



Polyglots:

The Bible in Multiple Tongues, 1502-1657

Discover the sources, innovations, and uses of these monuments to early modern devotion, scholarship, and technical skill.

This resource will introduce you to the great polyglot Bibles of the early modern period. These books – editions of the Bible that displayed multiple ancient translations side-by-side – rank among the most impressive monuments to early modern religious devotion, critical scholarship, and technical craftsmanship. This resource will allow you to engage with these great books and uncover the immense scholarly and technical effort that went into making them, the challenges that had to be overcome to produce them, and the different ways in which readers actually used them.

Sources

These sections describe the raw material for the great polyglots: manuscripts, printed books, and other scholarly materials that polyglot scholars used to make their great books.

Translations

These fields show the techniques and strategies polyglot scholars adopted to make the many unfamiliar languages of Scripture accessible and understandable to their readers.

Tools

These sections discuss the wide range of scholarly applications for using the great polyglots, and the different types of printed works they made possible.

“The Age of Great Polyglots”

1502-1657

Conditions and Challenges Behind the Making of the Great Polyglots

Cathedrals of Print

Polyglot Bibles had existed since at least the third century, but none could compare with the four “great” polyglot Bibles of the early modern period: the *Complutensian* (Alcalá de Henares, Spain, 1514-1517), *Antwerp* (1569-1572), *Paris* (1628-1645), and *London* (1654-1657) polyglots. These editions – all of them printed in large, folio-sized editions numbering between 6 and 8 volumes – are the printing equivalent of cathedrals: expressions of devotion to God through the highest level of intellectual and technical mastery. In them, readers encountered the cutting edge of biblical scholarship and printing technology in books that were meant to bring honor and glory to the



nations that produced them.

Historical Background

The great polyglots represented the major intellectual and cultural trends of the day. From humanism came the desire to create the most accurate biblical text possible in its original languages, from the Reformation came the impetus to evangelize and unite Christendom using the Bible, from increasing cultural exchanges with the Ottoman empire came the interest in Near Eastern languages, and from print culture came the resolution that all this could be accomplished through the printed word. Polyglots united all these strands of cultural history in the service of religion, and the work behind them went on to fundamentally shape intellectual culture for centuries.

The historical and cultural impact of the great polyglots is somewhat overlooked today. In large part, this is due to the fact that the massive collective effort behind these books is hidden by the printed page. This resource will draw back the curtain on the stories behind the three great polyglots in the collection of the Newberry Library: the *Complutensian*, the *Antwerp*, and the *London*.

In what follows, you will gain a sense of the individuals who helped create these great books.

The Polyglot Project

In what follows, you will see biblical scholars, linguists, artists, grammarians, translators, editors, printers, and theologians working to create the editions of the Biblical text in various languages, many of which had never appeared before in print. On the technical side, you will see how printers, compositors, type founders, and engravers worked long hours to display these texts in a clear yet appealing manner. On top of all this, you will learn about how diplomats, bishops, publishers, and political operatives scrambled and cajoled to secure the immense amount of money required to fund these projects. In short, our resource will provide an opportunity to engage with early modern religious and intellectual history, and also better understand what goes into the making of a great book.

Complutensian (1517)

Alcalá de Henares, Spain

The first great polyglot Bible

At the turn of the 16th century, Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros was greatly concerned with the poor quality of Biblical scholarship in Spain, and resolved to change it through the foundation of a university at Alcalá de Henares (Complutense in Latin). There he gathered experts in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew – including many conversos, Jewish converts to Christianity



– to create an edition of the Bible that included Hebrew, Latin, Greek, and Aramaic versions of Scripture on a single page. It was only in this way, Cisneros claimed in the preface to the work, that Christians could experience as much of the spiritual power and depth of the Bible as possible. Cisneros spared no expense; between acquiring manuscripts, supporting the team of scholars, creating new print types, and funding the massive effort to print the six folio volumes, the Complutensian cost an estimated 50,000 gold ducats, an immense amount. Money, however, was not the object; the first polyglot Bible was, more than anything else, an expression of religious devotion. Cisneros even stipulated in his will that a full copy of the Complutensian Bible was to be sold for no more than 6 ½ gold ducats, which guaranteed that his estate would never profit from it. Though the Bible was printed in 1517, the papacy refused to allow the editions to be sold until 1520. Of the 600 copies initially printed, only about 150 survive today.

Antwerp (1571)

Antwerp, Belgium

Christopher Plantin's royal achievement

Six decades after the *Complutensian*, the Flemish printer and entrepreneur Christopher Plantin resolved to publish another polyglot, both as an act of devotion and as a way to cement his status as the greatest printer of his time. Originally, Plantin suggested printing a new edition of the *Complutensian*, but the advances in biblical scholarship since 1517 called for an entirely new edition that would have four languages: Latin, Aramaic, Greek, and Syriac, a relative newcomer to European biblical scholarship. During the 1560s, Plantin began assembling the resources and scholars needed for the project in his printing shop in Antwerp. But the world in which they worked was a far different one than the world the *Complutensian* scholars had known; the events of the Reformation had made the act of producing a Bible in its original languages very controversial; Protestants demanded that the Bible be translated from its original languages, while Catholic authorities insisted that only the Latin Vulgate was needed. Many in the Church opposed Plantin's polyglot, and religious tensions in the Low Countries threatened to derail the work completely. Eventually, the printer secured the support of Philip II, the king of Spain, who sent the esteemed biblical scholar Benito Arias Montano to assist with the project. The six-volume Bible was printed between 1569 and 1572 in 1200 complete sets at a cost of at least 40,000 crowns, a third more than what Plantin had originally estimated. The Inquisition scrutinized the work intensely, and did not allow the Bible to be sold until 1580.

