

THE VULGATE BIBLE

by DOM G. D. SCHLEGEL, O.S.B.

THE language of the primitive Church was Greek. It was in Greek that the first Christians read the inspired writings of the Old Covenant, in Greek that the Apostles recorded the Christian revelation, in Greek that they celebrated the Eucharist and held their liturgical gatherings. The Old Testament had already been translated from Hebrew into Greek in the third century B.C., for even at that time many Jews were so ignorant of the ancient tongue of their people that it became necessary to provide these "Hellenists" with a version of the Scriptures which they could read and understand. This Greek version was the work of Jewish scholars in an age when there was no danger from a rival Christianity to the traditional Israelitish interpretation of the Law and the Prophets. It is known to us as the "Septuagint" on account of the legend told of its composition. Its success was so great that it must have very largely supplanted the original Hebrew text among the Greek-speaking Jews of the Dispersion, who were becoming more and more numerous and influential; there are no Hebrew texts of this period surviving with which to verify and control the fidelity of the Septuagint version. Indeed the earliest Hebrew manuscripts which we possess date from about the ninth century A.D. when definite danger did exist of a rival interpretation to the traditional Rabbinical one. That part of the Roman Empire therefore into which the Christian Church was born spoke Greek, and the Jewish population of the Empire read their Bible in Greek. Hence it is only natural that the Apostles should have adopted, and, as it were, consecrated, the language of the majority of their converts, and that it should be the Greek version of which they made use when quoting the Old Testament, even though some of them, like St. Paul, were certainly conversant with ancient Hebrew.

This remained the state of affairs—both Jewish and Gentile Christians accepting without question the Greek version as the inspired word of God—for the first four centuries of the Church's existence. When, in the second century A.D. the expansion of Christianity in the Latin speaking West had made imperative a Latin translation of both Testaments for the use of those ignorant of Greek, and when Latin was seen to be the most suitable language for the celebration of the Liturgy of the Roman Church, the versions of the Scriptures which were forthcoming (and they were many), were all based on the Septuagint. About that time, however, a certain dissatisfaction with the Septuagint began to manifest itself *outside* the Church, and three scholars, independently, essayed a fresh translation into Greek of the *Old Testament* writings. As in the earlier case of the Septuagint we have once more no Hebrew

text of the period enabling us to control the justice of their accusations against it, or by which to judge of their own success in achieving a better rendering. It may also be noted that Jewish accusations, of the Christian period, levelled against the fidelity of the Septuagint, may be due, at least in part, to the fact that the wording of this version, accomplished by Jewish scholars in the pre-Christian era, easily admitted a Messianic interpretation in harmony with the doctrines of Christianity: an opportunity of which Christian commentators were not slow to avail themselves.

Origen was absolutely the only early Christian writer to apply himself to a critical textual study of the Bible, making use for this purpose of the labours of the three scholars above mentioned: Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion; it was not till St. Jerome's time that such a critical approach to textual problems was envisaged in the West. It was the Septuagint which served as the basis of all the Latin translations up to his time—of those at any rate which enjoyed official recognition in the services of the Church. There were many of these early Latin translations of Scripture as we know from the famous passage in St. Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* (ii, 11), and this is especially true of the Psalms. Each of the chief liturgical centres had their own Psalter: Rome, Milan, Spain, Africa: although the differences between them were only minor ones, and they all appear to be descended from a common ancestor, to which the African version would seem to offer the most important testimony. This last is known to us principally from the fact that St. Augustine makes use of it in his *Enarrationes in Psalmos*; the Graeco-latin manuscript Psalter of Verona bearing witness also in all likelihood to this translation. The Roman, Milanese and Spanish, or Mozarabic Psalters are all of them still employed in the liturgies of these rites; in the case of the Roman, its text is now only used in St. Peter's, although in those portions of the Liturgy less liable to change, viz. the chant pieces, it still underlies the text of the liturgical books of the Roman rite. Besides the versions of these Psalters made to be used and still in use, attempts have been made at various times to provide scholars with critical editions from the manuscripts; so far however none of these have proved satisfactory.

