

myBible

The Translation of the Bible: Early Translations to the King James Version

A Challenge and a Solution

Our study in this series culminates in a discussion of the translation of the original languages (Hebrew, a little Aramaic, and Greek) into the language of the audience. The only reason we even need to have this discussion is because of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9). After the flood, man rebelled against God's command to spread out and fill the earth. They decided to make a name for themselves and pool their combined resources to make a city and build a tower that would touch heaven. God thwarted their plans by confusing their languages, making it impossible for them to easily communicate and therefore cooperate. As a result, they spread throughout the earth and settled in distinct areas.

While this slowed man's cooperative rebellion, it presents a barrier to the antidote to man's rebellious heart: the gospel of Jesus Christ. The vision given to the church in Matthew 28:18-19 is one of the gospel reaching every human in the world.

"And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:"

Matthew 28:18-19

The conflict between the language barrier and the commission of the church was resolved for the early church on the Day of Pentecost. Read Acts 2:1-12, and you will find that the Lord lifted the language barrier by enabling those early Christians to speak in other languages so that every person in Jerusalem could hear the gospel in their native tongue (language). Keep in mind that this was before the New Testament was recorded. Although those early Christians only had Jews in mind, God had a much greater plan for the gospel: it would indeed go to the whole world and be preached and believed among the nations.

When the Lord led men of God to record the New Testament, He did not choose Hebrew or Aramaic. Instead, he led each of them to write in Koine Greek. Koine (common) Greek was the language of most of the people in the Mediterranean and Middle East during that time period. It was the language that would best allow the gospel to travel worldwide and in turn be translated into local dialects.

What do we learn from this? It is apparent that God intends people to be able to read and hear His Word in their own language. **The Bible is intended to be understood by all people, without language barriers.** This is the underlying premise of Bible translations. It is also the passion that sparked many to give countless hours in study and translation, and sacrifice property, freedom, and their very lives.

Because our goal is to have a better understanding of English translations of the Bible, we will use the updated chart derived from the Thompson Chain Reference Study Bible as our reference. In our prior study on the transmission of the Bible, we discussed the Original Manuscripts, Ancient Copies, the Masoretic Text, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and other more recently discovered ancient manuscripts. We will move beyond these to begin our study with the earliest translations of the Bible.

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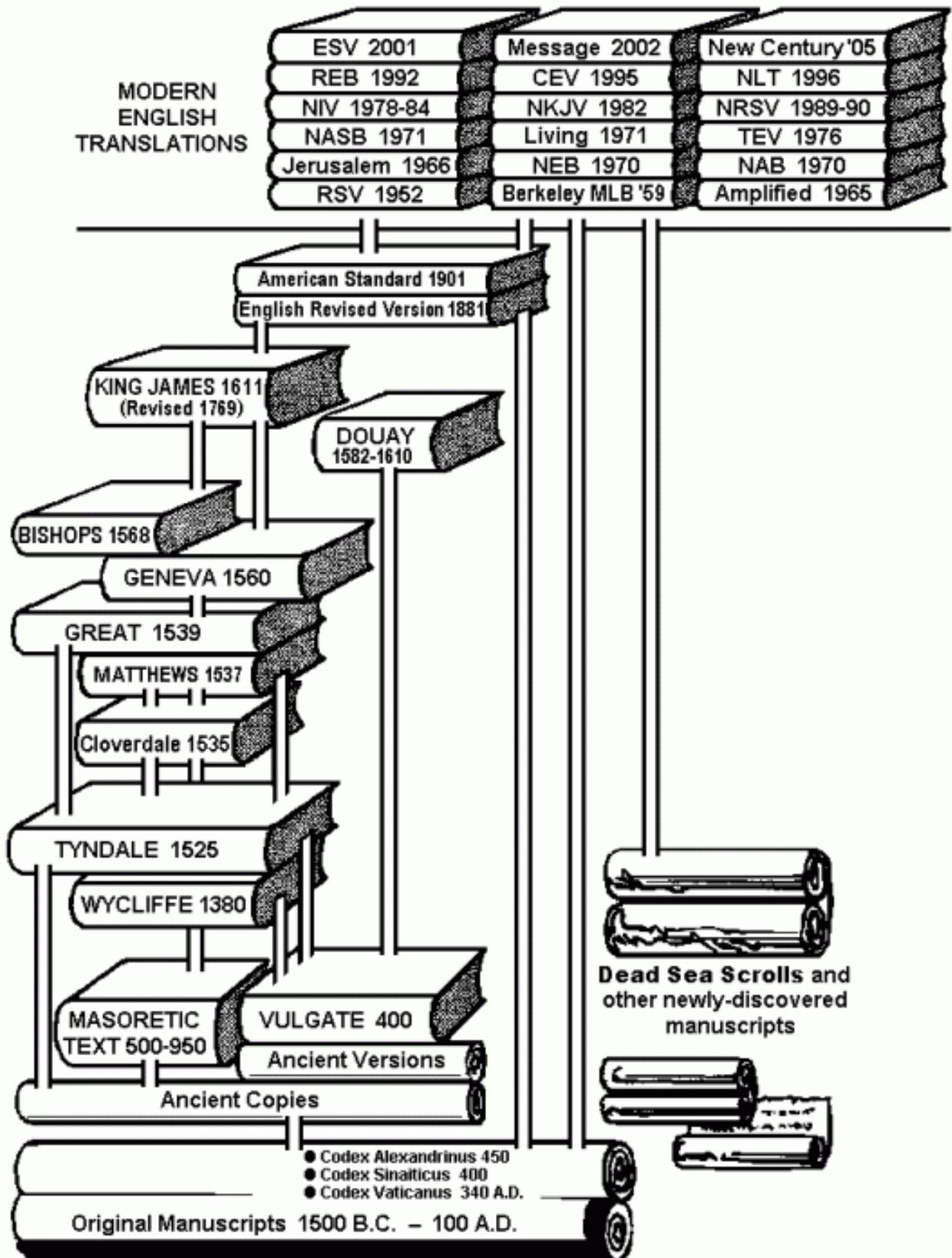


Chart adapted and updated from Thompson Chain Reference Study Bible by David Ahl, Nov. 2010, www.BibleStudyMen.com

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Early Translations

The earliest translations of the Bible occurred during the Old Testament and inter-testament time period. The Babylonian Jews likely translated the Hebrew of the Old Testament in Aramaic, the common language of Babylon, during their captivity. Years later, after the completion of the Old Testament and the success of the Greek Empire through Alexander the Great, the common language became Greek and the Old Testament was again translated. Approximately 70 scholars were gathered to work on this translation in Alexandria, Egypt. Their work was completed around 132 BC. The result is what we now know as the Septuagint (the 70 – named after the scholars who worked on it). This work was eventually well respected and considered to have equal standing with the Hebrew Scriptures by pre-Christian Jews such as the Jewish philosopher, Philo; and Jewish historian, Josephus.

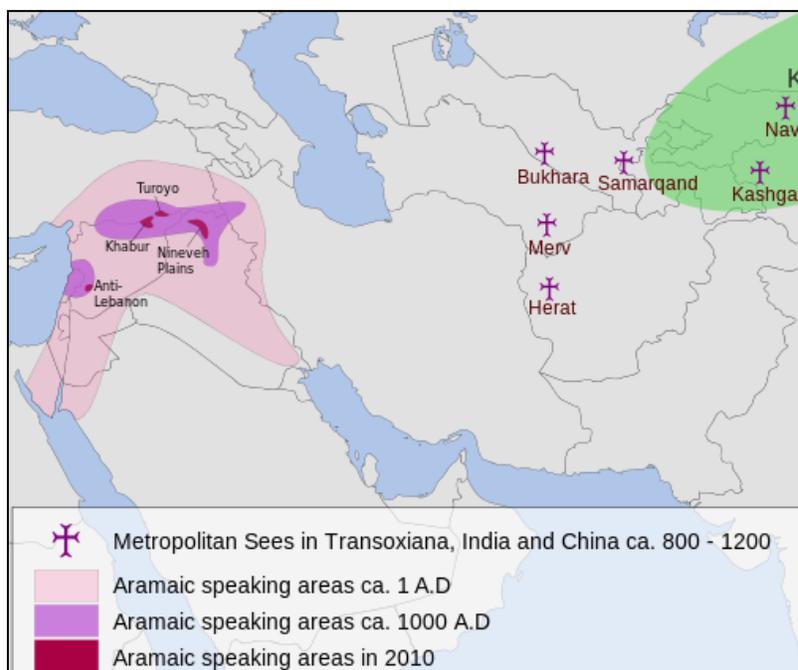
It appears that the early churches were no less passionate about producing solid translations of both the Old and New Testament.

