Family Stories: How We Got the Bible We’ve Got

Week 4: Protestant Rumblings

**Translating and Printing the Bible**

* After the Vulgate, Europe does see several translations of the Bible, most originating from monastic communities. A few from the first millennium AD that survive mostly intact to our own day are the Gothic Bible (from northern European monks), the and the Old English Bible (whose Psalms and Gospels made it to the digital era).
* In the 12th, 13th, and 14th centuries AD, groups like the Waldensians in France and the Lollards in England start teaching anti-clerical doctrines and translating the Bible into local languages, and the association of the two spurs the Roman Church to insist that the Vulgate is the only real Bible, attempting to destroy local (and schismatic) translations.
* When Gutenberg develops the movable-type printing press in the 15th century (there were already printing presses; Gutenberg’s innovation was a press that could, with one set of tiles, print any book without carving new ones), his first product is the Latin Bible.

**Luther’s German Bible**

* Starting in the 15th century, several translations from the Latin Vulgate to German arise in post-Gutenberg Germany.
* In the early 16th century, the Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus publishes an edition of the Greek New Testament, making the best scholarship from Europe and Asia over 200 years available across Europe.
* Martin Luther, already excommunicated, uses Erasmus’s New Testament and conversations with townspeople, not professors, to develop a German Bible that sounds like common people talk. He relied on his friend Philip Melancthon to translate the Greek Septuagint into German in early editions, then in later editions hired professors of Hebrew language to work from the Masoretic texts (those used in Synagogue) to translate the Old Testament.
* In the process of working with those Hebrew scholars, Luther is the first to move the books that only exist in Greek manuscripts out of the main sequence of Old Testament books and into a section that he labels “Apocrypha” (hidden books).
* Luther also moves Hebrews and James to the end of the New Testament. In his letters he refers to James as “a letter of straw” and questions whether Hebrews, Jude, and Revelation should even be part of the canon.

**Luther’s Ripples**

* The Roman Church responds to Luther’s Bible, which sells 200,000 copies (an unbelievable number in the 16th century) by making the Latin Vulgate, which before was de facto the Bible that most Western European churches read from, the official Bible of the Roman Church and casting suspicion on all attempts to render the Bible in any language but Latin.
* Although Luther never thought of himself as a Protestant, in the next few generations Protestant regions in Germany, France, the Netherlands, Scotland, and England become centers of a new universal literary education as churches make private Bible-reading a new core of Christian devotion. Aspirations to universal literacy begin in Central Europe with Luther’s Bible.
* Although Luther’s Bible and most local-language Bibles from the 16th to the 18th centuries include the “Apocryphal” books, the stage is set here for the modern, 66-book Protestant Bible to emerge alongside the Jewish Bible, the Greek Septuagint, and the Latin Vulgate. After 1534 the world always has at least 4 Bibles traveling internationally.