London (1657)

London, England

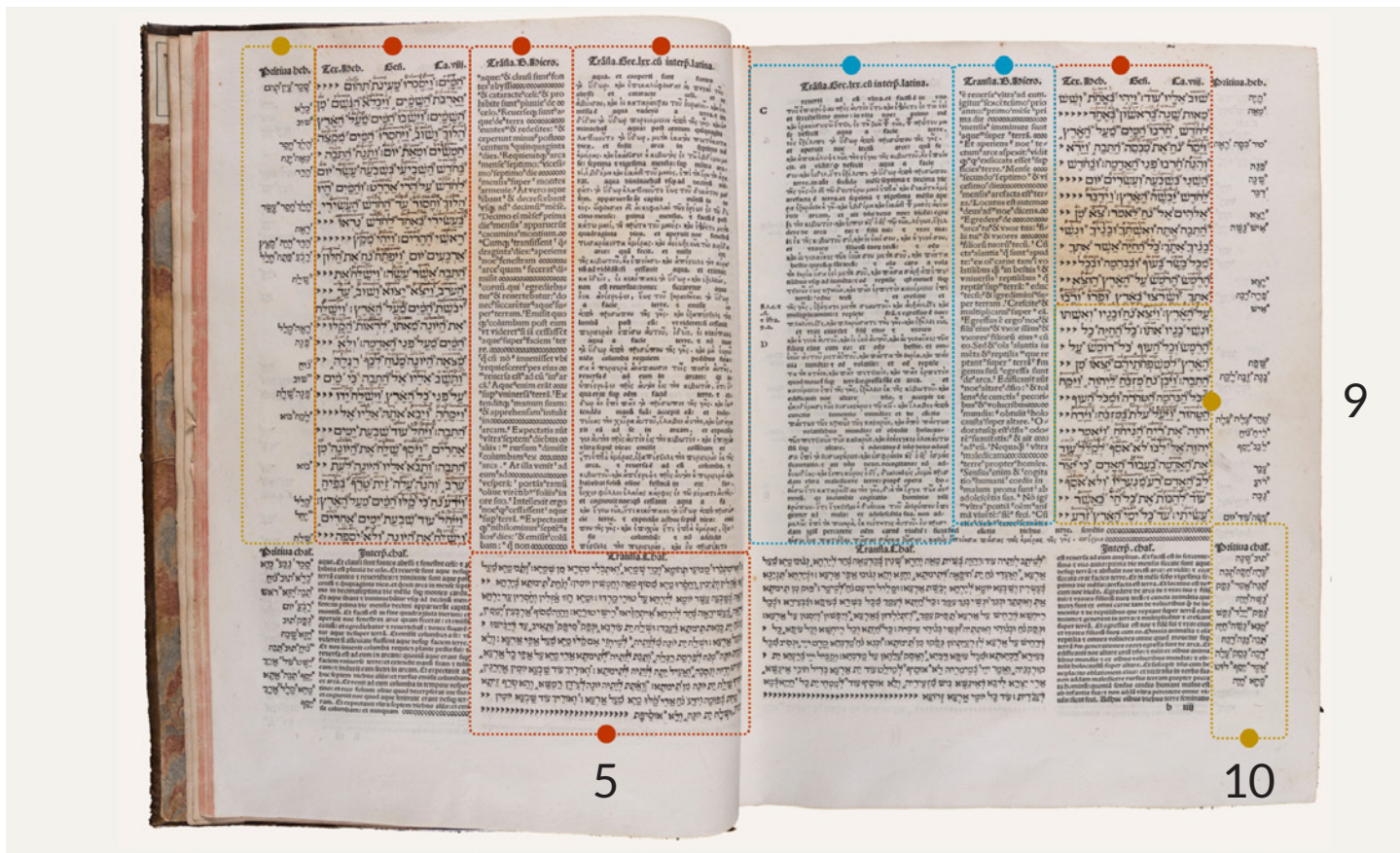
The pinnacle of polyglot scholarship

The last great polyglot Bible came out of the English Civil War. Brian Walton, an Anglican priest and scholar, was one of many intellectuals loyal to the British monarchy who lost his ecclesiastical position after the victory of the Parliamentary forces under Oliver Cromwell. Eventually, Walton



found refuge at Oxford University, where he decided to create another polyglot Bible. Walton was convinced that providing the people with the Bible in its original languages and most ancient translations was the best way to bring order to a faith in chaos. In collaboration with other scholars – most of whom were also displaced after the war – Walton led the production of the most ambitious polyglot yet, featuring 9 languages (Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Arabic, Persian, Ethiopic, and Samaritan). Walton believed that all these versions together would make “the truest glasses to represent the sense and reading” of Scripture. As Cromwell’s Council of State was not interested in supporting the project, Walton and his team turned to the English people instead, soliciting subscriptions from the general public beginning in 1652, with a complete polyglot priced at £10. By the end of that year alone, £4,000 had been raised. Thanks to this outpouring of public support, the six-volume polyglot was printed on time between 1654 and 1657. Although not nearly as aesthetically pleasing as its predecessors, the London polyglot bettered them all in terms of its scholarly impact; Walton’s edition and his introductory material were indispensable texts for biblical studies well into the 19th century.

