

## THE LANGUAGES OF THE BIBLE

We read the Bible in English, in France they read it in French, in Germany they read it in German, so what is the original? The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, just a small part of it was written in Aramaic. You see an example of Hebrew below and it is read from right to left, the opposite to English. Aramaic is similar to Hebrew. What you see below is the beginning of the book of Genesis, the first words of the Old Testament. The dots above and below the letters are the vowels. The large letters are the consonants. When reading Hebrew, as well as reading from right to left, you also have to read above and below! The first thing any aspiring Bible scholar needs to do is to study Hebrew and Greek, and be able to read them like his/her native language!

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ

The New Testament was written in Greek. Greek is read from left to right as we read English, and the first half of the Our Father in Matthew 6 looks like this.

Πάτερ ἡμῶν ὁ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς,  
ἁγιασθήτω τὸ ὄνομά σου·  
ἐλθέτω ἡ βασιλεία σου·  
γενηθήτω τὸ θέλημά σου,  
ὡς ἐν οὐρανῷ καὶ ἐπὶ γῆς·

? No translation is ever a perfect translation because it doesn't reflect the nuances of the original language. As an exercise now with your group, pick one verse of the Bible and compare the different ways this is translated in different Bibles in your group. As I already said, the translation that most accurately reflects the original languages is considered by many to be the Revised Standard Version and so I recommend [The Ignatius Bible: Revised Standard Version - Second Catholic Edition](#)

## THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BIBLE – CANONS OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT

The word “Bible” comes from the Greek *biblia* meaning “the books”. There was a time when there was no Bible. The Bible has a history and a beginning just like other books. The Bible grew into its present form over a considerable period of time. The process by which books were accepted into the Scriptures is called canonization. (One of the meanings of the word ‘canon’ is ‘measure’ or ‘rule’. A canon is a collection of books functioning as the rule/measure for a people in explaining who they are and what they must do etc., i.e. it reflects who they are.) Canonization, accepting a book into the body of the Sacred Scriptures, occurs only after a book has been read and has served the believing community for some time.

By the time of Jesus the canon of the Hebrew Bible (what we call the Old Testament) was not yet completely fixed. Before the end of the first century, c 90 AD, the Hebrew canon (OT) was fixed. Obviously Jesus and his contemporaries would not have called their Bible the Old Testament. It only became known as the Old Testament when the New Testament began to

emerge. The books of the NT grew up gradually in the time following Jesus. The letters of Paul were the first documents of the NT to be written. The Gospels followed these. In the early centuries there was discussion about what should or should not be regarded as authoritative. The discussion continued for longer about the Book of Revelation so that it was not until the fifth century that a consensus emerged about the 27 books of the NT.

### MANUSCRIPTS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

The original manuscript written by each of the biblical writers is called the autograph. We do not have the original manuscripts, the autographs, that the authors of the NT wrote. We have only copies, and not perfect copies unfortunately. The manuscripts are often named after the library in which they are retained. The three oldest copies are, beginning with the oldest:

1. the Rylands Fragment of John 18:31-33 (in the Rylands Library in Manchester and hence its name) dating from c 130 AD. Thus oldest manuscript of the NT that we have contains only three verses and that was written c 130 AD. You can see an interesting photograph of this on page 98 of *Path Through Scripture* by Mark Link.
2. the Bodmer II papyrus (at Cologne near Geneva) dating from c 200 AD containing most of John and
3. the Chester Beatty papyrus (Dublin) dating from c 300 AD containing most of the NT.

When we compare the interval between these copies and their originals with the interval between author and manuscripts in other writings it becomes so small as to be almost negligible. For example, the oldest copy of Thucydides' *History* which he wrote c 400 BC dates from c 900 AD, the oldest copy of Aristotle's *Poetics* which he wrote c 400 BC dates from 1100 AD and the oldest copy of Caesar's *Gallic Wars* which he wrote c 50 BC dates from c 1000 AD. The earliest copy of Horace is 900 years after his death, the oldest copy of Plato 1300 years after his death and the oldest copy of Euripides 1600 years after his death. The following table gives us the gap between original and copy.

Horace	900 years
Caesar <i>Gallic Wars</i>	1050 years
Thucydides <i>History</i>	1300 years
Plato	1300 years
Aristotle <i>Poetics</i>	1500 years
Euripedes	1600 years

Why do we not have better manuscripts? When the Roman Empire was crumbling under the barbarian invasion of wild tribes literature of all kinds suffered. The great libraries of antiquity perished. Christian literature was more likely than secular to be destroyed by pagans or sometimes by Christians to keep it out of pagan hands. Yet it also had the advantage because people loved it more dearly.

