

# The Road to the AV:

a survey of the New Testament<sup>1</sup> from the Apostle Paul to Miles Smith

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## Part I

From

## Manuscript to Print

### With mine own hand

Paul's letter to the Galatians is probably one of the earlier pieces of New Testament writing. In chapter 6 verse 11 he declares 'Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand'.<sup>2</sup> This reminds us of a basic fact to do with the unfolding history of the New Testament, a point so obvious that we easily forget it. For three-quarters of the time that the New Testament has existed it has only done so in copies made by hand, truly 'manu-scripts', two Latin words meaning hand-written.<sup>3</sup>

Palestine in Apostolic times was under Roman rule, but for about three hundred years before that it had been under the cultural dominion of Greece. Greek was the everyday language throughout the whole Mediterranean region, acceptable even in Rome. This was the language of 'the fulness of the times', and was the instrument used, under the Sovereign Spirit of God, for that written record which is the New Testament of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Very quickly the burden of copying and translating these Scriptures was taken up by the churches. The practicalities of accurately multiplying and disseminating the written Word of God start us on the path to the present printed editions of our English Authorised Version.

### Rolls and Papyrus

In New Testament times the Greeks and Romans used papyrus rolls for writing. Papyrus is the fibrous pith of a



### *The Papyrus Plant*

water plant once plentiful in the Nile, but scarcely found there now. Two layers of fibres laid at right angles to each other, soaked, squeezed and glued, formed sheets of a material that could receive marks. The side with horizontal fibres was intended for writing (the 'Recto') but it was quite possible to use the reverse (the 'Verso'). Best quality sheets were those using the largest fibres, and such sheets were joined side-by-side to make rolls of any length. The longest roll known is 133 feet (40.5m), but the average length of Greek literary rolls was 35 feet (10m). Height was variable, the usual being 10 inches (254mm) although 19 inches (482mm) was not unknown, and there were 'pocket' scrolls of only 5 inches (127mm). On such papyrus rolls the writing was most

often in columns 2½–3 inches (63.5–76mm) wide. There were margins between columns and at the top and bottom for annotations and the insertion of corrections, etc. Ordinarily, rolls were written only on one side but if material was scarce or there was a lot to be said, they could be written 'within and without' (Ezekiel 2.10) or 'within and on the backside' (Revelation 5.1). Sometimes the verso of an existing work was used for more writing—one early 4th century manuscript of Hebrews (P13) is on the back of a 3rd-century condensed edition of the Epitome of Livy.

Taking average figures as a guide, we can visualize the autographs of the New Testament books (that is, the first written forms made by John, Luke, etc.) being written in this manner. An epistle such as 2 Thessalonians would be contained on a 15-inch roll of five columns only. Romans would need 11½ feet, Revelation 15 feet, Mark 19 feet, Luke 32 feet! So long as the papyrus roll was the medium of literature, the various copies of the books of the New Testament almost certainly circulated separately. Each book has its own 'history'. Indeed, until the use of the printing press in the 15th century very few Christian communities, and even fewer individuals, possessed all the canonical books.

Imagine the difficulties of using scrolls. I can quote Revelation 5.1 and expect you easily to verify this reference in a Bible—but what if you had a

collection of scrolls to sort out, and no pages to turn or verse and chapter numbers! Remember, there are no ‘reader aids’ or ‘editorial input’—No separation of words punctuation minimal later corrections at top and bottom scarcely any capitals or paragraphs and no chapter or verse numbers and the lines don’t always run the same way. How difficult to find the exact verse—perhaps we should excuse those early Christian writers who quote ‘freely’ and sometimes quote the same verse slightly differently, or just say ‘somewhere in Luke’.

### ■ *Codices and Vellum*

Christians were particularly concerned to improve on this. As early as the 2nd century AD ‘codex’ experiments were tried. A papyrus codex is made up of sheets of papyrus folded once into a ‘quire’ or gathering, like a gigantic scrap-book. It is in fact the basis of the book as we have it today, and it was the desire of the churches for ‘user friendly’ and portable Scriptures that helped establish this now universal system of book construction. Truly, in the providence of our mighty God the full record of His Word deserves even in this small but significant point to be called *The Book*. Quires were fastened by threads through the inner margin, like a modern stapling process, and sometimes monstrous fifty-sheet folds were used in a single cumbersome quire. One famous papyrus codex referred to in the cataloguing system for these documents as P46, called Chester Beatty II, was

once a single quire codex of 104 leaves—only 86 are known to exist now.