St. Jerome was commissioned by Pope Damasus, probably in 382, to prepare a fresh Latin version of the books of the Bible, and he set to work at once on this great task which was destined to mark a turning point not only in the life of the Church but in the history of Latin literature. The first portion produced by Jerome was naturally the Gospels which appeared in 384. This was soon afterwards followed by a revision of the existing Latin translation of the Psalms in use at Rome: the Roman Psalter. He tells us himself (*Praef. in Libr. Psalmorum*) that he revised it with the help of the Greek text of the Septuagint only. But it was done very rapidly, and proved, as the author admits, a poor

piece of work, which he was later at pains to have suppressed. In this he seems to have succeeded, for it would have remained unknown to us had not Dom Morin discovered St. Jerome's *Commentarioli* on the Psalms, delivered during his sojourn in Bethlehem and based on this first revision of the Latin Psalter. It follows that we are acquainted with his version only in a fragmentary way, from the passages commented upon in these sermons, and possibly also from the Psalm quotations in Jerome's letters about this time (c. 390). No manuscript Psalter of this first revision is extant.

It seems probable that St. Jerome's next attempt at translating the Psalms was the one known to us as the *Psalterium iuxta Hebraeos*.¹ In it he deliberately set aside all the existing Latin versions and undertook the translation of the Hebrew text with his newly acquired knowledge of that tongue which had cost him so much labour and fatigue. It has been judged to be a fairly accurate rendering of the Hebrew of that time, which, incidentally, Jerome's version shows to have been substantially the same as that to which Hebrew manuscripts of a later date bear witness. Despite its obvious merits this translation was not adopted for use in the Liturgy: it was too different from the old Psalter, and attachment to traditional forms, almost always one of the "marks" of the Roman Church, was too strong to welcome any such departure from them as the acceptance of St. Jerome's Psalter would have necessitated. It is found in many biblical manuscripts however, particularly those of Spanish origin, it is to be found in the *Patrologia Latina* (Migne), and it is proposed to re-edit it along with other Latin Psalters in the *Collectanea Biblica Latina*.² St. Jerome must have been disappointed that his version was not received with enthusiasm, but disappointments of this kind were becoming not infrequent in his life, and he had already acquired the faculty of not being vanquished by adverse criticism. In the present instance, moreover, he did not hold obstinately to his original opinion. Perhaps it occurred to him that his natural pleasure in being able to read the Scriptures in Hebrew (a pleasure which few, very few, could share with him at that time), had led him to overrate the importance of what he called the *Hebraica veritas* by implying that truth could only be written in Hebrew. There might after all be something to be said for tradition. Hence it was that he undertook his third revision: the Gallican Psalter, which is the one we read in the Breviary and in our printed Bibles.

The Gallican Psalter, St. Jerome's last word on the Psalms, can be regarded as a compromise. While maintaining his dissatisfaction with the old Latin Psalter, Jerome now saw that it was essential to keep to

¹ This is the opinion of A. Allgeier, set forth in his book *Die Psalmen der Vulgata* (Paderborn, 1940), and it has been adopted by many continental scholars.

² A series of texts and studies relating to the Latin Bible, published by the Abbey of San Girolamo in Rome.

its wording as much as possible. He also saw that while overrating the importance of the Hebrew, he had somewhat underrated that of the older Greek versions as witnesses to the original. So it was that, while at times translating directly from the Hebrew (a fact which scholars, until quite recently, seem to have overlooked), he also took into consideration the four Greek versions which he found in Origen's Hexapla. Whether the asterisks and obelisks occurring in some manuscripts of the Gallican Psalter are those which St. Jerome himself inserted, still remains a problem; it is a fact that in the oldest and most important manuscripts these signs are absent. In introducing his last translation St. Jerome uses words which show clearly enough how widely his maturer point of view differed from his earlier opinions on the principles of scripture translation. ". . . sic psallendum est ut nos interpretati sumus, et tamen sciendum quid Hebræica veritas habeat. Hoc enim, quod septuaginta transtulerunt, propter vetustatem in ecclesia decantandum est, et illud ab eruditissimis sciendum propter notitiam scripturarum" (Epist. cvi, 46). The correspondence with Augustine had borne fruit. Even so, with all its respect for the old Latin Psalter, his revision was not adopted until long after his death. Its final victory in the West was due to Charlemagne's insistence, for political motives, on liturgical unity throughout his empire and to the fact that his English secretary, the learned Alcuin, saw that the Gallican was preferable to the Roman Psalter. But the latter did not die out everywhere: in Rome itself it is still "gloriously reigning" in its citadel, the Vatican Basilica.

