

In the Language of the Plowboy
The Interesting and Marvelous History of
The Bible in the English Language¹
by Don Burke

The history of God's word as it has spread from place to place and language to language is nothing less than fascinating. Whether we look at the history of the Hebrew text, the Greek text, or at one of the thousands of languages which scripture has been translated into, we can only marvel at the means God has used in giving His word to mankind. We also marvel at and admire the great men whom He used to do that work, and the passion that motivated them.

The words of William Tyndale may best describe the heartbeat of many of those men who shouldered the work of translating the scriptures into English. As the story goes, Tyndale regularly challenged the priests of his area about their ignorance of Biblical matters. He even once told a priest, "If God spares my life, 'ere many years I will cause the boy who driveth the plough to know more of the Scriptures than you do." It was this passion to give the common Englishman the chance to read and understand God's word in his everyday language that inspired and energized the works of Tyndale and many other men we find in the history of the English Bible.

Tyndale, however, was certainly not the first to bring the scriptures into the "mother tongue" of the Englishman. For nearly a thousand years before him men such as Caedmon, Aldhelm, Bede, and Alfred the Great labored to bring portions of the scriptures in the language of the people of the island we now know as England. A verse here, a psalm there, short passages, and eventually even a gospel and the Psalter were to be found in the vernacular of the day. Some people even took manuscripts of scripture written in other languages and "penciled in" a translation in their own language between the lines. Some of these "glosses," as they are called, date back as early as the late-seventh century.

Working a century-and-a-half before Tyndale, John Wycliffe translated a large portion of the scriptures into Middle English (the English of his day). These scriptures were translated from the Latin, and some believe that the bulk of this work was not done by Wycliffe but by others that helped him. Be that as it may, in 1382 this work was published and came to be

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known as Wycliffe's Bible. But for all this effort to bring God's word to the English people, Wycliffe's work was not well received. In fact, his efforts so infuriated some officials that even thirty-one years after his death, the Council of Constance ordered that his body be exhumed, burned, and his ashes thrown into the River Swift. But in spite of the initial poor reception, with some post-humus revisions Wycliffe's Bible remained the predominate English Bible until the time of Tyndale.

Like Wycliffe, Tyndale paid a high price for his passion to put the Bible in the language of the common Englishman. Since producing a Bible in the vernacular was illegal in England at the time, Tyndale was forced to leave his beloved country, never to return. He lived on the main continent, at times driven from one city to another because of his work on the English scriptures.

Tyndale's desire for a new English Bible was fueled by a number of circumstances. With the invention of the printing press there was a renewed passion throughout most of Europe to translate and distribute the Bible into the various languages and countries. Also, tremendous advances had been made in the textual studies of the original Bible languages, and this made a better translation possible. But foremost in Tyndale's heart was a burning realization that "it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the Scriptures were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue." And since the English language had changed so dramatically over the past 140 years, the language of Wycliffe's Bible was no longer the language of the common man. Driven by these factors Tyndale published his English New Testament (NT) in 1525, followed five years later by a partial Old Testament (OT). These formed the first English Bible (although incomplete) to be directly based upon the original Biblical languages.

There is an interesting sidebar to the story of Tyndale's Bibles. Some suggest that by 1526 some of these scriptures found their way into the English king's hand. The king immediately condemned the work and ordered that they be destroyed. Money from the royal treasury was even used to purchase copies of these Bibles in order to destroy them. However, the king didn't realize he was buying these Bibles at four times their cost. This money was funneled back to Tyndale, who was then able to reprint and distribute four times as many Bibles as the king had bought and destroyed.

Tyndale, often called "the father of the English Bible," died at the stake as a heretic at the hands of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. His dying prayer was, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."

Only five years after Tyndale's OT was published, the Coverdale Bible went into print (1535). This first complete English Bible was the work of a Puritan by the name of Miles Coverdale, although he did depend greatly upon portions of Tyndale's Bible as well as some of the work of Martin Luther. Coverdale's Bible was also known as the "Bugs Bible" because of its rendering of Ps. 91:5, "Thou shalt not neede to be afraid of any bugges by night." [sic]

In 1537 the next version of the English Bible was published, this one known as the Matthew Bible. This Bible was the work of John Rogers, a man who had helped William Tyndale on portions of his work. After Tyndale's death, Rogers took the pen name of Thomas Matthew and continued Tyndale's goal to provide a complete Bible in the English vernacular. Rogers depended primarily on Tyndale's work, but also regularly consulted Coverdale's. Ironically, within months of Tyndale's execution as a heretic, much of the work for which he was sentenced to death – now in the form of the Matthew Bible – was put in print with royal approval. But royal approval notwithstanding, nearly twenty years later would find Rogers himself burned at the stake as the first Christian martyred under the reign of Bloody Mary Tudor.

Only two years after the Matthew Bible's publication, the Great Bible was introduced (1539, with revisions in 1540 and 1541). It was produced by Miles Coverdale, who was mentioned earlier. The Great Bible was a revision of the Matthew Bible, which itself was a revision of Tyndale's Bible. Thus the efforts of "the father of the English Bible" were still being felt.

