

How We Got Our Bible

Trinitarian Bible Society - London, England



We have received several requests for a brief outline of the history of our English Bible. Many large volumes have been written on the subject, and it may seem presumptuous to attempt to summarise such a vast accumulation of literature in a mere eight pages. It is hoped that many who have neither the time nor the inclination to read a lengthy treatise on the subject may find the information they need in this short article.

“THE LORD GAVE THE WORD”

The Bible is the gift of God and the writers of the individual books testify that they received a revelation from God.

“The Spirit of the LORD spake by me, and His Word was in my tongue” - (2 Samuel 23:2)

“I have put My Words in thy mouth” - (Jeremiah 1:9)

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God” - (2 Timothy 3:16)

“Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” - (2 Peter 1:21)

The Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 4 describes the Holy Scriptures as “every Word which proceedeth out of the mouth of God”.

The Books of the Old Testament were written in Hebrew on rolls prepared from the skins of animals, and scrupulous care was taken to ensure that copies were accurate. These books were compiled over a period of nearly one thousand years and were completed about 400 years before the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ at Bethlehem. Nearly 300 years before that event the Hebrew books appeared in a Greek translation which became known as the Version of the Seventy (Septuagint) because the translation was believed to be the work of seventy learned Jews of Alexandria. This version was in common use in the days of the Apostles and is often quoted in the New Testament.

INSPIRATION AND AUTHORITY

The New Testament Books were written in Greek and were added at intervals during the hundred years following the Saviour’s birth. Like the Old Testament Books they were recognised as “Holy Scripture” and acknowledged to be divinely inspired. Peter includes the epistles of Paul with “the other

Scriptures" (2 Peter 3:16), and Paul declares that his teaching was delivered "not in words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth" – (I Corinthians 2:13). From the last quarter of the first century to the end of the second there is a widening stream of testimony to the unique authority of the New Testament Scriptures. These testimonies may be gathered from the surviving writings of early Christian teachers in the Greek and Latin churches of Africa, Palestine, Syria, Rome and France. Here we may allow Irenaeus of Lyons (AD 180) to speak for them all — "The Scriptures are perfect, inasmuch as they were uttered by the Word of God and His Spirit" — and he proceeds to use the Old and New Testaments as "Scripture" without distinction.

Councils of the Churches made official pronouncements on the subject from time to time during the following centuries, but it can be seen that there is no ground for the claim often made by the Roman Church that we received our Bible from her hands. All of the Books of the Bible were in use and acknowledged among Christian people generations before Rome ever claimed to be "mother and mistress of all the churches".

In the first five hundred years of the Christian era there were several important translations of the Holy Scriptures in Syriac, Latin, Egyptian (Coptic), Gothic and Armenian. These were all in existence centuries before there was a Bible in English. Early in the 4th century Jerome of Bethlehem completed a Latin translation which became known as the "Vulgate" because it was in the common or "vulgar" tongue of a large portion of the professing Church. Early attempts to put the Bible into the language of our own country were based not on the Hebrew and Greek, but on this Latin version.

THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

In order to trace the history of the English versions of the Holy Scriptures it is necessary to remember a little of the history of the English people and their language. When the Roman forces withdrew early in the fifth century the South Britons obtained the help of the Saxons against the attacks of the Picts and Scots. The Saxons returned from their victory in the North and began to take possession of the South. This struggle continued for about 150 years during which the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, a heathen people, gradually gained control and divided the country into seven kingdoms. Each of these in turn was absorbed by its stronger neighbour and finally in AD 827 Egbert combined them under his own rule, and his kingdom came to be known as Angle-land or England. In this period the light of the Gospel was practically extinguished over much of the country and then rekindled after the conversion of Ethelbert, King of Kent, at the end of the 6th century.

During the Saxon period the Danes repeatedly invaded and occupied large areas of the country. In AD 878 Alfred the Great overcame their army at Ethandune and their king embraced the Christian faith and submitted to Alfred. The next one hundred and fifty years witnessed many periods of strife between the English and the Danes, culminating in the Danish invasion of the

northern counties at the instigation of William of Normandy. Harold defeated the Danes in the North, but was himself defeated at Hastings by the Normans under William, who divided up a large part of the country among his nobles. The English Church was reorganised under Lanfranc, Archbishop of Canterbury.

