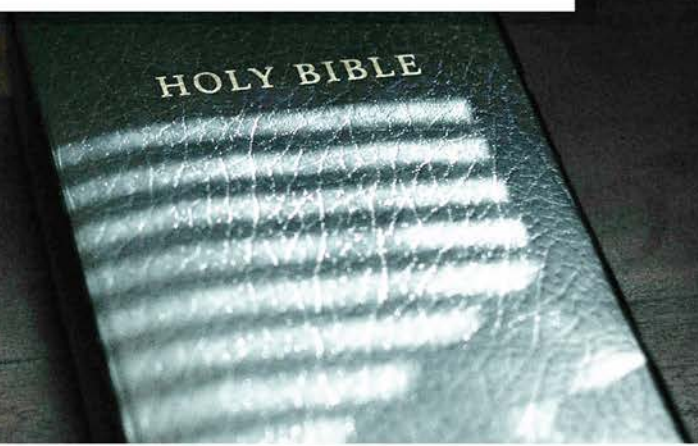
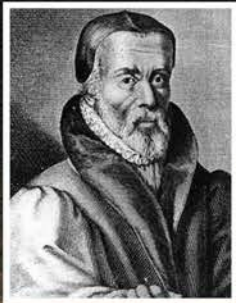




# THE BIBLE ACROSS THE CENTURIES

## HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE IN THE LANGUAGE WE SPEAK



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# THE BIBLE ACROSS THE CENTURIES

HOW WE GOT THE BIBLE  
IN THE LANGUAGE WE SPEAK

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COLIN KIRTON

CONTENT EDITOR: DR NG KAM WENG  
GENERAL EDITOR: PETER C. T. LIM

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# Foreword

It gives me immense pleasure in writing this foreword for this new book “The Bible Across the Centuries – How We Got the Bible in the Language We Speak”.

This book is a profound Theological, Archaeological, Historical and Cultural exploration into unfolding the progress of the Bible from its birth till the present age. The producers of this book intend its audience to have an adventurous, intellectual and spiritual journey in the course of unfolding every page.

I would like to express my gratitude to everyone in the team who have made this book possible.

For Christians, the Bible is not just a text, a cultural artefact, nor even just a sacred text. It is a vital fount of encounter with God, a catalyst for conversion and a guide to discerning a way forward. I commend this book for the pedagogical purpose of the church and for the intellectual and spiritual quest of all its readers.



**Rev. Mathew K Punnoose**  
**General Secretary,**  
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# INTRODUCTION

I dare say most of us take our Bibles for granted. We probably have a few copies lying around our home in various versions, plus the luxury of online versions available at the press of a button on apps on our digital devices or via the internet.

But the story of how the Bible came to us in the language we speak is a fascinating one, spanning centuries and countries, involving kings and smugglers, scholars and rascals, burnings at the stake, political intrigue, power struggles, men on the run, betrayal, civil wars, and much more.

And overseeing this epic adventure, we will come to realise, was the One whose desire was that all humankind should come to know him and his Son, Jesus Christ, revealed to us through the Holy Spirit in the written Word of God – in our own language.

So fasten your seatbelts and come join us on this exciting journey of discovery!

# CHAPTER 1

## ORIGINS



*A Bible manuscript from 1300.*

*Source: The National Library of Israel Collection.*

Before we look at how the Bible came about in our own language, let's first travel back in time to the very beginnings of the Bible.

The Bible is in reality not a single book. It's an anthology of 66 books, divided into two clear parts – what we today

