

Where Did We Get Our English Bible?¹

Back in 1966, the founder of Wycliffe Bible Translators promoted a special day to honor the work of Bible translation. The US Congress proclaimed that Sept 30 of each year would be marked as Bible Translation Day. That special day is not marked on most calendars, but it is an officially recognized day set aside by Congress to highlight the importance of the work of Bible translation.

Anyone of us can easily read several English language translations of the Bible. We probably don't appreciate all the work and sacrifice that has made it possible for us to read the Bible in our own language and in a format that we can easily understand.

Some of us are likely not aware of how and why we have the Bible in the English language. Some perhaps think that the Bible just dropped out of heaven and into our laps. It just showed up in the book store. People believe some crazy conspiracy theories regarding the origins of the Bible; there is a lot of misinformation about that topic floating around. A brief study of where we got the English Bible might be helpful.

Why do we need a translation of the Bible into our language?

*1 Corinthians 14:7–9 And even things without life giving sound, whether pipe or harp, except they give a distinction in the sounds, how shall it be known what is piped or harped? 8 For if the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle? 9 So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words **easy to be understood**, how shall it be known what is spoken?*

The point of a Bible translation is to provide “words easy to be understood.” We need the Bible translated into a format that we can understand. That's what we have in good English Bible translations.

Of course, we have to start with the original language biblical documents. The Bible was given to us in Hebrew and Greek, not in English. How did it come to be translated into English?

¹ Most of this material comes from William Combs, former professor at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary.

I. Old English or Anglo-Saxon Period, 450–1150

- A. The English language originated in northern Europe, places like Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands. It came to the British Isles in the 5th century AD. So there were no English translations of the Bible before that.
- B. At this time, the Bible typically read at church was the Latin Vulgate, and most common people could not read Latin or understand much of it. Most people probably could not even read English; illiteracy was very common.
- C. The first English translation from this period was by a farmer named Caedmon, who rendered various portions of the OT (Genesis, Exodus, and Daniel) into English poetry around 670 AD. These were poems of Bible stories that could be memorized by the common people, not a proper translation. But that was the earliest English translation effort that historians are aware of.

II. Middle English Period, 1380–1475

The main character during this era was John Wycliffe (c. 1330–84)

- A. Wycliffe is often called “The Morning Star of the Reformation.” He was a scholar who taught at Oxford, and he believed that the Bible was the only rule of faith and practice. If every person was responsible to obey the Bible, then the whole Bible should be translated into English.
- B. Wycliffe, with some help from others, produced the first complete English Bible about 1380. The Wycliffe Bible was translated from the Latin Vulgate, not the original languages.

III. Modern English Period, 1475—

The invention of the printing press in 1454 by Johann Gutenberg made widespread circulation of the Bible possible for the first time. Prior to that, all copies of the Bible were hand-written, and thus, very expensive. Further, this was the beginning of the Renaissance, and scholars were able to translate Scriptures from their original languages.

A. William Tyndale (c. 1494–1536)

1. Tyndale was discouraged about the spiritual condition of the people of his era, and he hoped that translating the Bible into the common language of the people would educate them about spiritual matters.
2. Tyndale discovered that even the clergy knew little about the Bible. In a debate with a Roman Catholic priest, he said: “If God spare my life, [before] many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough [to] know more of the Scripture than thou doest.”
3. He was not allowed to do his translation work in England because of a previous ban on Bible translation, so he went to Germany. In 1526, Tyndale produced the first printed English NT. He was the first Englishman to translate from the original Greek and Hebrew.
4. His NT was smuggled into England, where the authorities attempted to buy and then burn as many copies as possible. But the money that went to buy copies for burning was used to print more copies.
5. In 1536, Tyndale was convicted as a heretic and burned at the stake. His last words were: “Lord open the King of England’s eyes.” What Tyndale probably did not know was that just before he spoke those words, King Henry VIII had allowed a version of the Bible, which was largely Tyndale’s own work, to be circulated in England—Coverdale’s Bible.
6. Tyndale’s version of the NT provided the basis for all other English Bibles for the next 500 years. Eighty to ninety percent of the KJV NT is from Tyndale. He continued to have an influence even after his death because his colleagues continued the work of Bible translation.
7. It’s amazing that Tyndale, the first one to translate the Bible into English from the original languages, did such fine work that he influenced Bible translations for centuries, long after his death.

