A Brief History of the English Bible

by

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The year 2011 is the 400th anniversary of the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible. Without question, this has been the most widely accepted English version for the majority of the past four centuries. It not only has been central within Protestantism as a religious movement, it has played a determinative role in the English language itself. For better or worse, all subsequent versions have been and will continue to be evaluated in large measure against the KJV.

At the same time, English Bible translation did not begin with the KJV nor has it ceased since its publication. The earliest translation effort of any kind actually happens within the Bible itself, when some of the Jews who returned from Babylon were not able to understand the Hebrew Bible when read by Ezra. Hence, Ezra's assistants, the Levites, translated the Hebrew into Aramaic for their benefit (cf. Ne. 8:7-8). Indeed, the formal translation of the Old Testament into a second language began two centuries or more before the birth of Jesus (the Septuagint in Greek; later, the Targums in Aramaic). Translations of the New Testament began early in the Christian era (Old Latin, 2nd century; Coptic, 3rd century; Syriac and Gothic, 4th century; Armenian and Georgian, 5th century; Ethiopic, 6th century). Such efforts, of course, were so that the Scriptures could be read and understood by people in their native language. The translation of Scripture into English had the same goal.

The Earliest English Translations

While the first complete translation of the Bible into English did not occur until 1382 (Wyclif's Version), various parts of the Bible were available much earlier in Anglo-Saxon. Caedmon and others rendered biblical stories in verse and song (7th century). The Bede translated had translated all or most of John's Gospel by AD 735. Alfred the Great encouraged the translation of the Ten Commandments, the Psalms, and paraphrases of the gospels (ca. 950). The Lindesfarne Gospels, made on Holy Island in northern England by leaders in the Irish missionary community, offered an interlinear Northumbrian dialect directly beneath the

Latin text of the Vulgate (mid-10th century). The Wessex Gospels in Old English also appeared about the same time.[1]

In the 11th century, major changes in the English language developed after the Norman Conquest (1066), which brought elements of continental language into the English island. The new ruling class was Norman French, and in a relatively short period, the Anglo-Saxon translations were seriously outdated and virtually unintelligible to the masses. It should be remembered, of course, that the average Englishman's knowledge of the Bible came from the public reading of Scripture in the churches. While some of gentry might have owned Psalters or other parts of the Bible for private devotions, this was not the norm, nor for that matter, was literacy very widespread at this early period.

By the end of the 12th century, an Augustinian monk named Orm had produced a poetical version of the Gospels and Acts. By the middle of the 13th century, Genesis and Exodus had been translated into rhyming English verse, along with the Psalms. By the end of the 14th century, the most important letters in the New Testament had been translated.[2] These Middle English translations seem quite antiquated to modern readers (often confused with Old English), but they served an important bridge for understanding the Bible. Most importantly, by the end of the 14th century an Oxford scholar named John Wyclif directed an effort to translate the entire Bible into English. It is to his effort that we now turn.

The Wyclif Version

John Wyclif (or Wycliffe) was regarded as the leading scholar of the 14th century in England. As a professor at Oxford University, he became a leading philosopher and was invited to serve at court by John of Gaunt, the acting ruler (until Richard II was old enough to reign). However, Wyclif had a penchant for reform—and this about a century before the Protestant Reformation. He deeply care for the poor and railed against the abuses of the church. The church owned a third of the land in England, and Wyclif offended church hierarchy by supporting the right of the government to seize the property of corrupt priests. Priests often were illiterate and immoral. Offices in the church were bought or given away as political favors. To make matters worse, Wyclif could see that some of the church's teachings

[1] F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University, 1978), pp. 2-9. The periods of the English language are: Old English (ca. 450-1100), Middle English (ca. 1100-1450) and Modern English (ca. 1450 and later).

[2] Bruce, pp. 10-11.

had departed from the Bible. He began to argue against some of the errant theologies of the medieval church, especially the doctrine of transubstantiation (the belief that the bread and wine turn into the literal body and blood of Christ), the notion of purgatory, and the sale of indulgences (purchased reprieves from purgatory for the dead). He claimed that Christ was *spiritually* present in the Eucharist, but the bread and wine were still bread and wine. He rejected ceremonies that were not specifically mentioned in the Bible, and indeed, argued that they interfered with a true worship of God. He also dismissed the medieval notion that God's people needed a priestly mediator in order to commune with God.

During Wyclif's career, the so-called Great Schism occurred in the Roman Catholic Church. Two popes, one in Rome and the other in Avignon, each claimed to be the only true pope, and each excommunicated the other. Such a debacle naturally contributed to Wyclif's radical ideas that the papacy as a political force constantly striving for mastery was nothing less than sheer worldliness. In view of what Wyclif saw as the spiritual bankruptcy of the pope's office, he determined to place Christ and the Bible at the center.

