

History of the English Bible

What a fascinating history the English Bible has including martyrs, translations by Kings and poets and a search for the definitive translation that would confirm “truth.” Here’s a short, concise history of the English Bible from the earliest times to the late 1800’s and early 1900’s.

443 BC Completion of all the books of the original Hebrew manuscripts that make up the 39 books of the Old Testament

200 BC Completion of the Septuagint Greek Manuscripts that contain the translation of the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 14 books of the Apocrypha.

60 AD Completion of the Greek manuscripts that make up the 27 books of the New Testament

90-95 AD Council of Jamnia, a Jewish council, met to revise the Books of the Canon (or the Old Testament as it is known to Christians.) These were the criteria:

1. The books had to conform to the Pentateuch (the first five books).
2. The books had to be written in Hebrew.
3. The books had to be written in Palestine.
4. The books had to be written before 400 B.C..

One result is the removal of the 14 books known as the Apocrypha.

360 AD Laodocia Council meets to decide which books and writings will be accepted as Holy Scripture. The Greek Septuagint is accepted for the Old Testament. Criteria for the New Testament writings include that they must be written by an Apostle or during the time of the Apostles, that they must support true doctrine and must have wide spread usage. Thus, even though the Shepherd of Hermas, the First Letter of Clement, and the Didache may have been widely used and contain true doctrines. They were not canonical because they were not apostolic nor connected to the apostolic age, or they were local writings without support in many areas.

390 AD Jerome’s Latin Vulgate translation of the Bible is produced and in wide circulation. It includes all 80 books including the Apocrypha. It is used in Celtic monasteries in Britain. During this period the British within the Roman Empire use Latin as the official language

Historical Background: 5th – 6th Century: Germanic peoples who came to Britain bring their dialects of which Saxon becomes standard Old English. Because of this, a need for an English version of the scriptures arises.

7th Century: Herdsman Caedmon, spoken of by Bede, the learned monk of Jarrow, sings the themes of the Bible in English. This becomes a common method for presenting scriptural themes in English.

640 AD to 735 AD Aldheim is credited with translating the whole Bible into English while Bede was still working on completing his translation when he died. The translations of these times are based on translations of the Latin Vulgate version rather than translations of the original Hebrew and Greek versions.

1384 John Wycliffe finishes the first translation of the entire Bible into English. His version and copies of it are handwritten.

1408 Synod of Oxford tries to suppress the Wycliffe Bible with little success.

1455 Gutenberg invents the printing press making it possible to mass produce books. The first book printed is Gutenberg's Bible in Latin.

Historical Background: Reformation

A revolution in western thinking followed the midpoint of the 15th century A.D. The Renaissance opened up the treasures of both classical and patristic learning in a new way. It also revived interest in the study of both Greek and Hebrew that made possible the study of the Bible in the original languages. This new interest in original editions stimulated textual research and also evidenced the corruption and ignorance of the contemporary church anew. The Renaissance created new opportunities for humanist scholars such as Erasmus of Rotterdam, who sought to make the Bible available to people of all ages, social levels, and countries.

More radical in outlook than Renaissance humanists were the Reformers, who measured the teaching and practice of the contemporary church by the standards of scripture. The Reformers were horrified by the obvious discrepancies. There soon emerged a mission to discover the pure biblical message and to reconstruct both the teaching and practice of the church. The Reformers became deeply convinced that it was both reasonable and necessary to circulate God's word to purify the church from ignorance and destructive practices. (from <http://davidsonpress.com>)

1525 William Tyndale's New Testament is completed. His translation is based on the Latin Vulgate, Erasmus Greek and the original Greek manuscripts. His wording and sentence structures are found in most modern day translations of the Bible.

Tyndale was committed to taking the Bible directly to the people. Expressing open defiance of the Pope, Tyndale said that if God would spare his life he would make it possible for even a ploughboy to know more about Holy Scripture than the Pope himself. By August of 1525, his translation of the New Testament was complete. Printing began at Cologne, but when the authorities forbade the project, Tyndale escaped to Worms, where 6,000 copies were printed and sold in England by April of 1526. The official opposition in England led to the destruction of most of these early copies.

