

How We Got the Bible

English Bibles Before the King James

Background

For about a thousand years the Latin Vulgate of Jerome was the only Bible for Christians in the Western world. Although at first his translation was met with skepticism and criticism it soon became the authorized, accepted, sanctioned translation of the Bible. Jerome completed the Vulgate around 405 A.D. The influence of the Latin Vulgate is significant to our translations today. In fact, some of the words that Jerome either coined or gave new significance to included: *salvation, regeneration, justification, sanctification, propitiation, reconciliation, inspiration, and scripture.*

Interestingly, it was Jerome's Latin Vulgate that led to the difficulty in new translations being made. At least sixteen popes pronounced the Vulgate "infallible." In 1590 Pope Sixtus V released several penalties for anyone daring to alter it.

Not long after Jerome completed his translation in the early 5th century, there was an invasion of Britain of several tribes from Denmark and northern Germany. These tribes, primarily the Angles and the Saxons, crossed the North Sea and pushed the then Celtic speaking people into what is now Wales, Scotland and Ireland. The Angles came from England and their language was called Englisc - from which the words England and English are derived.

(Old English: 450 – 1100) The invading Germanic tribes spoke similar languages, which in Britain developed into what we now call Old English. About half of the most commonly used words in Modern English have Old English roots. The words *be, strong* and *water*, for example, derive from Old English. The ***Wessex Gospels*** (also known as the ***West-Saxon Gospels***) are a full translation of the four gospels into a West Saxon dialect of Old English. Produced in approximately 990, they are the first translation of all four gospels into English without the Latin text. Seven manuscript copies still survive.

Anglo-Saxon (Old English) **Wessex Gospels c.990 The Lord's Prayer**

Ure fæder þu ðe on heofone eart: si þin nama gehalgod tocume þin rice. gewurðe ðin willa on heofone and on eorþan. syle us todæg urne dæghwamlican hlaf: and forgyf us ure gyltas. swa we forgyfað ælcum þara þe wið us agyltað: and ne læd þu us on costunge: ac alys us fram yfele;

Wycliffe Bible

By the 14th century, the Roman Catholic Church had developed into a wealthy and powerful force in Western Christianity. Many Catholic Church leaders, including Popes, were questioned for their "heresy, blasphemy, murder, sodomy and sorcery." Born in this period in 1330, John Wycliffe entered the ministry as a Catholic priest. However, his study of Scripture convinced him that much of the doctrine and practice of the Catholic Church had become corrupt, and he openly criticized the Church. Wycliffe believed the Bible should be the absolute

standard. Wycliffe openly denied the teachings of the Church he saw as unbiblical: tradition equal to Scripture, infallibility of the Pope, and transubstantiation. Wycliffe was the first to call the Pope “antichrist.” Wycliffe’s attempt to expose the Church and call for reform earned him the title, “The Morning Star of the Reformation.” To Wycliffe, the best way to “educate a Christian or Christianize a pagan” was to place the Bible before the eyes of everyone. He believed the Bible should be accessible to everyone in a form they could understand.

As you can imagine, Wycliffe’s effort to translate the Bible into English was met with intense opposition from the Catholic Church. Latin was the official language of the Church even though English was becoming increasingly popular. The Catholic Church also maintained that the Scripture was given only to the clergy. The Church believed the Scripture was not for general consumption, especially for women and the uneducated.

Wycliffe was considered a heretic because of his beliefs. Wycliffe felt called by God to make the Bible understandable and accessible to the common Englishman. Wycliffe gathered a small group of scholars to assist him in translating the Bible from the Latin Vulgate into Middle English, which was the most widely spoken dialect at that time in England. All of Wycliffe’s Bibles had to be handwritten. It took about ten months for a scribe to reproduce one copy of the Bible.

A few years after Wycliffe’s death in 1384, Wycliffe’s personal secretary, John Purvey, revised Wycliffe’s Bible. This Bible was of tremendous importance and influence. Wycliffe’s philosophy was this: that Scripture was the only true authority for belief and practice and that no special religious agent was required to interpret it. The true meaning of Scripture is always revealed to people yielded to the Holy Spirit and who possess humility of mind. Ordinary laymen could understand the Bible if only it was translated into the language they were accustomed to speaking.

Wycliffe was never excommunicated from the Church. In fact he died of a stroke while celebrating Mass as a Catholic Priest. Forty-four years after his death the Church was so angry still, that they had his body exhumed, burned his bones and scattered the ashes in the River Swift.

The British people however were overjoyed to finally have a Bible in their language. Although the Church drew up laws forbidding anyone to translate the Holy Scriptures into English or to read “in whole or in part, in public or in private” any existing English translation.

Though Wycliffe never left the Catholic Church his courage to stand alone had an immeasurable effect upon others, including Luther, Zwingli and Calvin.

Wycliff 1395 (Middle English)

Oure fadir that art in heuenes, halewid be thi name; thi kyngdoom come to; be thi wille don `in erthe as in heuene; yyue to vs this dai oure `breed ouer othir substaunce; and foryyue to vs oure dettis, as we foryyuen to oure dettouris; and lede vs not in to temptacioun, but delyuere vs fro yuel. Amen.

Wycliff gave us the words *emperor, justice, profession, city, cradle, suddenly, angel, multitude, and glory.*

Tyndale Bible

Another young Catholic scholar that played a large roll in bringing the Bible to the English speaking people was William Tyndale. Tyndale was born in about 1494 in Gloucester, England. He grew up in a prosperous home and at the age of 12 attended Oxford University and later Cambridge University. The teaching of Martin Luther, that Christ gives salvation to those who turn to Him directly and place their total trust in Him without any mediation of priests or penances imposed by a hierarchical Church, became the theme of Tyndale and other Reformation leaders. Tyndale was compelled to see that every person be able to understand the Bible as directly as possible without hindrance of language or tradition.

Tyndale was a very plain spoken man and was equally as outspoken as Wycliffe had been. Tyndale called the monks, refuse and “bishops” (half-man, half-mishap). Not surprisingly, when Tyndale tried to get permission to translate the Bible into English in 1523 he was denied. To Tyndale, the lack of a printed English Bible from the original languages was an intolerable deprivation that he intended to rectify.

The first printed New Testament in English was published in February, 1526. These Bibles, which had to be smuggled to the people, created a flurry of action. The people wanted to read them and the Church wanted to burn them. Beside the fact that the Bible was translated in English the Catholic leaders did not like Tyndale’s marginal notes criticizing the pope and the Roman church. The Catholic Church’s endeavors to destroy Tyndale’s New Testament was so successful that of 6,000 copies printed in 1526, only three copies exist today. Tyndale and his efforts were met with constant resistance by Catholic Church.

Eventually, Tyndale was imprisoned and martyred. On the morning of October 6, 1536, Tyndale was led to a platform on a pile of wood where he was tied by a chain around his upper body and legs. He was tied to the stake by a rope around his neck and was given one last chance to recant. He did not. His last words were, “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes.” The executioner then tightened the rope killing Tyndale before the fire was set.

Tyndale’s death was an inspiration to many of his countrymen. They determined to bring his efforts to full completion and see that the English Bible was available to everyone. Hundreds of the words and phrases in our Bible’s today originated with Tyndale’s translation such as: *scapegoat, beautiful, seashore, stumbling block, taskmaster, two edged, viper, Passover, zealous, Jehovah, peacemaker,*

“Let there be light” (Ge. 1:3)

“Am I my brother’s keeper” (Ge. 4:9)

“Let my people go” (Ex. 5:1)

“The apple of his eye” (Dt. 32:10)

“The salt of the earth” (Mt. 5:13)

“Judge not that ye be not judged” (Mt. 7:1)

“Ask and it shall be given you” (Mt. 7:7)

“The truth shall make you free” (Jn 8:32)

“The root of all evil” (1Ti. 6:10)

“The powers that be” (Ro 13:1)
“fight the good fight” (1Ti 6:12)
“flowing with milk and honey” (Ex 33:3)
“signs of the times” (Mt 16:3)
“sick unto death” (Is 38:1)
“spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” (Mt 26:41)
“a law unto themselves” (Ro 2:14)

Tyndale 1535 (Early Modern English)

O our father which arte in heven, hallowed by they name. Let thy kyngdome come. Thy will be fulfilled, aswel in erth, as it is in heven. Geve us this daye our dayly breede. And forgeve us our trespases, even as we forgeve our trespassers. And leade us not into temptacion: but delyver us from evyll. For thyne is the kyngedome and the power, and the glorye for ever. Amen.

Coverdale Bible 1488-1569

Compiled by Myles Coverdale and published in 1535, was the first complete Modern English translation of the Bible (not just the Old Testament or New Testament), and the first complete printed translation into English. Myles made use of the Tyndale Bible as well as Luther’s German translation and the Latin Vulgate. The 1539 edition carried the royal license and was therefore the first officially approved Bible translation in English. It was the first English version to use the word “Byble.” It was the first Bible to separate the Apocrypha from the rest of the OT. Some of the phrases still used from Coverdale’s Bible are: “The pride of life” (1Jn 2:16), “The world passeth away” (1Jn 2:17), “Enter thou into the joy of the Lord” (Mt. 25:21,23). Coverdale also introduced “tender mercies,” “respect of persons,” and “the valley of the shadow of death.”

Matthew’s Bible 1537

The *Matthew Bible*, also known as *Matthew’s Version*, was first published in 1537 by John Rogers, under the pseudonym "Thomas Matthew". It combined the New Testament of William Tyndale, and as much of the Old Testament as he had been able to translate before being captured and put to death. The translations of Myles Coverdale from German and Latin sources completed the Old Testament and the Apocrypha. The Matthew Bible formed the basis for the *Great Bible*, the *Revised Standard Version* and today’s *English Standard Version*.

Taverner’s Bible

Taverner's Bible is a minor revision of Matthew's Bible edited by Richard Taverner and published in 1539. Taverner’s Bible was almost immediately overshadowed by the Great Bible.

The Great Bible

The Great Bible was the first authorized edition of the Bible in English, authorized by King Henry VIII of England to be read aloud in the church services of the Church of England.

The Great Bible was prepared by Myles Coverdale, working under commission of Sir Thomas Cromwell, Secretary to Henry VIII and Vicar General. In 1538, Cromwell directed the clergy to provide "one book of the bible of the largest volume in English, and the same set up in some convenient place within the said church that ye have care of, whereas your parishioners may most commodiously resort to the same and read it."

The Great Bible includes much from the *Tyndale Bible*, with the objectionable notes revised. Coverdale translated some books of the Old Testament from the Latin Vulgate and German translations, rather than working from the original Greek and Hebrew texts.

Although called the Great Bible because of its large size, it is known by several other names as well: the Cromwell Bible, since Thomas Cromwell directed its publication; Whitchurch's Bible after its first English printer; the Chained Bible, since it was chained to prevent removal from the church.

Great Bible 1540

Oure father which art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Lett thy kyngdome come. Thy will be fulfilled, as well in earth, as it is in heaven. Geve us this daye oure daylye bread. And forgeve us our dettes, as we forgeve oure deters. And leade us not into teptacyon: but delyver us from evyll. For thyne is the kyngdome and the power, and the glorye for ever. Amen.

Geneva Bible 1560

The Geneva Bible of 1560 is one of the most historically significant translations of the Bible into the English language, preceding the King James translation by 51 years. It was the primary Bible of the 16th century Protestant movement and was the Bible used by William Shakespeare, Oliver Cromwell, John Milton, John Knox, John Donne, and John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim's Progress*. It was the first Bible taken to America on the *Mayflower*. A number of innovative features set this Bible apart from previous English Bibles.

1. It was small and inexpensive, not huge and unaffordable like the Great Bible.
2. It was the first English Bible to be printed in the more legible Roman Type, not the harder to read Gothic print. Roman type is found in virtually all Bibles today.
3. Verse divisions were adopted for the first time in an English Bible. Each verse was printed as a separate unit or paragraph.
4. The NT used italics to display English words not in the original Greek but necessary to make sense in English.
5. It had numerous annotations that served as a commentary to the text. It was the first "Study Bible."

6. Each chapter had a summary statement at the beginning of the chapter.

The Geneva Bible became the most popular version because it was the best English version available. It was never authorized but it received the “stamp of approval” from the people. It was also called the *Breeches Bible* because in Ge. 3:7 it said, “They sewed fig leaves together and made themselves *breeches*.” This is where we get our modern word “*britches*.”

Geneva Bible 1562

Our Father whiche art in heaven, hallowed by thy Name. Thy kingdome come. Thy wil be done even in earth, as (it is) in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our dettes, as we also forgive our deters. And lead us not into tentation, but deliver us from evil: for thyne is the kyndgome, and the power, and the glorie for ever. Amen.

Bishop’s Bible 1568

The Bishops' Bible was produced under the authority of the established Church of England in 1568. It was substantially revised in 1572, and this revised edition was to be prescribed as the base text for the Authorized King James Version of 1611. Though the Geneva Bible was the people’s choice, most of the leaders in the Church of England were not satisfied with it, mainly because it was not authorized and therefore could not be read from the pulpit.

Bishops’ Bible 1602

O our father which art in heaven, hallowed by thy name. Let thy kingdome come, Thy wil be done, as well in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as wee forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: for thine is the kingdome, and the power and the glory, for ever, Amen.

Rheims-Douay Bible

The Catholic church realizing they could not combat the Bible being translated into English made their own translation. The Douay–Rheims Bible (also known as the Rheims–Douai Bible or Douai Bible, and abbreviated as D–R and DV) is a translation of the Bible from the Latin Vulgate into English undertaken by members of the English College, Douai in the service of the Catholic Church. The New Testament was published in Reims (France) in 1582, in one volume with extensive commentary and notes. The Old Testament, which was published by the University of Douai, followed nearly thirty years later in two volumes. The translator’s reason for translating from the Latin text were given in their preface:

The antiquity of the Vulgate; its correction by Jerome according to the Greek; its continuous employment since that time in the Church’s services; because the Church Fathers used and expounded it; because the Council of Trent had declared it authentic; because in places where the Latin and Greek disagree the Latin is better than the Greek text- the proof adduced being that ‘most of the auncient

heretikes were Grecians, and therefore their Scriptures in Greeke were more corrupted by them, as the auncient fathers often complaine.'

Even though the translation was now in English, it used so many Latinisms that it was still difficult to understand. For example:

Mk 14:51 "a young man clothed with sindon on the bare"

Rm 2:25 "if thou be a prevaricator of the law, the circumcision is become prepuce"

Jg 5:28 "His mother looked out at a window and howled; and she spoke from the dining room"

Pp 2:7 "He exinanited himself"

2Pe 2:13 "coiquination and spottes, flowing in delacacies, in their feastings rioting with you."

The King James translator's did take some phrases from the Douay-Rheims:

This wicked generation – Mt. 12:45

the things that are Caesar's – Mk 12:17

in the shambles – 1Co. 10:25

In the book of Romans alone we find a list of Latin words which the KJ translators used:

Separated, consent, impenitent, approves, propitiation, remission, grace, glory, commendeth, concupiscence, revealed, expectation, conformable, confession is made, emulation, concluded, conformed, instant, contribution.

Rheims 1582

Ovr FATHER which art in heauen sanctisfied be thy name. Let thy Kingdom come. Thy wil be done, as in heauen in earth aijo. Give vs to day our fuperfubftantial bread. And forgiue vs our detres, as we aljo forgiue our detters. And leade vs not into sentation. But deliuer vs from euil. Amen.