How We Got the Bible

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# The English Bible to 1611

## Introduction

Christianity made its entrance into Britain no later than the third century, but at that time the Scriptures were not available in translation. The Latin language was then assuming dominance in the West as the language of the learned, which meant the early Bibles in England were not in English but Latin. Yet it was in England, so long deprived of the Living Word, where the battle was fought and won for the right of the common man to have his Bible in this own language.

## The Earliest English Versions

The beginnings of the English Bible go back to the middle of the seventh century. An unlearned laborer by the name of Caedmon (657-684) is reported to have arranged in verse from stories of the Bible on subjects ranging from the creation to the work of the apostles. Although these verses were not really translations, they mark the first known attempt to put the Bible accounts in the native Anglo-Saxon.

The next generation saw the first actual translation of any part of the Bible in English. The translation was the work of Aldhelm (d. 709), and the portion of Scripture translated was the Book of Psalms.

A little later the venerable Bede (d. 735) is said to have finished in the last hours of his life a translation of the Gospel of John, but of his translation nothing has been preserved.

Toward the close of the ninth century King Alfred (d. 901) led his people in a religious reform that resulted in a translation of the Psalms and other sections of Scripture.

In the tenth century Abbot Aelfric translated additional portion of the Old Testament.

The Norman Conquest in 1066 brought about many changes in England. Chief among these was a modification of the language, now known as Middle English.

It was not until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries before parts of the Bible were put in English, and here the names of William of Shoreham and Richard Rolle stand out. It was their work on the Psalms in the first half of the fourteenth century that planted the seed of a struggle which was to last for two centuries in putting the Bible in the hand s of the common people.

## John Wycliffe (1330 – 1384)

During his life, England full of f action and unrest, much of which had been brought on by the Roman pope’s excessive demands for money. He was an Oxford scholar and teacher who emerged in the controversy over papal oppression as the champion of the people. Wycliffe’s first written work was in defense of Parliament in 1366 for its refusal to turn over money claimed by the pope. He and his associates called England to the great spiritual revival of the fourteenth century.

It was Wycliffe’s peculiar idea that common man was worth something. “No man,” he said, “was so rude a scholar but that he might learn the words of the Gospel according to his simplicity. During the last years of his life, Wycliffe undertook a translation of the Scriptures from Latin into the English tongue and completed in 1382. It was the first English translation of the complete Bible. No one knows how much, if any, did Wycliffe do of the actual translation, yet we refer to the translation as the Wycliffe version. Due to his scholarship and influence the historic project was accomplished.

In about 1388 and anonymous revision of Wycliffe’s Bible appeared, translated perhaps by John Purvey who was one of the Lollards, followers of Wycliffe. Lollardy and Wycliffe’s Bible were to prepare the way in England for the Reformation of the sixteenth century.

## William Tyndale (1494 – 1536)

The true father of the English Bible is William Tyndale. The story of Tyndale and his unrelenting efforts to put the Bible in the hands of the people is a story of triumph mingled with tears. His ambition was to give the English people a translation of the Bible based not on Latin but the original Greek and Hebrew and this became his chief end in life.

When Erasmus, a monk-scholar, issued the printed New Testament in Greek in 1516, Tyndale had set out to translate it. In 1524, Tyndale had to leave England after finding out that there was no place to do the work in England. He went to Germany, where by now his efforts at translation associated him with the Reformer Martin Luther, who has recently finished a translation into German. Many enemies of the Reformation and of Luther were likewise enemies of Tyndale.

* 1526 – Tyndale’s first copies of the New Testament were smuggled into England
* 1530 – Tyndale translated the Pentateuch
* 1531 – Tyndale translated Jonah
* 1534 – Tyndale published a revised Genesis
* 1534-35 – Tyndale published two additional editions of the New Testament

He coined such words as “Passover,” “scapegoat,” “mercy seat,” and “long-suffering.” His many expression is unforgettable and cherished by countless readers of the English Bible.

"My part be not in Christ if mine heart be not to follow and live according as I teach." On Mondays he visited other religious refugees from England. On Saturdays he walked Antwerp's streets, seeking to minister to the poor. On Sundays he dined in merchants' homes, reading Scripture before and after dinner. The rest of the week he devoted to writing tracts and books and translating the Bible.

In 1535, Tyndale was betrayed, Judas-like, and was imprisoned near Brussels. On Friday, October 6, 1536, after local officials took their seats, Tyndale was brought to the cross in the middle of the town square and given a chance to recant. That refused, he was given a moment to pray. English historian John Foxe said he cried out, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes!"

Then he was bound to the beam, and both an iron chain and a rope were put around his neck. Gunpowder was added to the brush and logs. At the signal of a local official, the executioner, standing behind Tyndale, quickly tightened the noose, strangling him. Then an official took up a lighted torch and handed it to the executioner, who set the wood ablaze.

## Other Sixteenth-Century Translations

Admires of Tyndale like to think that while he was in prison he heard about the publication in England (1535) of Bible partly based on his own. The Bible was that of Miles Coverdale, a former friend and associate of Tyndale. It was significant because it was the first in England to circulate without official hinderance. A flood of translations and revisions was to follow.

* 1537 – Matthew’s Bible was the work of John Rogers, Tyndale’s friend and was a combination of Tyndale and Coverdale’s work
* 1539 – Taverner’s Bible was an independent revision of Matthew’s Bible
* 1539 – Another revision of the Matthew’s Bible known as the Great Bible. It was the first of the English Bibles authorized to be read in churches. I was Henry VIII wish that the Great Bible be in every church and so it was.
* 1560 – Geneva Bible written in Geneva during Queen Mary’s persecution of non-Catholics. It became the most popular Bible because it was in legible type, in small form, with accompanying commentary and illustrations. It became the Bible of the family as the Great Bible was the Bible of the church.
  + It was the Bible of used by Shakespeare
  + It was the Bible of the Jamestown settlement in Virginia
  + It was the Bible brought to Plymouth on the Mayflower
  + It was the Bible that brought improved Hebrew and Greek scholarship
  + It was still popular even after the appearance of the King James Version
* 1568 – Geneva Bible was not popular with the English, so it was revised by English clergy because its commentaries presented view of John Calvin. This became know as the Bishop’s Bible.
* 1582 – Roman Catholic translation of the New Testament from the Latin Vulgate
* 1609-10 – Roman Catholic translation of the Old Testament from the Latin Vulgate

## The King James Version

The Authorized Version of 1611, better known as the King James Version, did what its many predecessors were unable to do, provide a translation for public and private use which was satisfactory to all.

* In 1604 King James summoned a meeting of representatives of diverse religious groups to discuss the question of religious toleration, also know as the Hampton Court Conference.
* Kings James laid down the main requirements of which no notes of comments were to be put in only to those that were essential to translating the text. The Geneva Bible were one-sided in its comments
* By 1607 the work of the translators had begun. Their task was not to make a new translation but to revise the 1602 edition of the Bishop’s Bible.
* About 48 choice Greek and Hebrew scholars were selected and divided into 6 working companies. There 2 groups in Oxford, 2 in Cambridge, and 2 in Westminster, each checking and correcting the work so that no man or group could claim authorship.
* After 7 years, since the convening of the Hampton Court Conference, in 1611 the first copies were printed and dedicated to King James.
* In 1613 a new edition was issued which contained more than four hundred variations from the original printing.

## Conclusion

Tyndale’s translation was the first based on the Greek and Hebrew texts, and it was his labors which opened the way for other translations. How appropriate it is that more than 80 percent of Tyndale’s translation is preserved today in the King James Version. William Tyndale is truly the father of the English Bible.