The Great Bible received its name because of its great bulk. This was the first English Bible authorized for public church use, and royal declaration required that each parish church have a copy of it accessible on a reading desk for the public to use at any time. (This Bible was also called the Chained Bible because many churches chained it to the reading desk.) The blessings of accessibility did have some drawbacks, for some people read aloud from this Bible during public services – a distraction which the king later made illegal.

As the acts of men do at times, Parliamentary law and royal decree in 1546 took a self-contradictory twist. Measures by these authorities banned and required the burning of the Tyndale and Coverdale Bibles even while the law required that the Great Bible – which was based upon these very works – to be accessible to everyone.

The Geneva Bible, the next in the lineage of English scriptures, was published in 1560. It was developed under the leadership of William Whittingham, but with varying degrees of help

from men such as John Knox, Miles Coverdale, John Calvin and Theodore Beza. The NT was based primarily on the Matthew Bible. The OT, however, required more extensive work because the previous English versions had only translated portions of the OT from Hebrew, choosing to use other languages as the basis for the remaining sections. The translators for the Geneva Bible chose to base all their OT upon the Hebrew, and this groundbreaking effort required much more work.

The Geneva Bible's popularity among the common people can be seen in the need for 120 editions in its forty-eight years of printing. It was especially popular among the Puritans, and was the Bible brought to American shores by those that settled in the early colonies. Part of its popularity was due to its smaller size, making it less cumbersome than the Great Bible. Also, English soldiers of the time were issued pocket Bibles consisting of excerpts from the Geneva Bible. The Scottish Parliament boosted the popularity of the Geneva Bible (there known as the "Bassandyne Bible") when it required each household above a given income level to own a copy.

The Geneva Bible was nicknamed the "Breeches Bible" because of its reading of Genesis 3:7, "...and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves breeches." Surprisingly, quotations from the Geneva Bible are even found in the preface of the 1611 King James Version.

After the Protestants published the Geneva Bible, the Archbishop of Canterbury gathered a number of bishops to produce a Bible having a more Anglican bent. This Bible, appropriately known as the Bishops' Bible, was published in 1568 and was based upon the Great Bible. The Bishops' Bible was a worthy effort, but it was still an inferior translation to the Geneva Bible. Its external trappings (finer printing, heavier paper, etc.) made it cumbersome, and hurt its popularity.

The Roman Catholics now felt pressure to produce their own English Bible. The Rheims-Douai Version, headed by Gregory Martin, appeared in print in 1582 (NT) and 1610 (OT). According to its preface, this Bible was published because "[t]o meet the Protestant challenge, priests must be ready to quote Scripture in the [common] tongue...." The names Rheims and Douai were the cities where the NT and the OT (respectively) were published. This work was translated from the Latin Vulgate instead of the original languages, and was not popular among the people.

The stage was now set for what history may show to be the most popular English Bible of all times. In 1604 the Puritans approached King James I for his approval to publish a new

version of the Bible. The king consented, but to the Puritans' dismay he assigned the directorship of this work to Richard Bancroft, bishop of London. Bancroft was unsympathetic to the Puritans, and even unsuccessfully advised the king against this project.

Approximately fifteen guidelines approved by the king governed the translation team's work. The first required that the text of the Bishops' Bible (1602 edition) be followed unless the Greek or Hebrew texts demanded a change.

The Greek text behind the King James Version (KJV) is often considered to be the Textus Receptus (TR). While this is functionally correct, technically TR is the name first given to the Greek text published by the Elzevir family in the Netherlands in 1633 – over twenty years after the KJV was put into circulation. (The name *Textus Receptus*, which means "received text," comes from the editors' overzealous boast in the preface of the 1633 edition claiming that all errors had been removed from the Greek text, making it "the text which is now received by all.") Therefore, it is probably more accurate to say that the KJV was based upon the same Greek text from which the 1633 TR was later published.

Many of us grew up with the KJV and are more familiar with it than any other version. Yet few of us have taken the time to see the heart of those scholars that undertook this noble effort. What was their motivation as they labored for those seven years? The following excerpts from the preface of the 1611 version, entitled *The Translators to the Reader*, answer that question in the translators' own words:

"But how shall men meditate in that, which they cannot understand? How shall they understand that which is kept close[d] in an unknown tongue? . . . Indeed without translation into the [common language], the unlearned are but like children at Jacob's well (which is deep) [John 4:11] without a bucket or something to draw with. . . ."

"[Those learned in the scholarly languages] were not content to have the Scriptures in the Language which they themselves understood, Greek and Latin, . . . but also for the **benefit** and edifying of the unlearned which hungered and thirsted after righteousness, and had souls to be saved as well as they, they provided Translations into the [common language] for their Countrymen, insomuch that most nations under heaven did shortly after their conversion, hear CHRIST speaking unto them in their mother tongue, not the voice of their Minister only, but also by the written word translated."

"[T]o have the Scriptures in the mother tongue is not a quaint conceit lately taken up, . . . but hath been thought upon, and put in practice of old, even from the first times of the conversion of any Nation; no doubt, because it was esteemed most profitable, to cause faith to grow in men's hearts the sooner. . . ."

