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SEARCHING FOR THE VULGATE: ONE GENUINE TEXT AND TWO FAKES

What do you do if you want a copy of the official Latin bible, the Vulgate?

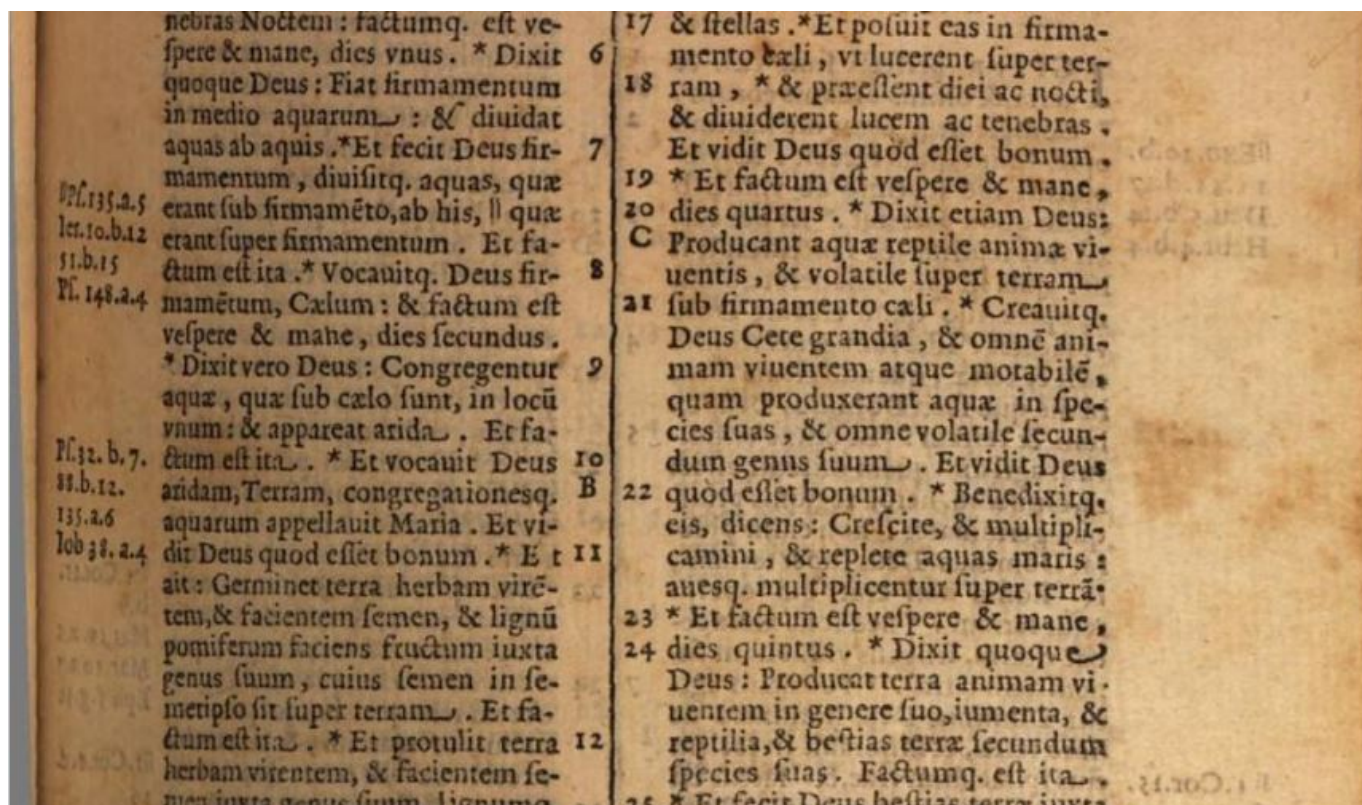
First, some necessary background.

The Vulgate was created by St Jerome out of a mass of earlier “old Latin” translations, of variable quality, complete with a preface to many of the books. It was then transmitted by copying down the centuries, becoming the standard medieval bible in the west, and the source for a vast amount of Dark Age and Medieval writing. Along the way it acquired a certain amount of copyist errors - I have no idea what these are - and it also acquired punctuation and other forms of reader helps. At the counter-reformation, with the arrival of printing, the Catholic church felt the need for an official text. After Pope Sixtus V made some clumsy attempts at this, Pope Clement VIII produced four editions: in 1590, 1592, 1593 and 1598. The last of these is referred to as the “Clementine Vulgate”. This was the official version of the Bible in the Catholic Church until 1979.



Title page of the 1598 Vulgate edition.

There is a copy of this edition at Google Books [here](#). Here is Genesis 1:11 in that volume, where "juxta" is still printed as "iuxta".

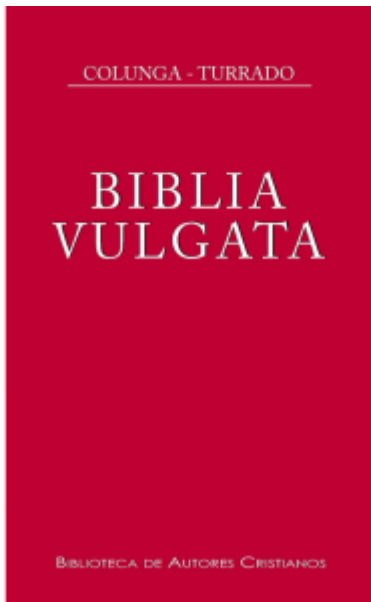


Over the following centuries, the text of the Clementine Vulgate was reprinted many times, and the readability improved with better fonts, text layout, and the modernisation of orthography by getting rid of the long-s (ſ) form of the consonant “s”.

