



From Atheist to Theist (Part 28)

Can We Trust Early Translations of
the Greek New Testament?

By

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Was Jesus of Nazareth the Messiah promised to Israel in the Old Testament? Did Jesus fulfill the Messianic prophecies?

The New Testament texts confirm that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Messiah.

But, so what? Who cares what the New Testament ‘confirms’ since the New Testament is just myths and legends written hundreds of years after the supposed 1st century AD events?

At least that’s what I thought when I was an atheist. However, I took up an investigation 55 years ago into the claims of theism and Christianity. Even though data concerning the credibility of the New Testament has grown since the early 70s, the information shared in this series is based on what was available to me during my investigation.

[In the last part of our report](#) we looked at what evidence might support the claims about Jesus of Nazareth from the New Testament texts. I discovered that there were three important areas to look at when testing the New Testament texts —

1. Greek manuscripts
2. Translations into other languages
3. Quotes from early Christian writers

We have looked at the discovered Greek manuscripts that date to the 2nd century AD and quotes from early Christian writers that date from the late 1st century to early 2nd century. Now we'll look at translations into other languages that date to the 2nd century.

Translations

New Testament texts include these statements by Jesus of Nazareth —

“And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’” Matthew 28:18-20

“It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Acts 1:7-8

The followers of Jesus of Nazareth soon learned that taking the Gospel of Christ into all of the world would include translating apostolic texts into a variety of languages.

The process began when the Greek king of Egypt, Ptolemy II, invited 72 Jewish scholars to translate the Torah (Genesis – Deuteronomy) from Hebrew into Greek. The translation would become part of the royal library at Alexandria, Egypt. That was in the middle part of the 3rd century BC. The rest of the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) was translated into Greek during the 2nd century BC. The Septuagint was eventually used by Jews who had been dispersed ‘among the Gentiles after the Babylonian Exile’ ([Britannica](#)). So, the idea of translating texts into other languages was something understood and even desired by the time the New Testament texts were written.

Some of the early translations of New Testament texts included **Syriac**, **Latin** and **Coptic**.

Syriac Translation of New Testament Texts

According to Book of Acts the persecution of Christians started by Saul of Tarsus in Jerusalem scattered followers of Jesus of Nazareth “throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” (Acts 8:1) This persecution may have started within 1-2 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. We learn from Acts 11 that “those who were scattered after the persecution that arose over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch.” (Acts 11:19) Saul of Tarsus went to the high priest and asked for letters to the synagogues of Damascus, Syria. Saul had heard that followers of Jesus of Nazareth may have traveled as far north as the Syrian city and he wanted to find and arrest them. It was during his journey to Damascus that Saul said he was blinded by a bright light and heard the voice of the risen Jesus.

Saul, who became known as Paul, spent time in Damascus before returning to Jerusalem and then returning to his home in Tarsus. Barnabas, who was a follower of Jesus in Jerusalem, was asked by the apostles to travel through Syria to check out a report that the Gospel was being preached to Gentiles as well as Jews. Barnabas went as far as Antioch and confirmed that Gentiles were becoming Christians. Barnabas then traveled to Tarsus to ask Saul (Paul) to help minister at the church in Antioch. They spent year in Antioch teaching “a great many people.” (Acts 11:26)

What language did the people speak in Syria? Ancient Syriac. It would be reasonable to think that Syrian Christians would eventually translate the Greek texts of the New Testament. If, as I believed as an atheist, the New Testament was written at least a hundred years after the 1st century, then there couldn't be any evidence of a Syriac translation until at least the 3rd century.

I was right – partially. The oldest known Syriac translations of the New Testament dated to the 4th and 5th centuries. However, I discovered that the form of text they preserved dated back to end of the 2nd century. I also read about a 2nd century text known as the [*Diatessaron*](#), written by a Syrian Christian name Tatian who was a student of Justin Martyr. *Diatessaron* was a harmony of the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) written about 150-170 AD. Fragments have been discovered in several ancient languages including Syriac, Greek, and Latin. There was some thought that Tatian may have written in his native Syrian language. That would have placed the Syriac translation of the four Gospels many years ‘before’ I believed the original Greek texts would have been written.

Latin Translation of New Testament Texts

The information I found dated the oldest Latin versions of the New Testament to North Africa at the end of the 2nd century into the 3rd century AD. Though the Roman Empire did its best to destroy all of the New Testament texts during the 3rd and early 4th centuries, some were still in use when freedom of religion was finally allowed after the Edict of Milan (313 AD).

[Codex Bobbiensis](#), one of the oldest Old Latin manuscripts of the New Testament, is dated to the early 5th century and contains large portions of the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. The codex is currently housed in the Turin National University Library. One of the interesting aspects of the Old Latin translation is that researchers believed it might represent a page from the New Testament used by Cyprian when he was bishop of Carthage during the 3rd century AD. A paleographic study determined it was a copy of a 2nd century papyrus script.