His views, as might be expected, were condemned by the Roman Catholic pope in 1377. Gradually, he was deserted by many of his friends in high places. Church authorities forced him to leave Oxford. In 1382, he went to live at his parish in Lutterworth in the midlands, where he eventually died of a stroke on New Years Eve in 1384. Here in Lutterworth, however, he began a project that would forever endear him to future generations. He and his loyal friends undertook to translate the Latin Vulgate into English. They worked from a Latin text more than 1000 years old! Their efforts were driven by the belief that Christians are directly responsible to God, and in order to know and obey God, they must be able to read the Bible for themselves. Scholars point to both an early and later version, the former (an incomplete version) produced while Wyclif was still alive and the latter after his death. Both, of course, were hand written, since the printing press was still a future technology. Popularly known as the "Wyclif Bible," the translation project was completed by his friends after his death. It became the first full translation of the Old and New Testaments into the English language.

In the process of his life, John Wyclif set the tone for reform and is justly dubbed "the morning star of the Reformation." Followers from his Oxford days spread across Leichestershire and beyond, where they were known as "Lollards," a group that organized with their own ministers and popular supporters. These "poor preachers," as they were called, began to

take the Word of God to the common people across the land…in their own language! They contended that the main task of a priest was to preach the Scriptures. The Bible should be available to everyone in his own language.

Ideas so radical for their time could hardly avoid the heavy hand of oppression. Wyclif was formally condemned even after his death at the Council of Constance some thirty years later. There, orders were given to destroy his writings, exhume his bones and burn them, and so far as possible, to erase his memory. In spite of this condemnation, Wyclif's ideas could not be obliterated. As Wyclif himself put it:

> *God's words will give men new life more than the other words that are for pleasure. O marvelous power of the Divine Seed which overpowers strong men in arms, softens hard hearts, and renews and changes into divine men, those men who had been brutalized by sins, and departed infinitely far from God. Obviously such miraculous power could never be worked by the work of a priest, if the Spirit of Life and the Eternal Word did not, above all things else, work with it.*

His followers remained loyal and, indeed, thrived in some parts of England. In significant ways, they were the forerunners of the reformers who would come a century later.

Reformation Bibles

It might not seem as though the Renaissance, with its humanistic overtones, had much to offer the Christian church, but in fact its revival of classical learning would spur a new generation on toward a renewed appreciation of the original languages of the Bible. By the late 1300s, a professorship of Greek had been established in Florence (1396), and within half a century, Greek studies were firmly established in the West. Inevitably, the budding Greek scholars pursued not only the ancient texts of classical Greek thinkers, but also, the texts of the New Testament. In 1444, Lorenzo Valla published a comparison between the Latin Vulgate and the Greek original, and his writings would be prized by Martin Luther less than a century later.[3]

The technological innovation of Gutenberg's printing press opened up an entirely new dimension (1445). With the development of paper made from rags, which was much less expensive than parchment, literacy began to spread rapidly, and there was a growing market for cheaper books. It is to

[3] P. McNair, "Seeds of Renewal," *Eerdmans Handbook to the History of Christianity*, ed. T. Dowley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 348-352.

the point that the first complete book known to have been printed in the Christian world was the Bible (1452). By roughly 1500, Europeans could afford to read and buy books. Martin Luther would gain an immediate following in Germany when his objections to the policies of papal Rome were run off in pamphlets and widely distributed. Printing brought with it standardization of language disseminated by books. The "King's English" may have developed in London, but it was carried to Yorkshire and Wales in printed form.[4]

On the continent, a Czech priest from Prague named Jan Hus (1372-1415) was exposed to the works of John Wyclif. In his preaching, he began to underscore the role of Scripture in the authority of the church, and among other things, he revised a Czech translation of the Bible in order to help his parishioners read it.[5] Though burned at the stake for his critique of the papacy, his martyrdom aroused national feelings among the Czech people that never completely died out. Indeed, when Pope John Paul II apologized for the burning of Hus on December 18, 1999, it was cause for great celebration in the Czech Republic.

By 1488 the Jews at Soncino, Italy had printed a complete Hebrew Bible, and further editions would follow. In the early 1500s in Spain, the *Complutensian Polyglot* was published, consisting of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, the Greek New Testament and the Latin Vulgate. Erasmus, the Dutch scholar, produced a Greek text of the New Testament in 1516. This Greek New Testament went through several editions and improvements. By the mid-1500s, a French printer was publishing the first of several critical editions of the Greek New Testament, which eventually became known as the *textus receptus*, that is, the text generally accepted. (The term "critical" refers to the effort to establish the earliest text by comparing various ancient manuscripts.) This would become the underlying New Testament Greek text used in various English translations of the Bible, including the King James Version.

Because of increasing literacy and widening accessibility to printed material, the Reformers desired to make the Scriptures available to everyone in his/her native language. In Germany, Martin Luther's 16th century translation became the grandfather of all subsequent German translations, even into the modern era. In a flurry of energy during two and a half months in 1522, he translated the complete New Testament from Greek, and he completed his translations of the Old Testament from Hebrew in stages between 1522 and 1532. The first completed German Bible appeared at

[4] E. Burns, et al, *World Civilizations*, 6th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 1.515-517.
[5] P. Kubricht, "Jan Hus," *EDT* (1984), p. 538.