From what has been said it is clear that the critical value of the Vulgate Bible as a witness to the original is by no means negligible. For the historical books of the Old Testament, for the prophets, for the Psalms (in the *Psalterium iuxta Hebraeos*) and some other sapiential books, it represents, provided we admit St. Jerome's knowledge of Hebrew and his honesty as a translator,¹ the Hebrew text as it was in the fourth century A.D.—five centuries earlier than the extant Hebrew manuscripts. And this is a capital point.

The witnesses to the original of the Old Testament, other than the Massoretic Text which was fixed shortly after Jerome's time and is to be found in Hebrew manuscripts dating from the ninth century, may be chronologically summarized thus:

1. The Septuagint, made about the third century B.C. (although it must be remembered that the oldest manuscripts containing it date from the third century A.D.). This is probably the most important witness.
2. (a) Aquila's version, made about 130 A.D., a very literal translation of the Hebrew.

¹ Even if these are not admitted, on account of what Jerome himself tells us, the Vulgate still has a unique critical value; there is nothing to replace it.

- (b) Theodotion's c. 144, which is really a revision of the Septuagint.
 - (c) The translation into good Greek which Symmachus made about 200 A.D.
3. The old Latin versions, dating from the second century, bear testimony to the Septuagint and so, indirectly, to the original.
 4. St. Jerome's translations from the Greek and Hebrew of almost all the books of the Old Testament, finally completed about 404.

The Vulgate Bible comprises all the books which St. Jerome translated or revised (the Gallican Psalter being found in most manuscripts¹ and not the *Psalterium iuxta Hebraeos*), and, for the rest of the books accepted by the Church as canonical, one of the old Latin versions. This holds good from the seventh century onwards, whence date our oldest Vulgate Bibles, for up to that time, naturally enough as it was something new, this version met with a certain amount of opposition and made its way but slowly. St. Gregory the Great says that he uses "the new version," but feels that he is free to quote the older text when he prefers it (*Epist. ad Leandrum*, V). By Bede's time however, Jerome's version had become what it has ever since remained, "our version."

St. Jerome's translation held, and holds, in the Latin speaking West the place that, prior to his time, was held by the Septuagint and the very literal old Latin versions of this official Greek text. It was adopted for use in the Liturgy, and it was the text commented upon by the later Latin Fathers and the writers of the medieval and renaissance Church. It should be noted however, that there was in fact no break clearly perceptible to any but textual experts between the versions used and commented upon by the early writers, and the Vulgate of St. Jerome. For in quite a considerable portion of the Bible, and that perhaps the most familiar—the Psalms, the New Testament, the Wisdom books—the Vulgate very largely reproduces, though sometimes in a revised form, the pre-Hieronymian version, i.e. the Septuagint, and, even where a new translation had been made, it differed only slightly from the text that it replaced. So it was that a medieval monk or schoolman, knowing only his Vulgate Bible, could read with as much delight (meeting in them the same familiar phrases of Holy Writ), Jerome's translation of Origen's sermons on the Canticle, or St. Ambrose's Commentary on St. Luke, or St. Augustine's *Enarrationes*, as he could the *Glossa Ordinaria* or the exegetical writings of Peter Lombard. It was really the same text of Scripture (with more frequent variations before and fewer after the Vulgate became generally accepted), that was read, loved, prayed, preached upon, and used in formulating dogmas from the Church's beginning up to the Vatican Council and beyond.

¹ But not always; frequently both are given, or even all three, i.e. the Roman Psalter too.