Wycliffe Bible translators are rendering the Bible into thousands of languages, for history has shown that when persecution and heresy come, those who have the Bible in their own language are better equipped to resist it. Church history confirms that in areas such as Egypt and Syria, where the Bible was translated into the languages of the common people at an early stage, the Muslim conquest in the seventh century was not able to wipe out Christianity. But in areas where there were no translations (as with the Berber peoples in North Africa) hardly a trace of Christianity is left.¹

Syriac Peshitta

One of the earliest translations of the Bible is the Syriac Peshitta. The Syriac language is a form of Aramaic, similar to the Aramaic spoken during the days of Christ. This was a popular language in the Assyrian areas in which Jews lived, descended from the inhabitants of the Northern Kingdom of Israel.

Several early Syriac copies of scripture exist. Many believe the Old Testament was originally translated by Jewish scribes and the New Testament was later added by Christians.



The extents of the Syriac language (from Wikipedia)

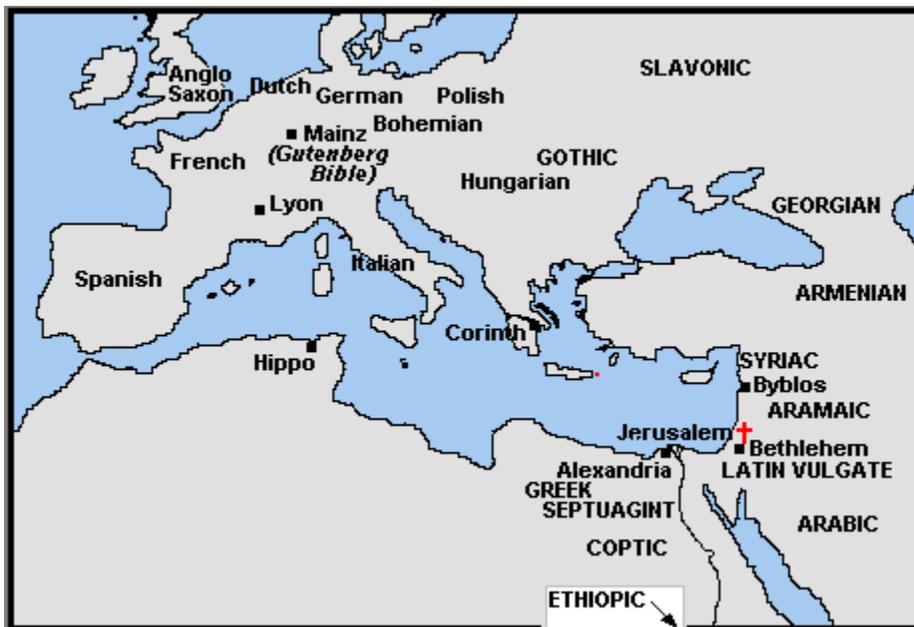
¹ Wegner, Paul D. (1999). *The Journey from Texts to Translations, The Origin and Development of the Bible*,. Grand Rapids: Baker Books. (JTT) p241.

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The Syriac Old Testament likely predated Christ. The earliest copies of the Syriac New Testament were probably written in the early to mid-second century. It is believed that around the fifth century, someone or some group of people created a more standard translation, now known as the Syriac Peshitta. Peshitta means “simple” or “common”. It was the Word of God in the common language of the people. It is known as a very simple and straightforward translation.

Other Ancient Translations



The gospel continued to spread throughout the world and other translations soon followed. Evidence exists of the Bible being copied into the Coptic (Egyptian) language as early as 125 AD.²

Armenia was the first “Christian” nation after its king converted to Christianity toward the end of the third century. Before a Bible

could be translated into Armenian, an alphabet first had to be invented for these people who previously used Syriac or Greek for written communication. The first Armenian Bible appeared by the beginning of the fifth century.

A Georgian version of at least some books of the New Testament followed in the mid-fifth century, likely translated from the Armenian version. Ethiopia had Bible translations at least by the fifth or sixth centuries. Arabic versions of the Bible were translated covertly by Jews and Christians against the will of Islam. They are dated to around the ninth and tenth centuries, but it is difficult to know whether these are the oldest translations or just the ones that have survived to this day.

Old Latin

“Old Latin” is a collective term for the Latin versions in existence before the Latin Vulgate. Gradually the West became Latin-speaking; by 250 (AD) Latin had become the language of Christian writers and theologians, so that soon there was great need for a Latin Bible.³

² JTT, p245.

³ JTT, p250.

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It is believed that the Bible was translated into Latin as early as the mid-second century. Because of the subsequent popularity and acceptance of the Latin Vulgate, little care was given for Old Latin manuscripts and therefore few survive. What we do know about them indicates that they were not written in the scholarly language of the time, but rather in plain language reflecting the dialects frequently spoken by their intended audience. Regarding the Greek texts used as the basis for the Old Latin texts, the Journey from Texts to Translations states:

The fragments are by no means standardized and contain a variety of different readings, but they clearly reflect the Western text type.⁴

The Latin Vulgate

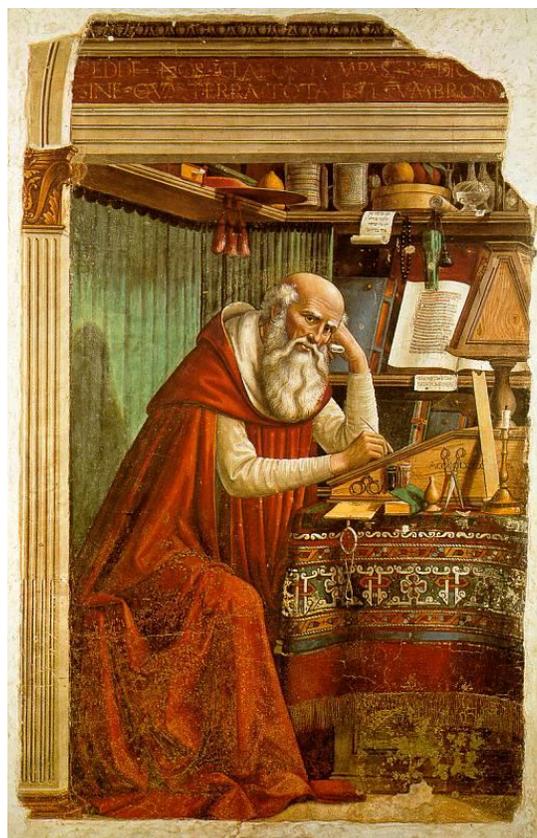
Jerome was born around 346 AD in what we now know as Bosnia and Herzegovina. He was a very gifted linguist, learning Greek at a young age and later in life, he learned Hebrew from a Jewish rabbi. He became the personal secretary to Pope Damasus I, and in 382 AD was commissioned to work on a standardized version of the gospels in Latin. After completing this work, Jerome continued on to other books. After the death of Pope Damasus I (and the fact that he was passed over for the job), he was forced to move to Bethlehem, where he made use of additional textual resources and resumed his work.

Jerome did not work alone on this translation, although he is credited with the results. His translation of the Bible was eventually known as the Latin Vulgate (Vulgate). Vulgate means “common”, indicating that it was written in the common language of the many who spoke Latin.