Wittenberg in 1534.[6] It is fair to say that the Reformation ideal of the Bible as the central Christian authority heightened the desire for accurate translations into the vernacular.

William Tyndale

William Tyndale (1492-1536) is justly named "The Father of the English Bible."[7] The idea that the Scriptures should be available in the common language so that anyone and everyone might read them was not immediately popular. In 1408, out of fear of John Wyclif's followers, the English Parliament passed the "Constitutions of Oxford," which forbade anyone translating or even reading a part of the Bible in the language of the people without permission from church authorities. People were burned at the stake for teaching their children in English the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments. By the middle of the 1400s, however, Greek scholars were moving westward, especially after the Muslims stormed Constantinople, the capital the Eastern Roman Empire. Along with the development of the printing press, it was now possible—though not yet legal—to publish the Bible in more easily available quantities and without copyists' errors.

William Tyndale, who studied at Oxford and Cambridge, determined that he would do just that—translate and publish the Bible in English—whether legal or not. By reading the Greek edition of the New Testament published by Erasmus, Tyndale came to understand just how ignorant of the Scriptures the people in his country really were, not to mention the churchmen. To one cleric, he is reported to have declared, *If God spare my life, ere many years pass, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou dost.* This work became his burning passion for which he eventually would give his life.

At Magdalen Hall, Oxford, and later at Cambridge, Tyndale was educated in Greek. (Later, he would learn Hebrew while on the run in Europe.) Hoping to win the support of Cuthbert Tunstall, the Bishop of London, Tyndale appealed to him for support. However, the London bishop was more interested in suppressing the spread of Lutheran ideas than he was in promoting the study of Scripture, and in the end, Tyndale's support came not from any entity in the church, but from a number of London merchants,

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[6] T. Lane, "A Flood of Bibles," *Eerdmans Handbook*, pp. 366-368.

[7] For a full biography of his life, see Brian Edwards, *William Tyndale: The Father of the English Bible*, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills, MI: William Tyndale College, 1982).

like Humphrey Monmouth, who had been smuggling Luther's writings into England. Given Tunstall's refusal and the restrictive Constitutions of Oxford, it would have been extremely dangerous for Tyndale to attempt any translation and publication in England. Hence, he removed to Europe, where the winds of change already were briskly blowing. By early 1525, his New Testament translated directly from the original Greek was ready for printing. Narrowly escaping arrest at Cologne, he was able to see the publication completed later that same year at Worms, Germany. The New Testament in English was then smuggled back into England.

The English powers were incensed, of course. King Henry VIII, Cardinal Woolsey and Sir Thomas More joined forces to suppress it. Woolsey issued a warrant for Tyndale's arrest. More wrote a tractate that Tyndale had deliberately distorted the text and that his translation was full of heresy.[8] The English bishops devised a plan to buy up Tyndale's smuggled English Bibles, and they located and bought as many as they could. Ironically, the money they paid was funneled back to Tyndale in Europe, enabling him to print more Bibles in improved and corrected editions. His New Testaments ended up in strange places, not the least of which was in the hands of Anne Boleyn (and Henry VIII actually borrowed her copy and read it, too)! When Tyndale left Worms, he was constantly on the run, polishing his knowledge of Hebrew, translating Old Testament texts, and hiding in Hamburg and Antwerp. By 1529, his name was openly linked by the authorities to the word "heretic," and in this period of Europe, such an appellation was extremely dangerous. Luther had the advantage of a large university library, a sympathetic faculty, and the strong protection of the Elector of Saxony. Tyndale had none of these. Still, while on the run, he finished his translation of the Pentateuch. Yet, everywhere he might attempt to print it was already compromised. To make matters worse, a ship on which he was passenger en route to Hamburg wrecked on the coast, and he lost all his valuable manuscripts, his money, and his long efforts of many months of hard work. Nevertheless, his translation of the Pentateuch was finally printed and smuggled into England by the summer of 1530!

And so it went. Tyndale running and the agents of England close at his heels. Eventually, Tyndale was betrayed by Henry Phillips, a young man from a wealthy family who gambled away his fortune and stood ready to accept any proposal for the sake of personal gain. Traveling to Antwerp, he located Tyndale and won his confidence in 1534. After making

[8] What Tyndale actually had done was drop words like "penance" and "confession," words fraught with Roman Catholic theology, and substituted for them more accurate English words like "repentance" and "acknowledge."

arrangements with officers for an ambush, he led Tyndale straight into their net. Tyndale spent eighteen months in a dungeon, cold, shivering and beset with incessant coughing. In October 1536, after a trial that was little more than a formality, Tyndale was strangled and burned at the stake. His last reported words were, "Lord, open the king of England's eyes." At his trial, a long list of charges were published, among them:

> *First, he had maintained that faith alone justifies*.
>
> *Second, he maintained that to believe in the forgiveness of sins and to embrace the mercy offered in the Gospel, was enough for salvation.*

In addition, he denied purgatory and claimed that neither the virgin Mary nor the saints actually pray for us in their own person.

