed February 20, 2012 and appears to be a good resource for this type of information.

<http://www.bible-researcher.com/vulgate1.html> accessed February 20, 2012.

Norman Geisler and William Nix; *A General Introduction to the Bible*; Chicago; Moody Press, ©1980, p. 507–508, 512–513, 539.