During Jerome’s studies, he coined the term “apocrypha” for books that he did not consider to be canonical. Even though he did not include apocryphal books in his earliest translation, some were included in later Vulgate versions.

It is unknown exactly which Greek textual families most influenced Jerome’s work as he likely leaned upon many Old Latin manuscripts in completing the Vulgate. It is believed that some of the Greek texts he used predated the Byzantine text type family.

Upon completion, the Vulgate eventually became the most prominent Bible translation throughout the West. It was updated on several occasions based upon new scholarship, but remained the gold



Jerome in his study

⁴ JTT, p251.

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standard. Even when early English translations were making inroads, the standard they wrestled against was the Vulgate. In fact, we will find that the first full English translation of the Bible rested solely upon the Vulgate in its translation of the New Testament.

Although it had already been around for over 1,000 years, the Catholic Church named the Vulgate the official Bible at the Council of Trent (1546-1563), largely because of the progress made during the Protestant Reformation. The Protestants were insistent upon the common people having the Word of God in their own language. The Catholics attempted to minimize the influence of other translations by decrying them as unauthoritative and erroneous in comparison to the Vulgate. The council issued the following statement regarding the text:

Moreover, this sacred and holy Synod,—considering that no small utility may accrue to the Church of God, if it be made known which out of all the Latin editions, now in circulation, of the sacred books, is to be held as authentic,—ordains and declares, that the said old and vulgate edition, which, by the lengthened usage of so many years, has been approved of in the Church, be, in public lectures, disputations, sermons and expositions, held as authentic; and that no one is to dare, or presume to reject it under any pretext whatever.

The Vulgate heavily influenced the development of English language, providing us important words such as salvation (*salvatio*), justificatio (justification), testament (*testamentum*), sanctificatio (sanctification), regeneration (*regeneratio*), publican (*publicanus*), and creation (*creatio*).

Though updated, it remained the version used by Catholics in worship until the 1960's, when during Vatican II, the Catholics allowed Mass to be celebrated in local dialects rather than in Latin.

Early English Translations

The history of English Bible translations is rich with many inspiring and humbling accounts of godly men (and no doubt women too) who gave much so that we might have the Word in our native tongue.

Before we begin this study, we first need to understand the powerful hold the Catholic Church and the successor Church of England (by 1534), held upon England. There was a very real fear that if the people could read the Bible in their native language that the established church would lose power. Therefore they either opposed or tightly controlled all translation efforts.

The Latin Vulgate, though likely available to clergy, could not be understood by most people. In fact, many priests probably were not sufficiently educated to be able to read the Latin well or even comprehend it. The study of Scripture was not encouraged, nor was it an option for most people.

Christianity is believed to have reached England by at least the late third century. It would be many years however, before portions of the Bible would be translated to Old English. Keep in mind that Old English sounded VERY different than modern English; in fact you would not recognize.

The first effort we know of to translate any scriptures to Old English was by a cowherder named Caedmon, around the late seventh century. He translated Bible passages to Old English and then put

them to song so that people could memorize them. The following legend provides us some insight into Caedmon's calling.

This man Caedmon was completely ungifted in poetry and song, and one night, when his companions were enjoying themselves at a party, he stole away to the stable in case he would be asked to sing. In the stable he fell asleep, and dreamed that a man came and stood beside him and told him to sing. He replied that he could not sing, but the command was repeated. "What shall I sing?" Caedmon asked, and he was told to sing how all things were first created. So he began to praise the Creator in words which he had never heard before:

Now must we praise
The Maker of the heavenly realm,
The Creator's power and wisdom,
The deeds of the Father of glory;
How He, being God eternal,
Was the Author of all wonders,
Who first to the sons of men
Made heaven for the roof of their abode,
And then created the earth,
Almighty Guardian of mankind...⁵



Memorial Obelisk for Caedmon

Around 700 AD, Aldhelm translated the Psalms into Anglo-Saxon. Bede is another famous name in English theological history. He wrote a very popular account of English history spanning from the arrival of Caesar around 57 BC to 731 AD. He translated some portions of Scripture into Old English and was said to have been dictating a translation of the Gospel of John to English with his dying breath.

Alfred the Great, the English monarch from 849-901, was educated (rare among kings in his day) and required the clergy to learn Latin and chose portions of Scripture to translate into Old English. He even made scripture the basis of many laws he enacted (i.e. the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule).

Some additional gains were made to English Bible translations around the turn of the millennium (1000 AD), but the successful invasion of the French-speaking Normans took its toll on the Old English language. By around the 1200's, it is said that Old English virtually died out. The resultant language, "Middle English" was a mixture of Norman (French) and English.

Several factors set the stage for the first real English Bible translation, including the separation of England and France from the Holy Roman Empire and the Bubonic plague of the fourteenth century

⁵ JTT, p272.

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resulting in the death of 30-40 percent of people in the cities. As people faced mortality, their interest in the things of the Lord increased. The time was ripe for a true translation of the Bible into English.

The Wycliffe Bible

John Wycliffe lived from 1329 to 1384. During those 55 years, God used him mightily to create the first translation of the Bible into Middle English. He was educated at Oxford and became a Bible teacher, scholar, and debater.

In time he grew greatly concerned about the corruption in the church and the papacy; the hierarchy of the church had become so wealthy and powerful that even the king of England had to bow to their bidding. In response, Wycliffe devoted increasing time speaking and writing against this corruption, something that the papacy and the established church bitterly resented. He also opposed the requirement of an intermediary (i.e. a priest or pope) to communicate with God and the doctrine of transubstantiation (i.e., the bread and the wine of communion actually become the body and blood of Christ).⁶



John Wycliffe

Wycliffe was eventually ousted from his teaching position at Oxford. This was only a setback, but not an end to his efforts. He believed that people needed the Bible in their own language for a revival to sweep the land. He said, “it helpeth Christian men to study the Gospel in that tongue in which they know best Christ’s sentence.”⁷

Wycliffe used the Latin Vulgate as his source and translated his first version of the New Testament, publishing it in 1380. It is believed that several of his students helped with the translation. An Old Testament was later published. Though Wycliffe died of natural causes in 1384, the work he began continued under the various men he had influenced. A second version of the Wycliffe Bible was published around 1395. It was an update to the prior version, making it more readable in the common tongue. The men involved in this updated version

were imprisoned and some were burned at the stake with Bibles tied around their necks.

The Council of Constance declared that Wycliffe was a heretic in 1415, and banned his works. Jan Hus, heavily influenced by Wycliffe and an influent leader in his own rite, was also called a heretic and burned at the stake. In 1428, Pope Martin V ordered that Wycliffe’s corpse be dug up, burned, and the ashes cast into the River Swift. He is called by some the “Morningstar of the Reformation”. The work he began influenced countless people. The Wycliffe Bible remained the only Bible available in English for almost 200 years, until the work of William Tyndale.

⁶ JTT, p279-280.

⁷ JTT, p280.

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John 3:16 in the Wycliffe Bible reads as follows:

For God louede so the world, that he ȝaf his oon bigetun sone, that ech man that bileueth in him perische not, but haue euerlastynghe lijf.

John 3:16 – Wycliffe Bible, Second Edition

From Tyndale to King James

To understand the significance of the Tyndale translation, we need to understand the times in which it was written. Not long after Wycliffe's second edition was published in 1395, a council was summoned at Oxford by the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1407-1408, which made the following statement:

We therefore decree and ordain, that no man, hereafter, by his own authority translate any text of the Scripture into English or any other tongue, by way of a book, libel, or treatise, now lately set forth in the time of John Wickliff, or since, or hereafter to be set forth, in part or in whole, privily or apertly, upon pain of greater excommunication, until the said translation be allowed by the ordinary of the place, or, if the case so require, by the council provincial. He that shall do contrary to this, shall likewise be punished as a favourer of error and heresy.⁸

Middle English, spoken during the days of John Wycliffe was replaced with the beginnings of Modern English. The transition was a result of the Renaissance and the push away from the French influences upon the English language due to the hatred between France and England. The printing press was also invented by Johann Gutenberg in Germany in the 1450's, increasing literacy and standardizing language. The very first English book printed was the Canterbury Tales. This publication revealed a hunger for more books in the English language.