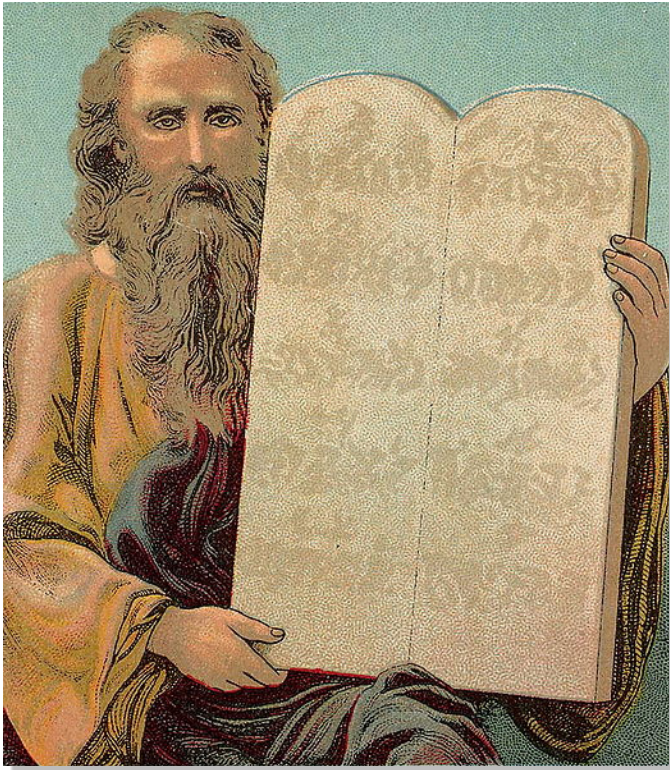
call the Old Testament, comprising 39 books, and the New Testament, comprising 27 books. Yet this anthology of books tells one amazing, overarching, cohesive story of God and his people, and God's rescue plan for fallen humankind through his Son, Jesus Christ.

### 1.1 The Bible's authors

We speak of the Bible as the Word of God, written by him. But God didn't magically write on tablets of stone – except for the Ten Commandments, of course. Nor were his sacred writings written in the clouds for all to see, or dropped on planet Earth at some point in history by an angel on a delivery round.

God used *people* to write his story. Not one or two, but over 40 authors from various backgrounds who lived in different geographical areas and periods of time over a span of more than a thousand years and covering at least

4,000 years of human history.



*Moses with the 10 commandments.*

*The Ten Commandments, illustration from a Bible card published by the Providence Lithograph Company Circa c.1907.*

Many of the Old Testament authors were great leaders, kings or prophets. The New Testament writers included unschooled fishermen, an educated doctor and one of the most highly educated Pharisees of his time, the apostle Paul. What was the common thread among them? Only

that God had chosen them to write a portion of his truth in his Word.

The first part of 2 Timothy 3:16 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed.” God is the primary author of his Word. His breath runs right through it. But 2 Peter 1:20-21 says, “Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet’s own interpretation of things. For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” (NIV) Through human agents, God breathed his Word.

But how did this happen in reality? Did God whisper his words in their ears? Or bring them to some higher level of enlightenment such that light bulbs went off in their heads and they immediately knew what God wanted them to write? Or did he put them into a trance and move their pens zombie-like across a page?

I guess we’ll never know. But it’s evident from what we see in the Bible that as the Holy Spirit “carried along” these biblical writers, it was never at the expense of their personalities, intellect and ability. As they were directed by the Holy Spirit, they wrote down words in their own

writing styles and genres that still somehow carried the breath of God. This is why you will find such diversity in the writings of Scripture – stories, poetry, moral and social law (including health guidelines), prophecy, letters, and so on.

Now it should be pointed out that some parts of the Bible were written well after the fact. For example, Moses wrote Genesis, but he couldn't possibly have been present at the creation of the universe, nor know first-hand the stories of Noah, Abraham and others.

In those days, story-telling was an oral tradition. Without mass media to distract, people would gather around and tell or hear these well-worn stories of their history which would be repeated over the generations. People became familiar with these stories in much the same way we become familiar with a movie that we have watched so many times that we not only know the story so well but can also quote the script almost verbatim!

At other times, the Bible authors had access to other older manuscripts containing details and facts about past historical events, or access to eyewitnesses themselves (e.g. Luke 1:1-4).

We come back in the end to what the Bible says about itself

– that behind the words of human authors are the very breath and words of God, and that everything was overseen by the hand of the Holy Spirit. We can therefore trust that God himself preserved what needed to be recorded – or even possibly provided additional divine revelation in some way – when it was eventually written down by the authors of Scripture.