We also know something about the Old Latin version because of what Jerome wrote later in the 4th century while revising the Latin translation of the Gospels for the bishop of Rome —

“You urge me to revise the old Latin version, and, as it were, to sit in judgment on the copies of the Scriptures which are now scattered throughout the whole world; and, inasmuch as they differ from one another, you would have me decide which of them agree with the Greek original. The labour is one of love, but at the same time both perilous and presumptuous; for in judging others I must be content to be judged by all; and how can I dare to change the language of the world in its hoary old age, and carry it back to the early days of its infancy? Is there a man, learned or unlearned, who will not, when he takes the volume into his hands, and perceives that what he reads does not suit his settled tastes, break out immediately into violent language, and call me a forger and a profane person for having the audacity to add anything to the ancient books, or to make any changes or corrections therein? Now there are

two consoling reflections which enable me to bear the odium—in the first place, the command is given by you who are the supreme bishop; and secondly, even on the showing of those who revile us, readings at variance with the early copies cannot be right. For if we are to pin our faith to the Latin texts, it is for our opponents to tell us which; for there are almost as many forms of texts as there are copies. If, on the other hand, we are to glean the truth from a comparison of many, why not go back to the original Greek and correct the mistakes introduced by inaccurate translators, and the blundering alterations of confident but ignorant critics, and, further, all that has been inserted or changed by copyists more asleep than awake? I am not discussing the Old Testament, which was turned into Greek by the Seventy elders, and has reached us by a descent of three steps. I do not ask what Aquila and Symmachus think, or why Theodotion takes a middle course between the ancients and the moderns. I am willing to let that be the true translation which had apostolic approval. I am now speaking of the New Testament. This was undoubtedly composed in Greek, with the exception of the work of Matthew the

Apostle, who was the first to commit to writing the Gospel of Christ, and who published his work in Judæa in Hebrew characters. We must confess that as we have it in our language it is marked by discrepancies, and now that the stream is distributed into different channels we must go back to the fountainhead. I pass over those manuscripts which are associated with the names of Lucian and Hesychius, and the authority of which is perversely maintained by a handful of disputatious persons. It is obvious that these writers could not amend anything in the Old Testament after the labours of the Seventy; and it was useless to correct the New, for versions of Scripture which already exist in the languages of many nations show that their additions are false. I therefore promise in this short Preface the four Gospels only, which are to be taken in the following order, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, as they have been revised by a comparison of the Greek manuscripts. Only early ones have been used. But to avoid any great divergences from the Latin which we are accustomed to read, I have used my pen with some restraint, and while I have corrected only such passages as seemed to convey

a different meaning, I have allowed the rest to remain as they are.” [Jerome, Preface to the Four Gospels](#)

Coptic Translation of New Testament Texts

The Coptic language was a language used in Egypt during the time of early Christianity. The primary dialects that impacted New Testament texts were **Sahidic** (Upper Egypt) and **Bohairic** (Lower Egypt).

Sahidic Versions

[MS 193](#) – *Crosby-Schøyen Codex* dates from the 3rd century and includes 1 Peter

[MS 2650](#) – *Codex-Schøyen* dates from early 4th century and includes the Gospel of Matthew

[British Library MS. Oriental 7594](#) – dates to the late 3rd or early 4th century and includes the Book of Acts

[Michigan MS. Inv 3992](#) – dates to the 4th century and includes 1 Corinthians and Titus

[Berlin MS. Or. 408](#) and [British Museum Or. 3518](#) – dates to the 4th century and contains Book of Revelation, 1 John, and Philemon

[Codex Bodmer XIX](#) – dates to the 4th century and includes the four Gospels

[Codex Bodmer XIX](#) – dates to 4th or 5th century and includes portions of Matthew and Romans

Bohairic Versions

[Codex Bodmer III](#) – dates to the 4th century and includes the Gospel of John

[Codex Glazier](#) – dates to the 4th or 5th century and includes about half of the Book of Acts

Other Coptic versions include the Fayyumic and Akhmimic dialects.

Evidence

Once I saw the evidence for early Greek, Syrian, Latin, and Coptic manuscripts, along with the letters of early Church Fathers quoting from New Testament writings dating to the 2nd century, **much** earlier than I had thought, it was no longer a stretch because of the evidence. It dawned on me during my investigation that if Christians were quoting New Testament texts in the late part of the 1st century and early part of the 2nd century, the original texts were probably written close to the time Christians claimed they were written.

Next Time

In the next part of my report I'll look at the evidence for the Pauline epistles having been written in the middle of the 1st century AD.