Finally, the corruptions in the Catholic Church were reaching an apex and the Reformation was in full swing. In Germany, Martin Luther spoke out against the Pope for selling indulgences to finance the construction of St. Peter's Basilica. Luther published a German version of the New Testament in 1522, followed by a translation of the entire Bible (and Apocrypha) in 1534. In England, the Catholic Cardinal Thomas Wolsey was a political animal and lived a very opulent lifestyle. He was considered to be a second king, next to Henry VIII and commanded thousands of servants.

Wycliffe's version was written in a form of English that had fallen out of use in the past almost 150 years. It was written by hand and did not make use of the printing press (no one had yet printed it because of the edict issued by the Oxford Council). Additionally, the Wycliffe Bible was a translation of the Latin Vulgate and did not make use of the original Greek or Hebrew texts. The time was ripe for a new version in the English language.



Cardinal Wolsey

⁸ Brake, Donald L. (2011). *A Visual History of the King James Bible*, Grand Rapids: Baker Books. (VH of KJV) p35.

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Tyndale New Testament (1526, 1534)

William Tyndale was born around 1494 in Gloucestershire, England. He studied at Oxford University during his mid-teens, where he became a student of the original biblical languages. The study of biblical languages was a newly introduced “major” in his day and the more he learned, the more he questioned the teachers of theology at these great English learning institutions. He was ordained in 1515 and received a Masters degree.



Believed to be a picture of William Tyndale

Tyndale’s studies, along with his questioning disposition led him into many discussions with those of opposing opinion. Because the scriptures were not translated into Modern English, his knowledge of the Bible in its original language made him a formidable foe in a debate. Tyndale was amazed at the basic lack of understanding the

Catholic clergy and priests had for the Word of God. In addition, they

held the rules of the Pope to be at least as authoritative, if not more relevant and important, than the Bible. The following excerpt from Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs* describes one of Tyndale’s disputes.

There dwelt not far off a certain doctor, that had been chancellor to a bishop, who had been of old, familiar acquaintance with Master Tyndale, and favored him well; unto whom Master Tyndale went and opened his mind upon divers questions of the Scripture: for to him he durst be bold to disclose his heart. Unto whom the doctor said, "Do you not know that the pope is very Antichrist, whom the Scripture speaketh of? But beware what you say; for if you shall be perceived to be of that opinion, it will cost you your life."

Not long after, Master Tyndale happened to be in the company of a certain divine, recounted for a learned man, and, in communing and disputing with him, he drove him to that issue, that the said great doctor burst out into these blasphemous words, "We were better to be without God's laws than the pope's." Master Tyndale, hearing this, full of godly zeal, and not bearing that blasphemous saying, replied, "I defy the pope, and all his laws;" and added, "If God spared him life, ere many years he would cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than he did."⁹

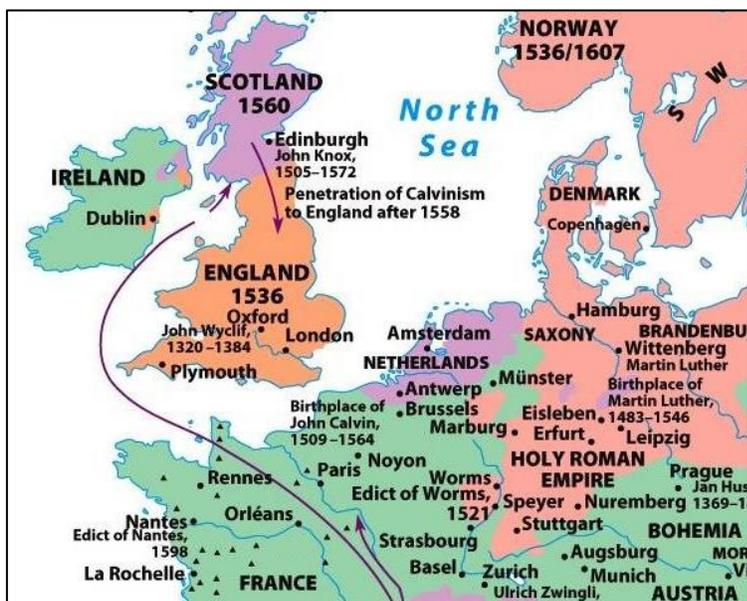
I believe this burden, zeal, and determination were God-ordained to set the English world on fire by the translation of the Bible into Modern English. Tyndale’s chief problem was the Oxford decree of 1407-1408, which was still in effect. He had to seek permission from Cardinal Thomas Wolsey and Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall, to undertake the translation. Unfortunately, permission was denied by both Catholic

⁹ Foxe, John (1563). *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, Whitaker House. (Foxe’s) p138-139.

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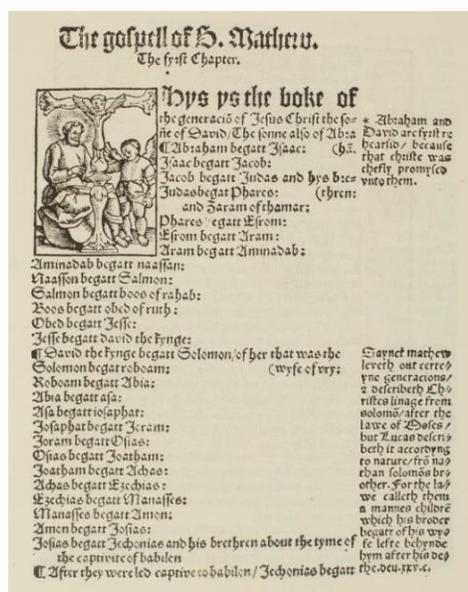
authorities. Tyndale's burden however, was not abated and he began to work on a translation despite their opposition.



Tyndale began his New Testament translation in 1523, while staying in the home of Humphrey Monmouth, a wealthy alderman (city councilman) of London. Monmouth provided lodging, resources, and basic income for Tyndale. However the word of the translation soon started getting out and Tyndale realized it was no longer safe to remain in England. He left for Germany after only six months.

Hamburg, Germany was Tyndale's intended destination, but he probably spent time in Wittenberg, Germany where Martin Luther was preaching. While it is not known whether Luther and Tyndale met, there is strong reason to believe that Luther's German translation of the Bible had some influence on Tyndale's work.¹⁰ Germany was a safe place for Luther because of

Upon completing his translation, Tyndale went to Cologne, Germany to have his New Testament translation printed by Peter Quentel. Word soon spread back to England, which was able to influence local Cologne church authorities to ban the printing and seek to seize the work. Tyndale fled to Worms, Germany carrying the completed copies of Matthew (and possibly portions of Mark). There Peter Schoeffer, a former apprentice to Johann Gutenberg,¹¹ printed the first edition of Tyndale's New Testament, which was published in 1526.



Only one fragment remains of Tyndale's original Gospel of Matthew from Cologne

Tyndale's New Testaments were smuggled to England in bales of cotton or other inconspicuous imports. When Bishop Tunstall learned about the New Testaments he was livid and tried to collect as many copies as possible to burn them. In fact, he paid people to buy them to get them off of the market. This

¹⁰ VH of KJV, p45.

¹¹ Johann Gutenberg is credited as the inventor of the moveable-type printing press.

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turned to Tyndale's favor as he was able to sell all of his copies, pay his debts, and continue on with his work. Bishop Tunstall's collection and destruction of the Bibles only served to increase the demand for the sacred texts. Tyndale had produced a best-seller. Though the English authorities could not reach Tyndale, they arrested and imprisoned his former benefactor, Humphrey Monmouth, in the Tower of London for assisting Tyndale, along with other like-minded reformers.

