

How we got the Bible in English

Today we have more than 100 English translations of the Bible and tend to forget that for centuries it was obtainable in England only in Latin and that even when it was translated it was illegal to possess a copy and people were burned at the stake for making it available.

When Christianity came to England it was with the Scriptures in Latin, and the Vulgate, translated from Hebrew and Greek into Latin by Jerome in the late 4th century, became the accepted version of the western church. Only the more educated could understand it, and the church wanted it that way as those in authority wished to retain the power to interpret it and control people's thinking. Although the Vulgate text became corrupted during the Middle Ages it was seen as inspired and most people saw no need to challenge or change that. Remember too that until the mid 15th century every manuscript had to be copied by hand and no ordinary person could possess one.

However, much of the Bible had been translated into Anglo-Saxon, for example by the Venerable Bede in the 8th century, and was also put into song and poetry, which helped spread it to the general population. There is a competent translation of the Gospels, of which we still have manuscripts, dating from the mid 10th century, as well as versions of the first 7 books of the Bible, the Psalms, and various other portions, with King Alfred the Great featuring as one of the translators.

After the Norman Conquest in 1066, Latin and French took over and there was very little translation into the English of the day. The mediaeval church centred on the Mass rather than on the Bible and many people were illiterate, dependent on hearing the liturgy in churches.

In the 14th century John Wycliffe took a stand against the prevailing church culture, saying that the Bible, not the church and the Pope, was the basis of Christian faith and that people needed to have it in their own language. With a group of followers he set out to make that possible and the result was the first complete Bible in English, even if it was not a particularly good translation and was done from the Latin rather than from the original languages. It was welcomed by the ordinary people but opposed by the church, and Wycliffe was also accused of helping to foment the popular revolt against the poll tax. He was placed under house arrest for the last 18 months of his life and later his translation and other books were burned and he was condemned as a heretic. His followers were hunted out and executed and 20 years after his death his body was dug up and burned. But his work could not be destroyed and the illegal English Bible became very popular.

Early in the 16th century William Tyndale, seeing the ignorance of the average clergy and the corruption of the church, and inspired by the work of Martin Luther in Germany, resolved to translate first the New Testament and then the Old into English which would be comprehensible to everyone. By this time printing had been invented and there had been an explosion of scholarship, with Greek and Hebrew being studied, and Tyndale translated from these original languages, completing the New Testament in 1525, though he was unable to finish the Old Testament before his death. He was opposed by the church, and obtained funding from merchants after being turned down by the Bishop of London. He had to flee to Germany and then Belgium to complete the New Testament and get it printed, copies then being smuggled into England. The Bishop of London tried to seize and burn them but there were about 50,000 copies in circulation by the time Tyndale died. He was betrayed, imprisoned and burned at the stake, as were many of his followers, but the distribution of his translation was backed by Henry VIII, even though this was to spite the Pope, with whom he had a personal quarrel! The translation was not perfect and was somewhat partisan in places under the influence of Reformist theology, but it had a tremendous impact and about 90% of it was incorporated into the King James Version (KJV).

Revisions and other translations followed, including the Geneva Bible in 1560, which was the first to contain numbered verses (chapter divisions having been introduced in the 13th century) and the Rheims-Douai in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, produced by the Roman Catholic Church when it gave up the battle against English translations.

After Henry VIII's death there was half a century of turmoil as England alternated between Catholic and Protestant monarchs, with persecution of the other party, but by the time Elizabeth I died in 1603 the English Bible and Protestantism had become accepted, although the Puritans wanted a more radical reform of the church. King James I inherited a number of English translations and considerable religious disunity, and under pressure from Protestants commissioned a new translation. About 50 scholars worked from the original texts, though heavily influenced by Tyndale's version, to produce a Bible in the English of the day which would satisfy all sections of the church. The language was already dated by the time it was published in 1611, but although the tag Authorised Version is misleading as there is no evidence of any official endorsement, it gradually replaced

the Geneva Bible and proved hugely influential on English language and literature. It was also produced in normal sized volumes, enabling individuals to have their own copies for the first time.

There were some revisions and translations over the years which followed, but it was only in the late 19th century that the first major one appeared. The Revised Version, initiated in response to the discovery of better manuscripts and an improved understanding of the original languages, along with a need to update the English, is not significantly different to the KJV. It is a good study version but not in contemporary English style and did not replace the KJV for most people. It was not until the second half of the 20th century that the KJV's predominance was challenged and a plethora of new translations and paraphrases appeared – the Revised Standard Version, the New English Bible, the Good News Bible and the Living Bible among the better known. The New International Version, published in 1978 (the New Testament had appeared in 1973) was the first to become widely popular and to replace the KJV as the translation used by the majority of evangelical Christians. The story is not over and other versions have appeared since, notably The Message, an American paraphrase used especially by some younger people, and the lesser known English Standard Version, which is a more literal translation.

In fact as long as the language continues to evolve, new translations will be needed, to fulfil the aim of Wycliffe, Tyndale and others, that English-speaking people can have an accurate contemporary translation, for which we should be thankful.