

A

**Brief History
of the
English
Bible**

By Jim Cox

Terms to Understand

The Bible is without a doubt the most beloved book in the English language. Even in today's materialistic-scientific society it is the best selling book on the market. Hope, peace, love, joy, forgiveness and eternal life are found in its pages. Many guide their lives by the principles set forth in this ancient book. Although it was written over nineteen hundred years ago, the Bible is ever new. Its relevance is perpetual in any society. It is never out-of-date.

The Bible has been the moral and ethical foundation for the greatest democracy the world has ever seen - the United States of America. The idea of liberty and justice for all was planted in the minds of those who framed the Constitution early in life as they were reared reading the Bible.

In spite of the love for and popularity of the Bible, very few people know much about the history of this greatest of religious books. While espousing genuine faith in the authority and authenticity of the Bible, many do not realize all that has been involved in the creation and transmission of this marvelous book.

The Bible is a single book that is composed of sixty-six separate books written by forty authors over a period of approximately sixteen hundred years. The authors were kings and princes, poets and philosophers, prophets and statesmen, unschooled fishermen and herdsmen, men from all levels of society. Although written by many authors over hundreds of years, the Bible develops a common theme - redemption for mankind.

The two divisions of the Bible are called the Old and New Testaments. The word testament means "covenant" or "agreement." The "old agreement" was keeping the law and the "new agreement" is grace through Jesus Christ.

There are several terms one must understand when talking about the Bible and its history. These are revelation, inspiration, illumination, autographs, manuscripts and canon.

Revelation, simply defined, means "God making Himself known to man." Unless God reveals Himself to the human race

we could never know Him. The record in the Bible of God revealing Himself to individuals also reveals Him to us. Within the pages of the Bible we find direct revelations about God Himself. The revelation is also progressive. This means that as we proceed through the Bible from the beginning, we see more and more who God is and what His plan is. This revelation is completely accurate.

The word inspiration in II Timothy 3:16 ("All Scripture is given by inspiration...") means literally Scripture is "God breathed". Ryrie defines inspiration thus: "God superintended the human authors of the Bible so that they composed and recorded without error His message to mankind in the words of their original writings."

Illumination is the enabling by the Holy Spirit to understand and comprehend the Bible. Illumination is not concerned with merely understanding the facts but in discerning principles and applying them to life.

Autographs are the original writings of the books of the Bible. These are the words from the very pen of the men who wrote the various books. There are no autographs in existence today.

Manuscripts are handwritten copies of the Scriptures. Before the invention of the printing press every copy of the Bible was hand copied from another manuscript. Someone copied the original then someone copied that copy, and so on for hundreds of years. The oldest complete Old Testament manuscript dates from around A.D. 900 and the oldest New Testament manuscript dates from around A.D. 330.

Early Translations

As we study the history of the Bible, one of our first considerations should be the language in which it was originally written.

The Old Testament was written in two related, but distinct languages – Hebrew and Aramaic. The vast majority was written in Hebrew. Aramaic occurs occasionally. Simplicity is the beauty of the Hebrew language. Only about five thousand

different words are used in the Hebrew Old Testament. Hebrew is read from right to left and back to front. Aramaic eventually replaced Hebrew as the everyday language. Aramaic was the “native language” of Judea when Christ was upon the earth.

The New Testament was written in Greek. When Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.) spread his empire around the Mediterranean world, his armies took the Greek language with them. By the first Christian century Greek had become the international language of the Roman Empire.

The Greek in which the New Testament was written is called “koine” (common) Greek. It was the language of the common people. Since “koine” Greek did not conform to the norms and rules of classical Greek, scholars for many centuries thought the Greek of the New Testament was a “special spiritual language of the Holy Spirit.” In the 1890s a German pastor named Adolf Deissman discovered that the New Testament Greek was not a special spiritual language but was the language of everyday life in the first century. Someone has said that this was “the greatest single discovery of an interpretative principle ever made in New Testament archaeology.”