Tyndale's success allowed him to continue his studies and translation work and in 1534, he published a second edition to his New Testament. The second edition was significantly improved with stronger translations and fewer marginal notes. In fact it is said that 80-90% of Tyndale's second New Testament translation has survived in the King James Version to this day.

One of the marks against the Tyndale Bible in the eyes of his critics were the pro-reformation marginal notes. Below is a sampling of some of Tyndale's comments on specific passages.

Luke 17:10 – In works may no faith be put, for by them no man is justified before God, but by Christ's blood only.

Romans 5:14-15 – Adam's disobedience damned us all ere we ourselves wrought evil. And Christ's obedience saveth us all ere we ourselves work any good.

Galatians 2:16 – Deeds of the law justify not, but faith justifieth. The law uttereth my sin and damnation, and maketh me flee to Christ for mercy and life. As the law roared unto me that I was damned for my sins, so faith certifieth me that I am forgiven and shall live through Christ.

Colossians 2:14 – The law is our handwriting in that the conscience setteth to her seal, subscribeth and consenteth that the law is just and we sinners, which law concerning damnation is taken away through faith in Christ.

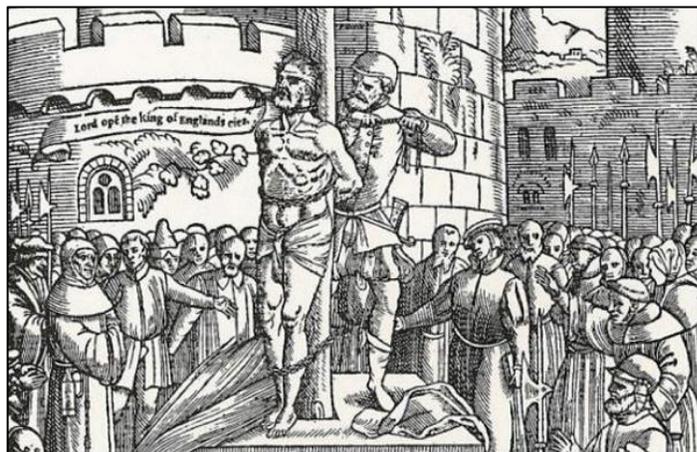
Hebrews 11:1 – Faith and trust in Christ only, is the life and quietness of the conscience, and not trust in works, how holy soever they appear.

James 2:24 – Now if any that is not merciful believeth to have mercy of God, he deceiveth himself, because he hath not God's word for him. For God's promise pertaineth to the merciful only, and true mercy is therefore known by her deeds.

Also in 1534, Tyndale moved to Belgium, believing that the ongoing Reformation would make it easier to move closer to London. While living with the Poyntz family in Antwerp, he was betrayed by a supposed friend (Henry Phillips), who allowed him to be captured and taken to Brussels, which was under the authority of Charles V, who was a very dedicated Roman Catholic. He endured difficult circumstances during his two-year imprisonment in Brussels, Belgium. The only surviving hand-written letter we have from Tyndale was a letter written from jail, requesting warmer clothing, but especially a copy of the Hebrew Bible. Although he was in very poor health, he desired above all to continue his translation work of the Old Testament. Tyndale had completed a translation of the first five books of the Old Testament (Pentateuch) and Jonah, but had much work left to go.

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Even though King Henry VIII and other English authorities sought to bargain for his life, Tyndale was found guilty of heresy and in August 1536 was condemned to death. He was strangled and then burned on a stake. His last words were, “Lord, open the eyes of the King of England”.

Less than a year later, Henry VIII authorized the translation of an English Bible, much of which would be based on Tyndale’s work. Within four years of his death, four English

translations would be in circulation in England, all based upon his work. Tyndale’s translation of John 3:16 reads as follows:

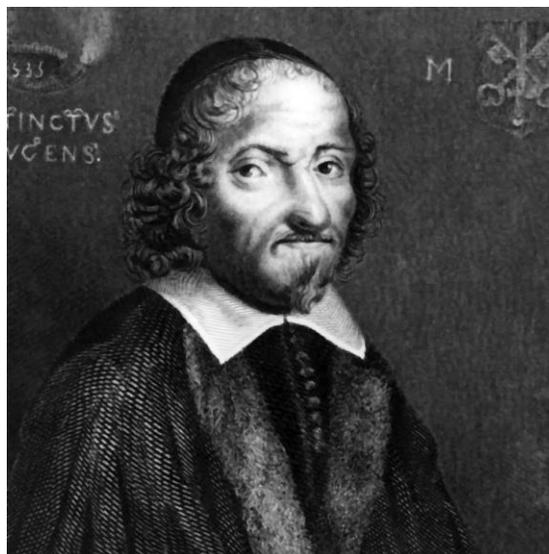
For God so loveth the worlde yt he hath given his only sonne that none that beleve in him shuld perisse: but have everlasting lyfe.

John 3:16 – Tyndale New Testament, Second Edition

The Coverdale Bible (1535)

The very year of Tyndale’s death, a significant event occurred in English history. King Henry VIII broke from the Catholic Church and instituted the Church of England, with himself serving as its head. The reasons behind this break were largely centered on Henry’s divorce from Katherine of Aragon. While Henry did not oppose the doctrines of the Catholic Church, God used these circumstances to open the door for the proliferation of the English Bible.

Miles Coverdale was a former Augustinian monk who left the priesthood to join the Lutheran cause. He was an associate of William Tyndale who assisted with his translation of the Pentateuch. Coverdale was not as strong of a translator as Tyndale, as Coverdale himself acknowledged, but he was encouraged to



Miles Coverdale

produce his own translation while he was exiled to Belgium. Coverdale leaned heavily upon Tyndale’s work to the extent he could, and refreshed Tyndale’s New Testament with a slightly more fluid style. Because Coverdale did not have a strong knowledge of the original languages, he leaned upon translations from Latin and German. There were three words hotly debated in Tyndale’s New

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Testament in England: congregation (instead of church), elders (instead of priests), and love (instead of charity). Coverdale left these words unchanged.

Upon completion of Coverdale's translation in 1535, copies were quickly sent to England. Having heard that King Henry was amenable to an English translation of the Bible, Coverdale took the added precaution of dedicating it to Henry VIII for being a better "Defender of the Faith" than the pope himself. When the king heard that this translation was dedicated to him, he asked his counselors to look through it and advise him as to whether it should be accepted. The counselors condemned it for being saturated with heresies, but when they were asked to point out even one, none could be found. King Henry therefore decreed that the translation should be accepted.¹²

Although Coverdale's Bible was reprinted in 1537, 1550, and 1553, it never became the authorized English version of the Bible, largely for political reasons. Coverdale's translation of John 3:16 follows:

For God so loued the worlde, that he gaue his onely sonne, that who so euer beleueth in hi, shulde not perishe, but haue euerlastinge life.

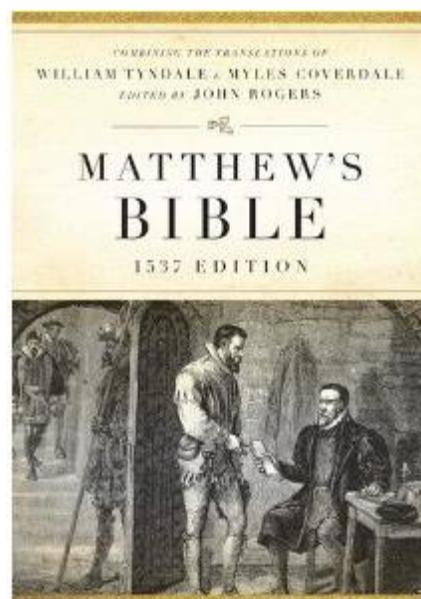
John 3:16 – Coverdale Bible

Later in life, Coverdale also worked as an editor of the Great Bible (the authorized Bible of England) and assisted with the Geneva Bible. Apparently his dedication of the Coverdale Bible to Henry VIII paid great dividends and allowed him to ride the political winds and stay alive to continue the work of translation.