ANGLO SAXON VERSIONS

There were several attempts to make the light of God's Word available to the people in the Anglo Saxon tongue. Early in the 8th century Eadhelm of Glastonbury translated the Psalms, and Egbert of Holy Island translated the Gospels. A copy of this version may be seen in the British Museum. In AD 735 Bede laboured at Jarrow on his translation of the Gospel. A letter written by one of his pupils describes how the aged scholar pressed on with his work of translating the Scriptures up to the last moment of his life. Early in the morning of "Ascension Day" in AD 735 he summoned his helpers to continue with the task and dictated to them the translation of John's Gospel from the words, "What are they among so many?" As the sun was setting one of the scribes told him there was only one more chapter but it seemed hard for Bede to speak. He replied, "Nay, it is easy, take up thy pen and write quickly". The young scribe wrote on until he could tell his master that only one sentence was wanting. When Bede dictated it the young man exclaimed. "It is finished, master!" Bede replied, "Aye it is finished! lift me up and place me by the window where I have so often prayed to God". Then with the Name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit upon his lips he passed into the presence of the Lord.

Alfred the Great desired that his people should be able to read the Word of God and he personally engaged in a translation of the Psalms until his death in AD 901. In the later 10th century Archbishop Aelfric and a number of others endeavoured to provide translations which could be read in the Churches so that many who could not read would at least hear the word of Truth.

WYCLIFFE'S BIBLE

The next four hundred years were an important period in the development of the English language. It is not possible to give precise dates but from AD 1066 to about 1150 Saxon and Norman French were in use side by side. From about 1150 the gradual fusion of the two peoples caused their languages to mingle with one another, producing what has been described as "semi-Saxon". The old Saxon and the Norman French fell into disuse, and from about 1250 "English" emerges to pass through a century or more of development before being used as the vehicle of Wycliffe's English Bible of AD 1382.

Wycliffe, knowing no Hebrew or Greek, translated from the Latin Vulgate which was far from perfect, but the English Version nevertheless showed only too clearly how far the doctrines of the Roman Church were removed from the plain teaching of God's Word. Wycliffe was accused of heresy and

excommunicated, but continued with his task until his death in 1384. Every copy of his translation had to be written by hand, but so many were written that a Bill was enacted in Parliament to forbid its circulation. Archbishop Arundel complained to the Pope of “that pestilent wretch Wycliffe”. The convocation of Oxford under Arundel in 1408 decreed “that no man hereafter by his own authority translate any text of the Scripture into English or any other tongue, by way of book, pamphlet or treatise; and that no man read any such book, pamphlet or treatise, now lately composed in the time of John Wycliffe or since ... publicly or privately upon pain of greater excommunication He that shall do contrary to this shall likewise be punished as a favourer of heresy and error”. During the next hundred years many Christian martyrs were burned to death with Wycliffe’s Bible tied around their necks, but 170 copies remain to this day to testify to his faithfulness and the diligence of his helpers.

INVENTION OF PRINTING

About twenty years after Wycliffe’s death a boy named Gensfleisch (“Gooseflesh”) was amusing himself cutting out the letters of his name from a piece of bark. He dropped one of these accidentally in a pot of hot dye, snatched it out and dropped it on a piece of white skin on a bench near the fire and was intrigued to see the pattern of the letter was impressed on the skin. It is possible that this experience lingered in his mind and suggested the idea of printing. Thirty years afterwards he set up his famous press at Menz under the name of Gutenberg, his mother’s family name. This was an epoch-making invention and was to contribute greatly towards the rapid reproduction of the Scriptures and the establishment of the Reformation in Europe.

WILLIAM TYNDALE

For several hundred years the Greek language was almost unknown in Western Europe, but a great revival of Greek learning commenced about the middle of the 15th century and the new art of printing was the means of placing printed copies of the Greek Scriptures in the hands of Christian scholars. Erasmus of Rotterdam published his first edition of the Greek New Testament in 1516, and, provided William Tyndale with the means of giving to English readers for the first time a New Testament translated directly from the Greek, the language in which it was first written. Like Wycliffe, Tyndale was accused of heresy, and was not allowed to pursue his studies in peace. He spent several years on the Continent and was eventually betrayed by a false friend, arrested, imprisoned, and burned at the stake at Vilvorde in Belgium in 1536. The place is marked by a memorial erected by the Trinitarian Bible Society and the Belgian Bible Society and the inscriptions include Tyndale’s dying prayer— “Lord open the King of England’s eyes”. His prayer was answered when in 1538 King Henry VIII gave instructions that a large Bible should be placed in every parish church.