In New Testament times Hebrew was used only by scholars. Aramaic was the “native language” and Greek was the international language in use.

The fact that the Bible was written originally in the language of the common people sets a very important precedent: God intended for the people to have His revelation in their own everyday language. This precedent has been the driving force behind the translation of the Bible into everyday language through the centuries. Throughout its history, the Bible has been read far more in translated form than in the original languages.

Very early in church history Christians began to translate the Bible into other languages. In the second century it was already translated into Latin and Syriac.

As Latin became the language of Christendom under Rome the need for an accurate Latin Bible became apparent. The Bishop of Damascus commissioned a man by the name of

Jerome to translate such a Bible. Between A.D. 386 and A.D. 404 he translated the Old Testament from the original Hebrew into Latin and the New Testament from the original Greek into Latin. This translation, known as the Vulgate, was the standard Bible of Christendom for over a thousand years. The Gutenberg Bible, the first Bible printed on a printing press in 1456, was the Latin Vulgate.

It is interesting that Jerome's translation was unwelcomed by the majority of the churches. They were attached to the old Latin translations that they had been using. There was a riot in one North African congregation when the new Latin version was read in public.

As the centuries passed, the Bible was translated into many languages. In the third century, the Coptic Bible was produced. In the fourth century the Gothic and Ethiopian versions were translated. The ninth century produced Slavic and German translations; and so it went, on and on. Eventually, the translation of the Word of God into the common language of many countries provided light for the world. It was not until the end of the fourteenth century (1382), however, that there was a translation of the whole Bible into English.

English Translations

During the second century, Roman conquest took Christianity to England. At that time there was not an English language. Angles and Saxons began to exert influence on the language of the British Isles in the fifth century. Originally it was called Angleland, later to become England. The language which developed, English, became the foundation for English.

As early as A.D. 670 a poet named Caedman was paraphrasing parts of the Bible into Old English verse form. Soon portions of the Bible were translated from Latin into English. Around A.D. 700, a bishop translated the Book of Psalms. A monk named Bede translated parts of the New Testament. Tradition holds that he completed the Book of John on his deathbed in A.D. 735. An interlinear English translation of the Gospels was produced by a priest named Aldred around

A.D. 950 The English people were getting parts of the Bible in their own language, but they still remained almost completely dependent on the public reading of Scripture from the Latin, and sermons from the priests for their understanding of the Bible. The official position of the Roman Church was that only the clergy should be allowed to read the Bible because the common people might misunderstand it and misapply it.

The English speaking people did not have a complete Bible in their own language until 1382, over 1000 years after Christianity was brought to Britain. The first complete Bible was the Wycliffe Bible, translated from the Latin into English. No one knows who actually did the translating, but John Wycliffe, for whom it is named, spearheaded the effort.

A revision of the Wycliffe Bible in 1388 used a more natural style and became very popular. The Wycliffe Bible was translated over sixty years before the invention of the printing press, so every copy had to be written by hand. There are still about 170 copies in existence. The Wycliffe Bible had wide influence for many years.

For his efforts Wycliffe was declared to be a heretic by the Roman Church and his translation was condemned. His work was so hated that in 1428, over forty years after his death, his remains were dug up and burned. Laws were passed outlawing the possession of English Scriptures. Anyone caught with an English Bible was burned at the stake, usually with their Bible tied around their neck.

No new translation appeared in English for nearly 150 years. In 1523 William Tyndale, a noted scholar, tried to get help from the church to produce a new translation. Instead of help he got hindrance. He was forced to leave England to escape persecution in 1524.

Tyndale once told a priest that if God spared his life, he would make the boy who drove the plough to know more Scripture than the cleric himself did. It is estimated that over 90% of the New Testament left by Tyndale was carried over into the King James Version.

Tyndale translated from the Greek instead of Latin and in 1525 produced an English New Testament which was smuggled into England. The bishop of London tried to buy all the smuggled New Testaments and thus financed Tyndale's translation of the Old Testament.