Some 90% of his words would later pass into the King James Version of the Bible. Indeed, it has been said with some merit that every English New Testament until the 20th century was simply a revision of Tyndale's. Here is his translation of the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 13:

> *Though I speake with the tonges of men and angels and yet had no love I were even as soundynge brass: and as a tynklynge Cymball. and though I coulde prophesy and vnderstode all secretes and all knowledge: yee if I had all faith so that I coulde move mountains oute of there places and yet had no love I were nothynge. And though I bestowed all my gooddes to fede the poore and though I gave my body even that I burned and yet have no love it profeteth me nothynge.*

Tyndale's Immediate Heritage

The work of Tyndale seemed to open the door to English Bible translation. Though Tyndale's untimely arrest prevented him from completing his translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew, Miles Coverdale, a graduate of Cambridge University who had assisted Tyndale in Europe, now took up the torch. Coverdale was not the scholar in Greek and Hebrew that Tyndale had been; however, he was conversant with German and Latin and so supplemented the work of Tyndale by working from some five Old Testament texts. These were Tyndale's incomplete translation of the Old Testament, the Latin Vulgate, Luther's German translation, and a

couple others. He revised Tyndale's New Testament, and the whole, both Old and New Testaments, was published by 1535, while Tyndale was still in prison.

John Rogers, also an associate of Tyndale's and writing under the pen-name of Thomas Matthew, produced an English translation in 1537, the year after Tyndale's martyrdom. This Bible was essentially the work of Tyndale, and Rogers published it under a pseudonym, since it was still too early to concede publicly that it was mostly the work of the hunted heretic. In addition, this Bible had the advantage of receiving a royal license, which now was also granted to Coverdale's second edition. Now, there were two English Bible's in circulation, both by formal permission of the king! It was poetic justice, of course, that both the Coverdale and Matthew translations largely included the work of Tyndale. At the end of Malachi, the initials W.T. appeared in Matthew's Bible, and those "in the know" would immediately have recognized this as an overture to William Tyndale. In both these Bibles, the Apocrypha was printed as an appendix to the Old Testament.

The Great Bible

With two English Bible's now circulating with legal permission, there was now no reason that individual congregations could not have their own English editions of the Bible. To this end, Coverdale was commissioned to revise the Matthew's Bible, and its printing began in 1538. By 1539, there was such a fever of interest in reading the English Bible (parish Bibles were chained to a desk near the front of individual churches) that the king found it necessary to issue a proclamation that people could not simply walk up and read aloud from it during the services, thus disrupting the liturgy! By 1540, a second edition was published containing a subscript on the title page, "This is the Byble apoynted to the use of the churches." Several subsequent editions followed. It should be remembered, of course, that most common people would have been unable to afford a copy of the Bible for private use. The Bible in their local parish church was readily available, however.

In spite of the fact that the majority of the Great Bible ultimately must be credited to William Tyndale, Tyndale's own reputation as a heretic did not diminish. In 1546 Henry VIII ordered that all copies of Tyndale's (and Coverdale's) New Testament be gathered and burned, and huge quantities were destroyed at St. Paul's Cross in London—in spite of the fact that Tyndale's work lived on in the editions of the Great Bible in virtually every parish church in the whole of England!

Several other translations were attempted over the next couple decades. Some, like the Bishop Becke's Bible, were published with annotations—and the fact that the annotations were set in the same typeface as the text itself created not a little confusion.[9] When Mary ascended to the throne in 1553, her return to a more stringent catholicity meant imminent danger to English Bible translators. John Rogers and Thomas Cranmer were executed, while others escaped to the continent. Many Bibles were burned at Mary's orders. When Mary was succeeded by Elizabeth, the charged atmosphere changed again, and she reissued her father's order that every parish church should have its own copy of the English Bible.

The Geneva Bible

In 1560, a new effort was made by Englishmen who had escaped to the continent during Mary's "bloody reign." In John Calvin's Geneva additional translation efforts were ongoing, and now a new English Bible appeared with extensive annotations based on the theology of the Reformers. This Geneva Bible consisted of a major revision of the Great Bible, especially those parts not translated by Tyndale earlier, since these sections had not been translated directly from Hebrew. For the New Testament, they revised Tyndale's latest edition. Again, the Apocryphal books appeared as an appendix. The annotations were clearly Calvinist in theological orientation, and it is hardly to be doubted that they contributed greatly to the theology of English Puritanism, not to mention Scottish Presbyterianism. This version was most clearly anti-Roman Catholic in its notations in the Book of Revelation, where the pope is directly identified as the beast from the sea. This was the Bible read by William Shakespeare. It also was the most popular of the current translations and quickly became the Bible in the homes of most Protestants.

