

Bible Language Revolution

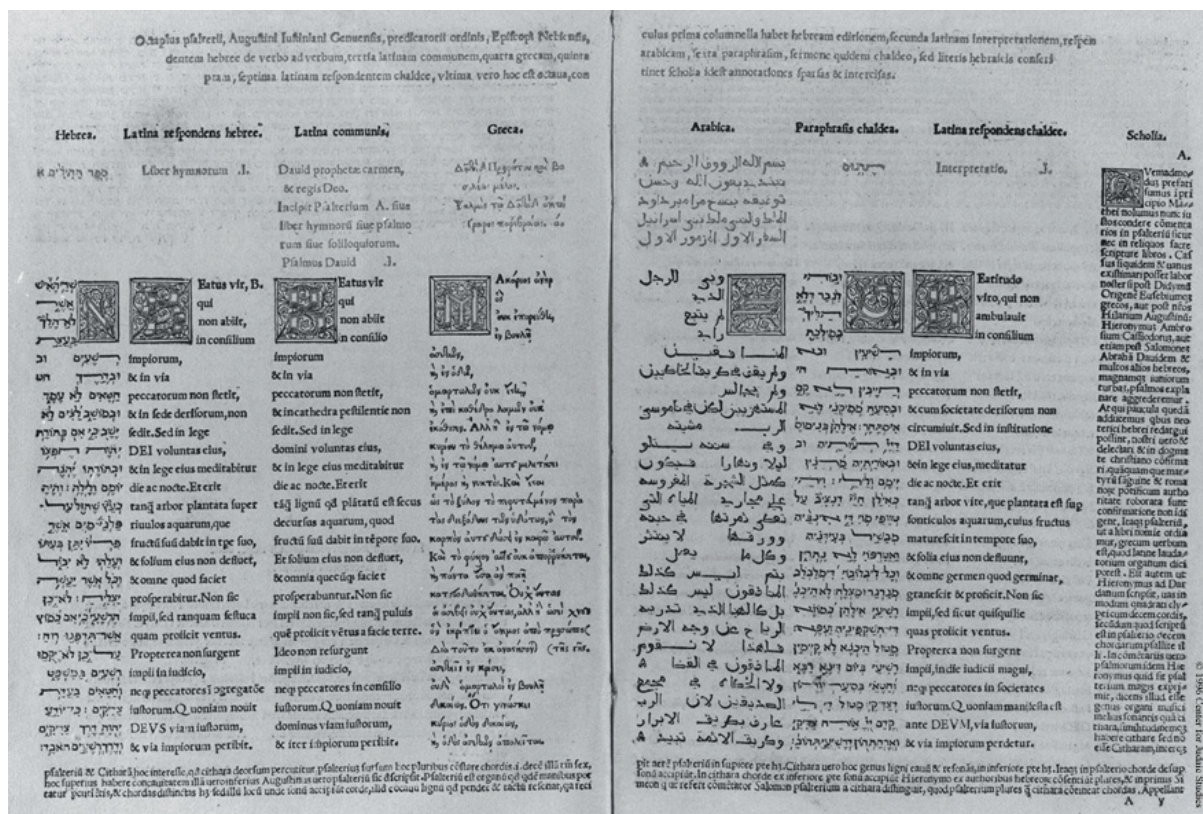
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Today we have all sorts of Bible websites, apps, and software that are linked to many translations, languages, lexicons, and commentaries. You can take a virtual stroll through a seminary library on your smart phone! At times, the sheer volume of Bible-related content available at our fingertips can leave us feeling overwhelmed. But did you know that half a millennium ago there was another revolutionary use of available technology for streamlining the scholar's access to such knowledge?

For your enjoyment (and perhaps, education) I offer two images from Bible language “study books” printed in the early 1500s (realize that the printing press was not yet 100 years old). Now these Bibles were not for liturgical use, but for serious language students who wanted to think outside traditional boxes in their meditations upon Scripture. For scholars interested in exploring the reception history of the text in its various translations, a multi-language Bible (or, “Polyglot”) was the latest “must have” all-in-one gadget (although a bit more bulky than an iPhone)!⁽¹⁾

