

Earliest portion of the Bible (the Psalms) to be printed in Greek.

Bible. O.T. Psalms [Psalterium Graeco-Latinum cum canticis]. Impressum Mediolani: [Bonus Accursius], 20 September 1481. 11 3/8 inches (290 mm), [364] pp.

The sacred songs of the Book of Psalms have long played a central role in both Jewish and Christian religious services and private devotion. This *Psalterium Graeco-Latinum* (Hebrew scriptures printed for Roman Catholic religious purposes), edited by Johannes Crastonus, author of the first Greek dictionary to be compiled by a non-Greek, contains the earliest portion of the Bible to appear in print in Greek. (Gutenberg's Bible of the mid-1450s was an all-Latin production: its all-Greek counterpart did not appear until 1518). The main text consists of the Psalms (in a Greek translation from the Hebrew). The appended canticles include the Magnificat (**Spread 183**) and the Benedictus (**Spread 184**): they are the earliest portions of the New Testament to have been printed in their original Greek.

Scholars and collectors have long attached a special importance to the original printing of a text. Where the author and his publisher are contemporaries, and where royalties and authorization are involved, as with Dickens or Joyce, this creates no sense of dissonance or discontinuity in the reader—indeed, the reverse—but when it comes to the early years of printing, when long-dead authors suddenly erupt into print in various languages, far from their homeland, any sense of primacy and authority becomes confused and uncertain. Many an ancient Greek author, for instance, was first published in a more accessible Latin translation. Does this still count as a “first edition”?

Christianity has its three sacred languages (Hebrew, Greek and Latin) that every clergyman was once obliged to learn. The Collegium Trilingue in Louvain was the institutional embodiment of this ideal of learning, as were the several great multi-volume polyglot Bibles of the 16th and 17th centuries. A polyphony of manuscript sources, multiple languages and translations have vastly complicated the task of exegesis. A 19th-century translation of the Gospels into Maori may testify to the missionary endeavors and colonial assumptions of Anglican settlers in New Zealand, but a 2nd-century Greek translation of the Old Testament is quite another matter. Just as the Gospels present four

different witnesses to the life of Christ, so any early translation (such as the Septuagint) offers independent testimony to the exact meaning of the Old Testament as perceived by believers who were far closer to its origins than any modern Jew or Christian. (In a similar way, French scholars have long consulted Randle Cotgrave's French-English dictionary of 1611 to help them know just what a French Renaissance poet might have meant by a particular word).

The New Testament was originally written in Greek. To bring the Old Testament into parallel play, a translation was essential. This the 70 (or 72, a mystic number) translators of the so-called Septuagint provided in the early 2nd century. Latin (and European vernacular) translations came only later, but much depended on the translator's source text. Just as the classic Elizabethan translation of Plutarch by Sir Thomas North was based not on Greek but on Jacques Amyot's no less notable French rendition, so the original Christian translation of the complete Bible had turned a uniform Greek edition (the translated Greek Septuagint and the original Greek New Testament) into Latin. This version is known as the *Vetus Latinus*, or Old Latin version. It was only with St. Jerome's 4th-century Latin version that a Hebrew text was first used as the basis of the Old Testament rendition. This version (suitably edited) now forms the current official Roman Catholic text, known as the Vulgate, a reminder that Latin was once the unscholarly language of the throng to whom translations were addressed. After Jerome, the sense of Divine Inspiration that the Septuagint once possessed slowly dwindled: it became to many just another edition of the Gospels in Maori.

The Septuagint text nonetheless retains a decisive importance for the theologian, and a residual significance to the mere believer—the generic man-in-the-pew. The books in the Septuagint differ from those of the Hebrew Old Testament both in order and in extent and include the books disowned by many Christian churches as apocryphal. Moreover, the numbering system of the Psalms—the book here reproduced—varies between the two texts, and therefore their translations. Owing to conflations and divisions, and choice of original source texts, the Roman Catholic Psalms differ in numbering from that found in many Protestant psalters in all but the first eight and the last three of the 150 psalms.