## 1.2 The Bible's cohesion



*The Malmesbury Bible.*

*A Bible handwritten in Latin, on display in Malmesbury Abbey, Wiltshire, England. The Bible was written in Belgium in 1407 AD, for reading aloud in a monastery.*

Perhaps the greatest testament to the divine origin of the Bible is the fact that in spite of its incredible diversity, and that its authors wrote separately across geography and across time without collaboration, the message of Scripture is an astonishingly unified and coherent one right from its beginning in Genesis through to its ending in Revelation.

And what is that message?

Jesus.

Yes, we know that the New Testament is all about Jesus. But so is the Old Testament. Jesus himself said so. In Luke 24:25-27, Jesus explains to some of his followers how the entire Old Testament speaks of him. The writer of the book of Hebrews also shows how Jesus was prefigured in much of the Old Testament. He describes what is in the Old Testament as “shadows” of a greater “reality” that was to come later, and how that reality is Jesus.

To paraphrase the great theologian Augustine, “The Old Testament is Christ concealed and the New Testament is Christ revealed.” This also helps us understand a little

more why John describes Jesus’ coming to earth in human form as “the Word” taking on flesh (John 1:14).

Some sceptics have tried hard to explain all this away as coincidence or the result of some great conspiracy, but the Bible’s cohesion speaks loudly and clearly that it had a supernatural origin in the one central Author behind it – Almighty God, through his Holy Spirit.

### 1.3 The Bible’s languages

Compared to the New Testament, which was written over the span of about seventy years following Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension, the Old Testament was written over about 1,000 years, from approximately 1200-400 BC. Some of the stories in the earliest books date even further back, to the dawn of humanity.

The writers of the Old Testament, who were Jews, wrote almost entirely in their native language, Hebrew. (An interesting thing about the ancient Hebrew alphabet is that it consisted of 22 letters which were *all* consonants! It was only later that vowels were added.)



*Daniel's answer to the King by Briton Riviere c.1892.*

Several chapters in the prophetic books of Ezra and Daniel and a single verse in Jeremiah, were however written in Aramaic. Aramaic was the language of the Persian Empire. During the time when the Jews were in exile in Babylon, Babylon was conquered by the Persian Empire, and many of these exiled Jews became proficient in the language of their new colonists. Ezra and Daniel themselves lived during this time.

The exile of the Jews into Babylon for 70 years in the sixth century BC had a drastic effect on their culture. Many

soon lost touch with Hebrew, and adopted Aramaic like everyone else around them. Similarly, immigrant families in various parts of the world today often lose the language of their ancestors within a couple of generations.



*The Flight of the Prisoners (1896) by James Tissot; the exile of the Jews from Canaan to Babylon.  
Anonymous (photo by Adrian Pingstone)*

So, because many Jews were unable to understand Hebrew on their return to their homeland at the end of the exile about three generations later, Aramaic translations of the Hebrew scriptures were therefore produced, known as targums. (*Targum* means “translation” or “interpretation” in Hebrew.)

When Alexander the Great defeated the Persian Empire in 334 BC, he also brought with him a programme known as Hellenisation, whereby he sought to immerse all the lands he had conquered – much of the known world then – in the Greek culture, philosophy and language. The Greek language grew to become the official language in all these conquered territories, including Palestine, such that by the time Greece fell to the Romans in 146 BC and the Roman Empire became the new colonial power, Greek had so firmly entrenched itself all across much of the world that it continued to be used widely for centuries to come.



*Marble bust of Alexander the Great at the British Museum.  
Photographer: Yair Haklai*

Because of Hellenisation and the wide usage of the Greek language, a Greek translation of the Old Testament began in Alexandria, Egypt, in the mid third century BC, taking about 120 years to complete. This Greek version of the Old Testament became known as the Septuagint and was used by Hellenised Jews who were better at Greek than Hebrew.



*Map of the Hellenised Macedonian Empire, established by the military conquests of Alexander the Great in 334–323 BC.*

In Jesus' time, while the language of their Roman colonists was Latin, the common language in Palestine was Aramaic, a lasting legacy of the exile 600 years earlier. Hebrew was the language of the Jewish faith, mainly used by the priests and rabbis. Jesus himself most likely spoke a Galilean dialect of Aramaic on a daily basis as his first language, but would also be familiar with Hebrew. Some Aramaic words even appear in the New Testament. (The movie *The Passion of the Christ* uses Aramaic.) Most people in Jesus' time would also likely be able to speak at least some measure of Greek, especially

when communicating officially or with people from more Hellenised communities.

