

GRACE EPISCOPAL CHURCH
Sheboygan, Wisconsin

THE BIBLE IN ENGLISH

Where did our Bible come from? Despite what some may think, the Bible did not just drop out of the sky in 1611 (the King James Version), with Jesus' words highlighted in red. The Bible did not emerge as a complete canon of scripture until the fourth century, more than three centuries after the founding of the Church.¹ The process by which some books were considered canonical and some excluded from the canon is a study for another day. For today, we will consider how it is that the Bible came to be translated into English.

- 1) The Bible in the West was known from the late fourth century as the "Vulgate" (*Biblia Sacra Vulgatae*).
 - a) St. Jerome, at the specific commission of Pope Damasus, translated the Bible from Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) into Latin (A.D. 384–397).
 - i) Until this time the Bible was known only to scholars, in the Greek version known as the "Septuagint".
 - b) Scripture in Latin served the needs of the only literate people of the age, in the Church.
 - i) An edition of the Vulgate was the first book printed in moveable type, as the so-called "Gutenberg" ("Mazarin") Bible of 1456.
- 2) In the Anglo-Saxon period a number of translations of parts of the Bible into English were made. No complete translation of the Bible into English was undertaken.
 - a) All translations were made from the Latin Vulgate text, not from Hebrew or Greek manuscripts.
 - i) Examples include the translation of the Gospel of John made by the Venerable Bede (d. 735), and of the Heptateuch (Genesis through Judges) made by Aelfric, abbot of Eynsham (955–1020). These were private manuscripts used only in the translators' monasteries.
- 3) No complete translation of the Bible was attempted before that of John Wycliff, scholar of Oxford. This translation (1380–97) was made from the Latin Vulgate.
 - a) Wycliff did not actually prepare most of the translation, which was the work of Nicholas Hereford and John Purvey.
 - i) Wycliff inspired the translations, as the key figure among of the Lollards,² a religious sect which espoused a sort of early form of Protestantism, including the direct access to Scripture by the people.
 - (1) The English crown suppressed the Lollards, violently.
 - (a) Wycliff's Bible gained no currency in England, due to the small number of copies (<100) and its association with an heretical sect.

¹ The list which most agree is the earliest list to contain all of the books of the Bible as we know it, and no others, was that compiled by St. Athanasius in Alexandria in A.D. 367.

² "Lollard" derives from the Middle Dutch *lollen* or *lullen* ("to sing"), and refers to the Lollard practice of chanting prayers.

- 4) The first English version of the Bible to be made directly from the Hebrew and Greek was the work of William Tyndale (1494?–1536).
 - a) Tyndale published his New Testament in 1526 (revised 1534), and the Pentateuch and Jonah (1536).
 - i) Tyndale was burned at the stake in 1536, as an heretic.
 - (1) His dying words: “Lord, open the eyes of the king of England.”
 - b) Much of Tyndale’s Bible (together with additional material) was published in 1537 as “Matthew’s Bible,” by “Thomas Matthew” (John Rogers, a friend of Tyndale).
 - i) A revision of Matthew’s Bible was published in sequential pamphlet form by Richard Taverner (a powerful lawyer), beginning in 1539.

- 5) In 1535, Miles Coverdale (1487?–1569) prepared the first *published* translation of the complete Bible into English.
 - a) Coverdale’s translation is based on the Latin Vulgate.
 - i) Coverdale also relied heavily on Tyndale (a friend) and on Martin Luther’s translation of the Vulgate into German.
 - (1) Coverdale published in Zurich, as an exile from England.
 - (2) Coverdale’s Bible is the basis for the “Great Bible,” set up in every English church by royal decree after the accession of Puritan control in England.³