The Bishops' Bible

The popularity of the Geneva Bible, and indeed, its superior translation quality to the Great Bible, meant that the days of the Great Bible were at an end. However, the Church of England would hardly want to make

[9] For instance in Becke's Bible the annotation for 1 Pe. 3:7 reads: "He dwelleth with his wife according to knowledge, that taketh her as a necessary helper, and not as a bonde servante, or a bonde slave. And yf she be not obedient and healpful to hym, endeavoureth to beate the feare of God into her heade, that thereby she maye be compelled to learne her dutie, and to do it," cf. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*, 3rd. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 83-84.

the Geneva Bible the one to be issued to parish churches, especially since it was so heavily slanted toward Calvinism. Hence, in 1561 English bishops who were qualified along with various other scholars began a revision of the Great Bible by checking it against the original Greek and Hebrew texts. This so-called "Bishops' Bible" was completed in 1568. They were instructed to add no "bitter or controversial" annotations. The Bishops' Bible gradually replaced the Great Bible in the parish churches.

Unfortunately, the scholarship behind the Bishops' Bible was not nearly as good as the scholarship behind the Geneva Bible. While the Calvinist annotations might have been objectionable, the excellence of translation certainly was not. The upshot was that when Elizabeth died and the crown passed to James in 1603, the time was ripe for yet another step forward in English Bible Translation. This would result in the best translation of all, the King James Version.

The King James Version [10]

James VI, the son of Mary Queen of Scotts, had for many years been the king of Scotland, but when Elizabeth I died, he then became James I, the king of England as well. Only a few months into his reign he convened a conference at Hampton Court to review religious matters, and the major suggestion of significance was that there be conducted a new English translation of the Bible produced by the best scholars from Oxford and Cambridge Universities, a Bible without theological annotations and suitable for use in all the English churches. In particular, James detested the Geneva Bible's annotations, which in addition to a pronounced Calvinist slant, also contained comments that seemed to conflict with the divine right of kings. Hence, when Dr. John Reynolds suggested a new translation, James pounced upon it as a great opportunity.

Richard Bancroft, the Archbishop of Canterbury, organized the effort, directing the rules that guided them and creating six panels of translators (47 scholars in all), three for the Old Testament, two for the New Testament and one for the Apocrypha. The panels started with the text of the Bishop's Bible, comparing it with the available Hebrew and Greek texts. Marginal notes were confined to explanations of Greek and Hebrew words, but no theological annotations were allowed. Chapter and verse divisions were retained, plus the translators provided new chapter headings. When the six

[10] For a fuller summary, see Bruce, pp. 96-112. For an extensive work dealing entirely with the history of the KJV, see A. McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001).

panels had completed their work, it then was reviewed by a committee of twelve scholars, two from each of the six panels. The work was published in 1611 and officially appointed to be read in all the churches in England. Commonly, the King James Version (KJV) is referred to as the "Authorized Version," though this designation is somewhat ambiguous, since there is no existing record of such an authorization or what it authorized.[11] Still, the KJV clearly was designated as the one to replace the Bishop's Bible in the English parish churches. In the preface, the translators were gracious and careful to give credit to the previous efforts of English Bible translators. They acknowledged that their work would not be perfect and conceded that all Bible translation is a history of revision and correction. They frankly admitted that in some cases, where words appear only a single time in the Bible, any translation of them is less than certain. This was equally true of variant readings in the original languages.

In the four centuries since its publication, the KJV has served as the most prominent English Bible in the long history of English Bibles. It eventually established itself as the preferred version, both for the church and the individual, surpassing both the Bishop's Bible and the Geneva Bible alike. Still, the KJV was not without its critics. Just as is true for any contemporary translation, the "new boy on the block" never receives unqualified acceptance. In Scotland, the Geneva Bible held prominence for at least another half century. The Puritans in America preferred the Geneva Bible as well. Indeed, for more than a century the KJV was criticized regularly, partly because it seemed too churchly.[12] The earliest editions of the KJV had their share of misspellings and typos, though these have gradually been weeded out in subsequent editions. Probably the most notorious error was when the printer left out the word "not" in the seventh commandment in the 1631 edition. Imagine readers' surprise when they saw the line, "Thou shalt commit adultery." Some printers' errors were more humorous than dangerous, such as, the 1795 edition that has Mark 7:27 saying, "Let the children first be killed," instead of "Let the children first be filled," or the edition that read "the dogs liked his blood" instead of "the dogs licked his blood." A real howler was the verse in Psalm 119:161 that read, "Printers (instead of "princes") have persecuted me without a cause!" Over time, multitudinous spelling changes kept the KJV up-to-date.

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[11] Unfortunately, the records at Whitehall from 1600-1613 were all destroyed by a fire, so if any authorization had been given, it no longer is available, cf. Bruce, pp. 99-100.

[12] For instance, the KJV used words like "church" instead of "congregation." In addition, expressions like "if a man desire the office of a bishop…" (1 Ti. 3:1) seemed to support church hierarchy, especially since there is not comparable word of "office" in any Greek text of the New Testament.

