

Names You Should Know in Bible Translation¹

Back in 1966, the founder of Wycliffe Bible Translators established 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.

As it stands today, over 800 people groups have received the entire Bible in their own heart language. That means that about 6 billion people can read the complete Bible in their first language.

Sadly, many people groups still do not have any part of the Bible in their native languages. Our goal should be that the Bible is available to everyone on the planet in a language they understand. We should support the ongoing work of Bible translation.

We have the great privilege of reading 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.

In previous years, we've looked at much of the history of the translation of the Bible into English. Today I want to focus on the people who were involved in this process. I want to consider some of the most important people who have been responsible for the most significant Bible translations.

Normally, I preach *from* the Bible; we typically go verse by verse through a passage of Scripture on Sunday mornings. But today, I'll be speaking *about* the Bible and I'll be highlighting some of the most important names in the history of Bible translation.

¹ Many of the details here comes from William Combs, former professor at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary. See his material, *How We Got Our Bibles*.

The Bible tells us that “All Scripture is given by inspiration” and that “Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.” God originally revealed his word to prophets and apostles in Hebrew and Greek. Under God’s providence, other people translated the Bible into various languages.

We’ll be looking at about a dozen important people in the field of Bible translation. I’m not defending all of these people or implying that I am in favor of their work. I’m not endorsing all of these people or claiming that they were exemplary Christians. I’m only saying that we should be aware of these major figures in the work of Bible translation and appreciate what they have done for us.

We begin our survey of important people in Bible translation with ...

I. The Seventy (LXX)

- A. One of the earliest translations of Scripture was the translation of the Hebrew OT into the Greek language. This work is called the Septuagint (meaning “seventy,” abbreviated as LXX)
- B. This work began in Egypt around 250 B.C. and was completed by 100 B.C. This translation was needed because most Jews outside of Palestine at that time knew only Greek. They wanted a translation of the Hebrew Bible in a language they spoke.
- C. According to legend (Letter of Aristeas, 100 B.C.), the Septuagint was the work of 72 Jews, six from each tribe, who came to Alexandria at the request of Egyptian ruler Ptolemy Philadelphus.
- D. The LXX is not a single, unified translation; it’s a set of MSS produced by different people in different places using various methods produced over the course of several centuries.

It’s mostly a good translation, but varies a bit in accuracy. Some parts amount to a paraphrase rather than a literal translation.

- E. People from other countries used the LXX to make translations for themselves. This Greek translation, not the original Hebrew, was the main basis for several ancient translations: e.g., the Old Latin, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian, Slavonic, and Arabic translations of the OT.²

Trans: The LXX was one of the very first translations of the Bible. Skipping ahead a few centuries, we have our next major translator, ...

II. Jerome (ca. 342–420)

- A. Eusebius Hieronymus Sophronius, more commonly known as Jerome, was probably the greatest Christian scholar of his era. Perhaps the most important single figure in the history of Bible translation, he spent three decades creating a Latin version that would be the standard for more than a thousand years.³
- B. In 383, the bishop of Rome asked Jerome to produce a uniform and reliable text of the Old Latin Scriptures. Old Latin translations varied widely in accuracy and quality. Jerome undertook a thorough revision of the Old Latin, which he finished about 405.

He translated from the Hebrew MSS and from the Greek LXX.
- C. This translation became known as The Vulgate because Latin was the common language spoken by educated people in Europe. The word “vulgar” means “common.” The common language had been Greek, but Latin replaced it gradually in the west. The Vulgate was the Bible of the European church for the next 1000 years and had a profound influence on modern Bible translations made prior to the 19th century.
- D. The first book printed on Gutenberg’s press in 1454 was Jerome’s Latin Vulgate. Jerome’s translation had a profound impact on the church and the entire western culture.

² “Septuagint” in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Septuagint>

³ Mark Galli and Ted Olsen, “Introduction,” in *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 337.

III. Caedmon (ca. 670)

Caedmon was a farmer who translated 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; it was not a full, literal translation. But that was the earliest English translation effort that historians are aware of.

Other translators around this same time include:

- A. Aldhelm, Bishop of Sherborne, translated the Psalms around 700.
- B. Egbert, Bishop of York, probably translated Matthew, Mark, and Luke around 705.
- C. The Venerable Bede, who was the greatest scholar in England in the 8th century, may have translated the Gospel of John.
- D. King Alfred the Great (849–899) translated a few part of the Bible.
- E. Alefric (ca. 955–1020), abbot of Eynsham, translated portions of the first seven books of the OT.

So during the early middle ages, some small parts of the Bible were translated into English, but no one translated the entire Bible into English until ...

IV. John Wycliffe (ca. 1330–84)

- A. Wycliffe is often called “The Morning Star of the Reformation” because he was one of the first to try to reform the church by appealing to the Scriptures.
- B. He was born around 1330 and studied theology at Oxford. He had the reputation of being the most brilliant man at the University.⁴ He taught the Bible there and also served as the pastor of a local church.
- C. Wycliffe believed that the Bible was the only rule of faith and practice. If every person was responsible to obey the Bible, then everybody should be able to read the Bible in his own language. He believed that the whole Bible should be translated into English.

