

Τὴν ἀρχὴν ἰσχυροὺς ὁ Θεὸς τὴν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν. Ἡ δὲ γῆ ἦν ἄβυσσος καὶ ἀνεστραμμένη, καὶ σκοτεινὴ ἡ ἀβύσσος καὶ σκότος Θεοῦ ἐσφάμετο ἐν αὐτῇ. Καὶ εἶπε ὁ Θεός, γενέστω φῶς· καὶ ἐγένετο φῶς. Καὶ εὖλε ὁ Θεὸς τὸ φῶς, ἐνὶ τοῦτο· καὶ διεχώρισεν ὁ Θεὸς τὰ μέγαρα τοῦ σκοτοῦ, καὶ ἐπὶ μέσῳ τοῦ σκότους. Καὶ ἰσχυροὺς ὁ Θεὸς τὰ φῶς ἡμέρας, καὶ τὸ σκοτεινὸν ἡμέρας. Καὶ ἐγένετο ἡμέρας, καὶ ἐγένετο νύκτις, ἡμέρας μία.

Καὶ εἶπε ὁ Θεός, γενέστω στερεώματα ἐν μέσῳ τοῦ ὕδατος· καὶ ἔστω στερεώματα ἀπὸ μέσῳ ὕδατος καὶ ὕδατος· καὶ ἐγένετο οὐρανός. Καὶ ἐποίησεν ὁ Θεὸς τὸ στερεώμα· καὶ διεχώρισεν ὁ Θεὸς τὰ μέγαρα τοῦ ὕδατος, ὅτι ἡμεῖς τοῦ στερεώματος, καὶ τὰ μέγαρα τοῦ ὕδατος, τοῦ ἐπάνω τοῦ στερεώματος. Καὶ ἰσχυροὺς ὁ Θεὸς τὰ στερεώματα οὐρανοῦ· καὶ εἶπε ὁ Θεὸς τοῦ οὐρανοῦ· καὶ ἐγένετο οὐρανός, καὶ ἡμέρας δευτέρου.



The Bible: The Book That Bridges the Millennia

* *Beginnings* * *Canon* * *Outside* * *Translations* * *Today*

* *Youth* *



Three Early Biblical Translations

We do not have any of the original manuscripts of the books that have been included in the Bible. All we have is copies of copies. Most of the original manuscripts of the Old Testament were written in Hebrew, although a few chapters of Ezra and Daniel were recorded in Aramaic, the language of Jesus. The books of the New Testament were first written in Greek.

The first translations of the Bible were of the **Hebrew Bible**. The **Septuagint** (SEP-too-a-jint) was a Greek translation written about three centuries before the birth of Christ. Two other early translations, composed after the birth of Christ, were the **Peshitta** in Syriac and the **Vulgate** in Latin. These three translations, the **Septuagint**, **Peshitta**, and **Vulgate** became the official translations of the Old Testament for the Greek-, Syriac-, and Latin-speaking churches respectively. Each also became the basis for other translations of the Bible.

The Septuagint

The Septuagint (from the Latin word *septuaginta* meaning seventy) was a Greek version of the Bible created during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus (ca. 285-246 BCE) in Alexandria, Egypt for Diaspora Jews. Most of Jews living outside of Palestine were Greek-speaking as a result of Alexander the Great's (357-323 BCE) campaign to Hellenize his empire.

First verses of Genesis (click for larger picture)

At first, the Septuagint (LXX) consisted only of the **Pentateuch** (Torah, first five books of the Bible). Different books were translated from the Hebrew over a span of two centuries, including the books of



the **Apocrypha**, and were added to the LXX. Since the Greek used in the LXX reflects an Alexandrian origin, the scholars who created it were most likely Alexandrian rather than Palestinian, as was **suggested by a legend** circulated by a writer who called himself Aristeas.

From Alexandria, use of the LXX spread to other Jews of the dispersion. Not surprisingly, early Christians, most of whom spoke Greek, also used the LXX, even in Palestine where they also knew Hebrew. The Septuagint became a very popular translation and a useful tool for evangelization. Many Christians during the time of **Origen of Alexandria** (185-254), for example, valued the LXX as strongly as many 20th-century Christians value the King James Version of the Bible. Origen studied Hebrew texts and revised the LXX. He then published the **Hexapla**, which featured six translations of the entire Old Testament divided in columns, including his version of the LXX.

Among Hellenistic Jews, two views of the Septuagint developed. One group thought the translation was too loose and revised the books in order to make them a more literal translation. Aquila, a Jewish proselyte produced such a translation ca. 128. Others, like **Philo of Alexandria** (c. 15 BCE-50 CE), believed that the original Greek translators of the LXX were inspired and shared equal authority with the original Hebrew version. Jewish reaction against the LXX began in the first century and grew until Judaism rejected it entirely in the second century. Christians, on the other hand, followed the view of Philo.

Today members of the Eastern Church who speak Greek still hold the Septuagint in high regard. It remains the official translation of the Old Testament for them.

The Peshitta

The Peshitta is a Syriac Bible. Its creation represented an attempt to created a "standard version" of the Bible amidst a variety of other Syriac texts.

The name Peshitta (which means "simple" or "clear") was first used by Moses bar Kepha (d. 903), perhaps to distinguish it from the more complex Syrohexapla, translated ca. 616 from Origen's **revised Septuagint**. Written before Syrian Christians divided into two

communities in 431 and this version therefore was accepted by both the Jacobites (**Monophysites**) and the **Nestorians**.