1 2 3 4 6 7 8





Complutensian (1517) Elements

1. Finding Fullness of the Word

Polyglot scholars promoted understanding Hebrew



---. *Hebrew Vocabulary*. Alcalá de Henares, Spain. 1517.

Hebrew, believed by many to be God's language, was a critical component of any polyglot *Bible*, and features prominently in all of them. Hebrew in particular was to be the centerpiece of the *Complutensian* polyglot, since Cisneros believed that it contained the fullest meaning and mystery of God's Word. Understanding Hebrew depended on understanding its root words, the building blocks on which all Hebrew vocabulary (and thus all of Scripture) were built. The Complutensian scholars hoped to promote the learning of Hebrew by including root words that were keyed to entries in the Hebrew vocabulary located in the sixth volume. By learning these words, users could better grasp the full range of meaning behind the Hebrew language, which would open the door to the deep spiritual mysteries it expressed.

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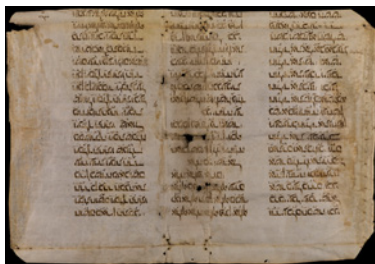
- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=398508>

Other Sources:

- Otero, Andrés Piquer and Pablo Torijano Morales, eds. *The Text of the Hebrew Bible and Its Editions: Studies in Celebration of the Fifth Centennial of the Complutensian Polyglot*. Supplements to the Textual History of the Bible 1. Leiden: Brill, 2014.

2. Making the Hebrew Text

Scholars use medieval manuscripts to create the Hebrew text



---. *First Chronicles in Hebrew*. Spain. 11th century.

All polyglot texts were ultimately based on manuscript copies of biblical texts. Thanks to its thriving Jewish community, Spain was the leading center of Hebrew scholarship since the Middle Ages. Everyone agreed that the highest quality Hebrew manuscripts were produced there, so Cisneros was well-positioned to acquire the best proof texts on which to



base the *Complutensian's* Hebrew edition, and the conversos recruited to produce it – Pablo Coronel, Alfonso de Toledo, and Alfonso de Zamora – all had extensive experience working with these manuscript sources. Even the later polyglots turned to Spanish manuscripts to produce their versions. The manuscript displayed above is the Newberry's oldest Hebrew manuscript, a fragment of the *Book of Chronicles* that was made in Spain at some point in the 11th century.

Newberry Catalog:

- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=961738>

Other Sources:

- Ortega-Monasterio, Teresa. "Spanish Biblical Hebrew Manuscripts." *Hebrew Studies*, 45 (2004), 163–74.

3. The *Vulgate*

The standard Latin translation of the *Bible* poses a challenge to polyglot scholars



---. [Bible][Manuscript]. France(?). Ca. 1230-1250.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the dominant version of the *Bible* was the Latin translation made in the 4th century that was attributed to St. Jerome. By the 16th century, scholars agreed that it was a very problematic text, filled with questionable translations and 1,000 years of inherited scribal errors that scholars were eager to fix. The Roman Church, however, considered the *Vulgate* the definitive translation, and forbade anyone from making a corrected edition. As a result, the *Complutensian* scholars built their edition of the *Vulgate* from medieval manuscripts in Spain, none of which were complete. The *Vulgate* shown here is a complete version of a 13th-century manuscript of the *Vulgate* from France.

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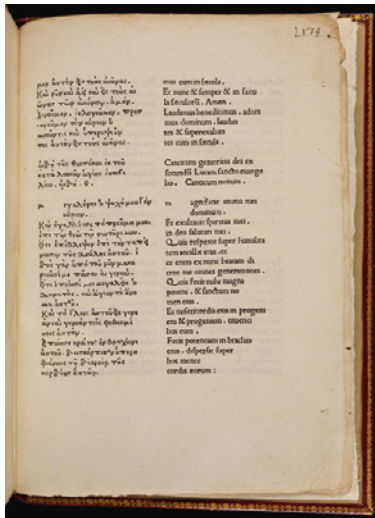
Other Sources:

- [Evangelistary] [manuscript]. Germany, between 1050 and 1100. VAULT folio Case MS 4



4. The Septuagint

The Greek translation of the Old Testament gains new life in the polyglots



---. [Psalterium Graeco-Latinum cum canticis]. Milan, Italy. 1481.

Centuries before the birth of Christ, Greek-speaking Jews living in Egypt created a Greek translation of the Old Testament called the *Septuagint*, so-called because around 70 (Septuagint is the Latin word for 70) scholars produced it. During the Middle Ages, the *Septuagint* was relatively unknown in western Europe, where Jerome's *Vulgate* translation dominated.