B. Miles Coverdale (1488–1569)

1. Coverdale was a graduate of Cambridge and a RC monk who became a Protestant under the influence of Reformation teaching. Because of his beliefs, he was forced to leave England in 1528 and moved in Antwerp (Belgium), where he eventually became an assistant to Tyndale.
2. In 1535, Coverdale produced the first complete printed English Bible. It was probably printed in Cologne (Germany). His NT was a slight revision of Tyndale's translation.
3. Coverdale's 1537 edition became the first whole English Bible to be printed in England.

C. Thomas Matthew (c. 1500–1555)

1. Thomas Matthew was the pen name of John Rogers. Rogers graduated from Cambridge, served as a minister in London, and in 1534 met Tyndale in Antwerp and became one of his assistants.
2. In 1537 he produced his version called Matthew's Bible, printed in Antwerp.
3. The Archbishop of Canterbury had wanted to get an English Bible officially licensed by the King. He obtained a royal license for Matthew's Bible as well as the Coverdale Bible. So in 1537 there were two English Bibles, Coverdale's and Matthew's, circulating in England. They were both essentially minor revisions of Tyndale.

D. The Great Bible — 1539

1. British officials wanted the Bible to be placed in all the churches; and in 1538, Oliver Cromwell issued a decree to that effect. Coverdale's edition was too small for a church Bible, and Matthew's Bible contained notes that were rather controversial.

2. The Great Bible was a revision of Matthew's Bible by Miles Coverdale. The Great Bible became the first Bible authorized to be used in the Church of England. The clergy were ordered to place a copy in a convenient place in every church. Again, this Bible was mostly Tyndale's work.
3. The Great Bible was also known as the Chained Bible. It was one of the most beautiful books ever printed and thus very valuable. It soon became a target of theft. The Great Bible was often chained to the pulpit to prevent anyone from stealing it.

E. The Geneva Bible — 1560

1. Many English Protestants had fled to Geneva during Queen Mary's reign; she was a Roman Catholic—"Bloody Mary," who killed many Protestant leaders. A group of Englishmen living in Geneva produced the Geneva Bible in 1560.
2. The Geneva Bible was marked by a number of noteworthy firsts that contributed to its popularity.
 - a) It was printed with clear, readable Roman type. Bibles before this time used a printing style that was rather hard to read. The Geneva Bible was easy to read.
 - b) It was the first English Bible to introduce numbered verses.
 - c) It was also the first Bible to use italics to mark those words which the translators added for clarity.
 - d) It contained a very extensive set of explanatory notes. Some of these notes were rather controversial and caused some hostility toward the publication. King James famously hated the Geneva Bible notes.
 - e) Most printings of the Geneva version were issued in small, conveniently sized editions and were sold at a moderate price.

3. For about 75 years, the Geneva version was the household Bible of most of English-speaking Protestants. Famous authors like William Shakespeare and by John Bunyan used the Geneva Bible and quoted from it. The Pilgrims brought the Geneva Bible to America on the Mayflower in 1620.
 4. The Geneva Bible was so popular that it was quoted by the translators of the Kings James Version in their preface.
- F. The Bishops' Bible — 1568
1. Leaders in the church of England recognized that the Geneva Bible was superior to the Great Bible. However, the Geneva was not acceptable to them, mainly because of its controversial notes.
 2. Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury, became the editor-in-chief of a new English Bible. He and sixteen colleagues made a new translation and called it the Bishops' Bible.
 3. But it was not well received by the majority of the people; it was not particularly well done and never became popular. Most people still preferred the Geneva Bible.
- G. The Douai-Rheims Version — 1609–10
1. This was the first Catholic translation of the Bible into English.
 2. The translation was done at a college in Douai, France. The source was the Latin Vulgate.
 3. The reason for this translation was not a desire to make the Word of God accessible to all English-speakers in their common language, but primarily as a tool for refuting Protestants, who were constantly appealing to Scripture. English Catholics wanted a translation they could quote from when debating Protestants rather than having to translate from the Latin.

