

Reformation History

1. The Medieval Bible

The idea that the Bible disappeared during the Middle Ages is an old and enduring Protestant myth. Scripture was the heart of medieval Christian life, but in ways quite different from the way we think of the Bible today. For the great medieval churchmen and women, such as Thomas Aquinas or Hildegard of Bingen, there was no higher calling than reading and interpreting scripture. For scholars, monks and mystics, commentary on the biblical texts was a contemplative act; and the many years spent studying theology at the leading universities of Paris, Oxford, and Cambridge were devoted to interpreting biblical texts. Preaching, whether in the great cathedrals or among the Dominicans in rural parishes, flourished in the late Middle Ages in both Latin and the vernacular languages, and what the people heard were accounts of the biblical stories. Without doubt, the books of Christian scripture formed the worldview of both literate and illiterate men and women of all levels of medieval society.

However, if we are to enter the worlds of the Bible in the medieval period; we need to leave behind our modern idea of the Bible as a book. That conception was in many ways a creation of the Protestant Reformation. Although the culture of the Middle Ages was suffused with scripture, very few Christians encountered the biblical text as a single volume with the two testaments. Indeed, the Bible as a book originated in the medieval world and ultimately became central to the Protestant Reformation with the aid of the printing press. Nevertheless, this development in the Middle Ages was slow and largely limited to the educated elite. For most medieval Christians, as for the men and

women of the early church, the Hebrew Bible, or Old Testament, was not a book, but a body of texts.

In the early medieval culture in the West, the Old Testament was known in several forms, most prominently in the Greek of the Septuagint, which appeared in the third century BCE. Most medieval commentators were fully persuaded that the Septuagint was the miraculous work of seventy or seventy-two scholars in Alexandria who produced one harmonious translation. But after the fall of Rome few churchmen in the West could read the Septuagint. Translations of the Greek versions of the Old Testament into Latin in the West were known as the *Vetus Latina*, which formed the version of scripture known to Augustine in North Africa. The *Vetus Latina* did not consist of one text, but was a large and diverse collection of translations that varied across locations. Augustine, who did not read Greek, was not bothered by the variant forms of scripture, for he argued that a collection of texts was a sign of health within the church. There was no authoritative version of the Bible in the Latin West until the fifth century, and it took a long time to acquire its authority.

The key figure was Jerome (347-420), who sought to create a standard Latin Bible through translation from the Hebrew and Greek. Jerome, who learned his Hebrew from Jewish teachers, and who had a fine classical education, adopted an approach he called *Hebraica veritas*. His method of translating sacred texts was not merely an academic exercise but the fulfillment of a way of life devoted to the Word of God. Unlike Augustine, Jerome believed that the church should have a standard vernacular version of the Bible. In his age, the language of the people was Latin. He argued that the Bible should be prepared only from the original sacred languages, but that the Latin translation

should not slavishly follow either the Hebrew or Greek because no two languages are the same. Consequently, Jerome adopted what became known as the sense-for-sense method of translation. This meant that the translator should not simply produce a literal version of the original; because, for example, the original Hebrew could not be fully expressed in Latin words. Recognizing the differences, the translator should consider the whole meaning of the original text (its literary character and historical setting) and seek the best possible Latin style to express the original meaning. The result should be a faithful translation that was also pleasurable to read. The crowning achievement of Jerome's translation labors was a Latin Bible that became known in the West as the Vulgate.

The Vulgate, however, was not an entirely new translation, as Jerome drew heavily from existing Latin versions such as those of the *Vetus latina*. Jerome's achievement, nevertheless, was no less extraordinary; and he provided the Church in the West with a Latin Bible, although his work did not enjoy immediate success or widespread acceptance. Its place as the Bible of the Western Church was not established until long after his death.

Although in time the Vulgate emerged as the Bible of the Medieval church, its history was complicated because of the ways in which texts were copied and transmitted. Before the invention of printing in the fifteenth century the Vulgate was produced and disseminated by the hands of scribes who copied the text with varying degrees of accuracy. The inevitable result was that the medieval church possessed numerous different and often conflicting versions of the Latin Bible. Although there were numerous attempts to create an authoritative version of the Vulgate by correcting the errors that had crept into the Bible through scribal mistakes, from Italy to Spain and north to the German

lands and England, the Vulgate existed in a multiplicity of forms with significant textual variations. One of the most determined efforts to harmonize the Vulgate text came under the emperor Charlemagne in the ninth century, but until the end of the Middle Ages numerous different manuscript traditions meant that we cannot speak of one form of the Latin Bible. When in the 1450s Johann Gutenberg produced the first work from his printing press it was an edition of the Vulgate; and he used the version which had emerged from Paris. The invention of printing changed the landscape by making it possible to create more consistent forms of the Bible that could be disseminated across distant lands. The printing press, however, was by no means perfect, and printers, like monastic scribes, were fully capable of introducing errors or variations when they typeset their text.