These excerpts show without a doubt that the same passion that burned within Wycliffe and Tyndale also burned within the translators of this day as well: *Give God's word to the common man in a language he can readily understand.*

When the KJV was introduced in 1611, two separate printers (one in Oxford, the other in Cambridge) were commissioned with the job of printing the initial order of 20,000 Bibles. There were slight differences between these two printings, including a difference in Ruth 3:15. One printing published a particular word in that passage as "he" while the other printed it as "she." This difference led to the nicknames of "the Great He Bible" and "the Great She Bible" for these two printings of the first edition of the KJV.

There were a number of printer errors in other early editions of the KJV. A 1717 Oxford edition was nicknamed "the Vinegar Bible" because the chapter heading for Luke 20 mistakenly used the word "Vinegar" instead of "Vineyard." A typographical error in a 1795 Oxford edition caused Mark 7:27 to read, "Let the children first be killed" ("filled" was the intended word), and thus earned this edition the name of the "Murderers' Bible." Probably the most notorious printing error of all was found in a 1631 edition (later nicknamed "the Wicked Bible") in which the word "not" was inadvertently omitted from the seventh commandment. (The printer was fined 300 pounds for this error.) One typesetter's self-fulfilling error was found in Ps. 119:161 of yet another edition: "Printers have persecuted me without a cause."

Until 1826 the KJV contained the Apocrypha, but it was then omitted for financial reasons – presumably to help reduce the cost of printing.

Although not without its critics, the KJV was well received from its earliest days. In its first 33 years of publication there were an incredible 182 or more editions.

Those of us who grew up using the KJV might be quite amazed at the differences between the Bible we've always known and the original 1611 version. Below is a letter-for-letter copy of John 4:34-35 as found in the 1611 version:

Jesus saith vnto them, My meat is, to doe the will of him that sent mee, and to finish his worke.

Say not ye, There are yet foure moneths, and then commeth haruest? Behold, I say vnto you, Lift vp your eyes, and looke on the fields: for they are white already to haruest.

(Anyone interested in seeing more of this fascinating original KJV text might try to secure a copy of the Thomas Nelson reprint of the 1611 version, or might find excerpts of the text on the Internet.)

It may also surprise some to know that the KJV has undergone several revisions after its 1611 release. Major revisions were undertaken in 1629, 1638, 1724, 1729, and 1762, with most of the changes to modernize its language. (After seeing the passage above, the need for such updates should be obvious.) In 1769 Benjamin Blayney edited the KJV once again, producing the Oxford Standard Edition which is the standard KJV edition we are now familiar with. According to one authority, this later revision had approximately 75,000 changes from the original 1611 edition.

During the remainder of the eighteenth century and the nineteenth century additional versions and revisions of the scriptures would appear, but most were completely overshadowed by the popularity of the KJV. The 1880's introduced the Revised Version (or English Revised Version). The initial intention was to update much of the archaic language of the last revision of the KJV. In fact, the first guideline for this work called for the text of the KJV to be followed with as few alterations as possible. These instructions notwithstanding, one author notes that the RV made over 36,000 changes from the KJV text.

The Revised Version was intended to be a cooperative effort between British and American scholars. As work progressed, however, the American group felt the British weren't giving due consideration to American input. So, the American's decided to produce their own edition and in 1901 published the American Standard Version. (Some may recall Dr. J. E. Cobb's use of this version in his *Cobb's Baptist Church Manual*.)

The latter half of the twentieth century would see new Bible versions issued at a frequency reminiscent of late sixteenth century. And like those versions found in our earlier history, the motivations behind some versions are possibly questionable, and some may fall short in the quality of their translation. But certainly applaudable is the desire behind many of them to maintain the vision that threads its way back through the KJV translators all the way to Wycliffe and Tyndale of old: *Give God's word to the common man in a language he can readily understand.*

God's word in the language of the plowboy – the passion that so stirred the souls of the brave men who for that goal alone were willing to sacrifice reputation, home, and even life itself.

Men who cared not who may scoff or who may criticize, but willingly lived and even died that others might be able to understand God's truth from their own reading. May we find ourselves standing among the ranks of such men, equally willing to lay all on the line in order that in every land and among every people, the plowboy – the child of the commonest of men – might easily read and understand God's word in order that he may both withstand and refute the religious ignorance of his day. God forbid that we should be guilty of hiding His timeless truths – truths which these men so willingly labored and died to make clear for us – in vocabulary as foreign to the common man as the Hebrew and Greek in which they were originally written. Freely it has been given to us in a language we can understand; we are honor-bound to freely give to others in like fashion.

God's word . . . *in the language of the plowboy*

Recommended Reading:

The Journey from Texts to Translations, Paul Wegner (Baker Academic, 1999)

The Indestructible Book, Ken Connolly (Baker, 1996)

The English Bible, F. F. Bruce (Lutterworth Press, 1961)

The Holy Bible, 1611 Edition (Thomas Nelson, n.d.)

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