Tyndale's English work is similar to that of Martin Luther. Although he used Luther's German translation, Tyndale also drew upon the Latin Vulgate as well as Erasmus' Greek text. Ninety percent of the New Testament in the King James Version (KJV) is Tyndale's translation. By the same token, where the KJV departed from Tyndale's wording, the English Revised Version

(ERV) of 1881 went back to it. Without question, this first printed English New Testament is the basis of all future works in translation.

1536 Tyndale executed. Tyndale did not live to complete his Old Testament translation. On May 21, 1535, he was arrested and later executed for heresy at Vilvorde, Belgium, on October 6, 1536. His dying prayer was that the Lord would open the eyes of the King of England. He left behind a manuscript containing the translation of the historical books from Joshua to 2 Chronicles that was finally published in 1537.

1535 Myles Coverdale, a student of Tyndale's, produces a Bible. It includes 80 books (The 39 Old Testament, 27 New Testament and 14 Apochrypha) His version uses the translations Tyndale was able to complete. Coverdale finished translating the rest of the Bible but not being a Hebrew or Greek scholar his portions are based on intermediate Latin and German translations rather than the original Greek and Hebrew.

1537 Matthews Bible printed. Matthews Bible is really Tyndale's translation supplemented by Coverdale's translation. Henry VIII through the efforts of Archbishop Crammer and Thomas Cromwell gave permission for this English version of the Bible to be bought and sold throughout Britain.

Historical Background Leading to King James (Protestant) and Rheims-Douay (Catholic) Bibles: It is during this time that the Protestant Reformers gain political power in England with the breakoff from the Catholic Church by Henry VIII. The various Bible translations that follow are dependent upon the rise and fall of Protestant power. Mary Tudor is Catholic and during her time no new translations are permitted. Elizabeth is Protestant. Mary Stuart, never allowed to reign, is Catholic. Her son James who became King James I of England and King James VI of Scotland was raised in England by Elizabeth as a Protestant upon Mary Stuart's abdication of the crown of Scotland when James was one year of age.

1539 The Great Bible is called that because of its size but it is basically Matthews Bible and was authorized for public use. It contains 80 books including the Apochrypha as an appendix.

1546 Council of Trent is called to answer the accusations of corruption and apostasy in the Catholic Church by the Protestant Reformers. The Council meets over a 27 year period. One of the results is that Jerome's Latin Vulgate version of the Bible is held to be the official version of the Bible accepted by the Catholic Church.

1560 The Geneva Bible is printed. Verses are added for the first time in this edition. It is also the first translation of the Bible based entirely on the original Hebrew and Greek. It was translated by exiles from England living in Geneva during the Catholic Mary Tudor's reign. The majority of the translation is attributed to William Whittington a relative of John Calvin.

1568 Bishops Bible produced. Because there was no "official" version of the Bible in England at this time, the Archbishop of Canterbury suggested the Geneva Bible be revised by the Bishop's to be used by all the churches. This is the version known as The Bishop's Bible

1609 Rheims-Douay Bible is the First Complete English Catholic Bible. Called Rheims – Douay because the New Testament portion was first completed in Rheims France in 1582 followed by the Old Testament finished in 1609 in Douay. In this version the 14 books of the Apochrypha are returned to the Bible in the order written rather than kept separate in an appendix.

1611 King James Version. The stated purpose of the King James translation was “not to make a bad version good, but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones one principal good one.” It is primarily a re-translation of the Bishop’s Bible. 54 men work on translation using all the widely accepted versions up to then including Bishop’s, Geneva, Matthews, Coverdale and Tyndale translation as well as looking at original manuscripts. All available copies of the original manuscripts are brought in. It is found that the Hebrew manuscripts are virtually identical while there is wide variations in the Greek manuscripts as they have been hand copied and handed down. The 54 men work as teams checking each other’s work. It was printed originally with all 80 books including the Apochrypha again as a separate section.

1613-1901: At that time until today translations have continued as translators gained a better understanding of the Hebrew language and the Greek writers. 300 corrections were made in the 1613 version of the King James Version. In the 18th century Bishop Challoner made revisions to the Rheims-Douay Bible removing some Latin terms and adding the use of King James translation in some areas.

The Apochrypha were removed in 1885 from King James Versions when the English Revised Version was printed and in **1901** when the American Standard Version was printed.

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