

*Dives est qui sibi nihil deesse putat.<sup>1</sup>*

# The Old Latin Bible



“...[A]s the number of Latin-speaking Christians grew, the Bible was translated into Latin so that the Christians of the time could understand it. It is believed that the first Latin translation was completed around A.D. 200, although no manuscripts of this era exist today. The first Latin manuscripts were surely created in North Africa, for it seems that the church in North Africa was Latin-speaking from the start as compared to the predominantly Greek-speaking churches in Asia and Europe.”<sup>2</sup>

It is hard today to imagine what life was like for Christians in the first couple of centuries AD in the Roman Empire. Persecution, which waxed and waned until 313 AD when Christianity was legalised in the empire, did not stop the growth of the church, although it must have made circulating and translating the Bible more difficult. Anyone with the ability to do so who got hold of a copy of one of the New Testament books would probably have had a go at translating it into Latin, if not for their own benefit then for that of those whose Greek was weaker or non-existent. As far as we can tell it may be more correct to speak of the first Latin translations rather than the first Latin translation. Our knowledge of what these translations may have been like comes from tiny fragments and from quotations preserved in the writings of theologians of the time. That the situation was somewhat chaotic we can gather from Augustine of Hippo<sup>3</sup> (345-430) who wrote in his *De Doctrina Christiana, ii.11* complaining of “a crowd of translators” and “an innumerable variety of Latin translators:”

"Translators from Hebrew into Greek can be numbered, but Latin translators by no means. For whenever, in the first ages of the faith, a Greek manuscript came into the hands of anyone who had also a little skill in both languages, he made bold to translate it forthwith."<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand at least some of the North African, Latin speaking Christians seem to have had a complete common translation. Well before Augustine, Cyprian (200-258), a Christian writer from Carthage in North Africa, quoted the Bible in Latin extensively just as though he had a copy in front of him.

By the year 380 official persecution of Christianity had been over for many years but the situation with regard to a Latin translation of the Bible was still chaotic. A scholar was needed who could carefully compare the Latin translations of the New Testament with the Greek original and who could understand Hebrew in order to translate the Old Testament.

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1 He is a rich man who thinks to himself that he lacks nothing.

2 <https://www.gotquestions.org/Latin-Vulgate.html>

3 A city in Modern Algeria.

4 <http://www.bible-researcher.com/oldlatin.html>

If you have a synchrological chart you can look at this period in some detail.

Vocabulary to learn:

*Sapientia* – wisdom

Bible example:

*in quo sunt omnes thesauri **sapientiae** et scientiae absconditi* (Colossians 2:3)

*vita* – life

Bible example:

*esto fidelis usque ad mortem et dabo tibi coronam **vitae*** (Revelation 2:10b)

*forma* – beauty, form

Bible example:

*sed regnavit mors ab Adam usque ad Mosen etiam in eos qui non peccaverunt in similitudinem praevaricationis Adae qui est **forma** futuri* (Romans 5:12)

NB:- *forma* here is “form, or figure.”

*deliberare* – to deliberate, to consider seriously

Look up the Bible verses and see how the vocabulary word fits in in each example.

Can you translate this?

*Augustinus formam sapientiae amat. Cyprianus vitam deliberat.*

Answer on the next page.

Suggested answers:

Augustine loves the beauty of wisdom. Cyprian considers life seriously.