⁴Dallas Theological Seminary, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 105:446.

Quote Wycliffe: “The Bible is the faith of the Church, and the more widely it becomes known the better it will be. Therefore, since the [common people] should know the faith, it should be taught in whatever language is most easily understood.”

- D. Wycliffe, with some help from others, produced the first complete English Bible about 1380.
- E. The Wycliffe Bible was translated from the Latin Vulgate, not the original languages.

Wycliffe’s influence continued so strongly that the RCC formally condemned him at the Council of Constance (1414), long after his death. Church officials ordered that his writings be destroyed, his bones removed from the grave and burned, and the ashes to be thrown into a nearby river.

V. Johann Gutenberg (c. 1454)

Gutenberg was not a translator, but his invention of the printing press made the work of Bible publication far easier. Before the invention of the printing press, everything was copied by hand. We call those copies “manuscripts,” and they were very expensive and difficult to make. Hand-copying was also prone to errors.

Gutenberg invented the printing press in the mid-1400s, which made widespread publication of the Bible possible for the first time. And for the first time, each copy was exactly the same as all the other copies.

So the printing press was a genuine revolution for publishing the Bible.

Not too long after the invention of the printing press, another important person in the history of Bible translation arose, namely ...

VI. Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536)

Erasmus was born the illegitimate son of a Dutch priest. He was a very accomplished scholar who became an Augustinian monk and later the secretary to a bishop. Having first mastered Latin, Erasmus began to study Greek at the University of Paris and then at Oxford in 1499.

On a visit to Basel, Switzerland, in 1514, Erasmus talked to a local printer about the possibility of publishing a NT in both Latin and Greek. His idea was to print his own Latin translation next to a Greek text to show that his Latin followed the Greek better than Jerome's Latin Vulgate did.

Erasmus returned to Basel in July of 1515 and began the project. The work was carried on at a frantic pace, involving two presses, and was completed on March 7, 1516. Erasmus himself confessed that the first edition was "thrown together rather than edited." The text included numerous misprints.

Erasmus revised his Greek NT over the next few years, correcting errors and misprints. He supervised five editions of his work, and then other publishers took his Greek NT, revised it somewhat, and published it.

Another name associated with the work of Erasmus is Theodore Beza. He is important because he published nine editions of Erasmus' Greek NT between 1565 and 1604. Scholars believe that the KJV translators used Beza's 1598 edition of the Greek NT as their main source for their translation of the NT. So we can trace the KJV NT right back to Beza and eventually to Erasmus.

Around that same time, another important figure was doing translation work...

VII. William Tyndale (c. 1494–1536)

- A. Tyndale was born in western England. He was a very good student who had a profound talent for languages. Around 1515, he was ordained into the priesthood. He eventually read the works of Martin Luther. Tyndale became a Protestant believer while he was a student at Cambridge—he embraced the biblical teaching that salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone.
- B. 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.
- C. Tyndale discovered that even the clergy of his day 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."

App: This is another important principle of Bible translation: the boy who drives the plow—a common laborer—ought to be able to read and understand his translation of the Bible. The Bible ought to reflect the common language of the common person.

- D. Tyndale 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, he produced the first printed English NT translated from the original Greek. Earlier translations into English had come from Latin.
- E. Translating the Bible into English was illegal at that time, so Tyndale's friends smuggled those Bibles into England. The authorities attempted to destroy Tyndale's translation. They bought and burned as many copies as they could find. But Tyndale was making money on every copy that he sold, and the money was used to print more copies.
- F. 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. Tyndale's Bible was already in circulation and having a major effect on the English-speaking world.
- G. Tyndale's version of the NT provided the basis for most other English Bibles for the next 400 years. About 80% of the KJV NT is directly from Tyndale. He continued to have an influence even after his death because his colleagues continued to use his work in their Bible translations.

One of Tyndale's colleagues was a man named ...

VIII. Miles Coverdale (1488–1569)

- A. 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 to Antwerp (Belgium), where he eventually became an assistant to Tyndale.

- B. 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.
- C. Coverdale's 1537 edition became the first whole English Bible to be printed in England.

Another of Tyndale's associates was ...

IX. John Rogers (aka Thomas Matthew, c. 1500–1555)

- A. Rogers graduated from Cambridge, served as a minister in London, and in 1534 met Tyndale in Antwerp and became one of his assistants. He took on the name Thomas Matthew to confuse the authorities who were trying to stop English Bible translation efforts.
- B. In 1537 he produced his version called Matthew's Bible, printed in Antwerp.
- C. The Archbishop of Canterbury wanted the King to officially license an English Bible. 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, published and available in England. They were both essentially minor revisions of Tyndale.

