Ad Fontes, Week Thirteen: The Latin, Syriac, and Coptic Bibles, and the Fathers

Chapter 12: The Latin Bible, the Syriac Bible, and the Coptic Bible, and What the Fathers Quoted

Adult Sunday School · **Grace Free Lutheran Church** · Valley City, North Dakota

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Week Thirteen

The apostles wrote in Greek, but within a century the church was reading their words in Latin, Syriac, and Coptic. Those early translations, and the Bible quotations in the church fathers, are witnesses too. This week we meet them. The rule of thumb for the hour: **Greek first, translations confirming, fathers telling us when and where.** And the picture behind it is Pentecost: one apostolic Word, received from the start in many tongues.

How we will spend the next hour

Minutes	What we are doing
0 to 5	Opening and prayer
5 to 10	Report back: the non-Greek witnesses you found
10 to 15	Greek first, translations confirming, fathers locating
15 to 27	The Latin Bible: Old Latin and Jerome's Vulgate
27 to 36	The Syriac Bible
36 to 43	The Coptic Bible
43 to 53	The fathers as witnesses
53 to 61	A case where the translations decide: 2 Peter 3:10
61 to 66	One Word, many tongues
66 to 70	Assignment and closing

1. Report back: the non-Greek witnesses you found

Last week you opened a long NET note and listed witnesses that are not Greek manuscripts. Here is a key to the common abbreviations.

You saw	It means
it, it-a, it-k, and so on	Old Latin (Latin *itala*), with a letter for each manuscript
vg	The Latin Vulgate
syr, syr-s, syr-c, syr-p, syr-h	Syriac: Sinaitic, Curetonian, Peshitta, Harklean
cop, cop-sa, cop-bo	Coptic: Sahidic, Bohairic
Names like Origen, Cyprian, Chrysostom	Church fathers quoting the verse

Which ones were on your list? By the end of today each should have a face.

2. Greek first, translations confirming, fathers locating

Witness	What it gives us	Its limits
Greek manuscripts	The apostles' own language, copied directly	Most are centuries after the originals
Early translations (Latin, Syriac, Coptic)	A view of Greek copies from the 100s to 300s that no longer survive, made in different regions	A translator stands between us and the Greek. Some Greek details, like word order or the article, do not carry over
The church fathers	A reading pinned to a person, a place, and a date	They sometimes quote loosely from memory, and later copyists sometimes "updated" their quotations

This is a default, not an iron law. Now and then a translation or a father preserves a reading the Greek copies lost. We will see one today.

3. The Latin Bible

The Old Latin (from the late 100s)

By AD 200, the churches of Carthage in North Africa, where Tertullian wrote, were reading the New Testament in Latin. Unknown translators in different regions made different versions, so the "Old Latin" is a family of translations, not one, with an African form and a European form. Augustine complained that anyone who got hold of a Greek manuscript and knew a little Greek tried his hand at translating. Its readings often agree with the Western text we met last week; the Latin column of Codex Bezae is itself an Old Latin text.

Manuscript	Date	Note
Codex Vercellensis (a)	300s	The oldest Old Latin Gospels, in Vercelli, Italy
Codex Bobbiensis (k)	About 400	An African text, kept at the monastery of Bobbio; now in Turin. The only witness with Mark's shorter ending alone (Week Six)
Codex Palatinus (e)	400s	Another African Gospels text

Jerome's Vulgate (from 382)

Around 382 Pope Damasus asked Jerome, the finest biblical scholar in the Latin church, to bring order to the Latin Bible. For the Gospels, Jerome did not start from scratch. He corrected the Old Latin against good, older Greek manuscripts. His letter to Damasus explaining his method reads like a textual critic's report. (Most scholars think the rest of the Vulgate New Testament was revised by an unknown reviser around 400, not by Jerome himself, which is why Acts and Paul keep more Old Latin wording.)

The Vulgate slowly replaced the Old Latin and became the Bible of the Western church for a thousand years. The Council of Trent made it the Roman Church's official Bible in 1546. Two famous copies: Codex Amiatinus (early 700s, made in northern England, now in Florence), the oldest complete Vulgate Bible, and Codex Fuldensis (546), whose Gospels are woven into one harmony.

For Lutherans: the Vulgate is our long memory. Luther sang it, prayed it, and memorized it as a friar. Going back to the Greek was not throwing it away. It was going behind it, to the sources.