A more usual format was quires of 8–12 leaves, joined as needful. The main advantage of this was that more material could be contained, and more easily consulted, without the volume becoming unmanageable. P46, referred to above, originally contained all the Pauline epistles except Timothy and Titus. As a scroll this would have needed one



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*Part of the Epistle of James on Papyrus<sup>4</sup>*

of 60 feet—or at least two 30-footers. The five separate scrolls needed for the Gospels and Acts are replaced in the 3rd century by one codex, P45 (Chester Beatty I).

Another step in the external form of New Testament material came with the establishment of Christianity under the reign of Emperor Constantine, in the 4th century. The status of the Christian documents changed abruptly, and the wholesale destruction of books that had accompanied earlier persecutions ceased (for a while). Demand began to grow instead throughout the empire as Christianity became respectable. Just at this point the book makers re-

introduced vellum as the writing material. It had been in use for some time in Pergamum from about 190 BC, but never on a large scale (and it is a form of the name of that town which gives us the name ‘parchment’ for vellum).

Vellum is made from the skins of cattle, sheep and goats, especially young ones. The hair is scraped off, the skins washed, rubbed with pumice, and dressed with chalk, giving an almost white sheet, durable and easy to write on in black or certain other colours. Once Christianity became an imperial religion, the physical appearance of the books took on an importance that had not been

*Title page of Matthew's Gospel on vellum from the Lindisfarne Gospels<sup>5</sup>*



there before, and some of the vellum codices of Scripture are extremely beautiful things to look at, though not necessarily reliable or accurate because of that! For completeness I note that ‘paper’, a Chinese cloth-based refinement of the papyrus writing material, did appear in the West in the 12th century, but from the 4th–15th centuries vellum was the preferred material.

### ■ *Translations*

Scripture, existing in three languages, and offering translations within itself, (Matthew 1.23; Mark 5.41, 15.22, 34; John 1.38, 41, 42, 9.7; Acts 4.36, 9.36, 13.8) is inherently translatable, and response to the need for Scriptures in the vernacular, or common language of a people, is as old as the New Testament. Early translations of the New Testament from Greek into Latin began about 180 AD, and both Old and New Testaments were in fact translated from Greek (the Old Testament from the Septuagint). The early translation of the Old and New Testaments into Latin is referred to as the ‘Old Latin’. Around 300 AD there was a translation of the New Testament into Syriac, the ‘Old Syriac’, and also four Coptic Versions, the language spoken in four dialects in Egypt. Other early translations of the Scriptures were in Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, Slavic, and Gothic.

The most significant and influential translation was in 380 AD, when Jerome translated anew into Latin the Old

Testament from Hebrew and the New Testament from Greek. This return to Hebrew rather than Greek as the proper source for Old Testament translation, although beyond doubt the correct procedure, was strongly resisted and resented at the time. However, this Latin version, styled the ‘Vulgate’ because it was the vulgar, or common, language, became the Bible of the Western Church until the Protestant Reformation in the 1500s. Apart from the long, slow adulteration of the Vulgate text over 1000 years,<sup>6</sup> it generated problems of translation all through that time. From Augustine to Erasmus, Bible translation never escaped the incubus of Latin as the source text. This historical period, in very general terms, is that of the Byzantine Empire, centred in Byzantium (subsequently Constantinople, now Istanbul). Most Greek scholarship and literature, including many Biblical texts, were drawn there, and thus for a time lost to the Western world.

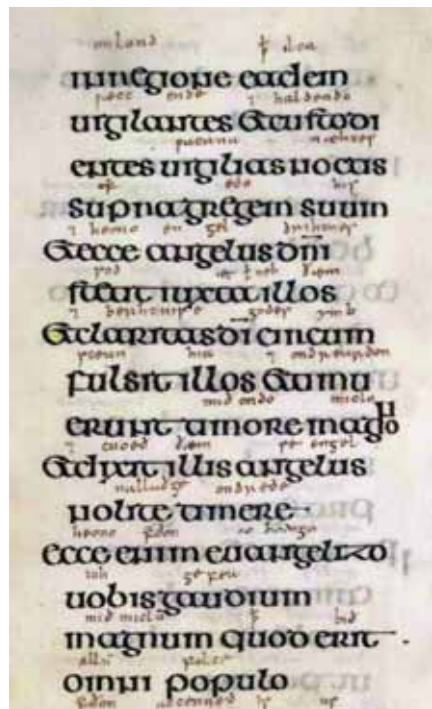
### English Scriptures: *Caedmon to Wycliffe*

There were yearnings and strivings toward the provision of English-language Scripture all through the so-called Dark Ages, as the following brief list indicates:

- 440 Roman legions withdraw from Britain.
- 670 Caedmon composes poems in Old English derived from the Biblical narratives.