### MANUSCRIPTS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the spring of 1947 two shepherds discovered by accident some jars containing scrolls in a cave at Qumran in the cliffs near the Dead Sea. Exploration of the area was begun and thousands of fragments of scrolls were discovered. These are commonly called the Dead Sea Scrolls or sometimes the Qumran scrolls. Among the items discovered were texts of the OT dating from the end of the third century BC. The community of Essenes, whose library these

caves housed, lived there from 150 BC - 68 AD so they have to be earlier than the latter date and account must be taken of the fact that they would have had manuscripts there that were older than the foundation of their monastery. Paleography (study of handwriting) indicates that some of the manuscripts are older than 150 BC. These are the oldest texts of the OT in existence, more than a thousand years older than the next oldest copy of the OT in existence.

### **COPYING MANUSCRIPTS**

In the early centuries personal reading was fairly unusual because few were educated enough to read. Reading material was scarce. The process of copying a manuscript was long. Parchment and ink had to be prepared and every word of the text copied. In today's terms, the whole process would have amounted to thousands of dollars or euro. But the monasteries regarded reading the Bible so important that they were prepared to invest the resources and time necessary. The printing press was invented in 1456 and before the days of printing, professional scribes earned their living by copying and writing at quick speed. But minor mistakes could be made while copying, especially if writing quickly. It could easily happen that a scribe could leave out one line if the same word occurred at the beginning of two lines. Another scribe who would copy from this later would also leave it out. It could also happen that something could be added by mistake. Therefore those who translate the Bible from its original languages must firstly try to reconstruct the most perfect text. About 80% of the text of the Bible in manuscripts is fine, the remaining 20% unfortunately has to be re-constructed. However it is not as alarming as it sounds. In most cases it is pretty clear what the author intended. We will meet an example of a probable scribal error later in Gospels in Lesson 6 (Matt 1:11)

### **THE AUTHORITY OF THE BIBLE AS WORD OF GOD**

Not all the Bible has the same authority for us. Before the New Testament was complete, Christians called the Hebrew Bible the Old Testament because its authority for them was primarily as a preparation for the Gospel, a promise fulfilled in Jesus. (Naturally the Jews do not call the Hebrew Bible the OT since they do not have a NT; they call the OT the Tanak. Tanak comes from three Hebrew words that designate the entire Old Testament, *Torah* i.e. the Law, *Nebhiim*, the Prophets and *Kokabhim* the Writings, i.e. the Wisdom Literature). Since Jesus, Christians have read the OT in the light of the NT. Even within the NT Christians give pride of place to the Gospel in the liturgy. A priest or deacon proclaims the Gospel and it is incensed on special occasions.

As individuals we also favor some parts of the Bible more than others. This is natural. God speaks to us more through some parts of the Bible than others. Not every part of the Bible demands the same attention from us. Otherwise we would be like the man who randomly opened the Bible and put his finger on a verse and this would be his command for the day. One day he chanced upon Matt 27:5 where it was said of Judas "and he went and hanged himself". Not being happy with this he tried again and landed on Luke 10:37 where Jesus said, "Go and do likewise". Some parts of the Bible demand more authority than others, and the original Hebrew OT and Greek NT have an authority superior to modern translations, i.e. they are more inspired than our English translations.

### **WHY DO CATHOLIC BIBLES HAVE SEVEN EXTRA BOOKS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT?**

If you find this explanation too complicated simply skip it for now. I will refer you to it

in later lessons. All you need to know is which are the seven books. Jews travelled and settled in many places, especially after the Jewish Exile in 587 BC when Jerusalem was captured by Babylon and they took their books with them and established synagogues. One of the largest colonies of Jews in the Diaspora was in Alexandria in Egypt where Jewish scribes produced a Greek Old Testament - later known as the Septuagint - that was eventually the favored version of the Old Testament by many Christians as well as Greek-speaking Jews. (Greek was the language of the Mediterranean basin at that time). This Greek version is called the Septuagint (from the Latin 'Septuaginta' meaning 70 and therefore designated as LXX, in Latin L=50 and X=10). The Septuagint included books and chapters not found in the Hebrew Old Testament. These additions are the books of *Tobit*, *Judith*, *Wisdom of Solomon*, *Ecclesiasticus (also called Sirach)*, *Baruch*, *1 & 2 Maccabees*, *additions to Esther*, *additions to Daniel (part of chapter 3; chapters 13 and 14) and the Letter of Jeremiah (Baruch 6)*.