The New Testament writers, writing in the period 50 to 100 AD, chose to write in Greek as it was the most widely used language at the time as well as the language of scholarship.

As the early Church was established and spread from the Jews to the Gentiles, the Septuagint became a wonderful asset to the early Christians, for now the Greek-speaking world could read the Old Testament in a language they knew well.

## 1.4 The Bible's media

Without modern technology for mass-production of books, how did the Bible get written down and then distributed?

The Bible itself indicates that stone, clay, lead or wooden tablets were sometimes used to inscribe God's Word (Exodus 34:1; Job 19:23-24; Habakkuk 2:2; Isaiah 30:8). These were of course long-lasting but hard to work on.

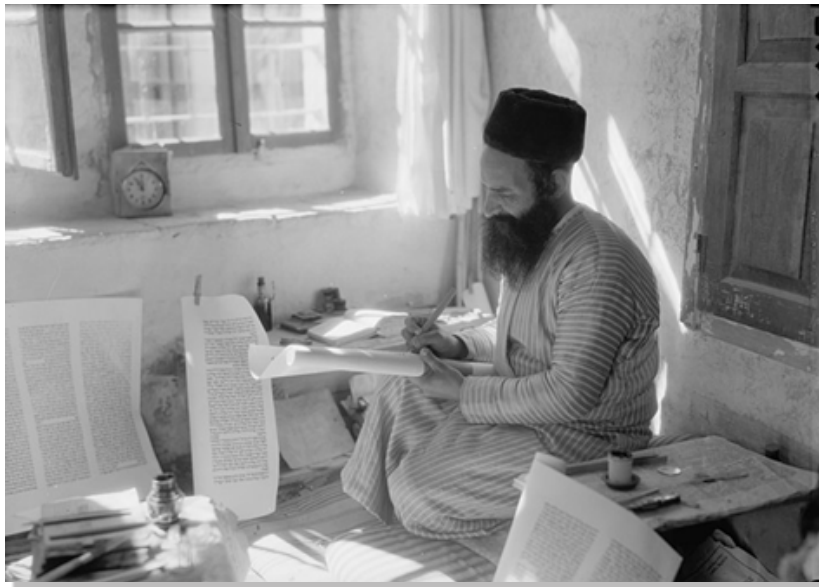


*Blank papyrus.*

Another common writing surface used was papyrus, one of the most ancient writing materials known to humans, and a precursor to modern-day paper. In fact, our modern English word 'paper' comes from the Latin word *papyrus*. Papyrus dates back to around 3000 BC. It was made from the pith of a reed that was commonly found along swampy river banks in the Middle East, especially in the delta of the Nile River in Egypt. Strips of the papyrus reed were dried and then hammered out so that their fibres intertwined. This could be used to form single sheets of papyrus which could also later be glued together with flour paste to form a rollable scroll.

The Greeks called papyrus rolls *biblia*, named after a seaport in Phoenicia (now Lebanon) called Byblos which was a major exporter of papyrus. *Biblia* (and its singular form *biblio*) later came to mean ‘books’ (or ‘book’) or ‘The Book’, that is, the Bible. Our English word ‘Bible’ is derived from this Greek word.

Another surface used for writing in the ancient world was animal skin. Leather scrolls had the advantage of not wearing out as quickly as papyrus and could also be stitched and rolled into a scroll. Parchment, usually made from the skin of a sheep or a goat, was another alternative. Parchment continued to be used for books well into the Middle Ages.



Until the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century AD, the Scriptures – as with any other writings – had to be painstakingly copied by hand on these materials.

The task of making new copies of the Scriptures by hand was the work of a special group of people known as scribes. Scribes took their work ultra-seriously. They were specially trained from young for the task and saw their work not just as a job but as something sacred done for God. Scribes would even ritually cleanse themselves before they did their work as a reminder of their sacred duty.

The Hebrew word for scribe is derived from another word meaning ‘to count’. This is because one of the things scribes did when they meticulously checked and rechecked the accuracy of what they copied was to count the number of words and letters to ensure that their copies tallied with the originals. If as much as a spelling error had been made, the copy would be destroyed.

