

St Jerome: Interpreter, translator, innovator

Generally people accept Bible translations and take them for granted without being aware of what they owe to the translators. Jerome (Eusebius Hieronymus, c. 331-420) is one of the few Bible translators whose name is well known. This may be because he is reputed to have pulled a thorn out of the paw of a lion, which settled down in his monastery in Bethlehem and is shown in many paintings of Jerome at work. He was nevertheless a pioneer of Bible translation and the outstanding Christian Bible scholar of his time.

He was born in Eastern Europe about AD 331, and was sent to study in Rome, where he lived a dissolute life, enjoying the many attractions of Rome, which included the circus and the theatre. He was a brilliant student and an avid reader, intending to practise law. Later, however, he learnt about the lives of the desert fathers, decided to follow suit, and gave up his career in the Roman imperial civil service.

In 382 he acted as interpreter at the synod of the Greek and Latin churches in Rome. The synod was not a success, but Jerome stayed there as the secretary, interpreter and theological adviser to the Pope. By this time he was a trilingual scholar, well versed in Hebrew, Greek and Latin. The standard version of the Old Testament at that time was the Greek Septuagint, the first ever Bible translation, which had been completed about 500 years earlier. Several unsatisfactory Latin translations of the Bible were in circulation, which led to confusion, and the Pope commissioned Jerome to translate the Bible into Latin. When the Pope died, Jerome fell out of favour and, having made many enemies, was driven from Rome. He moved to Bethlehem and continued his translation.

Although some conventions of punctuation had been developed by that time, Latin books tended to be written continuously, without breaks between words. The ends of sentences were marked by a gap followed by an enlarged letter or an occasional point. Jerome developed a system of punctuation “by phrases”, specially designed for reading aloud. Each phrase was treated as a mini-paragraph, starting with a letter projecting into the margin, before which the reader was expected to take a new breath.

He found it unsatisfactory to translate the Old Testament out of the Septuagint Greek, and when he had finished his first translation, he translated it again from the original Hebrew (which he called the “Hebrew truth” – *Hebraica veritas*). This return to the original text is one reason for what has been called the “innovative greatness” of his translation, which became known as the Vulgate.

The Vulgate was also the first translation to be done by someone who formulated and discussed well-developed ideas on translation, such as the conflict between literal translation and idiomatic rendering of the meaning. Jerome left a substantial body of commentaries and other writings that have contributed to the tradition of biblical scholarship in the West. This was partly necessitated by the fact that the reaction to his completed translation and revision of the Bible was not altogether favourable – a problem that is familiar to modern Bible translators. Augustine (354-430), for example, complained that his parishioners were dismayed at the disappearance of the familiar words they had come to expect. Augustine also argued that the Septuagint was an inspired translation and should not be replaced. He felt that the only place for texts translated into Latin was in critical editions discussing discrepancies between the Septuagint and the Hebrew text.

It is ironic that the Vulgate itself became the traditional authorised translation of the Western church for centuries, and the usual source text for translation. At times the Vulgate was even regarded as having greater authority than texts in the original languages.

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