Why is the Greek Old Testament called the Septuagint? Its name derives from a legend. The Letter of Aristeas, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC Jewish scholar, asserts that the king of Egypt Ptolemy II Philadelphus (283-246 BC) wished to have a translation of the OT for his library which he founded in Alexandria. This amount of what Aristeas states can be accepted, that it is before 250 BC and that it was translated in Alexandria. However Aristeas then adds the following explanation which, naturally, is not to be regarded as historical. He states that 72 men, 6 from each of the twelve tribes of Israel, came from Jerusalem to translate. Each was put into a separate cell on the island of Pharos. Each took 72 days to complete his translation and upon checking afterwards each was found to be identical.

The difference between Catholic and Protestant Bibles starts with the Septuagint. St. Jerome's Latin translation of the Bible from the Hebrew OT was made c 400 AD. This Latin translation, later called the Vulgate, originally contained Jerome's prefatory notes marking the seven books not found in the Hebrew but in subsequent editions these notes were omitted. The gradual acceptance of the Latin Vulgate as the approved Bible of the Western Church meant the adoption of the seven extra books into its OT canon. But that was not the only reason. The Jews at the time of Jesus also read these seven books as part of their Scriptures and thus the early Christians therefore also read them as part of their Old Testament. Therefore they were the Christian canon of the Old Testament at the time of Jesus. Unlike the remainder of the OT, these seven extra books were written in Greek and not in Hebrew.

Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century called into question the accuracy of the Latin translations and books not written in Hebrew. They rejected the Greek OT in favor of the Hebrew OT. In recent years non-Catholic Bibles once again print the seven books, but not in the same location as in Catholic Bibles, they place them all together at the end of the OT and call them "Apocrypha". The Catholic Church during the Council of Trent in 1546 reaffirmed the seven books. A few years later the Pope called them "deuterocanonical". They fill in gaps or throw new light on biblical history and enrich our understanding of Jewish piety in the years prior to Jesus. The Greek Orthodox Church has accepted even more books into the Old Testament than these seven.

### **RESEARCHING THE BIBLE**

A question I am sometimes asked is, "Where does one find so much information on the Bible for research?" Although you see only a fairly select number of books on the Bible in your local religious bookstore there are thousands of publications on the Bible every year. Bookstores

are market orientated and cannot afford to stock every book. A library attached to a university or institute which has a theological faculty will have a section on Scripture but even that will not contain every book because of financial limitations. The best libraries on Scripture are probably the Biblical Institute in Rome and the École Biblique in Jerusalem and the library of Boston College. “With so many thousands of books how do you find what you need for your research?” A list of all the publications on Scripture and Theology is published each year in a book called an Elenchus. “Elenchus” simply means list. There are different Elenchi published by different universities. The most complete is published by the Biblical Institute in Rome but there is also a very good one published by the Catholic University of Leuven (Louvain) every year. As I write now I have before me the Elenchus published in Leuven in 1993 containing the list of publications for 1992. The pages containing the publications on Scripture begin at page 126 and run until page 315. Each of those 189 pages lists about 22 books or articles in Scripture and Theology journals published on the Bible in 1992. That is well over 4000 publications during 1992! So there is an abundance of material for research. The publications in the Elenchus are listed by theme and by biblical book, ensuring that you can quickly find a publication relevant to your research. In case you want to look at this in your local theological library, the Elenchus I mentioned is published each year as part of a theological journal called *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses*. As there are more and more scholars researching the Bible each year, the number of publications grows each year. For example, looking at the Elenchus for 1969 published in 1970 you would see that there are 72 pages on Scripture. See how much the research has increased since then, from 72 pages to 189 pages in 1993. A question I am also asked is “How much does one need to read for a doctorate?” Generally you read everything written about your theme during the last 25 years, not everything written about the Bible, but what is written about your particular area of research.

### **THE CHURCH VENERATES THE SCRIPTURES**

Vatican II in *Dei Verbum* paragraph 25 encouraged people to study the Sacred Scriptures; “The sacred Synod forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful, especially those who live the religious life, to learn “the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ” (Phil 3:8) by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.” [Quotation from St Jerome, the patron saint of Scripture Study] Therefore let them go gladly to the sacred text itself, whether in the sacred liturgy, which is full of the divine words, or in devout reading, or in such suitable exercises and various other helps which, with the approval and guidance of the pastors of the Church, are happily spreading everywhere in our day. Let them remember however that prayer should accompany the reading of sacred Scriptures, so that a dialogue takes place between God and man.”

The same Vatican II document, *Dei Verbum* 21, writes beautifully on the importance of the Scriptures: “In the sacred books the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children, and talks with them.” This is repeated in CCC 104

I cherish the following quotation from Origen, a third century preacher, “You receive the body of the Lord with special care and reverence lest the smallest crumb of the consecrated gift fall to the floor. You should receive the word of God with equal care and reverence lest the smallest word of it fall to the floor and be lost.”



Can you set aside time every day to read the Scriptures and allow the Lord to speak to you?