Like previous English Bibles, the KJV included the Apocryphal books, despite objections by the Puritans, who would have had them eliminated altogether. By 1644, the Puritans succeeded in banishing any Apocryphal readings in church services, and later, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* clearly indicated that the Apocryphal Books were not inspired and held no theological authority. By 1826 the policy was adopted by the British and Foreign Bible Society of printing the KJV without the Apocrypha at all, and this practice is followed throughout the modern period, though it had been the case much earlier in America and elsewhere due to Puritan influence.

The Legacy of the King James Version

The passion for an English Bible had produced no less than nine versions/revisions in 85 years! With the advent of the King James Version, this well of productivity began to dry up. Though private translators continued their work over the years, for nearly the next three centuries the King James Version of the Bible was standard for most Protestants.[13] While the KJV was not the Bible of William Shakespeare, who used the Geneva Bible, it came to be the Bible of the common person in both England and America. Much of its language reminds one of the language of Shakespeare, even though revisions of it began as early as 1616 (mostly spelling changes), just five years after its initial production. Still, a growing recognition of the excellence of the KJV, its subsequent revisions and improvements, and an English civil war after the death of James left the KJV the master in the field. Within the first half of the 19th century, the punctuation had been improved and the text arranged in paragraphs. By 1851 dates had been inserted (following Ussher's chronology). Another 19th century innovation included prefacing pages of a family register, for births, deaths and marriages. In 1899 a publisher began printing the words of Jesus in red letters.[14] The KJV of the Bible remains among the great treasures of English prose.

Many well-known words and phrases in the English language derive from the KJV, not only theological phrases such as "Alpha and Omega," "Ancient of Days," "graven image," "not live by bread alone," and "seventy times seven," but also everyday phrases that most people do not recognize as coming from the Bible, like "apple of his eye," "a house divided," "the

[13] Roman Catholics, by contrast, depended upon the Douai-Rheims English version, which heavily depended upon the Latin Vulgate rather than the Greek and Hebrew texts.
[14] J. Lewis, "Versions, English (Pre-1960)," *ABD* (1992) 4.824-824.

quick and the dead," "reap the whirlwind," "scapegoat," and "two-edged sword." The fact that the KJV became the standard Protestant Bible meant that Bible memorization was also standardized. Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans and Pentecostals all memorized exactly the same words. English speaking Protestants the world over know the citation, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" (Ps. 23:6). No one still memorizes this same passage from the Geneva Bible, where it says, "Doubtless kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall remain a long season in the house of the Lord," or from the Bishop's Bible, which reads, "Truly felicity and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of God for a long time." At the very least and amidst many divisions, a single Bible in common usage gave some sense of connectedness between diverse Protestant Christians.

Certain ideas in the translation of the KJV became standardized, too, even though they may have owed as much to the Anglican orientation of the translators as to the original text of Scripture. For instance, when the KJV has Paul writing, "If a man desire the office of a bishop…" it is to the point that the Greek text says nothing whatsoever about an "office" (1 Ti. 3:1). The rendering "church" in the KJV is certainly more formal than Tyndale's "congregation," and the Puritans were quick to criticize it. Still, though there were many critics, the KJV survived and eventually was extolled. That the KJV regularly translated the Greek word *doulos* as "servant" (rather than "slave") provided a more gentle word for American southern slave-owners in their efforts to defend the institution of slavery. Southerners continued to refer to their slaves as "servants." Indeed, Henry Turner, a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, urged a new translation, charging that the Whites had made the Bible objectionable to Blacks.[15]

In America, Bible readings were part of standard education until relatively modern times, and the Bible used in the classroom was the KJV.[16] Abraham Lincoln quoted it in his Second Inaugural Address: "…the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether" (Ps. 19:9b). Familiar passages from the KJV appeared in other American literary works, such as, Father Mapple's sermon on Jonah in *Moby Dick. East of Eden* by John Steinbeck and *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway take their

[15] N. Knoll, "A World Without the KJV," *Christianity Today* (May 2011), p. 34.

[16] Roman Catholics objected, of course, and their objections even resulted in riots in Philadelphia in 1844, since their resistance to the KJV was taken to be a resistance against the Bible itself. Jews equally resented being forced to read and quote from a Protestant translation, cf. Knoll, p. 35.

titles from the KJV (Ge. 4:16; Ecc. 1:5).[17] When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted Isaiah 40:4-5, "Every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low…" he used the KJV. Their use of such phrases depended entirely upon the fact that this translation was so widely accepted in the English-speaking world. The current generation, which was reared with the KJV and has now graduated to other modern versions, will be the last generation of its kind.

Revising a Landmark

Although the KJV stood as the most widely read Bible for the better part of three centuries, two fundamental reasons calling for its revision would emerge over the years. One was the ever-changing English language itself. Words gradually shift in meaning over time, and expressions that were understandable in the 1600s would cease to be understood in the same way at later periods.[18] A few examples may suffice: the word "prevent" in the KJV meant "to go ahead of" or "precede" in the 17th century (Ps. 119:147; 1 Th. 4:15). Now, it means "to stop" or "prohibit." The word "suffer," which was used some 69 times in the KJV to mean "endure" and an additional 60 times to mean "allow," no longer means either in contemporary English. When the KJV uses the word "conversation," it always refers to behavior. Today, it means an exchange of words. In the KJV, words like "anon," "by and by," "presently," and "out of hand" mean "immediately," but the modern person is hardly likely to understand them in this way.