- 6) Under Mary Tudor, the use of the Bible in English was outlawed. On the accession of Elizabeth I it was decreed that a Bible in English was to be set up in every church.
 - a) Elizabeth decreed the use of the Great Bible.
 - i) The most popular translation of the time was the so-called “Geneva Bible,” prepared by Puritan exiles in Geneva during the reign of Mary.
 - (1) This was the Bible known by Shakespeare and Bunyan.
 - (2) The Geneva Bible remained based primarily on the Vulgate, but with certain corrections made from the Hebrew and Greek.
 - b) Not enough Great Bibles were available. Archbishop Parker therefore commissioned a new translation, the “Bishops’ Bible” (1568).
 - i) The Bishops’ Bible (so called because it was prepared by a committee of bishops) relies much more heavily, but not completely, on the Hebrew and Greek.
 - ii) The Church of England decreed (to which the crown agreed) that churches must use the Bishops’ Bible, in 1572.

- 7) During the Reformation much disagreement arose over which books should be included in the Bible.
 - i) Excluded books became the “Apocrypha,” but remain in Roman Catholic bibles as canonical.
 - ii) An English translation of the Bible (from the Vulgate) was prepared by English Catholic exiles in France, and published as the “Douai-Rheims Bible” (1582–1609).
 - (1) The Douai-Rheims Bible follows the Latin very closely.⁴

³ The version of the Psalter found in the *Book of Common Prayer* (first version published 1549) remains based primarily on Coverdale’s translation, *not* on subsequent translations.

⁴ The Bible in English now used in Roman Catholic churches is the “Jerusalem Bible,” based on a French translation from the Hebrew and Greek. The American Standard Bible is also often used.

- 8) In 1604, following a conference “for hearing and for the determining [of] things pretended to be amiss in the church,” King James I ordained: “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,⁵ and only to be used in all churches of England in time of divine service.”
- a) This Bible, completed in 1611, is known in America as the King James Bible, and in England and the Commonwealth as the “Authorized Version”.
 - b) The King James Bible relied primarily on the “Codex Alexandrinus” (5th C.) and the “Codex Bezae” (4th to 6th C.), collections of Hebrew and Greek manuscripts.⁶
- 9) Virtually all English versions of the Bible from 1611 have been based on the King James Bible.
- a) Most of these versions have sought to update or “correct” Elizabethan English into an idiom more understandable to modern readers and hearers.
 - b) Beginning in the late 19th century new versions (beginning with the “Revised Version” of 1881) have sought to correct the *very* few text variations of the King James Bible.
 - i) These variations have been identified through the discovery of more ancient manuscripts (*e.g.*, the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in 1946, and the “Codex Sinaiticus,” discovered in 1844).
 - c) New versions have also sought to be more literal to the Hebrew and Greek, allowing for less expression in English poesy.
 - i) More “literal” versions include the American Standard Version, the American Standard Bible, and the New International Version.
 - d) Newer versions in the King James tradition (*e.g.*, the New Revised Standard Version) change Hebrew and Greek pronoun forms to make them gender-inclusive, and verbs to make them collective.
 - e) Bibles such as the “Good News Bible” seek to use simple modern idiom. In so doing, they often paraphrase the original.
 - i) “The Message” (Eugene H. Peterson, 2003) is now a popular version in modern English.
 - (1) The Message must be seen to contain much *paraphrasing* of Scripture, with original text at times *changed* or *omitted*.
- 10) What English Bible is the best?
- a) There is no best! *All* translations have defects.
 - b) Use a Bible you are comfortable with and like. If you wish to study a key passage further, compare translations.
 - c) All translations (*not* paraphrased bibles) are based on reliable manuscripts that have been compared exhaustively.
 - i) More than 5000 ancient biblical manuscripts exist.
 - ii) No ancient text (*e.g.*, of Homer or Plato) has been studied and compared more exhaustively. The text is reliable!

⁵ A principal objection to the Geneva Bible was its use of many notes offering Puritan commentary.

⁶ Alexandrinus is held in the British Museum; Bezae by Cambridge University. Modern scholars have compared these MSS. carefully with the “Codex Emphraemi” (now in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris) and the “Codex Vaticanus” (Vatican Library). Text variations are not material.