Tyndale published an edition of the New Testament in a conveniently small size and arranged for thousands of copies to be smuggled into England in barrels, bales of cloth, and even in flour sacks. By these means the New Testament was rapidly and widely distributed. Many copies were seized and burned at St Paul's, as "a burnt offering most pleasing to Almighty God" — as Cardinal Campeggio wrote to Wolsey. Tyndale said that he was not surprised and would not be surprised if later they should burn him also.

OPPOSITION PROVIDENTIALLY OVER- RULED

The Bishop of London, who was anxious to obstruct the progress of the Reformation, consulted with Pakington a merchant with connections in Antwerp, and asked his advice about buying up all the copies that could be obtained in Europe. He did not know that Pakington was a friend of Tyndale. "Halle's Chronicle" contains a quaint description of the incident. "Gentle Master Pakington" said the Bishop deeming that he had God by the toe, when in truth he had, as he afterthought, the devil by the fist, "do your diligence to get them for me, and I will gladly give you whatever they cost, for the books are naughty and I intend to destroy them all, and to bum them at Paul's Cross". The bargain was made, and the story continues, "The Bishop had the Books, Pakington had the thanks, and Tyndale had the money".

Tyndale was quite pleased with the arrangement, as the money relieved him of his debts, the burning of some of the Testaments had the effect of encouraging many people to support the work he was doing, and he now had resources to spend on an improved edition. Some time afterwards a man named Constantine was being tried before Sir Thomas Moore for heresy. He was promised leniency if he would tell where Tyndale and his helpers obtained the money to pay for their editions. Constantine replied — "It is the Bishop of London that hath holpen us for he bestowed among us a great deal of money upon New Testaments to bum them, and that hath been our chief succour and comfort".

EDITIONS OF THE GREEK TEXT

The remainder of the 16th century saw the completion and fruitful use of several printed editions of the Greek New Testament and several translations of the entire Bible in the English language. Robert Stephens produced editions of the Greek in 1546, 1549, 1550 and 1551. Theodore Beza produced five editions of the Greek between 1559 and 1598, and the Elzevir brothers published at Leyden in 1633 an edition described in the title page as the "Received Text" the "Textus Receptus". Among English readers this title has often been given to Robert Stephen's edition of 1550.

THE ENGLISH VERSIONS

The English translation of Tyndale was followed by those of Coverdale (1536), Rogers (1537), Taverner (1538), the Great Bible (1539). the Geneva Bible

(1557-1560) and the Bishop's Bible (1568). These all owed much to Tyndale's pioneer labours and each contributed to the progress and establishment of the Reformation in this country. The Geneva Bible was translated and published by Protestant scholars who found refuge in Geneva during the persecutions of Mary's reign, 1553-1558. This version was very popular and remained in use for a considerable time after the first appearance of the Authorised Version. The Geneva Version was produced during a period when the Protestants were suffering violent persecution, and it is not surprising that the marginal notes very pungently exposed the errors of the Roman Church.

The most noticeable changes in the Geneva Bible were the adoption of Roman type in place of the old "black letter", and the division of the chapters into verses. These changes made the Geneva version much easier to use, and it achieved wonderful popularity. From 1560 to 1616 one or more editions appeared every year, and in 1599 ten separate editions were printed. About two hundred editions of this version are known to have been printed. It has been known as the "Breeches Bible" because of the use of this word in Genesis 3:7, where the A.V. has "aprons".

THE BISHOPS' BIBLE

Queen Elizabeth I commissioned Archbishop Parker to produce a Bible free from these controversial notes and his version appeared in 1568. It never achieved great popularity but it was later used at the basis of the revision of 1611 which was to become known as the "Authorised Version". Incidentally the Bishops' Bible had this caption — "Authorised and appointed to be read in Churches", but the version of 1611 did not have the word "authorised" on its title page.