Interest in learning and using Greek in religious studies grew throughout the 14th and 15th centuries, especially after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. Thereafter, Biblical material in Greek began to appear in print, beginning with the psalter pictured here. Inspired by this, Cisneros borrowed *Septuagint* manuscripts from the Vatican to produce the first printed edition of the entire *Septuagint Old Testament* in his polyglot.

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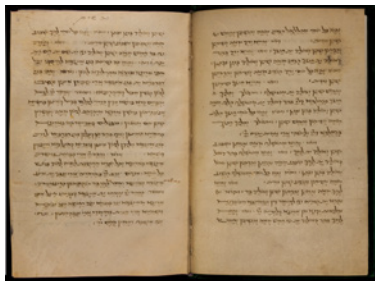
- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=400646>

Other Sources:

- O'Connell, S. *From Most Ancient Sources: The Nature and Text-Critical Use of the Greek Old Testament Text of the Complutensian Polyglot Bible*. Fribourg/Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2006.

5. Aramaic

Scholars use medieval manuscripts to locate the first translation of Old Testament



---. *Targum Onkelos of the Pentateuch*. Italy. 14th century.

To represent as much of the divine mystery as possible, the Complutensian scholars decided to include the *Targum*, a paraphrase of the Hebrew Scriptures in Aramaic, the language that Jews spoke after classical Hebrew died out as a spoken vernacular. Manuscripts of it – such as this example from the



Newberry's collections – were widely used in Jewish synagogues throughout Europe to explain and interpret the Hebrew text. The *Targum* was both a translation and an explanation, incorporating commentary from generations of rabbis and even some Talmudic fables along with the text. This made it somewhat difficult to use as a source for a definitive text of the Bible, and the *Complutensian* only included the *Targum* for the first volume of the Bible (which contained the *Pentateuch*). Later polyglots would include the entire *Targum*, after more editorial work had been done.

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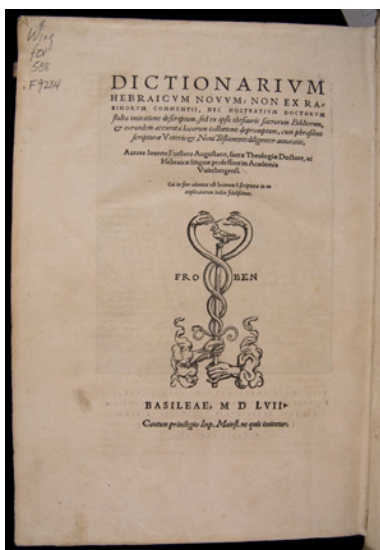
- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=124482>

Other Sources:

- Münster, Sebastian. *Arukh : dictionarium chaldaicum non ta[m] ad chaldaicos interpretes q[uam] rabbinoru[m] intelligenda co[m]mentaria necessarium*. Basel, 1527. VAULT Case PJ4937 .M86 1527

6. Learning Greek

Polyglots bring Greek into conversation with Hebrew for first time



---. *Sefer Tehilim = Psalterium Hebraicum*. Basel, Switzerland. 1563.

Polyglot scholars hoped that their readers would study the Bible in all the languages presented in these books, but they recognized the fact that few Europeans (even educated ones) were able to do so. Care was always taken to provide Latin translations of these other languages, so that users could see how the different languages related to each other. Demetrius Ducas, the Greek scholar tasked with preparing the *Septuagint* edition in the *Complutensian*, included a Latin translation that differed considerably from the *Vulgate* translation next to it. He hoped to inspire the same sort of work we see in the Hebrew Psalter pictured here, in which scholars were comfortable using Latin, Hebrew, and Greek to understand the text of the Bible.



Newberry Catalog:

- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=952285>

Other Sources:

- Fernández Marcos, Natalio. "Greek Sources of the Complutensian Polyglot." *Jewish Reception of Greek Bible Versions: Studies in Their Use in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages*. Tübingen: Siebeck, 2009, 302-315.

7. Calvary on the page

Printers use page layout to protect the authority of the *Vulgate*



Christopher Plantin, printer. *Plantin Polyglot*. Antwerp, Belgium. 1571.

Not everyone was excited about polyglots. Many scholars and ecclesiastical leaders argued that a polyglot edition would ruin Scripture, since it would allow the language of murderers (Jews) and heretics (Greeks) to distract readers from the essential Latin text. The Complutensian scholars refused to leave out these original languages, but placed the *Vulgate* in the very center of the page, with the Hebrew and Greek alongside. They described it as a representation of the Crucifixion, with Christ flanked by thieves on either side. As the image shows, the *Plantin Polyglot* takes the same visual approach in order to appease the Catholic church. Due to its Protestant origin, the *London Polyglot* did not bother with this, giving more prominence to the other original languages.

Newberry Catalog:

- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=234961>

Other Sources:

- Fernández Marcos, Natalio. "The First Polyglot Bible." In *The Text of the Hebrew Bible and Its Editions: Studies in Celebration of the Fifth Centennial of the Complutensian Polyglot*. Supplements to the Textual History of the Bible 1. Leiden: Brill, 2014, 3-18.