Matthews Bible (1537)

John Rogers was a former Catholic rector who left Catholicism and embraced the Reformed faith under the influence of William Tyndale. He became a student of Tyndale and assisted in translating and smuggling Bibles to England. When William Tyndale died, John Rogers adopted the pen name, "Thomas Matthew" and continued the work on the Old Testament where Tyndale left off. He used Coverdale's translations of the remaining Old Testament passages that were not completed by Tyndale before his death.

Rogers dedicated his Bible to King Henry VIII and (like Coverdale) was able to win favor and have the Bible licensed in England. This allowed for wide circulation and motivated many who were illiterate to learn to read. Scriptural literacy was growing throughout England. This prompted on English theologian (Edward Foxe) to complain:



¹² JTT, p291.

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The lay people do now know the holy scripture better than many of us; and the Germans have made the text of the Bible so plain and easy by the Hebrew and Greek tongue that now many things may be better understood without any glosses at all than by all the commentaries of the doctors.¹³

It appears that Tyndale's wish was coming true. The plow boy could know more about the Bible than the Catholic priests!

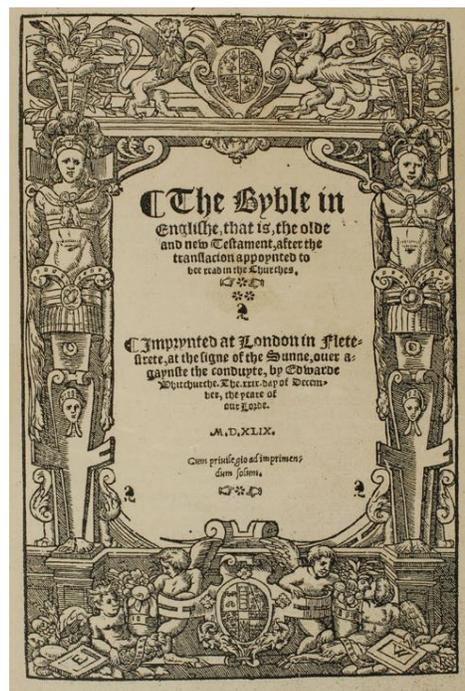
Unfortunately, England returned to Roman Catholicism under Mary Tudor (aka Bloody Mary) and John Rogers was promptly burned at the stake in 1555. For this reason, the Matthews Bible is sometimes called the "Martyr's Bible".

The Great Bible (1539)

Back in 1534 (the same year as Tyndale's death), the Upper House of Convocation of Canterbury requested King Henry VIII authorize a translation of the Bible into English. Despite the licensing of the Coverdale and Matthews Bible, the new translation work moved forward under the guidance of Thomas Cromwell, the first lord protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Cromwell chose Miles Coverdale to serve as the general editor of this new edition and directed him to use the Matthews Bible as the template.

There were some interesting reasons why the currently available Bible versions were insufficient. The Coverdale Bible depended upon other translations of the Bible as the source text rather than the original languages. The Matthews Bible had several pro-Reformation textual notes that were unacceptable to the clergy in the Catholic Church/Church of England.

Coverdale hurriedly put together this translation, relying upon Tyndale's English translation and Latin texts. It was originally intended to be printed in France because of their superior paper and printing process but Catholic influences there halted the printing process and destroyed much of the work that was already accomplished. Ultimately the Bible was printed in England and commonly called the "Great Bible" because it was printed upon large sheets (16 ½ by 11 inches). The Great Bible was authorized by King Henry VIII and a copy was placed in each church so that the lay members would have access to the written Word of God in their own tongue.



The Great Bible

Bible reading became so popular that Bishop Bonner complained that it disrupted his services, stating: "diverse willful and unlearned persons inconsiderately and indiscreetly read the same,

¹³ JTT, p293.

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especially and chiefly at the time of divine service, yea in the time of the sermon and declaration of the word of God.” This became such a point of irritation that in 1539 the king created the following law against reading the English Bible aloud during service: “[No man] shall openly read the bible or New Testament in the English tongue in any churches or chapels <or elstwhere> with any loud or high voice, <and specially> during the time of divine service, but quietly and reverently read the bible and New Testament by themselves <secretly> at all times and places convenient.”¹⁴

None of the controversial notes from the Matthews Bible were carried over into the Great Bible. Below is John 3:16 as translated in the Great Bible. The Great Bible however, retained the words “congregation” in lieu of “church”, “love” instead of “charity”, and “elder” instead of “priest”. However “baptize” was used instead of “washing”, which was used in other English translations.

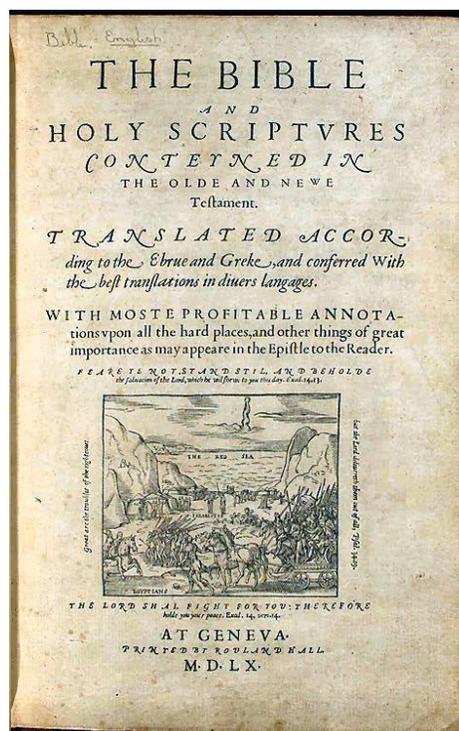
For God so loued y worlde, that, he gave is only begotten sonne, that whosoouer beleueth in him, shulde not perishe, but have euerlastyng lyfe

John 3:16 – The Great Bible

Geneva Bible (1560)

Although it took another 21 years, an English Bible version was finally completed that translated all of the scriptures from their original language. A significant failure among each of the prior versions of the complete Bible is that a large portion of the Old Testament was based upon other translations.

Significant political turmoil again changed the religious landscape in England. After the death of Henry VIII, his son Edward VI was named king at nine years old. He was raised as a Protestant and was the first English monarch to formally renounce Catholicism. During his reign all of the English Bible versions were allowed to be published and printed. A few minor additional versions popped up during this time but never gained much popularity. Unfortunately, Edward died at 15 and his half-sister Mary of Tudor (aka Bloody Mary) took the throne and banished her younger half-sister, Elizabeth to prison. Mary reinstated Catholicism in England and had over 280 dissenters burned at the stake (i.e. John Rogers). Many Protestants, including Miles Coverdale, fled to the continent to escape the persecution.



¹⁴ JTT, 294.

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One of the most inviting cities in Europe was Geneva, Switzerland. This was the home of John Calvin, a theological leader of the ongoing Reformation. While there, an Englishman named William



A woodcutting from the Geneva Bible

Whittingham (the brother-in-law of John Calvin's wife) completed an English translation of the New Testament and then worked with others to produce an Old Testament translated directly from Hebrew Masoretic texts. Whittingham completed this Bible in 1560 and it became known as the Geneva Bible.

Whittingham took a cue from Miles Coverdale and dedicated the new translation to Queen Elizabeth I (Mary's successor). The Bible was widely recognized as a very solid translation, even by those who had motives to dislike it. The Geneva Bible included Calvinistic and anti-Catholic marginal notes that offended those of different persuasions.

This version of the Holy Bible is significant because, for the very first time, a mechanically printed, mass-produced Bible was made available directly to the general public which came with a variety of scriptural study guides and aids (collectively called an apparatus), which included verse citations which allow the reader to cross-reference one verse with numerous relevant verses in the rest of the Bible, introductions to each book of the Bible which acted to summarize all of the material that each book would cover, maps, tables, woodcut illustrations, indexes, as well as other included features — all of which would eventually lead to the reputation of the Geneva Bible as history's very first study Bible.¹⁵

Below is John 3:16 from the Geneva Bible, along with its marginal notes.

