

Treasures of the Bible
The Dead Sea Scrolls and Beyond

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This is the show book that went with the exhibit of the same name at Azusa Pacific University. We attended 2010 June 13.

It is the story of the Bible in written form from the beginning to what we have today.

Without re-detailing all of the information, just let me say that I found the evolution of the sacred texts interesting.

The people of God, back to Abraham and first written down by Moses, found themselves more and more considering some of their written records as sacred. It had not occurred to me before that there was a pre-sacred period for these texts but of course there must have been. The collections became more and more revered, and the demarcations between scripture and other sacred writings became more distinct until committees at various times during the centuries around 0 CE canonized various collections into various Bibles for the various historic religions that are predecessors of today's Judeo-Christian faiths.

One section discusses paper and scroll technology of the various times and the necessary parts of publishing jargon so that we can understand what the collections contain and describe (sheets, leaves, etc.). The earliest texts are on the oldest and most fragile media. Most are in fragments that have been studied at length and patched into the corresponding places of reference texts. There are pictures of this. There are cases where important clarification comes from older texts.

Azusa Pacific University has acquired a handful of these fragments. This is one reason the show was held there.

I had heard of Jerome but didn't know enough about him to know why he was famous. He made the first vulgate translation of "the Bible," into the vulgate of his day: Latin. The Latin, including the Septuagint (LXX) are the oldest, or reference, texts for many of the translations we have today, inasmuch as they were performed at a time when they were the best available.

The Dead Sea Scrolls weren't even recovered from Khirbet Qumran until 1947. This was the most recent big archaeological improvement to the sources of antiquity and some of the improvements they enable have found their way into modern scholarship and translations.

What was most interesting and illuminating to me was the story of all the other vulgate translations, dating back to Gutenberg. Although it seems inevitable that the advent of printing would lead to popularization of the Bible, it was greatly resisted for centuries in every country. Wycliffe, the first translator into English, was so hated by the religious establishment that his bones were dug up 40 years after he was dead, burned, and scattered into the river! What an impact he must have had! After fifteen centuries of having the faith mediated through the priesthood and the written and published Word available only through their internal educational systems, popularization out among the vulgar vulgate speakers was a huge shock to the whole system of religion. And that doesn't even count the stresses and strains of the Protestant Reformation, which were clearly also enabled by printing technology.

Also fascinating were the limitations of printing technology and the types of decisions borne by publishers, particularly in the manual press era in the past. The production of a Bible would be a huge investment in time and money. How many copies to make? How much to charge for each one? How to finance? (Not mentioned -- how to store inventory?) And then there are the questions of authorization.

It's no wonder that family Bibles were a big deal up into the modern era. But to me, the miracle of the bound book, something I've always taken for granted from my earliest memories, is itself highly remarkable.

The first translation for the New World was for the Algonquin Indians. Of course, English was already established, although the Revolutionary War would put a crimp in the authorization process for the King James Version and following versions for many years.

The guide ends with a discussion of the Bible in modern technology. It went to the moon on microfiche. It is available as an iPhone App. today.