The second fundamental reason calling for revision was the discovery of older manuscripts closer to the originals, both for the New Testament as well as the Old Testament. The basic Greek text underlying the KJV was what a printer in Leyden in 1633 dubbed "the text which now is received by all." This expressed "received text," which was nothing more than a publishers blurb, was sometimes taken to mean authoritative, as though no more research into the text was warranted. In fact, better and older manuscripts than were available to the KJV translators have been discovered regularly over the centuries, not the least of which were Codex Sinaiticus and the Dead Sea Scrolls.[19] Hence, efforts to provide improved translations

[17] Hemingway did take the trouble to modernize the verb "ariseth" to "rises."
[18] A selected list of obsolete English terms and their meanings, both 17th century and modern, can be found in L. Weigle, *IDB* (1962) 3.582-589.
[19] To be sure, there have been ardent defenders of the KJV as though it were the only legitimate translation in existence, cf. J. Ray, *God Only Wrote One Bible* (Junction City, OR: The Eye Opener Publishers, 1955); E. Hill, *The King James Version Defended* (Des Moines, IA: Christian Research Press, 1956); W. Pickering, *The Identity of the New Testament* (Nashville: Nelson, 1977), etc. Nonetheless, such works have

have appeared at various times, such as, John Wesley's revision of the KJV New Testament (including some 12,000 alterations based on the study of the Greek text), John Darby's *New Translation* (1871, 1890), Young's *Literal Translation* (1862) and Rotherham's *Emphasized Version* (1897-1902), among others. These were essentially private efforts to improve the English Bible.

By the late 19th century, however, larger cooperative efforts were afoot. In 1870, a major revision was undertaken by some of the best of British scholars to be published by the presses of Oxford and Cambridge Universities. By 1871, an American committee of scholars had been selected to review the translation work being done by the British scholars, but the Americans agreed not to produce a version of their own for another 14 years. This *Revised Version* was issued in 1881 (New Testament) and 1885 (Old Testament). While certainly based on better and older manuscripts than the KJV, the *Revised Version* became a lightning rod, especially for conservatives, because of its omission of various texts that had been in the KJV but were not in the earliest manuscripts (e.g., 1 Jn. 5:7, etc.).[20] Also, some conservatives felt that some of its renderings were tilted toward liberalism.[21]

When the 14-year moratorium had expired, the Americans began working on their own contribution to a revised English Bible, and they published the *American Standard Version* in 1901. By all accounts it was a better end product than the 1881 *Revised Version*, and unlike its predecessors, it set out poetical passages in poetic form (poetry accounts for about 40% of the Old Testament). Still, both the RV and the ASV retained considerable archaic English carried over from the KJV.[22] Eventually, yet another revision was begun and published in 1946 as the *Revised Standard Version*. This version saw a wide circulation for the last half of the 20th century, and beginning in 1957, it became available both with and without the Apocrypha, eventually even distinguishing subtleties between Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox understandings of what constituted the

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won no more than a modicum of support from conservatives scholars, let alone scholars in the wider field of Bible translation.

[20] The fact notwithstanding that 1 Jn. 5:7 appears in no Greek manuscript earlier than the 16th century, there was considerable suspicion that "things were being left out."

[21] For instance, where the KJV renders 2 Ti. 3:16 as, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God…", the RV renders it, "Every scripture inspired of God…," leaving open the possibility that Paul considered some Scriptures inspired and others not, cf. E. Young, *Thy Word is Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), pp. 19-20.

[22] For examples of archaism in the ASV, see S. Kubo & W.Specht, *So Many Versions?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), pp. 41-43.

Apocrypha.[23] Hence, the RSV has become a "common Bible," that is, a Bible that can be used by all three branches of the Christian faith, Orthodox, Roman Catholic and Protestant.

Modern English Versions

Since the mid-20th century, a whole new company of Bible translations has arisen. To a large degree, these various versions are distinguished from each other by two major features. First, some are translated by individuals and others by committees. Second, there is a range of translations between two poles of translation theory, one along the lines of formal equivalency (word-for-word) and the other along the lines of dynamic equivalency (concept-for-concept).

Both of these factors bear upon the finished product. Translations by individuals naturally result in a consistency of diction and style, but at the same time, any personal idiosyncrasies cannot be balanced by other minds. The debate between formal and dynamic equivalency has been quite vigorous, though both theories bring to the table important features that should be appreciated. Formal equivalency is closer to the original word order and syntax, but it may be harder to understand in the second language, since both original word order and syntax often are not normative for the second language. Dynamic equivalency is easier to read, on the other hand, but it is more susceptible to interpretive readings.