H. The King James Version — 1611

1. After Queen Elizabeth's death in 1603, King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England. At a conference of religious officials in 1604, a Puritan leader suggested that a new translation was needed to replace the Bishops' Bible.
2. King James detested the Geneva Bible because of its notes, and he liked the idea of a new translation. With his permission, work on a new translation began.
3. About 50 of the leading biblical scholars in England began work on the translation. They were organized into six groups: three for the OT, two for the NT, and one for the Apocrypha. The groups worked at Westminster, Oxford, and Cambridge.
4. The KJV was a revision of the Bishops' Bible. The translators consulted the original languages as well as other English versions, including Tyndale's, Matthew's, Coverdale's, the Great Bible, and the Geneva Bible.
5. When the whole Bible had been translated, a group of twelve men reviewed it.
6. A study of the text of the KJV itself shows that the Tyndale/Coverdale versions were the primary sources. It appears that they kept about 80% of what Tyndale had done.
7. The translators admired the work of previous translators and recognized that other translations are also the Word of God. They note that there is nothing particularly unique about their work—it is a continuation of the process of revision of previous translations.
8. King James did not want the new translation to contain marginal notes, but the translators included them anyways. Such notes often aid the readers' understanding the text. The 1611 KJV included over 7,000 marginal notes.

9. Like all books printed at the time (and some still today), the original printing of the KJV contained a number of interesting errors.
 - a) A 1631 edition left out “not” in the seventh commandment (“Thou shalt commit adultery”) and got the name “Wicked Bible” (the publisher was fined 300 pounds, over \$50,000 in modern money).
 - b) A 1795 Oxford edition became known as the “Murderer’s Bible” because Mark 7:27 read “Let the children first be killed,” instead of “filled.”
 - c) Perhaps the most humorous printing error was the one that once showed up in Psalm 119:161, which instead of reading “princes have persecuted me without a cause,” read “printers have persecuted me without a cause.”
10. Although the KJV was superior to all previous versions, it was not well-received at first. Several prominent Christian leaders criticized the new translation. Many Protestants continued to use the Geneva Bible until it went out of print in 1644.
11. Although the KJV is often called the Authorized Version, King James never officially authorized or endorsed it. Henry VIII authorized the Great Bible, but James did not officially authorize the KJV.

Printers of the KJV often included the words “Appointed to be read in the churches” on the title page, but history has no record of an official authorization for the KJV.²
12. People are often not aware that the KJV is itself a revision and that it has been revised over the years. That means that the KJV we read today differs in some details from what was originally printed in 1611.

² Jack P. Lewis, *The English Bible/From KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation* (Baker, 1981), 35.

When the KJV was published in 1611, there were actually two printed editions, with over 200 minor variations in the biblical text between the two.³

- a) 1st Major Revision — 1629
- b) 2nd Major Revision — 1638
- c) 3rd Revision — 1762; this work had limited impact because a large portion was destroyed by a fire.
- d) 4th Major Revision — 1769 (Benjamin Blayney)

If you are using the KJV today, it is almost certain that it is Blayney's 1769 revision. Although it was originally published in 1611, virtually no one actually uses the 1611 KJV.

And you might notice, if you pay very close attention, that there are differences between published copies of the KJV. For example, the Cambridge and the Oxford editions of the KJV contain several hundred very minor differences between the two published editions.

The KJV that we have today is not exactly the same as what came off the presses in 1611. Like almost all translations, it has been revised. There are various reasons to revise a work, but the intent is to improve it.

Here is what the KJV translators said in their preface: "We do not deny, nay, we affirm and avow, that the very meanest [worst] translation of the Bible in *English* set forth by men of our profession . . . is the word of God."

In spite of minor deficiencies, the translations prior to the KJV were the word of God. The KJV is the Word of God.

³ Norton, *Textual History of the King James Bible*, pp. 173–79.

Quote: For more than two centuries [the KJV] accomplished what a Bible translation should. It spoke directly to the heart of the common man; [the average reader] forgot it was a translation and came to think that it was the original Bible⁴

For all intents and purposes, it was and is. Every accurate translation of the Bible is, essentially, the original Bible. Scholars still debate the fine points and minor details, but for our purposes, the Bibles that we carry are the same as what God originally inspired.

I won't take the time to talk about all the other more modern English translations of the Bible. The KJV held priority from the mid-1600s until the late 1800s when the Revised Version was published. And from that time until today, hundreds of English Bible translations have been made, some good, many not so good.

As we observe Bible Translation Day, we should be thankful for people like Wycliffe and Tyndale and their associates and colleagues, who risked their lives to translate and publish the Bible in English. We should be thankful that we have such easy access to the English Bible as we do today. There is no excuse for us to be ignorant of God's Word.

Isaiah 40:8 *The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever.*

For readers of the English language, the Word of God has been available since the late 1300s. But many people in the world are still waiting for the Bible to be translated into their heart language.

We appreciate the continuing efforts of those who are translating the Bible into languages that still do not have the Bible.

We have the Bible in our language. We ought to read it, love it, obey it, and proclaim it.

⁴ Lewis, *The English Bible*, 33.