The Old Testament portion was probably created a different times spanning the 1st and 2nd centuries CE. Some of it was translated by Jews working from mostly the Hebrew sometimes consulting the LXX. Except for Sirach, the books of the Apocrypha were translated from the Greek. The New Testament section was translated near the end of the 4th century or in the 5th century.

The Peshitta originated in **Osrhoëne**, a buffer state between the Roman and Parthian Empires. The language of Osrhoëne was Syriac, as it was for much of the area, except Antioch of Syria (see map). The Peshitta was probably written in the cities of **Edessa** (now Urfa, Turkey), **Nisibis**, and/or Arbela.

The Peshitta is the authoritative biblical text for today's Syrian Orthodox, Church of the East, and Maronite churches. The official **New Testament canon** includes 22 of the books in the Roman Catholic and Protestant canons but does not have 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and the Book of Revelation. In addition, this Syriac New Testament does not include Luke 22:17-18 and John 7:53-8:11.

The Vulgate

As the centuries after the resurrection unfolded, the dominant language spoken in the Roman Empire began to change. No longer was Greek the dominant language. In 382, Pope Damasus therefore commissioned Jerome (c. 347-420) to translate the Bible into Latin, a task which took him twenty years to complete. This Bible came to be known as the *versio vulgata* (common translation) and became standard for the Western Church. In English, we call this Bible the Vulgate.

Jerome by Rubens (detail, original in color, [click for complete painting](#))

Jerome's earliest translations of the Hebrew Bible were based upon Origen's revisions of **the Septuagint**; however around 393 he turned to manuscripts written in the original Hebrew. Augustine





argued that, by using Hebrew manuscripts, Jerome was driving a wedge between Christians of the East and West because the Greek-speaking Christians of the East were using the Septuagint.

To illustrate the folly of Jerome's approach, Augustine told him the tale of a bishop from Tripoli who authorized Jerome's new translation for use in his church. When the people heard the Old Testament lesson from Jonah, it was so unfamiliar that they protested the bishop's innovation by rioting in the streets. Augustine saw this as proof that Jerome's "Hebrew" version was a serious mistake.'

Jerome's translation did not achieve wide acceptance until centuries after his death.

The first book printed with movable type by Johannes Gutenberg was the Vulgate. A handful of copies of the complete original Gutenberg Bible (four on parchment and seventeen on paper) exist today.

The Vulgate as we know it today is not the one done by Jerome. He did not complete a translation of the New Testament. The Vulgate was created by assembling books from a variety of sources, including Jerome.

Take the Highway

Early English Biblical Translations. The first written English translations of the Bible were made from the Latin Vulgate rather than the original Hebrew and Greek languages. Learn about Caedmon, the Venerable Bede, Alfred the Great, Aldhelm, Eadfrith, the Lindisfarne Gospels, and John Wycliffe.

Choose a Byway

1. Read more about early translations on other web sites:

The Peshitta

- **Mesopotamian Scholasticism: A History of the Christian Theological School in the Syrian Orient**
<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/texts/junillus.intro.html>

Historical background about the Schools of Antioch, Edessa, and Nisibis.

- **The Peshitta (Syrian)** (an article about it)
<http://shell5.ba.best.com/~gdavis/ntcanon/peshitta.htm>
- **Syriac manuscripts of Urhoy (Edessa)**
<http://www.qualitair.com/osroene/html/syriactxt.html>
Pictures of Syriac Texts

The Septuagint

- **Ancient Scriptures of the Eastern Orthodox World**
<http://people.morehead-st.edu/fs/t.pitts/lxxocs.htm>
Information about pictures of pages from the Septuagint and The Old Church Slavonic Bible.
- **Letter of Aristeas**. Traditional account of the writing of the Septuagint. Authorship disputed.

The Vulgate

- **St. Jerome: The Perils of a Bible Translator** by Leslie J. Hoppe, *St. Anthony Messenger*, September 1997.
- **Jerome's Latin Vulgate Bible** (the Bible itself in Latin)
<http://estragon.uchicago.edu/Bibles/VULGATE.form.html> or
<http://diderot.uchicago.edu/Bibles/VULGATE.form.html>
- **The Vulgate (Latin)**
<http://shell5.ba.best.com/~gdavis/ntcanon/vulgate.htm>

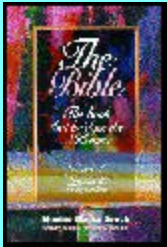
2. Read stories about modern translations of the Bible:

- **African American Jubilee Bible**: New Bible from the American Bible Society
<http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/bible/biblejubilee.stm>
- **Bishop Vaxby Joins Service for New Swedish Bible**: New official translation for Sweden
<http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/bible/bible2000.stm>
- **"The Bible Under Fire"**: About the Revised Standard Version
<http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/bible/underfire.stm>

Early English Biblical Translations



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	<p>This study is a resource from: The Women's Division General Board of Global Ministries The United Methodist Church E-mail: umw@gbgm-umc.org. Web: http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/</p>
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<http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/bible/translations.stm>

Notes

¹Leslie J. Hoppe, [St. Jerome: The Perils of a Bible Translator](#), *St. Anthony Messenger* (September 1997).

"Jerome" is a detail from painting by Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) in *An Outline of Christianity: The Story of Our Civilization*, Vol. III (New York: Bethlehem Publishers, Inc., 1926), p. 134.

Disclaimer: Some links jump to outside sites for further information on the Bible, interpretations, the canon, translations, manuscripts, resources, and other perspectives. Links do not constitute an endorsement by the Women's Division of the information on other web sites. External web sites offer us diverse perspectives; afford us an opportunity to compare them to United Methodist positions; and, encourage us to critically analyze the issues raised by [The Bible: the Book that Bridges the Millennia](#) web pages.