Tyndale was arrested in 1535. One year later he was strangled and burned at the stake for translating the Bible into the language of the people. His desire was that each person could read the Bible in his own language. As he died, he prayed that God would open the eyes of the king of England.

The Coverdale Bible was published by an English priest, Miles Coverdale, in 1535. Most of the Coverdale Bible was basically the work of Tyndale. This Bible carried a dedication to King Henry VIII, so he made no attempt to destroy it. The English people finally had access to the Word of God.

The next Bible was Matthew's Bible, published in 1537 under license from King Henry VIII. About two-thirds of this Bible was actually the work of Tyndale.

In 1539 the Great Bible, a revision of Matthew's Bible intended for use in the churches, was published. It was printed in a much larger size, thus the name. A copy was placed in each church so the people could come and read it.

The Geneva Bible was produced in Geneva, Switzerland by scholars who had been driven from England by the persecution under Queen Mary I who was also known as "Bloody Mary". The complete Geneva Bible came on the scene in 1560. It was the first Bible to use chapters and numbered verses. With its variety of study aids it has been called history's first study Bible.

The Bishops' Bible was produced in 1568 in reaction to the Geneva Bible which was very Calvinistic in its notes. It was published under the authority of the Church of England and was approved by the bishops for reading in their churches. Thus became known as the Bishops' Bible.

King James Version

The King James Version of the Bible, first published in 1611, has been the predominant English Bible for over 400 years. It is an excellent translation of the manuscripts that were available at that time. It is unsurpassed in literary beauty.

A little bit of historical background is necessary to understand how the translation came about. The Church of England (Anglican Church) had broken with the Roman Catholic Church. Within the Anglican Church there had developed a strong division between the Traditionalists and the Puritans, who wanted to reform the Anglican Church. Two versions of the Bible were especially popular at the time. The Traditionalists preferred the Bishops' Bible. The Puritans favored the Geneva Bible.

This was the situation when King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England. As James came into London, the Puritans presented him a petition signed by nearly a thousand Puritan clergymen seeking reform within the Anglican Church. The king was also head of the Anglican Church.

During a meeting at Hampton Court in January of 1604 between the king and representatives of the Traditionalists and the Puritans the discussions led to a decision to produce a new uniform translation to be used in all the Anglican Churches.

King James I decreed that the "most learned" men from the universities work on the translation. There were forty-seven men selected who, according to James, were "...all our principal learned men within this our kingdom."

The work of translating began in the summer of 1604. The scholars were divided into six groups. Each group was given a section of the Bible. Each man in the group translated the section; then they came together as a group and compared their individual translations. Once the group had its section completed, it was exchanged with another group and they reviewed each other's work. A committee of "two chief

persons” from each group then reviewed and edited the translation before it went to press.

The printing took about nine months and was finally ready for the public in 1611. The purpose, “...to deliver God’s book unto God’s people in a tongue which they understand,” was accomplished. The English of the King James Version was the common language of the day.

The King James Version was not immediately accepted. It took nearly fifty years for the King James Version to replace the very popular Geneva Bible.

There were several minor revisions of the King James Version between 1611 and 1616, mainly correcting editing and spelling errors. The first major revision was done in 1629. This revision dropped the Apocrypha which had been included in the original 1611 version. The Apocrypha is a group of fourteen books that were included between the Old and New Testaments, though they are not considered to be Scripture. The books of the Apocrypha are I and II Esdras, Tobit, Judith, Additions to Esther, Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, Song of Three Young Men, Susanna, Bel and the Dragon, Prayer of Manesseh, I and II Maccabees. There were other major revisions of the King James Bible in 1638 and 1762.

The major revision that gave us the King James Version as we have it today was done in 1769. It was this revision that modernized the spelling and punctuation of the Bible. For instance “Hierusalem” became Jerusalem, “ioy” became joy, “Marie” became Mary, etc. With the great changes in the English language during the 158 years since 1611 the 1769 revision had to be an extensive revision.