The Bishops' Bible took the place of the Great Bible in the public services of the Church, but for private use it never displaced the Geneva Version. The Puritans who held livings in the Church of England disregarded the ruling of Convocation and continued to take their texts from the Geneva Version. The last edition of the Bishops' Bible was printed in 1619, eight years after the appearance of the "Authorised Version". This 1619 edition contained at the end of the New Testament a number of readings from the Old Testament to be used in the Communion service on certain days. Strangely enough, these readings were taken from Matthew's Bible of 1537.

THE AUTHORISED VERSION

At the Hampton Court Conference of 1604 the Puritan leader Reynolds made the suggestion — which was first opposed and then adopted by the conference with the enthusiastic approval of James I — that there should be a new translation of the Holy Scriptures in English to replace the different versions in common use. Fifty-four men, including "High Churchmen" and Puritans, the greatest Hebrew and Greek scholars of the age, formed six companies to undertake the task. Using their Greek sources and the best commentaries of

European scholars and referring to existing versions in several other languages, they produced a version which accurately expresses the sense of the Hebrew and Greek in clear, vigorous idiomatic English. This Bible won its battles against the prejudice and criticism which greeted its first appearance, and became the Bible of the English-speaking world.

The Authorised Version has been well described as “the purest well of our native English, in its grand simplicity standing out in contrast to the ornate and affected diction of the language of that time”. In the language of a competent judge, “If accuracy and strictest attention to the letter of the text be supposed to constitute an excellent version this is of all versions the most excellent”. The spelling and punctuation were extensively revised in 1762 and 1769 by Dr Paris and Dr Blayney, and at various times there have been considerable additions to the marginal references, which in the first edition were not more than about nine thousand in number.

THE MODERN VERSIONS

Advocates of the modern versions often argue that the discovery of many ancient manuscripts unknown to the earlier translators has made it necessary to “correct” the Authorised Version in many places. Many people have been very sadly misled in this matter and have accepted the allegation that the manuscript evidence is unfavourable to our old Bible. This is very far from being the case. It is true that Erasmus, Stephens and Beza had comparatively few Greek manuscripts at their disposal, but these few were representative of the Greek text preserved in the great majority of the documents which have since come to light. These now number several thousand, and they give a very full measure of support to the Greek text underlying the Authorised Version. Surviving copies of very ancient translations originating in the second, third and fourth centuries, also testify to the integrity of our English Bible. The quotations from the ancient Scriptures preserved in the writings of the earliest Christian writers after the Apostles, also make it quite clear that those “fathers” had in their hands copies of the Greek Scriptures similar to those underlying our English Bible.

During the last 150 years it has unfortunately become increasingly the fashion among Biblical scholars and translators to adopt as their guides to the original text a small group of ancient but unreliable manuscripts, including the Vatican and Sinai copies of the 4th century and a few others which exhibit the same kind of abbreviated and altered text. One result of this tendency of modern scholarship is that modern critical editions of the Greek, and modern English versions based upon them, present in a weaker form many of the plainest declarations of the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

THE TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE AUTHORISED VERSION

The English reader is on safe ground in regarding the Authorised Version as a

faithful translation made from trustworthy sources. God has exercised His wisdom, power and grace in sending forth His Word by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and He has exercised His providence in the preservation of the written revelation and its propagation throughout the world.

There have been many attempts to replace the Authorised Version by a translation in more modern English, but as yet none of these excels the version which has held its place in the English speaking world for more than 350 years. It was very significant that while the American astronauts were encircling the moon they read and broadcast to the world the story of the creation — not from a modern version, not from an American version, not from the R.S.V or N.E.B., but from the Bible of the English-speaking world — the Authorised Version — an acknowledgement that this still has its pre-eminent place even in this age of modern science.

At the present time there are about one hundred modern English translations, most of which are based on less reliable manuscript sources, which were translated by scholars with less respect for the authority of the inspired Word and the eternal deity of the Lord Jesus Christ — “The Chief Subject of the Sacred Book” — and display less command of the wealth and resources of our English tongue.

As we recall the long history of our English Bible we remember the words of the Lord Jesus Himself:

“Other men laboured and ye are entered into their labours”.

Click [HERE](#) for PDF version formatted for 4 columns on legal size paper (8.5 inches by 14 inches).