8. Making Hebrew Type

Letter-founders create new typefaces for polyglots



Congregatio de Propaganda Fide. Alphabeta varia. Rome, Italy. 1630.



Many of the languages that appear in polyglots had rarely, if ever, been printed before. This forced early polyglot scholars to find printers skilled enough to make new print types from scratch, often using manuscript sources. Arnao Gúillen de Brocar, the printer of the *Complutensian polyglot*, developed six new type fonts for the work using the manuscripts Cisneros had collected. A century later, the Catholic church sought to make it easier to print in these languages by circulating print specimens taken from particular sources, such as the one pictured here, which printers throughout Europe could use to make their own types.

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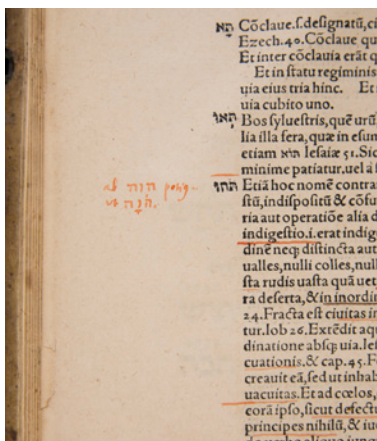
- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=286133>

Other Sources:

- Hall, Basil. *The Great Polyglot Bibles*. Publication number 124 of the Book Club of California. San Francisco: Published for its members by the Book Club of California, 1966.

9. Learning God's Language

Polyglots make widespread study of Hebrew more available



Johann Forster. *Dictionarium Hebraicum nouum*. Basel, Switzerland. 1557.

By making available definitive texts of the Bible in its original languages, polyglot scholars hoped to inspire other intellectuals to learn to use these languages on their own, so that the quality of Christian scholarship would grow. We can see this in action in the Newberry's copy of the *Complutensian*; an early user wrote Latin translations over the Hebrew words in this copy that are different from the *Vulgate*, which suggests that he used the book to learn Hebrew. In the process, he may have made use of a Latin-Hebrew dictionary like the one compiled by the scholar Johann Forster, who proudly claimed that his dictionary was based solely on biblical sources, which the *Complutensian* provided in abundance.



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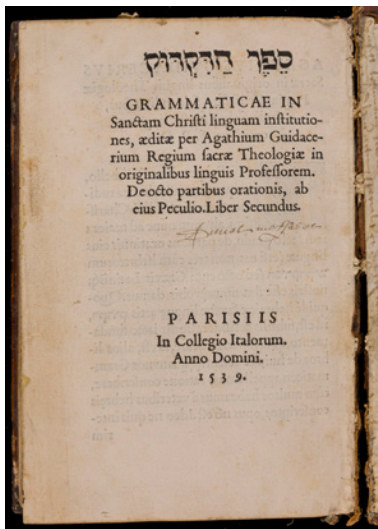
- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=182836>

Other Sources:

- Bell, Dean Phillip. *Jews in the Early Modern World*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008, 227-230.

10. Interpretive Editions

Polyglot editors interpret Hebrew before printing it



Rabbi David Kimhi. *Liber Michlol*. Paris. 1540.

Classical Hebrew is composed of only consonants in its written form; readers could decide which vowels to supply when reading it, which could dramatically alter the meaning of the word. This forced editors to make decisions about how certain words could be interpreted, especially when they were compared with the Latin or Greek versions. Scholars did this by relying on Hebrew grammars, which offered guidance on how particular words ought to be pronounced. The Complutensian scholars relied especially on the work of Rabbi David Kimhi, an influential medieval grammarian whose work remained popular in the early modern period, as evidenced by the printed example shown here.

Newberry Catalog:

- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=483893>

Other Sources:

- Reuchlin, Johann. *De accentibus et orthographia linguae Hebraicae*. Haguenau, 1518. VAULT Case PJ4581 .R4 1518



Antwerp (1571) Elements numbered on image



1. The Syriac Bible

Polyglot scholars seek out manuscripts of a new biblical language



---. Syriac Gospel Lectionary. 13th-15th century.

During the age of the great polyglots, scholars were keen to bring in any new ancient biblical languages that came to their attention. The first of these was Syriac, which was introduced to Europeans at the Fifth Lateran Council (1512-1517). Syriac was a literary language that was very close to Aramaic (though it had a different alphabet), and scholars were convinced that this was the language spoken by Christ, Mary, and the apostles. More importantly for polyglot creators, the first translation of the New Testament was into Syriac, in a version known as the *Peshitta*. Scholars and printers throughout Europe were eager to bring this



early translation into print, and acquired manuscripts to make the necessary typefaces. Plantin's polyglot used a 13th-century copy of the *Peshitta*; the Newberry's copy shown here dates from the same time.