Of the modern translations by individuals, *The New Testament in Modern English* by J. B. Phillips (1958) is certainly one of the best. When the early editions of Paul's letters began to appear in 1947, they received a warm endorsement from C. S. Lewis, and the version has been popular ever since. More recently, Eugene Peterson's *The Message* has been widely received (2002), which features very colloquial language.

Committee translations, of course, seek to avoid personal and denominational bias, and several noteworthy translations have appeared in the past half century. Among the ones that swing the pendulum toward formal equivalency, two of the more widely accepted have been the *New American Standard Bible* (1971) and the *English Standard Version* (2001). The NASB was based on the older ASV, updating archaic language, such as, substituting "you" and "your" for "thou" and "thee" and discontinuing the use of the divine name Jehovah. Also, the translators attempted very careful renderings of Greek tenses, such as the undefined action of the aorist and the

[23] 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh, for instance, are included in the Orthodox canon but not in the Roman Catholic canon.

continuous action of the imperfect. While such efforts are noteworthy, they resulted in a somewhat stilted form of English which often is not very idiomatic. No current English writer, for instance, would ever say, "And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, 'Listen *to this!"*' (Mk. 4:2-3a). The ESV is the most recent, and it is essentially an updating and revision of the RSV. As opposed to the NRSV, which also is a revision of the RSV but attempts to neutralize gender bias, the ESV translators had no compunctions about using a word like "brothers" where a mixed group was probably intended. The NKJV also should be mentioned here, which is the updating of the traditional KJV mostly with changes in archaic usage but still retaining the underlying base of the *Textus Receptus*.

Those translations that are more open to dynamic equivalency include *The New English Bible* (1970), *Today's English Version* (1966), the *New International Version* (1978) and the *Jerusalem Bible* (1966). Each of these versions was a new translation, not a revision of an older translation. The NIV has captured the larger share of readership and now is standard in many Christian congregations. It is dubbed "international," because the scholars who worked on it were from a variety of English-speaking countries, such as, Canada, England, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. Further, the translators came from a variety of Christian denominations, including Anglican, Baptist, Brethren, Church of Christ, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Nazarene, Presbyterian and Christian Reformed.

In addition, paraphrases have been popular, especially *The Living Bible* by Kenneth Taylor (1971). The problem with paraphrases, of course, is that they may take undue liberties in adding, omitting or altering the original in such a way that equivalence in meaning is not transferred.[24] For instance, in *The Living Bible* Taylor sometimes expands upon the original text, such as when he describes Amos as a "herdsman living in the village of Tekoa. All day long he sat on the hillsides watching the sheep, keeping them from straying" (Am. 1:1a). Anyone conversant with the Hebrew text of Amos 1:1 will immediately see that this expansion, while certainly idiomatic and readable, is simply not in the original text itself. He renders Isaiah 40:26: "As a shepherd leads his sheep, calling each by its pet name, and counts them to see that none are lost or strayed, so God does the stars and planets!" Such interpretive renderings might have been fine for Taylor's children, for whom he originally began this paraphrasing, but it hardly represents the Hebrew text! In Jordan's *Cotton Patch Version,* another paraphrase, the

[24] S. Kubo & W. Specht, *So Many Versions? Twentieth Century Versions of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), p. 17.

translator substitutes American southern people and places for the biblical ones. Instead of Corinth, he has "Atlanta," while Jews and Gentiles become "Whites" and "Negroes." Sometimes translations can become mini-commentaries, such as one finds in Francis Siewart's *Amplified Bible* (1958). Here, the text is expanded with additional words and phrases that might have been possible meanings in the original, but often, that are not all possible at the same time. Some of the expansions cannot be supported by the underlying original text. For instance, in Matthew 2:13, it reads, "Get up! [Tenderly] take…the young Child," and in Mark 8:35, it reads, "For whoever wants to save his [higher, spiritual, eternal] life, will lose [the lower, natural, temporal which is lived (only) in earth]…" Such expansions go considerably beyond what the original text will allow.

Undoubtedly, English Bible translation will continue, if for no other reason than that the English language continues to evolve. In this brief history we have sketched in some of the major efforts over the centuries. In all cases, however, the history of the English Bible has been an important, indeed crucial, effort to render the Word of God in the language of the people. This effort continues to go forward with attendant challenges, not only in approximating modern English, but in discovering nuances of ancient languages. The translators of the KJV were quite frank in this regard, and their sentiments serve as a sound benchmark for the future. They wrote:

> *There be many words in the Scriptures, which be never found there but once (having neither brother nor neighbor, as the Hebrews speak) so that we cannot be holpen by conference of places. Again, there be many rare names of certain birds, beasts, and precious stones, etc., concerning which the Hebrews themselves are so divided among themselves for judgment, that they may seem to have defined this or that, rather because they would say something, than because they were sure of that which they said.*

While important advances have been made in all these areas, since our knowledge of ancient Hebrew and Greek has been increasing over the generations, still it must be said that in principle we continue to work toward clarity in meaning, conceding that there are occasions when we cannot be as clear as we should wish. So, may the work continue! May the God of the Word bless our efforts to make clear the Word of God!