As a result of their seriousness and painstaking care, the accuracy of Scripture has been retained over the millennia.



*Dead Sea Scrolls fragments.*

Today, some 5,000 hand-copied manuscripts of all or part of the Bible exist, and amazingly, they agree in 98% of the text! No other ancient writings have these many manuscripts available for cross-checking, nor, on top of that, such amazing consistency in the text.

In 1947, the earliest copies of the Old Testament book of Isaiah were discovered in Qumran, near the Dead Sea. They are part of the famous Dead Sea Scrolls – one of the great archaeological finds of the twentieth century. Although they are at least 900 years older than any of the available Bible manuscripts we had before their discovery,

the text was still astonishingly identical, a testimony to the precision and care of the scribes who copied the Scriptures over the centuries.

## 1.5 The Bible's collation

So, if the books of the Bible were written over such a long time and in different places by different authors, how did they all come together into one book and become recognised as the Word of God?

The assembling of the Bible is known as ‘canonisation.’ The root word here, ‘canon’, is derived from an Arabic word *qanun*, meaning ‘law’, ‘rule’ or ‘measuring rod (i.e. ruler)’. So canonisation is the process of determining – through some legitimate means of measuring – what is and what is not. In the context of the ‘canon’ of the Bible, it specifically refers to deciding what writings should be included in the Bible on the basis of being “God-breathed” and therefore authoritative for the Church.

Contrary to what some critics have argued, the canonisation of the Bible was not engineered by any one particular individual, church or government.

Both the Jews and Jesus himself accepted the Old Testament as the authoritative Word of God. Jews refer to the Old Testament books in three categories – the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms. When Jesus met his shocked disciples after his resurrection, he explained how he was the fulfilment of the *entire* Old Testament. He said, “Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” (Luke 24:44b). In one fell swoop, Jesus was giving his stamp of approval to the divine authority – and therefore, ‘canon’ – of the entire 39 books of the Old Testament.



*The Pilgrims of Emmaus on the Road with Jesus by James Tissot c. 1890.  
Brooklyn Museum.*

After Jesus' life, death, resurrection and subsequent ascension, the men who had been given authority from Jesus – the Apostles – not only wrote of these events in the Gospels, but also wrote to churches and individuals to teach and encourage them in their faith. Their writings or those approved by them were recognised by the early Church to be inspired by God and were therefore accepted as authoritative Scripture. Even the Apostles themselves recognised each other's writings as being from God and therefore equally Scripture (e.g. 2 Peter 3:15–16).

One of the problems the early Church faced in its first three centuries of existence was the rise of false teachers and cults. Along with this, these people wanted other writings to be included as God-breathed and authoritative too. One of the most well-known cults arising during this time was Gnosticism. Gnostics mixed Christian teaching with eastern mysticism and other religious elements, creating a religion of their own. Some Gnostics were also prolific writers.

And so, in response to this, the early Church leaders met in a series of councils over the course of time to clearly identify which books were to be accepted by the Church as Scripture. Those from dubious sources, especially from

cults like the Gnostics, or which clearly contradicted the already accepted books of the Bible, were rejected.

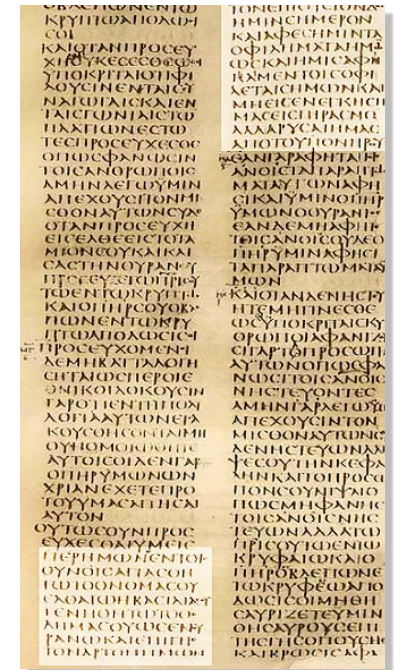
We do not know exactly when the full canon of the New Testament books was completed. The oldest full list that we have comes from Athanasius of Alexandria in 367 AD, and although there continued to be some debate over the inclusion of a few books, this list was endorsed and settled 30 years later at the Council of Carthage.