For God so loved the world, that he hath given his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Nothing else but the free love of the Father is the beginning of our salvation, and Christ is he in whom our righteousness and salvation dwells: and faith is the instrument or means by which we apprehend it, and everlasting life is that which is set before us to apprehend.

It is not the same to believe in a thing, and to believe about a thing, for we may not believe in anything except in God alone, but we may believe about anything whatever, says Nazianzene in his Oration of the Spirit.

John 3:16 – Geneva Bible, with Marginal Notes

¹⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geneva_Bible, as of September 11, 2014

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The Geneva Bible appears to be the first English translation to use the word “church” instead of “congregation”. It also uses the words “baptize” instead of “washings”. It does use the words “elder” and “love” consistently, however.

The Geneva Bible remained very popular in England, even after the advent of the King James Version in 1611. It was the Bible used by William Shakespeare, John Knox,¹⁶ and John Bunyan. In fact, some of the passengers on the Mayflower brought the Geneva Bible with them to America in 1620 rather than the King James Bible. The influence of John Knox and John Calvin in the Geneva Bible’s marginal notes led to a 1579 law in Scotland that all households that met a minimum income level were required to purchase a copy of the Geneva Bible.

Bishops Bible (1568)

The Geneva Bible’s strong translation and popularity revealed the marginal notes made the Geneva Bible unacceptable to the Church of England. This provided another opportunity for a new version. Matthew Parker, the Archbishop of Canterbury, led a group of Bishops to come together and render a new translation.

They were “to follow the common English translation used in the Church of England, and not to recede from it but where it varieth manifestly from the Hebrew, Latin, or Greek, to follow Pagininus and Munster “for the verity of the Hebrew” and “to set down any determination in places of controversy” “that the read may [avoid] them in his public reading”, and to

Because no one was commissioned to serve as the general editor of the translation, the translation rules followed by the various bishops varied greatly. The word “Yehovah” is translated as “the Lord” in most of the Old Testament, but “Jehovah” is translated as “God” in the Psalms.

The Bishops Bible was a significant improvement over the Great Bible and it became the authorized version of the Church of England. John 3:16 from the Bishops Bible is included below.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him, should not perish, but have everlasting life.

John 3:16 – The Bishops Bible

Douay-Rheims Bible (1593)

Not to be left outdone, the Roman Catholic Church finally commissioned an English translation of the Bible, using marginal notes that supported its teachings. It is interesting to note that they had opposed



Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury

¹⁶ John Knox was a Protestant leader and considered the founder of Presbyterianism in Scotland.

¹⁷ JTT, p300.

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the translation of the Bible into English for countless years and were behind much of the persecution that befell the translators.

William Allen, an English Roman Catholic who had moved to France during the reign of Protestant Elizabeth I, was the man chosen for the job. He had established an English college in Douai, France. Allen had to move his college to Rheims, France due to political tensions. It was there that he completed his New Testament. He later returned to Douai, where the Old Testament was completed. Therefore the Bible was called the “Douay-Rheims” Bible.

Scholars believe the translation to be adequate, but not superior to either the Geneva or Bishops Bible of the time. It was a translation of the Latin Vulgate to English. Yet, because it was a Catholic Bible, it carried the full authority of the Catholic Church who declared that its resulting translation was “truer than the vulgar Greek itself”.

Because the translation was Catholic, their theology flows throughout. The phrase “do penance” is used rather than “repent”. The Lord’s Prayer also states, “Give us to day our supersubstantial bread”, implying the doctrine of transubstantiation. Paul and Barnabas ordained “priests” in every city rather than “elders”. “Charity” was also used rather than “love”. While this version was only popular among Catholics, some of its translations were later used in the King James Version, leaving a lasting impression to this day.

The King James Version

Why a New Translation?

England was in a time of significant transition. Queen Elizabeth I had no direct heirs and therefore waited until she was upon her deathbed to appoint an heir to the throne... her cousin, James VI of Scotland. With this appointment, James VI became James I of the united monarchy, joining England, France, Scotland, and Ireland. While his mother, Mary Queen of Scots was a Roman Catholic, James was raised as a Protestant Presbyterian with a Calvinistic background. Yet, he was not so much a religious man as a shrewd politician. He had an agenda that was not subservient to any specific sect of religion, although his appointment as King of the united monarchy made him the head of the Church of England.

In 1603, King James traveled from Scotland to London in a grand procession, stopping at many towns along the way to establish the allegiance of the people to him. It was during this trip that he encountered the “Thousand Man March”. A group of 1,000 Anglican (Church of England) ministers who were part of a reformation movement dubbed the “Puritans” signed what is known as the Millenary Petition, seeking reforms in the Church of England. The Puritans were interested in reducing ceremonial



King James I

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observances and abuses that had crept in and turning the Church of England toward a more “pure” or Biblical form of worship. They did not oppose the King as the head of the church however. The petition was respectfully presented to King James, who promised to consider the matter once he settled in London.



John Rainolds

Many of the Anglican bishops in power were opposed to the Puritan reformation movement. They enjoyed their power and prestige and embraced ceremony. The feud between the two factions represented large political contingencies in England. In addition, a significant portion of the country remained Catholic. King James held the Hampton Court Conference in 1604 to mediate between the Anglicans and Puritans; however only four Puritan representatives were invited, in comparison to 19 Anglicans. Although the Puritans did not achieve any accommodations at the conference, John Rainolds, the President of Corpus Christi College at Oxford and a leading Puritan, stood at the conclusion and addressed the king, requesting that a new translation be pursued. At this time, each Christian faction within England had their own Bible. The Anglicans preferred the Bishops Bible; the Puritans embraced the Geneva Bible; and the Catholics used the Latin Vulgate or the Douay-Rheims Bible.

Rainolds’s suggestion may have been precipitated by his desire to seek authorization of his beloved Geneva Bible. Nevertheless, James recognized the political opportunity Rainolds was offering him: a way to foil the Puritans by publishing a translation free of their sectarian and objectionable notes. The timing was perfect. The Bishop’s Bible, authorized by the Church of England, had not gained general acceptance. The Geneva Bible, while widely circulated, especially among the Puritans, did not carry the authorization of the English church. The need for a new translation seemed clear to James, and he appointed teams to begin the work of translation.¹⁸

Translation Organization and Rules

King James quickly established a plan for the preparation of the new Bible and assembled a team. The KJV would be a revision of the Bishop’s Bible, although the best of the Hebrew and Greek texts could be used and other versions could be consulted. Though common today, King James created what would be the first committee-produced Bible translation.

The Bible (including the Apocrypha) was divided into six parts and distributed to 54 translators, which were also divided into six companies. The six companies segregated to three different locations: Westminster, Cambridge, and Oxford. A committee of twelve was formed of two leading men from each company that would review the work of each company. An editorial board of three men was then

