

Mount Olive Baptist Church
Bible Study Series: *How We Got the Bible*
Session 5 – “Ancient Versions of the New Testament”
(Based on Chapter 6)

Session Aim

To understand why ancient translations of the New Testament matter, how they function as secondary witnesses to the Greek text, how the Syriac, Coptic, and Latin versions help us trace the early history, spread, and stability of the New Testament text, and to clearly understand the role, significance, and lasting impact of Jerome in the transmission of Scripture.

I. Why Ancient Versions Matter (p. 65)

Ancient versions are translations, not originals. Because of that, they are secondary witnesses to the New Testament text—but they are still extremely valuable.

- Translations always involve some loss or interpretation.
- However, when translations are made very early, they preserve the form of the Greek text current at that time.
- Ancient versions provide an independent line of evidence, separate from Greek manuscripts.

Pentecost Connection

- The gospel proclaimed in many languages at Pentecost (Acts 2) naturally led to written translations.
- As Christianity spread beyond Greek-speaking regions, translation became a necessity (p. 65).

The Three Most Important Early Versions

1. **Syriac**
2. **Latin**
3. **Coptic (Egyptian)**

All three date back to the second century or earlier in origin, even though surviving manuscripts are later (p. 65).

II. The Syriac Versions (pp. 66–68)

Background: Syriac Language

- Primary language of Syria and Mesopotamia.
- Closely related to Aramaic, the everyday language of Jesus.
- Well suited for early gospel translation and circulation.

1. The Diatessaron (pp. 66–67)

What Is the Diatessaron?

- *Diatessaron* means “through four.”
- A harmony combining all Four Gospels into one continuous narrative.

Tatian

- Native of Mesopotamia and student of Justin Martyr.
- Compiled the Diatessaron around A.D. 170 after returning home.
- Original language (Greek or Syriac) is unknown.

Importance

- Widely used in Syriac churches.
- So influential that by the fifth century, it had to be removed to restore use of the four separate Gospels (p. 66).

Manuscript Evidence & Significance

- No complete copy survives; reconstructed from later sources.
- Demonstrates that the Four Gospels were already accepted by the early second century.

2. The Old Syriac (pp. 67–68)

- Identified in the nineteenth century.
- Possibly earlier than the Diatessaron, though debated (p. 67).

Two Key Manuscripts

1. Curetonian Syriac

- Fifth-century manuscript discovered in Egypt.
- Reflects an earlier text form than later Syriac tradition (p. 67).

2. Sinaitic Syriac

- Discovered in 1892 at St. Catherine’s Monastery.
- Found by Agnes Smith Lewis and Margaret Dunlop Gibson (p. 67).
- Possibly fourth century—the earliest Old Syriac witness (p. 68).

3. The Peshitta (p. 68)

- *Peshitta* means “simple” or “common.”
- Standard Syriac Bible from the fifth century onward.
- A revision of the Old Syriac, influenced by Greek manuscripts with early Byzantine readings.
- Over 350 manuscripts, but less textually significant than Old Syriac.

III. The Coptic Versions (p. 68)

Background

- Final stage of the Egyptian language, written using Greek characters.

Two Key Dialects

1. Sahidic (Upper Egypt)

- Centered in Thebes.
- Manuscripts date to the third–fourth centuries.
- Preserves a very early form of the New Testament text (p. 68).

2. Bohairic (Lower Egypt)

- Associated with Alexandria and the Nile Delta.
- Slightly later, with manuscripts from the fourth–fifth centuries (p. 68).

Importance

- Christianity reached Egypt early.
- Dry climate preserved manuscripts well.
- Coptic versions preserve a high-quality early text.

IV. The Latin Versions (pp. 69–73)

The Old Latin

- Developed informally by missionaries and local churches.
- Multiple independent translations produced many textual variations.
- Generally reflects a Western text-type.

The Latin Vulgate (pp. 70–73)

Jerome

- Born around **A.D. 345**.
- Educated in Rome in Latin, Greek, rhetoric, and classical literature.
- Later devoted himself fully to Scripture after a powerful spiritual crisis.
- Learned **Hebrew** during years of ascetic study in the desert.

Commission by Damasus

- In **A.D. 382–383**, Bishop **Damasus of Rome** commissioned Jerome to revise the Old Latin (p. 71).
- Jerome completed the revision of the **Four Gospels** by **A.D. 384**.

Jerome's Approach

- He did not believe Scripture needed correction.
- His goal was to restore Latin manuscripts to conform to the **original Greek**.
- Faced intense criticism for altering familiar wording.

Later Life

- After opposition in Rome, Jerome moved to Bethlehem.
- There he completed the Old Testament and continued scholarly work (pp. 71–72).

The Term "Vulgate"

- *Vulgata* means "**commonly accepted.**"
- Officially recognized at the **Council of Trent (1546)**, though widely used long before (p. 72).

V. Value of the Latin Versions (p. 73)

1. The Old Latin shows early Western Christianity.
2. The Vulgate has over **10,000 manuscripts**, more than any other biblical book.
3. Jerome consulted Greek manuscripts similar to **Vaticanus and Sinaiticus**.
4. The Vulgate served as Western Europe's Bible for **1,000 years**.
5. The first major printed Bible was the **Gutenberg Latin Bible** (1456).
6. Many English theological terms come from the Vulgate.
7. Roman Catholic English Bibles are **translations of a translation**).

Life Application

- **Trust the reliability of Scripture.** The Bible you hold today is the result of faithful transmission across languages, cultures, and centuries.
- **Appreciate the sacrifice behind the text.** Figures like Jerome devoted their lives—even enduring criticism—to ensure God's Word was accessible and accurate.
- **Celebrate God's global vision.** From Greek to Syriac, Coptic, and Latin, Scripture crossed borders so the gospel could reach *all* people.
- **Be faithful with what you've received.** Just as the early church preserved and shared the Word, believers today are called to study it, live it, and pass it on.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think God allowed the New Testament to be translated into multiple languages so early, rather than preserving it in only one "sacred" language?
2. The Diatessaron blended the four Gospels into one story, but the church eventually rejected it in favor of keeping the four distinct accounts. Why do you think preserving four voices mattered more than having one smooth narrative?
3. Jerome faced strong criticism for revising the Latin Bible, even though his goal was accuracy. Why do you think people often resist changes that improve understanding but alter familiar wording?
4. The early church invested enormous effort to preserve and transmit Scripture across cultures and centuries. What responsibility does that place on modern believers in how we read, study, live, and share the Bible?