4. The Syriac Bible

Syriac, a form of Aramaic, was the language of the church from Antioch eastward into Mesopotamia and beyond.

Stage	When	What it is
Tatian's Diatessaron	About 170	The four Gospels woven into one continuous story ("through four"). No copy survives; we know it through Ephrem the Syrian's commentary, Codex Fuldensis, and later harmonies. Until the 400s it was the Syriac church's main Gospel book

Stage	When	What it is
The Old Syriac	Translated in the 100s or 200s	Two Gospels manuscripts: the Curetonian (found in the 1840s) and the Sinaitic, discovered at St. Catherine's in 1892 by Agnes Smith Lewis, traveling with her twin sister Margaret Gibson, written underneath a later text. Often agrees with the Western text
The Peshitta ("the simple")	About 400	The standard Syriac Bible, the "Syriac Vulgate," with a text close to the Byzantine. It lacks 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, Jude, and Revelation
The Harklean	616	A very literal revision against Greek manuscripts, with notes in the margins recording variant readings: a textual apparatus a thousand years early

The Syriac shows us the text from the church of the East, a different corner of the Christian world from Rome or Alexandria.

5. The Coptic Bible

Coptic is the last stage of the ancient Egyptian language, written with Greek letters plus a few extra ones. City churches in Alexandria spoke Greek; the village churches along the Nile spoke Coptic.

Dialect	Region	Note
Sahidic	Upper (southern) Egypt	The oldest and most important, from the 200s
Bohairic	Lower Egypt, the Delta	One early copy of John survives from the 300s, but most copies are medieval. Still the language of the Coptic Orthodox liturgy today
Minor dialects	Various	One of them, Middle Egyptian, gives us Codex Glazier (about 400, now at the Morgan Library in New York), a copy of Acts 1 to 15 with many Western readings

Why it matters. Egypt is the home of the Alexandrian text: P66 and P75 came from Egyptian Christianity, Vaticanus was probably copied in Egypt, and Sinaiticus in Egypt or Caesarea. The Coptic translations were made from Egyptian Greek copies. So when the Coptic agrees with P75 and Vaticanus, we have independent strands of Egyptian evidence pointing the same way, as at John 1:18. The agreement is not perfect: at Acts 20:28 the Sahidic reads “church of the Lord” with the Western witnesses. And Codex Glazier reminds us that the Western text had readers in Egypt too.

6. The fathers as witnesses

A manuscript tells us a reading existed. A father tells us who was reading it, where, and when.

Father	Where and when	What he shows us
Origen (185 to 254)	Alexandria, then Caesarea	The Greek text of early-200s Egypt. At John 1:18 he reads “only God,” pushing that reading back a century before Sinaiticus and Vaticanus (Week Nine)
Cyprian (died 258)	Carthage, North Africa	The African Old Latin. We met him at the Comma (Week Eight), Acts 8:37 (Week Eleven), and the Apostolic Decree (Week Twelve)
Jerome (about 347 to 420)	Rome, then Bethlehem	Notes on Greek manuscripts that no longer survive, like the missing “without a cause” at Matthew 5:22 (Week Ten)
John Chrysostom (about 347 to 407)	Antioch, then Constantinople	The Greek text of late-300s Antioch, an early form of what became the Byzantine text
Augustine (354 to 430)	Hippo, North Africa	The Latin Bible of his day. Ambrose and Jerome knew the woman caught in adultery before him, but Augustine discusses it most explicitly and offers a theory of why some copies lacked it (Week Seven)

Handle with care

- **Quoting or paraphrasing?** Fathers often quoted from memory or loosely. A paraphrase is weak evidence for exact wording.
- **Quotation or echo?** Sometimes a father borrows biblical language without meaning to quote.

- **Whose text?** Later copyists of the fathers' own writings sometimes "corrected" their Bible quotations to the text familiar in the copyist's day.

So the fathers rarely settle a question alone. What they do superbly is locate a reading in time and place.

7. A case where the translations decide: 2 Peter 3:10

What happens to "the earth and its works" on the Day of the Lord? Put several Bibles side by side.

Reading	Found in	Followed by
"shall be **burned up**"	The Byzantine majority, with Alexandrinus	King James, NKJV
"will be **found**," that is, exposed or laid bare	Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and other early Greek copies; printed in NA27	ESV ("exposed"), NET ("laid bare"), NIV, BSB ("laid bare," with a footnote giving "will not be found" and "will be burned up")
"will **not** be found"	No Greek manuscript at all; implied by Sahidic Coptic and Syriac witnesses	The Greek text of NA28 (2012)

(There are other readings too, including P72's "will be found dissolved.")