One innovation that has affected all printed books is to divide the Latin letter “I”, which represented two sounds, into the modern vowel “i” and the modern consonant “j”. This was proposed by Gian Giorgio Trissino in a letter in 1524,^[1] It was advocated and adopted in an English book in 1634, in Charles Butler’s *English Grammar*.^[2] We still use this convention today. The Vulgate was intended to be read, despite being in Latin, so copies began to appear in this form also, such as in the 1688 edition [here](#).

The standard 19th century edition of the Vulgate, as far as I can tell, is that of Samuel Bagster. It seems to have been created for his *Biblia Sacra Polygotta*, and then reprinted separately. I have an undated copy (probably late 19th century) in my possession, with very tiny text, designed to be placed in a pocket. The typeface is visibly worn. The Bagster edition continued to be printed into the 20th century.

The modern equivalent is the A. Colunga - L. Turrado edition, *Biblia Vulgata*, BAC (1991), ISBN 978-8479140212, available for 45 euros (or equivalent) at the [BAC site](#), and also at [Amazon.com](#) (\$55) and [Amazon.co.uk](#) (£56). I’m not sure why it is so much cheaper in the USA. I’ve not seen this, so I can’t say whether it uses “j” or not.



In 2002-2005, Michael Tweedale and friends created an electronic text of the Clementine Vulgate, *Biblia Sacra Juxta Vulgatam Clementinam*, which was authorised by the Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales. This can be found online [here](#). The styling of the site is a little odd; the files are only visible from the left-top menu. But they are all there. It is a splendid piece of work, undertaken for the benefit of everyone. It seems to be based on the Colunga edition but with corrections.

Another very useful site is the [SacredBible.org](#), which contains online scans of the Leander van Ess edition which compares all four Clementine editions, and also includes a 1914 Hetzenauer edition (no “j” in this tho). All this material is free and public domain.

But by the late 19th century various academics were getting restless. The Clementine Vulgate was a practical useful book, but it was not a critical text. It reflected 15 centuries of tweaking, but had started to drift - allegedly - from Jerome’s original. In 1878 John Wordsworth started the Wordsworth-White edition of the Latin New Testament. In 1907 a Benedictine edition was started. Neither produced an edition of the complete text, but the word done fed into the “Stuttgart Vulgate”.

This means that someone wishing to purchase a Vulgate may be led astray by what I have seen called “fake vulgates”. There are two.

The first “fake vulgate” is the Stuttgart Vulgate, edited by R. Weber and now - in its 5th edition - by Roger Gryson. This is a real critical edition of Jerome’s text of the Vulgate, as I understand it, based upon text-critical principles and early mss. It has an apparatus. But it lacks punctuation, capitals, or paragraphs, just as books did back in Jerome’s time, which makes it nearly unreadable even before the language barrier is considered. For the half-dozen people who need to work, not with a medieval text, but the text of the 500s, it is a useful tool. It is, indeed, not a book at all. It’s a tool, a reference item. Under German law it is the property of the German Bible Society, the deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, who “defend their property” with [threats of lawsuits](#). It is also not a Catholic organisation.

The second “fake vulgate” is the “Nova Vulgata”, a secondary consequence of the massive loss of confidence in Catholicism by the Catholic hierarchs that led to Vatican II. This uses a great deal of Jerome’s Vulgate, derived from 20th century critical editions, but revises them in line with the Greek and Hebrew original. It is, in reality, a new Latin translation of the bible, rather than a Vulgate. It is officially approved, since 1972, as the standard Catholic Church Latin bible. It can be obtained at . I’m not sure how successful it is. But anyone

wishing to buy a Vulgate needs to avoid it. The text may be found online [here](#).

There is an interesting discussion of both by [Ron Conte](#), a traditionalist Catholic, [here](#). Another interesting comment is that the text of 4 Esdras in the Stuttgart Vulgate is 140 verses as compared to 70 in the Clementine Vulgate, as a portion of the text was only recovered in the 19th century.

You can most easily distinguish the three texts by looking at Genesis 3:20. Eve's name is different in each:

- **Heva:** the Clementine Vulgate.
- **Hava:** the Stuttgart edition of the Vulgate.
- **Eva:** the New Vulgate.

A rather useful parallel Greek, English and Clementine Vulgate in parallel columns is at [NewAdvent.org here](#).

It's all rather confusing. I would like a pocket-size Clementine Vulgate, in a nice soft leather binding, properly sewn. Does such a thing exist?

1. ^[1]Thus [Wikipedia](#) which links to the text of the letter.↵

2. ^[2]Lilo Moessner, "Chapter 10: Standardization", in: Alexander Bergs &c (ed.), *Early Modern English*, [p.171](#).↵