- 825 *Vespasian Psalter*—interlinear Old English translation of the earlier Latin text.
- 900 *Paris Psalter*—Old English version of the first fifty Psalms.
- 950 Aldred writes Old English between the lines of the *Lindisfarne Gospels*.<sup>7</sup>
- 970 First Old English version of the Gospel of Matthew, based upon Aldred’s gloss. The *Rushworth Gospels*.
- 1000 Aelfric translates abridged Pentateuch and several other portions of Scripture into Old English. The ‘*Wessex Gospels*’ and first Old English version of all four Gospels.
- 1200 Orm’s poetical paraphrase of Gospels and Acts in Middle English.
- 1300 *Midland Psalter*—metrical version of the Psalms in Middle English.
- 1320 Richard Rolle’s Middle English *Psalter*.
- 1382 Wycliffe completes translation of the Bible.
- 1388 Wycliffe Bible corrected by John Purvey.

The chronicler William of Malmesbury, 1090-1143, assures us that King Alfred, 849-899, had memorised the New Testament and Psalms together with other Old Testament portions, and was engaged at the time of his death in a new translation of the Psalms. You must realise that the language used was quite



*Part of Luke's Gospel from the Lindisfarne Gospels showing Aldred's translation into Old English written between the lines<sup>8</sup>*

variable throughout the 'Kingdoms' in Britain. An 'English' document produced in Wessex would not necessarily be useful in Mercia or Strathclyde or Northumbria, and we would not find any of these older forms easy to the eye, ear or tongue now! Compare these renderings of Luke 2.7,11:

[11th century: Wessex] and heo cende hyre frumcennedan sunu. and hine mid cildclapum bewand. and hine on binne

alede. forþam þe hig næfdon rum on cumena huse...forþam toðæg eow ys hælend acenned. se is drihten crist on dauides ceastre;

[14th century: Wycliffe] & she childide hir first goten sone, & wlappeðe hym in cloþis & putte hym in a cracche, for þer was not place to hym in þe comun stable...for a saueour is born to day to vs, þat is crist a lord in þe cite of dauid

and for contrast:-

[16th century: Tyndale] And she brought forth her fyrst begotten sonne and wrapped him in swadlynge cloothes and layed him in a manger because ther was no roume for them within in the ynne...for vnto you is borne this daye in the cite of David a saveoure which is Christ ye lorde.

Tyndale may strike us as quaint, but is quite comprehensible—one can read it aloud and hearers would understand; but without some familiarity with the sounds and orthography of Anglo-Saxon English it is none too easy to read Wessex or Wycliffe. Nevertheless, it is good to know that even around 1200 AD Orm had brought John 3.16 to the English of his day:

Thurrrh thatt te Laferrd seggde thus  
*In that the Lord said thus*  
 Till Nicodem withth worde  
*To Nicodemus with word*  
 Swa lufede the Laferrd Godd  
*So loved the Lord God*  
 The Werelld tatt he sennde  
*The world that he sent*

His aghenn sune Allmahtig Godd  
*His own son Almighty God*  
To wurrthen mann on erthe  
*To become man on earth*  
To lesenn mannkinn thurrrh hiss death  
*To release mankind through his death*  
Ut off the defless walde  
*Out of the devil's power*  
That whase trowwenn shall on himm  
*That whosoever shall believe on him*  
Wel mughe wurrthenn borrrghenn<sup>9</sup>  
*Surely may become saved*

The greater problem however for the accuracy and authenticity of all these English manuscript versions was their textual provenance. These were all derived from the Latin Vulgate, not the Biblical language texts. Not only was the starting point wrong—a translation of a translation—but the corruptions in and variations between copies of the Vulgate were growing out of hand in the passage of time.<sup>10</sup> There was at this point in the history of the text of Scripture great need for a method of reproduction which would anchor the text in a stable and accurately repeatable form, and for a return to the awareness and use of the Biblical languages as the only authoritative basis for translation.<sup>11</sup>