Why it matters. "Will be found" is the hardest reading, and it is easy to see why copyists changed it: "burned up" matches the fire in the verse, and "will not be found" makes the sentence simpler. The editors of the newest Greek edition, the team behind the computer-assisted method called the **CBGM** (Chapter 14), judged that "will be found" could not stand as it was, and printed the reading implied only by the Coptic and Syriac.

Critics, James Snapp among them, call that in effect a conjectural emendation and argue that "will be found" makes good sense as it stands. Our English Bibles have not followed NA28 here. But the case shows two things. First, the translations are real witnesses: here they are the only witnesses to one reading. Second, the work is not finished, and the editors' decisions remain open to challenge. Whichever reading is original, the verse's warning stands untouched: "the Day of the Lord will come like a thief" (2 Peter 3:10 BSB).

8. One Word, many tongues

The apostles wrote in Greek, and inspiration belongs to what they wrote. But within a few generations their words were being read in Latin in Carthage, in Syriac in Edessa, and in Coptic along the Nile. The church was many-tongued from Pentecost on, when "each one heard them speaking his own language" (Acts 2:6 BSB).

That is why the textual record is not a Greek monopoly. It is a catholic record, gathered from the whole church across the Mediterranean and beyond. When we weigh an Old Latin manuscript, a Coptic papyrus, or a quotation from Cyprian, we are doing what the Reformers did: Luther worked from Erasmus's Greek with the Vulgate at his elbow and the fathers in his memory. Our *ad fontes* has always been Greek first, but never Greek alone.

Hear the other side

Some scholars, drawing on Eldon Epp's work on the early text, argue the early translations and fathers deserve more weight than they usually get. The Old Latin and Old Syriac were translated from Greek copies older than most that survive. Bart Ehrman has argued that fathers sometimes preserve readings the Greek copies lost. Those are fair points, and 2 Peter 3:10 shows they can matter. The reason for keeping Greek first is simple: every translation passes through a translator's choices, a father may be paraphrasing, and many small Greek differences cannot be seen in Latin, Syriac, or Coptic at all.

For discussion

1. Why might a translation made in AD 200 tell us something a Greek manuscript from AD 900 cannot?
2. What are the risks of leaning on a father's quotation? When would you trust one?
3. At 2 Peter 3:10 the newest Greek edition and our English Bibles disagree. How do you feel about that? What does it say about the work of textual criticism?
4. What does Pentecost teach us about the church reading Scripture in many languages, including our own?

Working vocabulary, new this week

Add these to your vocabulary page.

Version. An early translation of the New Testament from Greek into another language.

Old Latin (Vetus Latina). The Latin translations made before Jerome, from the late 100s on.

Vulgate. The Latin Bible associated with Jerome: his revision of the Gospels (begun in 382) and his Old Testament, with the rest of the New Testament revised by others. The Western church's Bible for over a thousand years.

Diatessaron. Tatian's harmony of the four Gospels into one story, about AD 170.

Peshitta. The standard Syriac Bible, made around AD 400; its text is largely Byzantine.

Sahidic and Bohairic. The two main dialects of Coptic, from southern and northern Egypt.

Patristic citation. A Bible quotation in the writings of a church father, which places a reading at a known time and place.

Before next Sunday

Read. Chapter 13, “The Majority Text Position, Fairly Presented.”

Do this one thing. Read Romans 1 in a modern Bible, noting each textual footnote. Then write down, in one sentence, the strongest argument you can think of for trusting the reading found in the most manuscripts. We will test it next week.

Bring. Your Bible, your sentence, and your vocabulary pages.

Think about. In what language did the Gospel first reach your family? Who carried it across that border?

A closing word

Thanks be to God for the unknown translators who first carried the Gospels into Latin, Syriac, and Coptic. Thanks be to God for Jerome and his patient corrections, for Tatian and Ephrem, and for the monks along the Nile who copied Scripture in their own tongue. Thanks be to God for the fathers who quoted it, preached it, and argued over it. And thanks be to God that his Word, in every language the church speaks, does not return to him empty.

“So My word that proceeds from My mouth will not return to Me empty, but it will accomplish what I please, and it will prosper where I send it.” Isaiah 55:11 (BSB)

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Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible (BSB), with the KJV and other translations quoted where the lesson compares them. Confessional citations follow the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord.