

A black and white illustration of an open book with a scroll resting on it, set against a background of a window with a lamp. The scroll is unrolled and lies across the pages of the book. The lamp is on the left, and the window is in the background. The overall scene is a classic representation of the Bible and its study.

The English Bible Its Origin, Preservation and Blessing

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Trinitarian Bible Society

Tyndale House,
Dorset Road,
London, SW19 3NN,
England

THE ENGLISH BIBLE ITS ORIGIN, PRESERVATION AND BLESSING

Many volumes have been written on the subject of how we came to have the Authorised Version of the Bible. Most begin the story in sixteenth century England. The story, however, begins thousands of years earlier.

The Old Testament

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.” From that day until the day that God moved Moses to make a written account of His creation, the history of the earth and its people was passed down from father to son, mother to daughter, teacher to student, by word of mouth. This was as God intended, not only for the centuries between creation and the writings of Moses, but also for the whole of the Jewish people, as can be seen throughout the Old Testament, particularly in Deuteronomy 6. In the Jewish community the Word of the Lord was to be taught orally: “talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way...” (vs. 7). The Hebrew language was especially well-suited to this. Much of Hebrew Scripture has a cadence and rhythm which is easily memorised, and frequently devices such as repetition of sounds (such as is found in Psalm 119, in which each word of a section begins with the same letter) adds to the language’s appropriateness for a time when the importance was not in orthographic precision but in memorisation of historical fact and legal requirements. Thus the Old Testament, particularly its early portions, has a rich oral tradition.

He taught the church by the spoken word alone for two thousand years before Moses, so if he had wished, he could have taught it later the same way. But...it seemed good to God, for weighty reasons, to commit his word to writing. For this reason [Scripture] has, by divine ordinance, been made so necessary that it pertains not only to the well-being of

the church, but to its very being, so that now the church cannot exist without the Scripture.¹

Thus, during the life of Moses, the Hebrew Scriptures began to be committed to writing. The form of writing was without any punctuation marks or vowel designations in a simple consonantal text. The breaks between sentences and phrases and even words was to be known on the basis of the oral tradition. This continued throughout the years until the close of the canon of the Old Testament some four hundred years prior to the birth of Christ. During this period Greek came to be used as the common language of the people. Although in the Temple the Hebrew Scriptures continued to be used, they were also translated into Greek. This translation, known as the Septuagint, was used by Christ and the apostles in many of their quotations as recorded in the New Testament.

In the first centuries after the birth of Christ, a group of Jewish scholars and rabbis recognised that the Hebrew oral tradition was in danger of being lost. This group, called the Masoretes, set about producing a Hebrew Old Testament which provided not only a standardised consonantal text but also indicated the vowel sounds and accentuation as found in the oral tradition. Thus, in the early 11th century AD, the Masoretic Text was established. The Masoretes destroyed old manuscripts in order to avoid confusion which might be caused by differences in manuscripts. Although some used the Septuagint, it is this Masoretic Hebrew text which has become the standard throughout the centuries as the basis of the Old Testament in various languages.

The New Testament

However, the canon of Scripture did not end with the Old Testament. God in His providence moved men to write during the first century following the birth of Christ. Some He moved to write historical accounts of His Son and of the early church. Others He moved to send letters to the churches in order to encourage and correct them. And to one man He gave a vision of what was to come when His church was in 'the last days'. Thus, God provided an inspired and inerrant text of the New Testament. Rather than maintaining a Hebrew oral tradition as He had done in the early centuries of mankind, God had these men write in a time when Greek was the most common language of the people. The books and epistles were copied and recopied and sent throughout the Eastern and Western churches, in order that all might know the teachings of Christ.

Greek was very well suited to the writing of the New Testament. Whereas Hebrew was easy to remember, Greek was precise and explicit. Thus the

doctrinal teachings of the epistles were precisely stated in a very expressive language, which was well suited for God's purpose. But whereas there was essentially one standardised Hebrew text, there were copious copies of the Greek writings. Today we have over 5,000 manuscripts containing various portions of the New Testament writings. Whereas we have an Old Testament text based upon the standardising work of the Masoretes, we know the New Testament from the great quantity of manuscripts available today. The best and most faithful representation of this text is the *Textus Receptus*, also known as the Traditional or Received Text.

The Scriptures in the Original Languages

Various church fathers held differing positions as to which books of the New Testament should be added to the Old Testament to make up the Christian Scriptures, but in the end they recognised the twenty-seven books which, added to the Old Testament, make up what we know today as the Bible. During the first five hundred years of the Christian era several men produced translations of these Scriptures into various languages: Coptic, Gothic, Syriac, Armenian, Itala, etc. One of the most important of these, the Vulgate, was the Latin translation produced by Jerome in the 4th century. For several centuries this Latin translation became the basis of translations into other languages.

Several men realised the importance of producing the Scriptures in the languages of the common people, rather than leaving the common people to follow the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. There were adversaries to the work of translation, but to these adversaries the translators of the Authorised Version said,

No cause therefore why the Word translated should be denied to be the Word, or forbidden to be current, notwithstanding that some imperfections and blemishes may be noted in the setting forth of it.²

We do not deny, nay, we affirm and avow, that the very meanest translation of the Bible in English, set forth by men of our profession,... containeth the Word of God, nay, is the Word of God. As the King's Speech which he uttered in Parliament, being translated into *French, Dutch, Italian, and Latin*, is still the King's Speech, though it be not interpreted by every translator with the like grace, nor peradventure so fitly for phrase, nor so expressly for sense, everywhere.³

The Bible in English

Several attempts were made to provide the Word of God in the language of the people of England, and numerous translations of various portions of

Scripture were produced, although most were based upon the Latin rather than the original language texts. Early in the 8th century Aldhelm of Glastonbury translated the Psalms and Egbert of Holy Island translated the Gospels. In AD 735 Bede laboured at Jarrow on his translation of the Gospel. Alfred the Great desired that his people should be able to read the Word of God and he personally engaged in a translation of various passages of Scripture until his death in AD 901. In the late 10th century Archbishop Aelfric and a number of others endeavoured to provide translations which could be read in the Churches so that many who could not read would at least hear the Word of Truth.

However, it was not until the thirteenth century that a language resembling English came into being, and it was not until the fourteenth century that a truly English translation of the Scriptures was produced. Wycliffe, knowing no Hebrew or Greek, translated from the Latin Vulgate. This translation, because of its basis, was far from perfect; nevertheless it showed only too clearly how far the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church were removed from the plain teaching of God's Word. Wycliffe was accused of heresy and excommunicated, but continued with his task until his death in 1384. Every copy of his translation had to be written by hand, but so many were written that a Bill was enacted in Parliament to forbid its circulation. Yet the people were so hungry for the Word of God that Wycliffe's Bible continued in circulation. In 1408 a convocation at Oxford under Archbishop Arundel decreed that any man found translating any text of Scripture into English or any other tongue, or found reading either publicly or privately any such translation, would suffer excommunication and be punished as a favourer of heresy and error. During the next hundred years many Christians were burned to death with Wycliffe's Bible tied around their necks, but 170 copies remain to this day to testify to his faithfulness and the diligence of his helpers.

During this period also a young man in Germany made one of mankind's greatest discoveries. Thirty years afterwards he set up his famous Gutenberg printing press at Mainz. This epoch-making invention contributed greatly towards the revival of Greek learning, which commenced about the middle of the fifteenth century, and the establishment of the Reformation in Europe.

At the time of the Renaissance and the Reformation, men began to study Greek and worked to produce a single Greek New Testament text from the various manuscripts available to them. The Greek New Testament text of Erasmus, in time referred to as the Received Text, and the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament, came to be used by many scholars of the time. During this time men began to realise the importance of the original language texts of Scripture.

If you ask what [the Fathers] had before them, truly it was the *Hebrew* text of the Old Testament, the *Greek* of the New. These are the two golden pipes, or rather conduits, wherethrough the olive branches empty themselves into the gold.⁴

The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it, was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God, and, by His singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them.⁵

However, not everyone had opportunity to study the Scriptures in the original languages, but everyone had the moral right to study the Scriptures in their own languages.

Because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto, and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that, the Word of God dwelling plentifully in all, they may worship Him in an acceptable manner; and, through patience and comfort of the Scriptures, may have hope.⁶

If truth be to be tried by these tongues, then whence should a translation be made, but out of them. These tongues, therefore, (the Scriptures, we say, in those tongues,) we set before us to translate, being the tongues wherein God was pleased to speak to his Church by his Prophets and Apostles.⁷

Thus, William Tyndale, using the Greek New Testament of Erasmus, translated the New Testament into English. For his 'heresy' he spent several years in exile, eventually being arrested, imprisoned, and burned at the stake in 1536 in what is today Belgium. His prayer as the flames grew near was "Lord! open the eyes of the King of England", a prayer which God was pleased to answer two years later.

In October 1535, Miles Coverdale published the first complete Bible in English. "Although it was translated from German and Latin, not from the biblical languages, it read well."⁸ During the same time Matthew's Bible, edited by John Rogers, was also published.

“The Act of Supremacy passed by the English Parliament in 1534 separated the Church of England from Rome and made the King of England the head of the church,”⁹ thus beginning in earnest the Reformation in England. The Ten Articles, the basic theological guidelines for the new Church of England, were published in 1536. “Even though much of Roman Catholicism remained in these articles, progress was made toward the teaching of the Reformation.”¹⁰ Then came the Injunction of 1538, which “called for Bibles to be made available to the people in every parish church: ‘one book of the whole Bible of the largest volume, in English, and the same set up in some convenient place within the said church that you have cure of, where your parishioners may most commodiously resort to the same and read it...’. The clergy were warned not to discourage any person from reading or hearing the Bible read but rather to encourage its use.”¹¹

Henry VIII approved of the Coverdale Bible as well as Matthew’s Bible. The latter was essentially Tyndale’s work; thus, Tyndale’s dying prayer was answered as the English people were finally able to read the Scriptures in their own language.

However, “after careful scrutiny Matthew’s Bible was discovered to be too true to the biblical languages for the Tudor government – hence it was altered in 1538-39. The revised edition became known as the Great Bible. This was the version that finally made it to the lecterns of the churches for the Sunday morning Scripture lessons.”¹²

The work of translation, however, did not stop. Other English translations include those of Taverner (1539), the Geneva Bible (1557-1560), and the Bishops’ Bible (1568). Because of the persecutions of Protestants during its translation, the Geneva Bible contained numerous marginal notes exposing the errors of the Roman Catholic Church. The Geneva was the first to divide chapters into verses, making it much easier to use. It was popular and remained in use for a considerable time after the first appearance of the Authorised Version.

The Bishops’ Bible was commissioned by Queen Elizabeth I to be free from the controversial notes found in the Geneva Bible. The Bishops’ Bible took the place of the Great Bible in the public services of the Church but never achieved great popularity. However, it was later used as the basis of the revision of 1611 which was to become known as the Authorised Version.

The Authorised Version

January 16, 1604: the Puritan John Rainolds¹³ stood before the new king

of England in the palace at Hampton Court. “‘May your Majesty be pleased,’ said Dr. John Rainolds in his address to the king, ‘to direct that the Bible be now translated, such versions as are extant not answering to the original’.”¹⁴ This meeting, which the king hoped would help settle the dissension between the Puritans and the Church of England, did not begin as an attempt by the Puritans to produce a new English translation of the Scriptures. Rainolds “spoke offhand of the new Bible, amid much talk of other matters.”¹⁵ “As the crossfire increased and the meeting got rougher, perhaps the king saw that a diversion was wanted and seized upon Rainolds’ one acceptable proposal to heal the breach. Or perhaps James, who thought of himself as a gifted Bible student, was sincere in seeing the need for a new translation even though the idea was advanced by the wrong side.”¹⁶ Regardless, “as soon as James showed approval of Rainolds’ proposal, the ambitious Bishop Bancroft suppressed his own adverse thoughts and prepared to carry out the royal will with zeal and dispatch. Bishop Bancroft talked things over and chose the men to work on a proposal, perhaps casually broached, which the royal will had now raised to a splendid design. Tyndale’s prayer was now answered in full. James I had ordered what Tyndale died to do.”¹⁷ Thus “started the greatest writing project the world has ever known, and the greatest achievement of the reign of James I – the making of the English Bible which has ever since borne his name.”¹⁸

Bishop Bancroft appointed fifty-four learned men from throughout the kingdom to fulfil the king’s will of producing a new English translation of the Bible. These were divided into six main groups: two at Westminster, one for the Old Testament and one for the New; two at Oxford, one for each Testament; and two at Cambridge, one for the Old Testament and one for the Apocrypha. But, “though the king had named fifty-four learned men, he intended many more to share in the work.” Puritans and Anglicans, scholars and preachers from many areas worked on portions of the Bible and “the final version contains contributions from countless unknown linguists.”¹⁹

Though their differences like their skills were Elizabethan, those of the several sides who joined in the work would produce a masterpiece to transcend their age. With nice balance they put much of themselves and the background of the times into it, while also keeping much of themselves and their background out of it. That those who worked on the new Bible had varied points of view was, then, to be no stumbling block but instead to insure its having something for all.... The learned translators were divided by no wider differences: there were among them no Roman Catholics, Jews, or women. They were male Protestants, roughly or smoothly within the Church of England, and as such they thought in certain grooves. The marvel is that they did so well.²⁰

On November 10, 1610, Archbishop Richard Bancroft died “before he could hold in his hands the printed Bible he had first opposed at Hampton Court, then had taken under his charge to please the king.”²¹ In 1611 King James appointed George Abbot, one of the Oxford New Testament translators, to succeed Bancroft as Archbishop. “Abbot’s gain of the highest church post... marked the year of publication of the King James Bible.... Abbot’s elevation probably helped the new version along.”²² “Happily, the royal command at Hampton Court could give the new version enough prestige to insure its adoption, in time, by all the churchmen loyal to the Crown.... And so, although there is no record that Abbot, Bancroft before him, or any with power to do so ever ‘authorized’ the King James Bible, people speak of it as the Authorized Version.”²³

“The King James Bible began to seep into common living. First it made progress in the churches, where the clergy here and there preached from it. Listeners took to heart and treasured certain verses, sometimes because they were novel and striking, sometimes because they were apt and fluent. Then the new Bible found its way into some homes for reading, for learning to read, and for times of prayer. More careful study evolved by degrees, until the phrasings passed into daily language.”²⁴ By 1627 “the 1611 Bible by its own worth was making itself welcome throughout the country.... High churchmen in greater numbers began to use the 1611 version, which in centuries to come would be the sole bond uniting the countless English-speaking Protestant sects. In 1629 the Bible was...revised [at Cambridge], but only in small ways, and once more in minor respects in 1638. The last issue of the Geneva Bible was in 1644. By then the King James version was ahead of all others.”²⁵ A second revision of the Authorised Version was made in 1638, also at Cambridge. A third revision, in 1762, was also at Cambridge; F. S. Paris was the editor. The fourth revision was done at Oxford in 1769; Benjamin Blayney was the editor. This last became known as the Oxford ‘Standard’ Edition. It is the edition used by most who use the Authorised Version today.

George Abbot, in his preface to the Authorised Version, states, “Truly, good Christian reader, we never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one...but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one, not justly to be excepted against; that hath been our endeavour, that our mark.”²⁶ This the translators of the Authorised Version accomplished.

God has preserved His Word through the centuries, and continues in our century by providing for us His Word in a faithful translation in English. Today the Authorised Version is still the beloved standard by which other translations

are judged. It stands as a faithful translation of the true texts of God's Word; it continues strong, proclaiming God's message to a lost and dying world. It has the blessing of God upon it, and has been the source of salvation and sanctification for many thousands of people throughout its history. Thus the Authorised Version stands as it did nearly four hundred years ago, as the Word of God in English and a monument to the God who gave it.

Notes

This article is a revision and expansion of the Trinitarian Bible Society's publication, "How We Got Our Bible", Article No. 15.

¹Francis Turretin, *The Doctrine of Scripture*, John W. Beardslee III, ed. and trans. (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Baker Book House, 1981), p. 28.

²George Abbot, et al, *The Translators to the Reader*, 1611 (London: The Trinitarian Bible Society, 1911), p. 30.

³Ibid., p. 23. ⁴Ibid., p. 30.

⁵Westminster Confession of Faith, I.viii.

⁶Ibid. ⁷Ibid.

⁸William R. Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), p. 258.

⁹Ibid., p. 249. ¹⁰Ibid., p. 257.

¹¹Ibid., p. 258, quoting *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., Henry Bettenson, ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 231-32.

¹²Ibid.

¹³Rainolds is also spelled Reynolds, Reinolds or Raynolds in other publications.

¹⁴Gustavus S. Paine, *The Men Behind the King James Version* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Baker Book House, 1977), p. 1.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 4. ¹⁶Ibid., p 7. ¹⁷Ibid., p. 11. ¹⁸Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 21.

²⁰Ibid., p. 29.

²¹Ibid., p. 143.

²²Ibid., p. 145.

²³Ibid., p. 146

²⁴Ibid., p. 154.

²⁵Ibid., p. 163.

²⁶Abbot, p. 29.

The aims of the Society

To publish and distribute the Holy Scriptures throughout the world in many languages.

To promote Bible translations which are accurate and trustworthy.

To be instrumental in bringing light and life, through the Gospel of Christ, to those who are lost in sin and in the darkness of false religion and unbelief.

To uphold the doctrines of reformed Christianity, bearing witness to the equal and eternal deity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, One God in three Persons.

To uphold the Bible as the inspired, inerrant Word of God.

For the Glory of God and the Increase of His Kingdom through the circulation of Protestant or uncorrupted versions of the Word of God.

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Trinitarian Bible Society

Tyndale House, Dorset Road,
London, SW19 3NN, England

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