*Codex Vaticanus*

No one knows either when the first physical single-volume Bible combining both Old and New Testaments was produced. The two oldest surviving almost-complete Bibles, both in Greek and referred to by biblical manuscript

experts as the *Codex Vaticanus* and the *Codex Sinaiticus*, date back to the middle of the fourth century. The former is held in the library of the Vatican and the latter is on public display in the British Library in London, where they continue to be of great help to Bible scholars today.



*Codex Sinaiticus*



*Codex Sinaiticus*

## FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

### **Bible authors**

[The 35 Authors Who Wrote the Bible](#) (Jeffrey Kranz)

### **Bible languages**

[In What Language Was the Bible First Written?](#) (Biblica)

[New Testament Languages](#) (The Bible Journey)

### **Septuagint**

[What Is the Septuagint?](#) (Museum of the Bible)

### **Papyrus**

[How Papyrus Was Made](#) (Mark Anson)

[Meet Some of the Last Papyrus Makers in Egypt Keeping a 5,000-Year-Old Craft Alive | Still Standing](#) (Business Insider)

### **Scribes**

[Old Testament: God's Revelation Accurate | Is the Bible Reliable?](#) (Josh McDowell Ministry)

[Old Testament: Scribes' Commitment | Is the Bible Reliable?](#) (Josh McDowell Ministry)

[Old Testament: Committed to Detail | Is the Bible Reliable?](#) (Josh McDowell Ministry)

### **Dead Sea Scrolls**

[What Are the Dead Sea Scrolls?](#) (Dr Sean McDowell)

### **Biblical canon**

[How Did We Get the New Testament Canon?](#) (Toby Jennings)

[Were Some Books Left Out of the Bible?](#) (Dr Sean McDowell)

### **Biblical trustworthiness**

[Real Questions and Answers About the Bible](#) (Dr Sean McDowell)

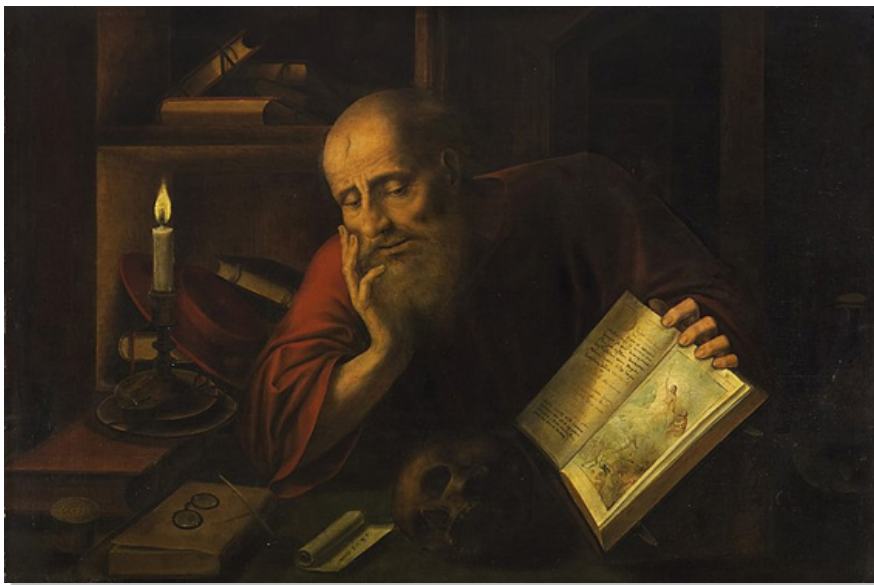
[The Bible Explored: Can I Trust the Bible?](#) (Canadian Bible Society)

# CHAPTER 2

## JEROME'S VULGATE AND OTHER EARLY BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

The Roman Empire of Jesus' time continued to grow and expand its influence across the world such that by the early fifth century, Latin had replaced Greek to become the common language across most of the Empire. With the declining influence of Greek, the time had come for a new translation of the Bible in the major language of the day, and for this purpose God raised up a man named Jerome.