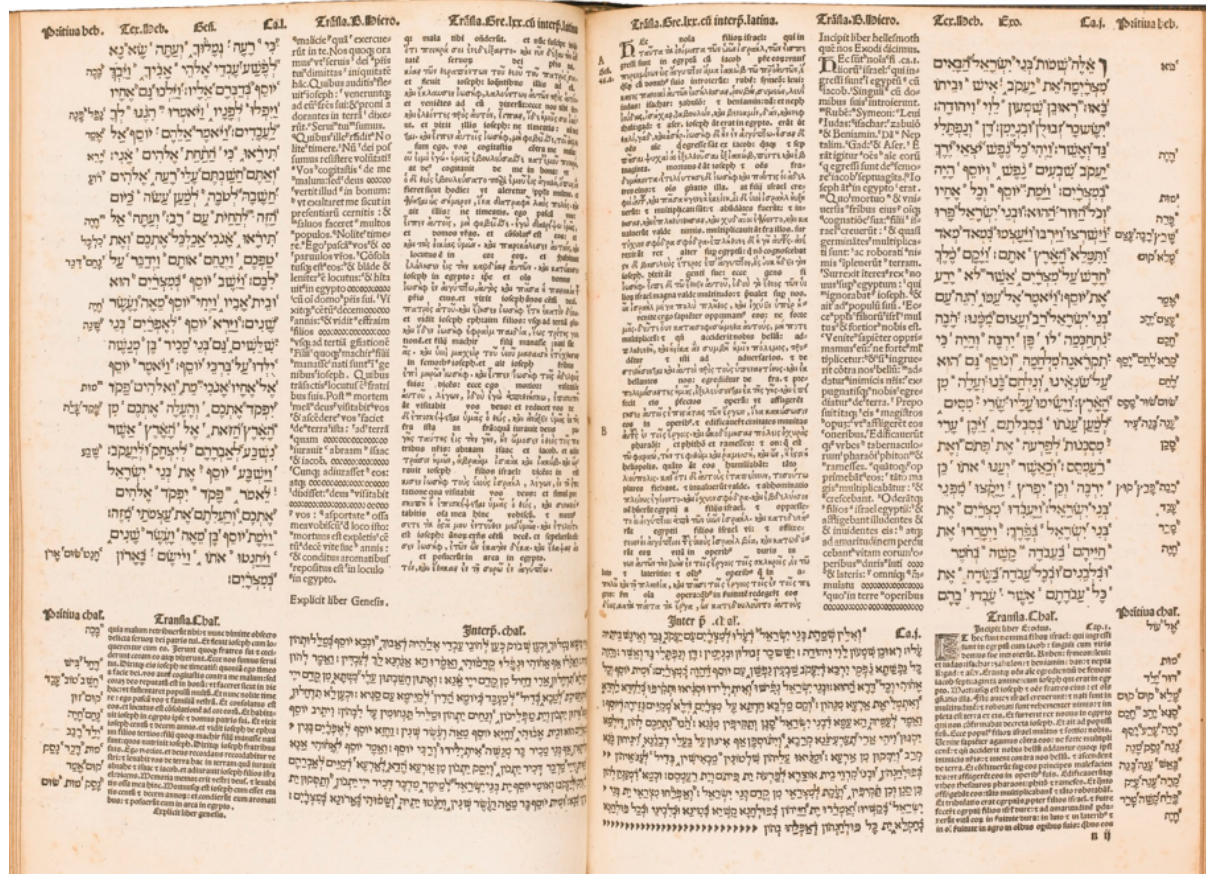
The first image is from a study of the Psalms, printed in 1516. Look at the languages (left to right): Hebrew, Latin translation directly from Hebrew, Latin Vulgate, LXX (Greek Septuagint), Arabic, Aramaic Targum, Latin translation of Aramaic, and a commentary in Latin. This must have been a typesetter's nightmare! [The NY Public Library has some nice color [images of this book](#).]



Can you identify which Psalm this is?

The second image is from a book printed around the same time (before 1520). The texts is Exodus 1. Whereas the the book above had a two-page layout, this book is a single-page layout, symmetrically centered on the spine. From right to left (on the right-hand page), the languages are: Hebrew, Latin, and Septuagint (with interlinear Latin). Notice also that located in the far right margin are the Hebrew roots of verbs used on that line.

That's not all. At the bottom of the page, you have an Aramaic Targum on the inside columns with a Latin translation of the Aramaic on the outside. These books were created as an innovative tool for Bible language scholars to immerse themselves in the world of the text. [As an aside, an original print of this book was recently listed at