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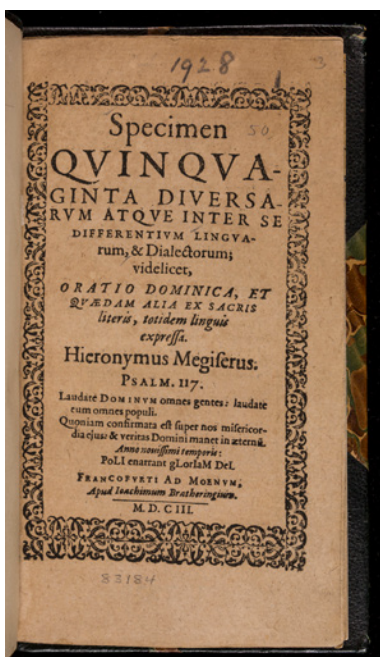
- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=844229>

Other Sources:

- Contini, Riccardo. "Gli inizi della linguistica siriana nell'Europa rinascimentale," in *Italia ed Europa nella linguistica del Rinascimento*. (Bib ID: 135672), pp. 483-502
- Wilkinson, Robert J. *The Kabbalistic Scholars of the Antwerp Polyglot Bible*. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

2. The Polyglot Effect

Printers place as much of the Word of God before readers as possible



Hieronymus Megiser. *Specimen quinquaginta diversarum atque inter se differentium linguarum, & dialectorum*. Frankfurt am Main, Germany. 1603.

Polyglot scholars agreed that when it came to printing the Word of God, more languages were better. Different translations were thought to complement one another, since multiple languages could reveal more of the divine meaning of Scripture than any single language could on its own. This rationale compelled the Antwerp scholars to add Syriac to the roster of Biblical languages in their polyglot, since it would allow the Gospel to speak in another voice. The introduction of Syriac reflected the general scholarly interest in printing the key texts of Christianity in as many languages as possible. The book shown here, for instance, gave readers 50 different versions of the Lord's Prayer in various languages and dialects. It was compiled by Hieronymus Megiser, a German historian and philologist who was interested in spreading the polyglot effect through dictionaries, grammars, and even a polyglot thesaurus.

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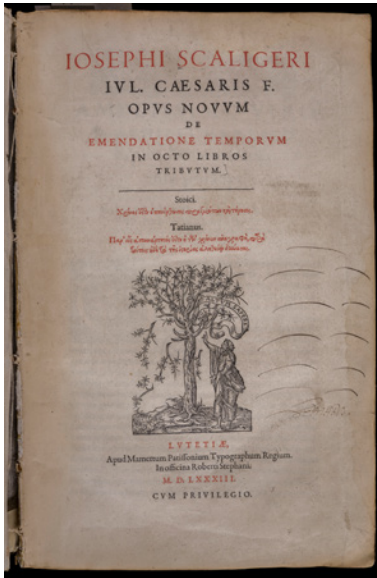
Other Sources:

- Guillaume Postel, *Lingvarum duodecim characteribus differentium alphabetum, introductio, ac legendi modus longè facilimus....* Paris, 1538.



3. Philology and Near Eastern Studies

Polyglots open up new fields of study using Near Eastern languages



Joseph Scaliger. *De emendatione temporum*. Paris, France. 1583.

Polyglots played a large role in increasing the presence of Near Eastern languages in scholarship. In particular, the typefaces designed to print unfamiliar languages often enjoyed long careers printing works of history, linguistics, and ethnography. The typefaces used to print the Syriac text in the Antwerp polyglot were passed down to Plantin's son-in-law, Frans Raphelengius, who used them to print a revised edition of the French scholar Joseph Scaliger's *De emendatione temporum*. This book, which charts out human history using ancient calendar systems, shared the same intellectual spirit as the polyglots, as it placed the histories of Near Eastern peoples (Jews, Babylonians, Persians, Egyptians, etc.) alongside that of the Greeks and Romans.

Newberry Catalog:

- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=656475>

Other Sources:

- Edward Rowe Mores, *A Dissertation upon English Typographical Founders and Foundries*. London, 1778.

4. Transliterating New Languages

Scholars use Hebrew to unlock other Near Eastern languages



Johann Widmanstetter, ed. *Syriacae linguae lesu Christo, eiusque Matri Virgini atq; Iudaeis omnibus, Christianae redemptionis Euangelicae* ... Vienna. 1555.

Christians in Europe assumed that Near Eastern Christians were backward, misguided, and ignorant of Christian doctrine. In part, the polyglots were made to help Europeans learn the languages needed to minister to their wayward brethren. Syriac was one of these, but, like many Near Eastern languages, hardly anyone in Europe was familiar with it. To get around that



problem, polyglot scholars used more familiar languages to help readers access unfamiliar ones. For the *Antwerp polyglot*, Plantin's collaborators decided to transliterate the *Peshitta* into Hebrew, so scholars could begin to grasp how the Syriac alphabet worked. They could then use the accompanying Latin paraphrases to translate it. In so doing, Plantin's team followed the same approach taken by Johann Widmanstetter, the first European to print the *Peshitta* in 1555. That edition was accompanied by this short text, which used Hebrew and Latin to help scholars master the Syriac alphabet.

Newberry Catalog:

- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=793622>

Other Sources:

- Wilkinson, Robert J. *Orientalism, Aramaic, and Kabbalah in the Catholic Reformation: The First Printing of the Syriac New Testament*. Leiden: Brill, 2007.

5. Royal Patronage

Polyglots as signs of political power



Pieter van der Heyden. *Biblia sacra*. Antwerp, Belgium. 1571.