### 2.1 Jerome (c344-420) and the Vulgate



Jerome's full name was Sophronius Eusebius Hieronymus. He was born somewhere between 342-347 in a part of Dalmatia that is now part of either modern-day Slovenia or Croatia. He went to study in Rome where he became entangled in a hedonistic, sexually permissive lifestyle that continued to scream at his conscience. He was torn by his sinful lifestyle and a sense of accountability to a higher power. Initially sceptical about Christianity, Jerome eventually committed his life to Christ and was baptised around the age of 20. He then became a desert monk for a couple of years before being ordained as a priest, devoting himself to the study of the Scriptures and its original languages.

One of Jerome's life missions was to replace the Greek Bible with a good Latin version. There had been some attempts at Latin versions before then, but none of them were good translations. Jerome's gung-ho character and deep passion for the Word of God helped him to produce a good translation known as the Vulgate. It was called this because it was written in the 'vulgar' or 'common', not

'profane' language of the people.



*The cave in Bethlehem where Jerome translated the Vulgate.*

*Photo by: P.C.T Lim*

Jerome took over 22 years to complete this massive task. In 384, he moved from Rome to Bethlehem where he set up his base at a monastery there and continued the work of translation he had just begun shortly earlier. The small room where he laboured all those years to complete the Vulgate is still in existence in Bethlehem today.



*Statue of Jerome in Bethlehem.*

*Photo by: P.C.T Lim*

Jerome finished his mammoth work in 405, and died fifteen years later. The bulk of his life had been committed to this great cause for God. He painstakingly translated the Old Testament, not just from the Greek Septuagint, but also from the original Hebrew text. In fact, though he initially largely depended on the Septuagint, the original Hebrew text eventually became his main source. He re-translated from Hebrew entire books that he had already finished translating from Greek in order to get closer to the original meanings and intentions of the text.

As is often the case with new translations, it took people some time to accept the Vulgate over the long-used Septuagint. In its early days, in spite of its popularity with people – or maybe because of it! – brickbats were thrown at it, with unsubstantiated accusations of it being less accurate than the Septuagint. But over the passage of time, people began to realise just how good a job Jerome had done and the Vulgate became the standard Latin version of the Bible for over 1,500 years!



*The Latin Vulgate*

## 2.2 Other early European translations

In the fourth century, shortly before Jerome began his work on the Vulgate, God was also raising up men to work on translations of the Bible in various other European languages.

Once such man was Ulfilas. His parents were of Cappadocian Greek origin but they had been captured and enslaved by plundering Goths, who took them away to the Gothic-controlled lands in what is now Romania. Although Ulfilas was raised as a Goth, and was destined like many Gothic men to become a warrior, he later became proficient in both Greek and Latin and instead became a Christian bishop and Bible translator.

Ulfilas led many to Christ and it was his heart's desire that his adopted people, the Goths, should have the Bible in their own language. The only problem was, like many other minor European languages at the time, there was no system for writing. Their languages were purely oral ones. And so before Ulfilas could even begin to translate the Bible, he had to

*Ulfilas translating the Bible (1879) by Wilhelm Lindenschmit.*



first create an alphabet for the Gothic language – which was precisely what he did!

No one knows exactly how much of the Bible he eventually translated, as surviving Gothic Bibles are far from complete. Gothic itself has also now become an extinct language.

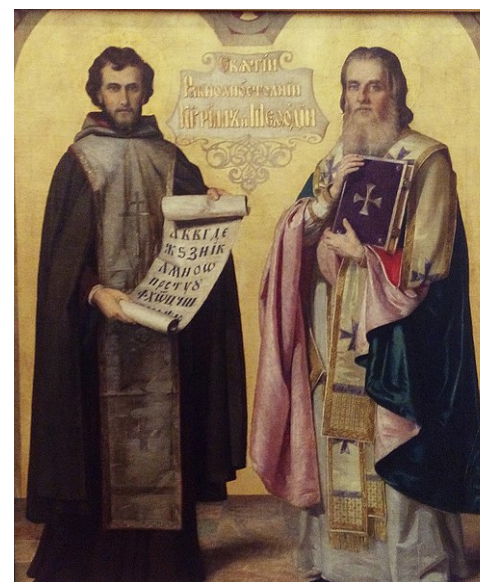
Another translator around this time was an Armenian monk named Mesrop. He had studied the classical languages and, like Ulfilas, had also developed alphabets for transliterating the languages of Armenia, Georgia and Caucasian Albania (now part of Azerbaijan). All these countries had recently become Christian kingdoms. And so, Mesrop made it his life's ambition to give them the Bible in their own languages. The Albanian Bible was sadly lost – along with the Albanian church – when the forces of Islam invaded in the seventh century. But Mesrop's legacy remains in his Armenian and Georgian Bibles which are still in use today – as well as the alphabets he devised for their languages simply because he wanted them to have the Bible in their everyday language.