X. Miles Coverdale and the translators of the Geneva Bible (c. 1560)

- A. Many English Protestants, including Miles Coverdale, had fled to Geneva, Switzerland, during the reign of Queen Mary—"Bloody Mary." Mary was a fervent RC, and she persecuted Protestants and tried to destroy their Bibles. Coverdale and other exiled Englishmen produced the Geneva Bible in 1560.

A fellow named William Whittingham was apparently the main editor of the Geneva Bible.

- B. When Queen Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558, Coverdale and many other English Protestants returned to England. The Geneva Bible contained a dedication to Queen Elizabeth.
- C. The NT of the Geneva Bible was essentially a revision of Tyndale.

- D. The Geneva Bible was marked by a number of noteworthy firsts that contributed to its popularity.
1. It was printed with clear Roman type. Previous English Bibles were printed in a heavy Gothic type, which was harder to read.
 2. It was the first English Bible to introduce numbered verses, each set off as a separate paragraph.
 3. It was also the first Bible to use italics to mark those words which the translators added to enhance understanding in English, but which are not represented in the original.
 4. It contained an extensive set of explanatory notes.
 5. It was published in small, conveniently sized editions and sold at a moderate price.

For about 75 years, the Geneva version was the household Bible of most English-speaking Protestants. The Geneva Bible was the version used by Shakespeare and John Bunyan. The Pilgrims and other early settlers brought the Geneva Bible to America.

All of that happened about 50 years before ...

XI. King James and John Reynolds (1611)

- A. After Queen Elizabeth's death in 1603, King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England.
- B. At a conference of church officials in 1604, a Puritan leader, John Reynolds, suggested that a new translation was needed to replace the version currently in use (the Bishops' Bible).
- C. King James hated the Geneva Bible because of its notes, and he did not appreciate the Bishop's Bible. He liked the idea of a new translation. With his permission, work began.
- D. The king himself had very little to do with the translation. About 50 of the leading biblical scholars in England produced 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.

- E. The translators consulted the original languages as well as other English versions, including Tyndale's, Matthew's, Coverdale's, the Great Bible, the Bishop's Bible, and the Geneva Bible.
- F. When the whole Bible had been translated, a group of twelve men reviewed it.
- G. 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.
- H. Had Reynolds not suggested to the king that a new translation was in order, the KJV never would have been done. He provided the spark for the whole project.

Quote: For more than two centuries [the KJV] accomplished what a Bible translation should. It spoke directly to the heart of the common man; ... he forgot it was a translation and came to think that it was the original Bible⁵

But eventually, people started calling for a new translation, and that effort was led by two British scholars, the dreaded ...

XII. Wescott and Hort (1881)

- A. By 1870, some religious leaders in England were calling for a minimal revision of the KJV. But the result was a translation that was significantly different from the KJV.
- B. Under the leadership of British scholars Wescott and Hort, the revision committee published the Revised Version in 1881.
- C. John Burgon, Dean of Chichester, was a fervent opponent of the Revised Version. He published a series of articles highly critical of the translation; he called it "the most astonishing, as well as the most calamitous literary blunder of the Age." I have that book.
- D. The RV NT was published in 1881 with 3 million copies sold the first year. Many English Christians accepted the Revised Version, but it never replaced the KJV in most churches.

⁵ Lewis, *The English Bible*, 33.

Charles Spurgeon summed up the situation when he said that the RV was “strong in Greek, weak in English.”

- E. An American edition came out in 1901. Many scholars believe the American Revised Version is just about the most literal version of the Bible published in the English language.

XIII. Modern language version translators

The Revised Version opened the flood gates to the production of modern language versions of the Bible. Various individuals produced versions of the Bible, such as...

- A. Richard Weymouth (1903)
- B. James Moffatt (1913, 1924)
- C. J. B. Phillips (1958)
- D. Kenneth Taylor (1967, 1971)

These were mostly the work of single individuals. Normally speaking, a translation produced by one person is not going to be as accurate as a translation done by a committee of scholars.

- E. Most of the latest modern translations are the work of large committees of scholars working together instead of one person doing most of the work.

Many other people have been involved in the process of translating the Bible, but those I've named are the most prominent figures in English Bible translation work.

All of these translations of the Bible into the English language had one purpose—to provide us with a Bible we can read and understand. Each new translation was an attempt to provide an accurate and accessible English Bible. We are blessed to have several good translations from which we can read and profit.

We should be thankful for all of those who were involved in translating the Bible so that people can have the Word of God in their own language and understand it. “Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God.”

We are glad that the work of Bible translation continues. Various agencies are still at work translating the Bible into the heart languages of various people groups scattered throughout the world. E.g., BI.

Maybe there is a young person here today who could commit himself to the work of Bible translation. There are many people groups who are still waiting for a copy of the Bible in their own heart language. This would be a very meaningful task to which one could devote his life.

All the work that goes into Bible translation is for nothing if we don't read our Bibles. Having a translation of the Bible in our language is a wonderful privilege, but the purpose of a translation is that we would read and understand what God has said and is saying to us today. Pick up a copy of the Bible and read it!