Amongst those who used the Latin Bible and the Old English portions derived from it, there was some understanding of the problem of ‘second-hand’ translation. Savour this 11th century poetic Welsh rebuke of those who translated the Psalms from Greek:

This harp the holy Hebrew text  
doth tender  
Which, to their power, whilst everyone  
doth render,  
In Latin tongue with many  
variations  
He clouds the Hebrew rays with  
his translations.  
Thus liquors when twice shifted out  
and poured  
In a third vessel are both cooled  
and soured;  
But holy Jerome truth to light  
did bring  
Briefer and fuller, fetched from  
the Hebrew spring.<sup>12</sup>

### ■ Printing

To contemplate the unfolding of history as in very truth the Living God dealing with His people and His Word in the midst of a careless and indifferent world, is a joyful source of refreshment and ground of praise for the believer. This is particularly true of the amazing confluence of events affecting the history of the Bible text in the 15th and 16th centuries. To meet the need just outlined we see that in Europe conditions were just ready for the large scale production of texts. The requirements for book-printing were available: paper was being produced and used in Europe,<sup>13</sup> artists had invented an oil-based ink which could be adapted for printing on paper and vellum, instead of insubstantial watery ink. There were presses in use for printing designs on textiles, adaptable for paper printing, and



the political consequences of any attempt to print an English Bible, Lollardy and the Wycliffe Bible being seriously proscribed. However, in his first edition of Jacobus de Voragine's *The Golden Legend*, 1483, he embedded large portions of Scripture material (the greater part of the Old Testament, in fact) which he had translated into English from the Latin and French sources of Voragine.

Book printing is now in place, and Bible production in multiple copies of the same text is possible. One more piece is needful to put the English Bible on track—the break with the Latin text as the basis of translation. There we will take up our journey on the road to the Authorised Version in part two of this article.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Originally planned as covering the whole Bible, but the Old Testament and Hebrew scholarship must wait their own article.

<sup>2</sup> See also 1 Corinthians 16.21, 2 Thessalonians 3.17 and Philemon 19.

<sup>3</sup> Perhaps it could have been from Greek roots *cheiro-graphs*, meaning just the same thing!

<sup>4</sup> Collections of Papyri Frame 15. Manuscripts Division. Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. Princeton University Library. By kind permission.

<sup>5</sup> By kind permission of The British Library (Cotton Nero D. IV, f27).

<sup>6</sup> The Vulgate of Jerome is scarcely to be recognised in the Vulgate of the Council of Trent.

<sup>7</sup> This is called 'glossing' and the addition of interlinear and marginal translation, comments and remarks is a feature of the handwritten Scripture versions.

<sup>8</sup> By kind permission of The British Library (Cotton Nero D. IV, f143v).

<sup>9</sup> The same passage would seem to be one of Tolkien's sources, as further on the expression 'middell ærd' (middle earth) appears as synonymous with 'thiss werell'd'.

<sup>10</sup> Please see the *Quarterly Record* 565 article on Wycliffe for general information, and especially page 25 for opposition to the vernacular Scriptures.

<sup>11</sup> An interesting observation, using modern terminology—all before Wycliffe, although recognisably 'Bible based' reads like poetic paraphrase. Wycliffe, **in terms of the text before him**, approximated more nearly to a formal equivalence approach. Wycliffe, of course, had a thoroughgoing doctrine of Scripture driving him to such carefulness.

<sup>12</sup> *Rhygyfarch [Ricemarch], 1056-99, son of Sulien, Bishop of St. David's*. I realise that he could be read as saying 'stick to the Latin, it's closer to the original', but perhaps the 'Hebrew rays' and 'Hebrew spring' suggest a clearer view?

<sup>13</sup> There was a papermill in Strasbourg around 1430, just about the time that Gutenberg was there!

<sup>14</sup> From Harley mss., 5906b, no.134, a woodcut of a small, early London printing office; C. C. Ryrie, *Formatting the Word of God*, [www.smu.edu/bridwell/publications/ryrie\\_catalog/intro.htm](http://www.smu.edu/bridwell/publications/ryrie_catalog/intro.htm), (28 November 2005).

<sup>15</sup> The expression always used in bibliography for the very first one of its kind.

<sup>16</sup> *Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophres*, translated from the French by the 2nd Earl Rivers.

<sup>17</sup> Picture courtesy of David C. Lachman, Antiquarian Theological Bookseller, [www.davidclachman.com](http://www.davidclachman.com)