

How We Got Our Bible

Lesson 4: History of the English Bible

I. John Wycliffe (ca. 1330–84)

- A. John Wycliffe is often called, “The Morning Star of the Reformation.” He believed that the Bible is our sole authority for faith and practice, and he recognized major differences between the teaching of Scripture and of the RCC.
- B. Wycliffe believed everyone should have access to the Scriptures in their own language. Therefore, he and one of his disciples, Nicholas of Hereford, began working on the first complete English translation of the Bible. The NT was completed in 1380, and the OT in 1388, after Wycliffe’s death.
- C. The Wycliff Bible was a very literal translation of the Latin Vulgate. As a result, it was not very readable, and it did not correct the theological errors in the Vulgate. As well, every Bible had to be hand copied at a cost of roughly six months wages. Still, the Wycliffe Bible circulated widely.

II. William Tyndale (ca. 1494–1536)

- A. Tyndale was teaching at Cambridge University, when Erasmus’s GNT was published in 1516. Tyndale poured over Erasmus’s GNT and became well versed in the theology of the NT.
- B. In 1522, he left Cambridge to return to Gloucestershire where he worked as a tutor in the home of Sir John Walsh. He preached in several local villages and used the Bible to confront the corruption on the church.
- C. The Walsh Family was known for bringing over dinner guests. During an argument with several clergy over for dinner one of the guests declared, “We were better to be without God’s law than the Pope’s.” Tyndale replied with one of his most famous lines, “I defy the Pope and all his laws, and if God spares my life, before many years pass I will make a boy behind the plow to know more Scripture than you do.”
- D. In 1526 Tyndale published the first English NT was translated entirely from the Greek. It’s estimated that in all some 16,000 copies of the Tyndale Bible made their way to England.
- E. Tyndale also translated portions of the OT—Pentateuch (1530), Jonah (1531), and Joshua–2 Chronicles—before he was captured and ultimately burned at the stake in 1536.
- F. Miles Coverdale (1488–1569) printed the first complete English Bible in 1535. He used Tyndale’s NT with slight revisions and Tyndale’s OT translations. He translated the remaining sections of the OT into English using a variety of other translations.

III. Geneva Bible

- A. During the reign of Bloody Mary (1553–1558), many English Protestants fled for Geneva, Switzerland (home of John Calvin), where they finished the Geneva Bible in 1560.

- B. The New Testament was a revision of Tyndale’s NT, and the Old Testament was first English version to be fully translated from the original Hebrew and Aramaic.
- C. Despite the widespread popularity and readability of the Geneva Bible and its linguistic advances, the Church of England rejected it, because of the Calvinistic notes. They continued to use an inferior version called The Bishop’s Bible.

IV. King James Bible

- A. When Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, the English crown passed to James VI of Scotland.
- B. In 1604, Dr. John Reynolds, proposed to King James, “That a translation be made of the whole Bible, as consonant as can be to the original Hebrew and Greek; and this to be set out and printed, without any marginal notes, and only to be used in all Churches of England in time of divine service.”
- C. “King James called for a translation with no political or theological notes. Forty-seven scholars—some from among the Puritans and some from those who were satisfied with the Church of England as it was—began working on this project” (Jones, *How We Got the Bible*, p. 139).
- D. The translators used Beza’s 1598 edition of the Textus Receptus for the NT and the Second Great Rabbinic Bible of 1524–25 for the OT.
- E. In the preface to the KJV, the translators rejected any sort of KJV-only position.
 1. “Yet for all that, as nothing is begun and perfected at the same time, and the latter thoughts are thought to be the wiser: so, if we building upon their foundation that went before us, and being holpen by their labours, do endeavour to make that better which they left so good; no man, we are sure, hath cause to mislike us; they, we persuade ourselves, if they were alive, would thank us.”
 2. “For by this means it cometh to pass, that whatsoever is sound already, (and all is sound for substance in one or other of our editions, and the worst of ours far better than their authentick Vulgar) the same will shine as gold more brightly, being rubbed and polished; also, if any thing be halting, or superfluous, or not so agreeable to the original, the same may be corrected, and the truth set in place.”
 3. “Now to the latter we answer, that we do not deny, nay, we affirm and avow, that the very meanest [poorest] translation of the Bible in *English* set forth by men of our profession (for we have seen none of theirs of the whole Bible as yet) containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God: as the King’s speech which he uttered in Parliament, being translated into *French, Dutch, Italian, and Latin*, is still the King’s speech, though it be not interpreted by every translator with the like grace, nor peradventure so fitly for phrase, nor so expressly for sense, every where.”
- F. The KJV went through many revisions (1612, 1613, 1629, 1638, 1762, 1769). The 1769 edition, known as the Oxford edition, is the one in print today.
 - According to the American Bible Society, there are 24,000 total changes in the KJV since the original 1611. 1,493 of these changes affect meaning, but 0 affect doctrine.

V. Growing Sentiment for New Translations

- A. The KJV dominated the English-speaking church for 170 years. It wasn't until 1881 that another major English version was published.
- B. During the 19th century, growing sentiment developed that a new translation was needed.
 1. Archaic Dependence on the Textus Receptus: By the end of the 19th century, NT scholars had access to a wealth of manuscript evidence that was not accessible to the KJV translators.
 - “It remains a fact that a dozen or so readings in the KJV find no support in any Greek manuscript whatsoever. In the last few verses of Revelation, a half dozen such interventions occur. These can be traced directly to the fact that Erasmus had to prepare a Greek manuscript for these verses by translating back from the Vulgate” (Carson, *The King James Version Debate*, p. 69).
 2. Archaic Language: Over time languages and the meaning of terms evolve. Some terms disappear from usage and others change meaning.
 - “The person brought up on the KJV knows that...‘*Suffer* little children...’ really means to permit them to come; that ‘prevent’ in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 really means ‘precede.’ But not many others do” (Carson, p. 98).
 - It is true that the KJV is more precise in its use of pronouns. “You” is singular, while “ye” is plural. *Thou, thee, thy, and thine* are also more precise than *you* and *your*; however, only the most skilled modern reader even recognizes these distinctions.

VI. Conclusion: The KJV has had a profound impact on the English language, and God has used it profoundly in the spread of the gospel. If you are familiar with the KJV and are most comfortable reading it, you should continue to do so. However, we must be honest about the fact that it is not practical or wise to require children, young believers, or unbelievers to struggle through the barrier of the archaic language in the KJV. If we do so, we are either prioritizing our comfort over teaching the Scriptures, or we are betraying a faulty view of inspiration. Neither is acceptable.