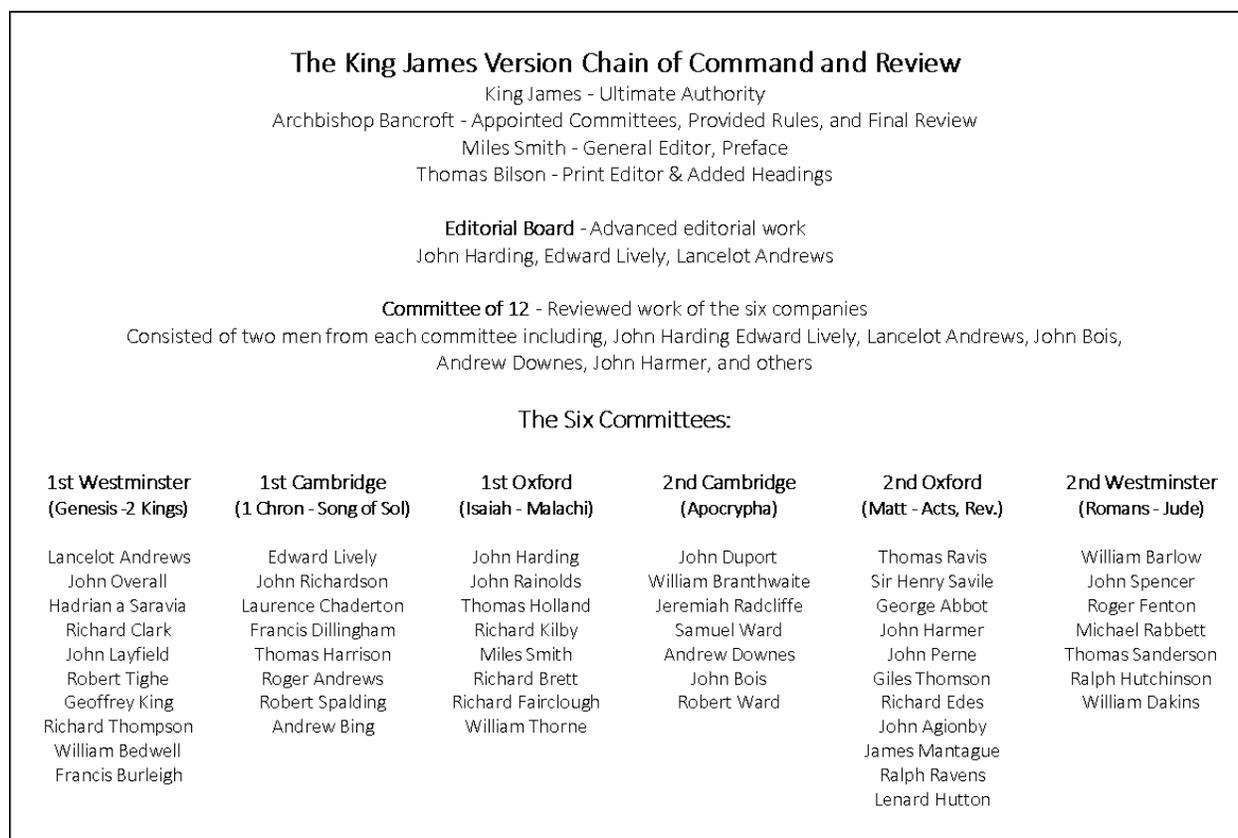
¹⁸ VH of KJV, p84.

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chosen from the company of twelve to do advanced editorial work. Miles Smith was made the General Editor of the Bible and wrote the preface. Thomas Bilson was the print editor and provided the headings for each chapter. Archbishop Richard Bancroft, the leading bishop in the Church of England retained overall editorial control and required fourteen changes of the final draft, one of which was to require the use of the term “bishopricke” in Acts 1:20, supporting his Anglican leanings. Of course, King James had to bless the final product.

The following diagram shows the hierarchy and organization of the KJV translation team.



The men chosen for this task were some of the foremost scholars in England. All but one were not paid for their participation, but were promised good paid positions of leadership within the Church of England when they came available.¹⁹

As you might imagine, the spiritual and intellectual qualifications of these men varied. Some appear to have taken this work very seriously and were highly qualified. Some were not. Lancelot Andrews as a popular Anglican minister who was considered a leader of the translation process. He had mastered 15 different languages and was a strong translator. He was also considered one of the strongest preachers of the day. Richard Thompson however, had a background in linguistics and literature and was a heavy drinker. It is said that he seldom went to bed sober.

¹⁹ *VH of KJV*, p90.

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With approval of King James, Archbishop Bancroft set forth 15 principles that were to be followed in the translation process. They are summarized below:²⁰

1. The ordinary Bible read in the Church, commonly called the Bishop's Bible, and as little altered as the Truth of the Original will permit.
2. The names of the Prophets and the Holy Writers, with the other names in the text to be retained, as nigh as may be, accordingly as they are vulgarly used.
3. The old ecclesiastical words to be kept, viz., as the word *church* not to be translated "congregation".
4. When a word has divers signification, that to be kept which hath been most commonly used by the most of the Ancient Fathers, being agreeable to the propriety of the place and the analogy of the faith.
5. The divisions of the chapters to be altered, either not at all, or as little as may be, if necessity or required.
6. No marginal notes at all to be affixed, but only for the explanation of the Hebrew or Greek words, which cannot without some circumlocution so briefly and fitly be expressed in the text.
7. Such quotations of places to be marginally set down as shall serve for the fit reference of one Scripture to another.
8. Every particular man of each company, to take the same chapter or chapters, and having translated or amended them severally by himself, where he things good, all to meet together, confer what they have done, and agree for their parts what shall stand.
9. As one company hath dispatched any one book in this manner they shall send it to the rest, to be considered seriously and judiciously, for His Majesty is very careful in this point.
10. If any company, upon the review of the book so sent, doubt or differ upon any place, to send them word thereof; note the place, and withal send the reasons, to which if they consent not, the difference to be compounded at the general meeting, which is to be of the chief person of each company, at the end of the work.
11. When any place of special obscurity is doubted of letters to be directed, by authority, to send to any learned man in the land, for his judgment of such a place.
12. Letters to be sent from every bishop to the rest of his clergy, admonishing them of this translation in hand; and to move and charge as many as being skilful in the tongues; and having taken pains in that kind, to send his particular observations to the company, either Westminster, Cambridge, or Oxford.
13. The directors in each company, to the deans of Westminster and Chester for that place; and the king's professors in the Hebrew or Greek in either University.
14. These translations to be used when they agree better with the text than the Bishop's Bible: Tyndale, Matthew's, Coverdale, Whitchurch [Great Bible], and Geneva.²¹

²⁰ *VH of KJV*, p116-124.

15. Besides the said directors before mentioned, three or four of the most Ancient and Grave Divines, in either of the Universities, not employed in translating, to be assigned by the Vice-Chancellor, upon conference with the rest to the heads, to be overseers of the translation as well Hebrew as Greek, for the better observation of the fourth rule above specified.

Committee work on the KJV began in 1604. The Committee of 12 began meeting in 1609 and worked for nine months to edit all of the texts. We do not know how this committee chose one reading over another; these notes have not survived. Miles Smith and Thomas Bilson added their finishing touches, and after incorporating Archbishop Bancroft's changes, the KJV went to the printer in 1611 and production began.

Revisions and Gradual Acceptance

The KJV that is sold in bookstores today is not the 1611 KJV produced by the translation committee. It has been revised several times due to printing errors, the findings of textual critics, misspellings, etc... Some of these revisions were even named for their errors. For example, the 1631 revision was called the "Wicked Bible" because the word "not" was omitted from Exodus 20:14, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." This error resulted in a fine for the printer. He ended up bankrupt and died in the poor house.

The chart below shows how the KJV has changed over the years.²²

Text	1611 and 1629	1638 Revision	Cambridge KJV 1999
Matthew 12:23	Is this the sonne of Daud?	Is not this the sonne of David?	Is not this the son of David?
1 John 5:12	hath not the Sonne	hath not the Sonne of God	hath not the Son of God
Acts 6:3	whom we may appoint	whom ye may appoint	whom we may appoint
John 14:6	the Trueth	and the truth	the truth

Although it did not gain immediate acceptance, over time the KJV became the prominent English translation. It probably helped that King James suspended the printing of the Bishop's Bible after 1606 and outlawed the printing of the Geneva Bible after 1616. Eventually, the only mass-produced copy of English scripture available was the KJV. It is a strong translation for its time and has been used by God to reach the lost and minister to His people for over 400 years.

To learn about contemporary English translations, see Lesson 2 of the [How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth](#) series, entitled, "The Basic Tool – A Good Translation" available at www.anchoredresources.org

²¹ It should be noted that although the Douay-Rheims version is not mentioned, the KJV ended up with several Douay-Rheims readings. This indicates it was used anyway. These instructions probably did not want to provide legitimacy to the Catholic text.

²² The chart was taken from *VH of KJV*, p210.