One of the most influential versions of the Vulgate was known as the Paris Bibles, which emerged in the thirteenth century. It was this tradition of the Vulgate that was printed by Gutenberg in the 1450s and later used in the sixteenth century as the basis for the official Catholic Bible following the Council of Trent. The Paris Bibles were closely associated with the University of Paris, which was the center of theological authority in the medieval West; and they were widely distributed across northern Europe. The bibles were produced in large numbers and in formats that could be easily used by students and preachers, who could carry them in their pockets.

Although Martin Luther and the Reformation are often credited with the translation of the Bible into the languages of the people, vernacular Bibles were well known in the Middle Ages. Bibles in English, French, German and Spanish were extremely popular, although church authorities were frequently uneasy with the idea of

laypeople having direct access to scripture. Certainly, the churches of Western Europe took different attitudes towards vernacular Bibles because for many bishops, particularly in England, there was a close association between translations and the spread of heresy.

By the end of the Middle Ages, literacy rates were growing, particularly in urban areas amongst merchants and the middle classes, creating a considerable demand for religious works in the vernacular. In addition, preachers and writers encouraged laypeople to become more active in their devotions by meditating on biblical texts, thus greatly increasing familiarity with scripture even among the vast majority who could not read. Although we find an increasing role for the Bible in the piety of the late Middle Ages, what constituted the biblical text remained somewhat unclear. As mentioned, few people had direct access to Bibles as books. Many of the texts that circulated among the literate were in fact harmonies or compendia of biblical stories, not the actual scriptures. For example, only certain parts of the Hebrew Bible were circulated widely, such as the historical books and Psalms. We know that the Pentateuch and Prophets were less frequently produced in translation for laypeople to read or hear.

Vernacular bibles and biblical literature became increasingly popular during the late Middle Ages and were regarded by clergy as helpful in instructing the common people; but these works did not hold the same theological authority as the Vulgate, which remained the unquestioned basis for doctrinal interpretation and theological commentary. Problems began when certain groups, such as the Lollards in England or the Hussite's in Bohemia, asserted that the vernacular translations were of equal or greater value than the Latin. The close association between these groups, which were regarded as heretical by the church hierarchies, and the translation of the Bible into the languages of the people

formed the background to the Reformation. Luther and his contemporaries, with their demands that the people should have direct access to the Bible, were repeating calls that had been made by earlier reformers of the medieval church. Such demands by the Protestants stirred old fears of the links between popular access to scripture and the spread of heresy.

We often think of the medieval church as being one thing, or of having one form. However, the truth was quite the opposite. The worship found in medieval churches across Europe was by no means uniform or static. The liturgical forms celebrated in any one location differed considerably from other parts of Europe. In England, there was the Sarum Rite, while in France and much of northern Europe the Gallican Rite (from the fifth century) was standard. Rome had its own rite, as did Milan and Spain. The rite consisted of two forms of worship, the mass and daily prayer (the office). For both parts, scripture was integral as it was read aloud in Latin according to the season of the church year. Ideally, the whole Bible was read through the liturgical year, and for most laypeople exposure to scriptural passages came through liturgical books such as lectionaries as well from prayer books. For the more affluent, devotional works such as the beautifully illustrated Books of Hours became extremely popular by the thirteenth century. They were dedicated to the Virgin Mary and contained a series of psalms, canticles, and prayers for private or family devotions.

Such devotional texts, prayer books, and biblical texts were produced in increasing numbers during the late Middle Ages for the small but growing number of people who could read. For the vast majority of Christians, however, the biblical stories continued to be encountered through a variety of other sensory means. We have spoken

about the crucial place of worship, but to this we must add sermons. Preachers recounted the parables and stories of the Bible in the languages of the people in order that many of the faithful knew them by heart. Other ways of encountering scripture included singing and the paintings of Bible scenes that were to be found on the walls of parish churches however humble.

Without doubt the Reformation message spread by Martin Luther, Huldrych Zwingli and others asserted the distinctive authority of the Bible as the Word of God; however, we cannot overlook the rich world of medieval Christianity, where scripture was central. Everywhere the layperson looked, whether to statues on cathedral doors or paintings on parish walls, the stories of the Bible shaped their imagination. In worship and preaching ordinary men and women heard the stories of the Bible, while in the universities scholars produced vast tomes of scriptural interpretation. One of the greatest cultural achievements of the Middle Ages was the Gutenberg Bible produced in the 1450s. It remains the symbol of a vibrant world of medieval engagement with the Word of God.

Questions for discussion:

How has the status and understanding of Jerome's Vulgate changed over time?

Why is the way the Bible is encountered important for how it is understood?

How is the Bible filtered through non-textual lenses today?

For further reading:

Frans van Liere, *An Introduction to the Medieval Bible* (Cambridge, 2014)