Due to their extremely high cost, all of the great polyglots required the assistance of the state. This forced their creators to play delicate games of diplomacy between secular and ecclesiastical authorities in order to finish them. Plantin had a more difficult time than most; many of the contributors to the project (including Plantin himself) were suspected Protestants. A crisis ensued when, with the polyglot project well under way, a Protestant revolt in the Netherlands led to a brutal repression by the Spanish in 1567. Plantin faced financial ruin in the aftermath, but he used the polyglot to save himself (and his business), pitching it as both a monument of Catholic piety and a scholarly tool to combat Protestantism. His rebranding efforts won the support of Philip II, who ensured that the project would be completed. The spectacular frontispiece in the first volume of the finished edition commemorated Philip's support.

Newberry Catalog:

- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=234961>



Other Sources:

- ---. *Correspondance de Christophe Plantin*, Epp. 39-47.

6. Greek Manuscripts

Polyglot editors reveal the Greek New Testament



---. *Gospels*. 12th century.

Knowledge of Greek was at the heart of the scholarly culture that produced the great polyglots. The original language of the New Testament, Greek had been a staple of biblical scholarship in Europe since the end of the 15th century. Although some Greek manuscripts could be found in medieval libraries, they became more widely available after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453, when refugees brought their books with them to new homes in Europe. Polyglot scholars attempted to find the oldest possible Greek manuscripts to make their editions, and would have been happy to have the Newberry's 12th-century copy of the *Greek Gospels*.

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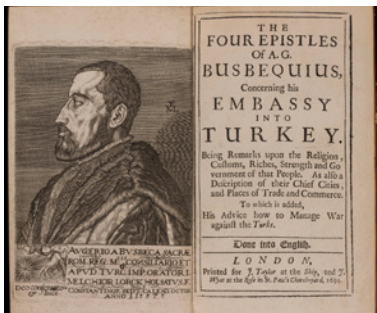
- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=160179>

Other Sources:

- Erasmus, Desiderius. *Novum Instrumentum*. Basel, 1516.

7. Acquiring Manuscripts

Polyglot editors depend on merchants and diplomats to acquire sources needed



Ogier Ghislan de Busbecq. *The four epistles of A.G. Busbequius, concerning his embassy into Turkey*. London.

Polyglots required manuscripts, but obtaining them could be difficult and prohibitively expensive. As such, polyglot scholars depended on others – diplomats, scholars, and members of the aristocracy – to travel to the Near East and acquire manuscripts for them. This process became much easier over the course of the 16th century, as diplomatic relations improved



between European states and the Ottoman Empire. The friendlier relations allowed for more Greek and Near Eastern manuscripts to come to Europe. One of the more successful of these agents was Ogier Ghislan de Busbecq, the Holy Roman Empire's ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in the 1550s and 1560s. An avid humanist himself, Busbecq always set time and money aside to purchase manuscripts – especially Greek ones – to bring back with him to Europe. His efforts helped provide the raw material for the scholars who worked on the Antwerp polyglot.

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London (1657) Elements

numbered on image





1. Supporting Oriental Studies

Polyglots lead to creation of other linguistic material



Edmund Castell. *Lexicon heptaglotton*. London, England. 1669.

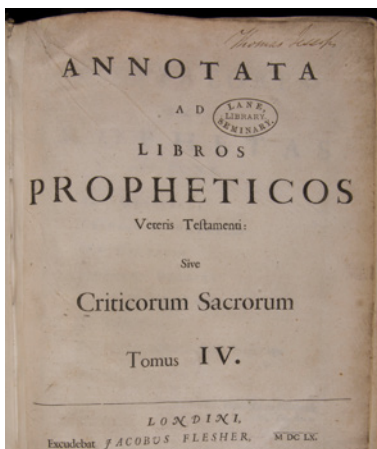
As big as they were, the polyglots could not display all of the scholarly work and research that went into them. Their creators often used the material that did not make it into the polyglots for other projects. In particular, the work of learning to read, write, and speak the Near Eastern languages in the polyglots contributed greatly to the development of what was then called Oriental studies. Thanks to Walton's project, England became the leader in this field by the middle of the 17th century, with scholars producing a number of historical, literary, and philological works centered on Near Eastern cultures. An early byproduct of this activity was the *Lexicon heptaglotton*, a dictionary of all seven Near Eastern languages used in the polyglot compiled by Edmund Castell, who had corrected the Samaritan, Syriac, Arabic, and Ethiopic editions in the London polyglot.

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2. Polyglots as Bibles

Other works help readers approach polyglots like any other Bible



John Pearson, editor. *Critici sacri, sive, Doctissimorum virorum in SS. Biblia annotationes, & tractatus*. London, England. 1660.

With all of their scholastic apparatus, it can be easy to forget that polyglots were still Bibles. As such, the creators of the great polyglots expected people to use them to learn about God. Indeed, polyglots were considered the most definitive editions of biblical texts available that would reveal the spiritual meaning of the Word in its deepest sense. Since using them was no easy task, however, scholars also developed materials to help readers get as much spiritual value out of the polyglots as possible. The text shown here, a collection of commentaries on all the books



of the Bible, is an example of one of these aids. This project was spearheaded by John Pearson, one of the early advocates for the *London polyglot*, and was perhaps intended to supplement Walton's great work.

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3. Matching Prints

Printers rise to the challenge of presenting the same text.