When one considers all that this implies, it is almost superfluous to observe that the Vulgate was the most frequently copied book throughout the Christian centuries. Even setting aside liturgical manuscripts, which also have their word to say as witnesses to the text, and apart from commentaries or incidental quotations, the number of the manuscripts is still imposing. Dom Quentin counted more than six hundred and fifty of them written between the seventh and eleventh centuries alone. It is impossible for a text so often copied not to become corrupted, and serious attempts were made at different periods throughout the Middle Ages to reduce these errors as much as possible and to try and arrive, by their elimination, at a knowledge of the text as it was when it left the hands of St. Jerome: to provide the Church, in other words, with a critical edition of the Vulgate Bible. In this connexion it will be sufficient to call to mind names like those of Cassiodorus, Alcuin, Theodulf, Lanfranc and Stephen Harding, as well as the thirteenth century scholastics who, hampered in their disputations by the then corrupt state of the biblical text, drew up their famous "Correctoria" or lists of readings, of which no less than three hundred still exist. Even after the invention of printing, these discrepancies in various editions of the Bible still persisted, and thus it was that the sixteenth century popes, Pius IV and Pius V, both expressed their desire to see the old and Vulgate Bible purged of all the errors that had crept into it.

This was the origin of the celebrated Sixto-Clementine edition which was finally published in its revised form in 1592; it has continued as the officially accepted text of the Vulgate ever since. The intention of the Council of Trent had been to have critical editions made, complete with mistakes, or what seemed to be so, of the Latin and Greek Bibles as well as of the Massoretic Text,¹ and then to proceed, with the help of these, to discover the original and correct the Vulgate accordingly. Although such a method would require years of painstaking labour—the minutiae preparatory to the critical edition of any important document cannot be done hastily if they are to be done well²—it is of course the only satisfactory one. Unfortunately it still remains to be done, for the Fathers of the Council imagined that it could be accomplished in a very short time, and so, under the illusion that they were in possession of a more or less definitive edition of the Septuagint (which we now know was certainly not the case), the commissions did not remain faithful to the original programme but short-circuited the work by trying to edit St. Jerome's Vulgate and correct it simultaneously.

¹ "... *corregere prima la nostra edizione latina, et poi anco la greca et la hebrea potendosi.*" (Cf. Letter from the Legates to Cardinal Farnese, 26th April, 1546).

² The excellent critical edition of the New Testament undertaken by Bishop Wordsworth and H. J. White was begun fifty-eight years ago; the *Monumenta Germaniae* have been in course of publication for over a century; and that crowning achievement of critical learning, the *Acta Sanctorum*, has taken three centuries to publish the lives of the saints from January to the first days of November.

Despite its great merits it has long been universally recognized that the edition they produced is by no means satisfactory in view not only of the considerable accretion of material that has come to light since the sixteenth century, but also of our more severely critical methods. It is possible to control the work of the Sixtine and Clementine commissions since most of the important manuscripts used by them are still at our disposal: the result of such examination shows that, careful though they were, the collations made by the sixteenth century editors were not always free from inaccuracies. Moreover, as was said above, the discovery and classification into families of a great number of ancient and important manuscripts not previously known (a task which has occupied biblical scholars throughout the last century, particularly since the pioneer work of Samuel Berger in 1893), has rendered a new critical edition of St. Jerome's Bible absolutely essential, and this not only to such as are conscious of its traditional value as the accepted version of the Western Church throughout the ages, but also to textual critics who realize its importance as one of the chief witnesses to the original wording of the inspired writings of the Old Testament.¹

THE 'AUTHORIZED' VERSION

EARLIEST USE OF THE EPITHET

by EDMUND F. SUTCLIFFE, S.J.

TITLES must be succinct. So it is as well to state at once that this note is concerned, not with the earliest use in English of the word 'authorized,' but with its earliest use as a designation of the version, or more correctly revision, of the Bible issued in A.D. 1611 during the reign of King James I.

Had there been an ordinance, whether of ecclesiastical or lay authorities, declaring the version to be authorized, the earliest use of the term would have been fixed by the date of the document containing the ordinance. It is a commonplace, however, in the histories of the English translations of the Bible that no such authorization is known to exist. Thus John Brown writes: 'There seems to be no authority for calling it the "Authorised Version," since, so far as is known, there was no Edict of Convocation, or Act of Parliament, or decision of Privy Council, or royal proclamation giving it authority,' *The History of the English Bible* (Cambridge, 1911) 108. Similar statements are found in B. F.

¹ Of this new edition, six volumes have appeared in twenty years: the whole Bible will comprise some twenty-eight volumes. It is well known that Pope Pius X entrusted the work to the Benedictines in 1907, and that it is now being executed by the monks of the Abbey of San Girolamo in Rome, which Pope Pius XI founded in 1933 for this and any similar work confided to them by the Holy See.