What is referred to as the “Authorized King James Version” today is actually this 1769 revision rather than the original 1611 translation. People of today would have great difficulty trying to read the language of the original 1611 translation.

The King James Version is no doubt the English Bible with the greatest literary beauty. It has been quoted by poets and statesmen for over four centuries. It is this literary quality which has given it such longevity as a favorite translation.

The King James Bible for Today

Unless everyone who wants to read the Bible learns Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic the translation of the Bible into various languages is a necessity. The purpose of translation is to place the Bible in the hands of the people in their own language so they can read it, understand it and apply it for themselves. Today translators are continuing the tremendous work. The Bible or part of the Bible is available in well over 1000 languages around the world.

Since I became a Believer in 1964 many new English translations have been published. There are too many on the market to list here. Why have so many new translations been produced? The main reason there are so many translations on the market today is the people's desire to have the Bible in the language they can read and understand.

The King James Version of the Bible is a beautiful, accurate translation that is recognized as a great piece of literature as well as the Holy Bible. However, the majority of English speaking people today cannot read and understand eighteenth century English. No English speaking nation still uses eighteenth century English as their everyday language.

The King James Bible was translated from Beza's publication of Erasmus's text which dated from 1516. This text became known as the "Textus Receptus" (received text). There have been several older manuscripts of the Scriptures found since the translation of the King James Version. The amazing fact is that there are no major differences in the various manuscripts that would change any major doctrine of the Bible.

The spelling of many words in the English language has changed over the years. Even the shape of some of the letters in the English language has changed since 1611. Many letter and spelling updates came about in the 1769 revision of the English in the King James Version of the Bible.

The English language has changed tremendously since the last major revision of the Authorized King James Version in 1769. To understand how the language has changed since the 1769 revision we must examine a few words whose meaning

have changed greatly during that period of time (see table 1) and words that were used in 1769 that are no longer used today (see table 2).

The English in the King James Version of the Bible has not been updated as the English language has changed over the past 240+ years. Thus the King James Version of 1769 is not in the everyday language of the people today. This has led to a proliferation of English translations seeking to become the Bible translation to replace the King James Version for today's English speaking world. However, there is now an Authorized King James Version of the Bible in today's English.

The **King James Bible for Today New Testament** updates the English of 1769 to present day English. These types of changes do not alter the translation nor change the meaning of the Authorized King James Version. These changes simply make the Authorized King James Version much more readable for today's Bible readers. The King James Bible for Today is to the 1769 King James Version what the 1769 was to the original 1611 King James Version.

People want a Bible in the language they use and read every day. Updating the language of the Authorized King James Version from its 1769 English to present day English gives them the Authorized King James Version that is very readable. It is in reality a means of preserving the Authorized King James Version in the face of all the new English translations that are seeking to replace it. This project will preserve the Authorized King James Version for many generations to come.

Work has begun on the Old Testament of the King James Bible for Today.

You can learn more about the King James Bible for Today by visiting Hopeway Books at <http://www.hopewaybooks.com>.

Table 1
Examples of words whose meanings have changed greatly

Word	Meaning in 1769	Meaning Today
Quick	Alive	Rapid, Fast
Peculiar	Special Possession	Weird or Strange
Conversation	Conduct, Behavior	Talk with Someone
Suffer	Allow, permit	Enduring Pain or Discomfort
Charity	Love	Giving to Meet a Need
Communicate	Give Money to Someone	Sharing Ideas
Prevent	Precede	Stop from Happening

Table 2
Examples of words that are no longer used today

Word Used In1769	Word Used Today
Ye	You
Thy	Your
Thou	You
Thine	Yours
Spake	Spoke
Art	Are
Wilt	Will
Shalt	Shall
Shew	Show
Hath	Has
Hast	Have
Canst	Can
Doth	Does
Believeth	Believes