---. *Biblia sacra polyglotta*. London, England. 1657.

Polyglots were immensely complicated works to publish, posing a considerable technical and logistical challenge to the printers who made them. They were responsible for translating the work of biblical scholars and editors into a finished product that would show the expansiveness of the divine Word in a way that people could still read. One of the most significant challenges printers faced was ensuring that all the languages printed on a single page showed exactly the same amount of text. With its nine languages, the *London polyglot* was especially daunting in this regard. In the passage shown here, for instance, the printers were responsible for matching up 11 different translations and paraphrases of just over two psalms.

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- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=236649>

Other Sources:

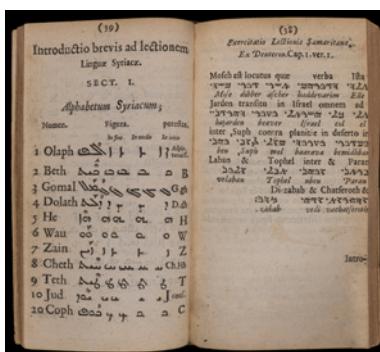
- Reed, *History of the English Letter-Founders*. 2nd ed. London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1952.

4. Preparing the way for the Polyglot

Scholars create texts to help others use polyglots

Brian Walton. *Introductio ad Lectionem Linguarum Orientalium*. London, England. 1655.

Polyglots were made to be used, but their creators did not assume that anyone would be able to do this without help. They worked hard to prepare the public to be able to get the most use out of them. For instance, one of Walton's primary



goals for his polyglot was to prepare missionaries to correct troubling religious practices and beliefs among Near Eastern Christians. This short work, published two years before the polyglot was finished, was intended to help achieve this goal. It taught readers how to read, write, and pronounce the Near Eastern languages that would appear in the polyglot. With this background, the London polyglot became a kind of textbook that missionaries and scholars could use to communicate with Eastern Christians in their native tongues.

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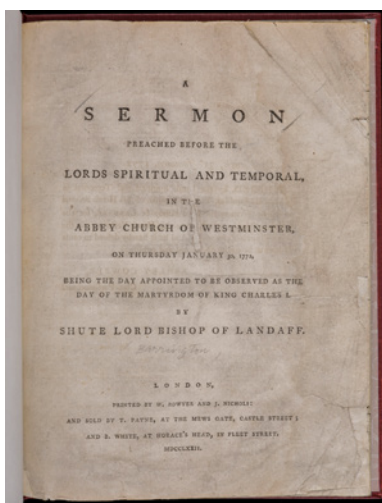
- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=764078>

Other Sources:

- Roger Williams, *Key to the Language of America*.

5. Preaching from the Polyglot

Polyglots support preachers by providing context for the Bible



Shute Barrington. *A sermon preached before the Lords Spiritual and Temporal in the Abbey Church of Westminster on Thursday, January 30, 1772*. London, England. 1772.

Preachers were always intended to be one of the primary users of polyglot Bibles. With a wide range of critical editions of complementary translations and variant readings at their disposal, these clergymen had all the tools they needed to uncover the deepest meanings of Scripture and share them with audiences. We know, at least, that the Newberry copy of the *London polyglot* was used for that purpose. Shute Barrington, an Anglican bishop, owned this particular copy, and must have used it to give this sermon in Westminster Abbey. While preaching on Proverbs 1:32, Barrington referred to “ancient versions” of a word in this verse, by which he meant the Syriac and Aramaic versions of this verse in his copy of the London polyglot.

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Other Sources:

- Peter McCullough, et al, *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon*.

6. Arabic Studies

Polyglots capitalize on interest in the Arabic Language



---. *Alphabetum arabicum*. Rome, Italy. 1592.

As relations with the Ottoman Empire improved, Europeans became more interested in Arabic, both for the purposes of ministering to Arabic-speaking Christians and converting Muslims. In time, this became one of the major motivating factors in polyglot scholarship; the *London polyglot* was rooted in the flowering of Arabic studies at the universities in Oxford and Cambridge in the 1620s. In this way, the London polyglot scholars carried on the project of the Medici Press in Rome, which was founded in 1584 to print material in Arabic for European as well as Ottoman audiences. Some of these materials included guidebooks for learning how to read, write, and translate Arabic, which were enthusiastically used by European scholars. The Newberry copy of this workbook shows this clearly; an early owner added additional Arabic works, including some copied out by hand.

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Other Sources:

- Arabic Gospels

7. Bibles Make Bibles

Polyglots lay the foundation for later Bible editions



---. *The Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments, in the Arabic language*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England. 1811.

Since the days of the *Complutensian*, polyglots were intended to show the Biblical text in the most accurate and perfect form possible. Biblical scholars were always excited to have them, since they always represented the most up-to-date critical editions of the Bible in its original languages. As such, polyglots were often used as the foundation of subsequent editions of



the Bible in any of the individual languages represented there. The text of the Arabic Bible shown here, for instance, was based on the Arabic text used in the London polyglot. The driving force behind this Bible, the Anglican bishop Shute Barrington, also owned the Newberry copy of the London polyglot.

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- <https://i-share.carli.illinois.edu/nby/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&v1=1&BBRecID=236660>