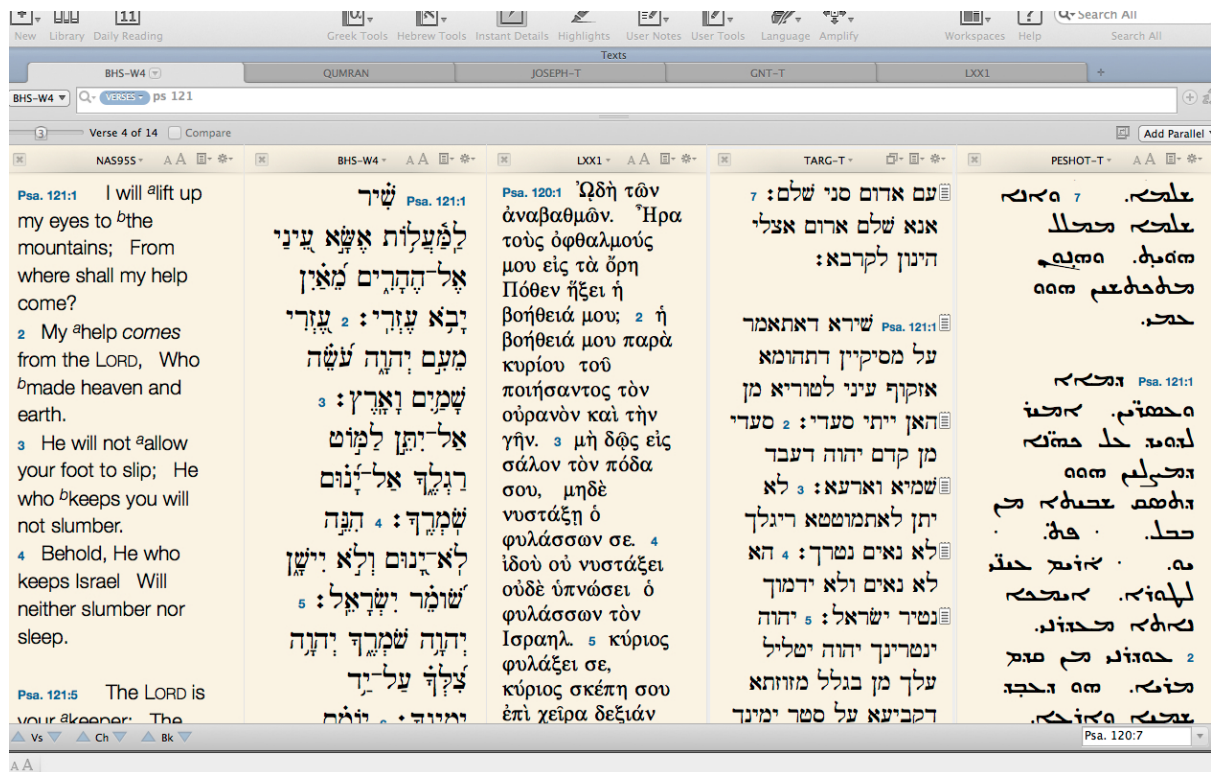


So, as you embark on your study of Bible languages, making use of today's technology, you're joining a kind of cutting-edge "Bible Language Revolution" that goes way back. Consider that these two books were in print the very year (1517) that Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses, an important event in Reformation history. Whether or not Luther would even have had access to these "study Bibles" I do not know, but he didn't start translating the Bible into German until the 1520s, when printed scholarly works like these were presumably available. In any event, publications of this nature give a snap shot into that time. We see clear exploitation of technology (printing press) for the sake of advancing the study of Scripture in multiple

languages. As more and more people had access to and gained competency in using resources like these, the claims of the “official” institution of authoritative interpreters were more easily undermined.

Keep in mind that Bible translation efforts have in many cases followed the courageous missionary spirit. I think of a brother in Messiah whose parents lived in Papua New Guinea for over three decades, learning a local (former cannibalistic!) tribe’s oral language, creating an alphabet and grammar for them, and then translating the Bible into that language! Indeed, that the Gospels themselves use Greek, Aramaic, Hebrew, and Latin, and that by the fourth century (A.D.) the Bible had been translated into many languages, tells me that Yeshua’s disciples are to think across cultural lines, in more than one language, as we bring His Word to the world. The five-hundred year-old books seen here testify to a significant line of inquiry and investment of available resources (contemporary to the Reformation) that seeks to go deeper into the Word by referring to this history of interpretation rather than depending upon priestly or rabbinic institutions. This is a good thing! Yeshua Himself teaches us to distinguish between the Word of God and the traditions of men. Should we be surprised if such inquiry is challenged by those who would like to control the reading and meaning of Scripture?

The last image is a screenshot from an Accordance “workspace.” You’ll see Psalm 121 represented (from left to right) in New American Standard, Masoretic Hebrew, Septuagint Greek, Aramaic Targum, and Syriac Peshitta. Of course, each of these versions is fully searchable and can be linked to dictionaries, maps, and other texts.



HalleluYah! The wonderful resources we have at our fingertips today would make those hard-working Reformers and “Early Modern” Bible scholars envious. Tools like [Accordance](#) (as seen in the screenshot above) and [eSword](#) would have blown their minds. In a very real way, “the books are open,” and it’s up to us to dive in and become good disciple-learners. Let us appreciate, be grateful for, and be good stewards of the “Bible tech” we have today; let us be diligent to continue this “anti-tradition” tradition, all to Yeshua’s glory! Let’s be good Bible language learners in this time of revolution!

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(1) Origen of Alexandria had compiled this kind of study tool (referred to as [Hexapla](#)) way back in the 3th century. It had Hebrew, Hebrew transliterated into Greek, along

with various Greek translations. Sadly, we have only fragments today; it would be another twelve hundred years before the printing press came on the scene.