The Origins of the Bible in English

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How did the Bible come to us in English? The Old Testament writings were inscribed in Hebrew and other ancient languages. We know that the Good News was passed on by word of mouth immediately after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ. Only decades later was the oral tradition put into written form, primarily in Greek. By the fifth century St. Jerome had translated the Bible into Latin. This was called the Latin Vulgate. In these pre-medieval times all writings were copied by hand.

The whole of the Holy Bible did not appear in English until the middle of the second millennium. It was a slow and troubled accomplishment. The production of the Bible emerged from a complicated past filled with intrigue and controversy, persecution and martyrdom. What happened?

At best, translation is a difficult and tricky task. An Italian adage says the translator is a traitor. In those early times it was a matter of life and death embroiled in historical, cultural, political, and religious clashes. But from that turmoil in those tumultuous times by dint of persevering and dedicated scholars the first English translations saw light of day. Briefly, this is what happened.

Christianity arrived on the shores of England in the seventh century in the person of St. Augustine of Canterbury and the missionary efforts that followed. Already at that time Caedmon, an illiterate herdsman, sang the Good News in Anglo-Saxon poetry. In the next century other preachers continued to provide biblical translations of sorts. Bishop Aldheim of Sherbourne translated the psalms. St. Bede, a monk of Jarrowwho told the story of Caedmon, translated some of the New Testament. Later appeared translations of the Ten Commandments, the Pentateuch, the Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles. Then followed interlinear versions -- the Latin text with English translations between the lines.

Only in the fourteenth century did the production of the entire Bible in English start with John Wycliffe. This century was fraught with difficulties for the Church. The pope was living in Avignon, France, and many suspected he was easily swayed by French politics. In 1378 Pope Gregory XI returned to Rome, but he died soon

after. When two popes were elected, one in Avignon and one in Rome, the Great Schism resulted (1378-1417). Confusion reigned and many questioned the authority of the Church. Like Martin Luther later, some thought the only certain rule of faith was the Bible. Ordinary people, who could not read Latin, could not read the Bible. Translations into the vernacular were needed.

Here enters John Wycliffe (1330-1384), whom we credit with the first translation of the whole Bible into English. Two versions appeared with his name: one was extremely literal; the second, which appeared after his death, was closer to the spoken English of his day. Both were translated from the Latin Vulgate, and copies were made by hand. It is unlikely that Wycliffe himself made the whole translation; he probably sponsored it. However, the translation did not receive a welcome. John Wycliffe was a dissident and his followers, called Lollards, were condemned for translating and for preaching from the new English Bible. Some were burned at the stake.

A synod at Oxford forbade the translation of the Bible and the reading of a vernacular translation without the specific permission of the bishop. Yet that did not stop the spread of Wycliffe's Bible, and copies were found in English homes even in the sixteenth century. Two major events after Wycliffe's time altered the course of this history. The first was the invention of the printing press in 1454 by Johann Gutenberg, a German printer. No longer were Bibles copied by hand. The second event was the Protestant Reformation initiated by Martin Luther, a German monk, in 1517. The firm separation from the pope took root in England in 1534 under King Henry VIII. The reformers insisted on Scripture alone, and aimed to make the Bible available to all people in their own language.

William Tyndale (1491-1536) began his translation work in good faith within the Roman Catholic Church, but strayed and ended as a Protestant. He sought permission from the bishop of London to make an English translation, but it was not granted. He went to the European mainland and settled in Germany, where the attempt to print his New Testament translation in Cologne was thwarted. Later he succeeded in publishing his work in Worms, and smuggled copies into England in 1526. But his efforts met with opposition and were repudiated by the authorities. Later he was arrested and executed as a heretic. Tyndale's was the first English translation of the Scriptures to be printed. His work had chapter divisions but no verse numbers. His translations from the Greek and Hebrew later became the basis for the Authorized and Revised versions.

Following Tyndale's death, King Henry VIII decided that England needed a vernacular Bible. Myles Coverdale (1487-1569), another dissident who had helped Tyndale with translation, was appointed editor. Coverdale did some of the translation but leaned heavily on the previous work of Tyndale, and omitted the controversial notes. Dubbed the "Great Bible" because it was so large, this version was placed in all English churches by order of Henry. Among other translations Coverdale influenced were the Geneva Bible and a revision of the Great Bible known as the Bishops' Bible. The "Breeches Bible" was another name for the Geneva Bible, the first to contain verse numbers, and was made with the Calvinists exiled to the Continent during the reign of Queen Mary. Coverdale died as a leader of the Puritans.

From the earlier political and religious turmoil the seventeenth century saw the appearance of two English translations that would endure in popular use into the twentieth century: the Authorized Version, popularly called the King James Bible, and the Douay-Rheims Bible.

The Douay-Rheims Bible was the Roman Catholic response to the Protestant translation. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) had declared the Latin Vulgate the official Bible of the Catholic Church. English Catholics in exile during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I realized that their co-religionists were at a disadvantage among Protestants, who could quote by heart from the Bible in English. They also feared that Catholics would read "heretical" Bibles laced with textual notes strongly critical of the pope and Roman Catholicism. The remedy came in the person of Gregory Martin (d. 1582), a Catholic priest ordained at the English College in Douai, France. He returned to Douai after starting the English College in Rome. Later the College in Douai moved to Rheims. It was at Douai in 1578 that Martin began to translate two chapters of the Bible each day and submit them to an editorial committee. He followed the Latin closely while keeping an eye on the Greek text and other English translations. Copious notes, some condemning Protestantism, were attached to the new translation. The New Testament was published in 1632, the year of his death, and the Old Testament in 1609. The Douay-Rheims Bible and its revisions remained the official Catholic version in English until the Second Vatican Council.

Almost in response, King James I ordered an English translation of the entire Bible to be used in all the churches of England. Forty-eight scholars were chosen from Westminster, Cambridge, and Oxford, and the work apportioned among them. An editorial board completed its work, and the Authorized Version appeared in 1611. This became the standard English Bible for more than two centuries and

exercised a remarkable influence on the diction and shape of the English language. Hence, "the King's English."

The controversies and intrigue surrounding Biblical translations in English virtually abated with the ascendance of the Douay-Rheims Bible and the King James Version. Another surge in new translations and animated discussions came only in the twentieth century.

Among the most popular editions of the Holy Bible in English today are the New American Bible (NAB), The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), Today's English Version (TEV), and Contemporary English Version (CEV). These are among the most widely read among Catholics, and they are the fruit of both Catholic and Protestant translators.*

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*Cf. John Stevens Kerr, *Ancient Texts Alive today: The Story of the English Bible*, New York, American Bible Society, 1999.