In 862, the prince of Moravia (now Slovakia) made an appeal for missionaries to work with new Christians in his land. Since so few Slavs understood Latin, two brothers, Cyril and Methodius, who were highly educated priests from

Thessalonica in Greece, moved to Moravia to translate the Bible into the Slavonic language. Like Ulfilas and Mesrop before them, they too had to first create an alphabet for Slavonic, which continues to be used not only in modern-day Slovakia but also in the neighbouring countries of Bulgaria, Romania, Russia and Yugoslavia.



*A depiction of Mesrop Mashtots at St. Mesrop Mashtots church in Kapan, Armenia.*



*Saints Cyril and Methodius, painted by Uroš Predić, c. 1912.*

## 2.3 Major European language translations

When Jerome finished the Latin Vulgate in 405, Latin was still widely used across the Western Roman Empire and therefore it was the ideal language for the masses. But the Western Roman Empire itself was beginning to show signs of cracks. Constant attacks from 'barbarian' groups in the Germanic lands, particularly the Goths, were beginning to take a toll on the mighty empire. In 410, its capital Rome was sacked by the Gothic chief Alaric and in 476, the Western Roman Empire finally fell, leaving only the Eastern Roman

Empire which was renamed the Byzantine Empire, with Constantinople (now Istanbul) as its capital and Greek its main common language. The Byzantine Empire continued to exist for about another 1,000 years until it too fell to the attacking forces of the Muslim Ottoman Turks.

With the demise of the Western Roman Empire, the use of Latin began to wane over the centuries, even though it remained the official language of the church and the Bible. With fewer and fewer people familiar with it, the time came when churchgoers had no idea what they were hearing at church. Even many of the priests themselves didn't understand what they were reading in the Vulgate. It would take a long – and dark – time before the Bible was translated into the common languages of the various European peoples – in fact, over 1,000 years.

Why did it take so long?

Well, firstly, many people were still illiterate. Even if there were Bibles in their own language, they would need to learn how to read them, and that would require education.

Secondly, without mass media, Bibles still had to be produced by hand, and that meant that apart from being hard to get,



*The Byzantine Empire on the death of Emperor Basil II in 1025.*

*By Cplakidas.*

they would also be expensive and beyond the means of the average person.

But thirdly, and probably most significantly, during this time of the Middle Ages, politics and the Church had sadly become so entwined that those in Church power were often there for political reasons. Religion was used as a tool to control the spiritually ignorant masses. It would be more favourable for those in power if people remained ignorant of what the Bible really said, and depended on the teachings and interpretations of the so-called clergy – the priests, cardinals, bishops and popes – for their spiritual knowledge and salvation.

Not all the clergy were necessarily politically motivated. Some were genuine people seeking after God and to help lead his people in his ways. However, there were those who gave excessive reverence to Latin as the only sanctioned language of the Bible and the Church, while others feared that if the Bible was to be translated into the common language of the people, and the affairs of the Church conducted in that language, “ordinary” people could interpret the Bible wrongly and it would open doors for all kinds of heresies.

In the twelfth century, groups such as the Beghards and

Beguines in and around Germany, together with the Waldensians in France, pushed for Bibles in the common language so that Christians could read it for themselves. This resulted in a backlash from Church leaders, causing Pope Innocent II to call for an investigation into the translating of Bibles. While he concluded that a desire to understand Scripture and urge others to follow its teachings was praiseworthy, just 30 years later, a council of bishops in France not only banned Bible translations but also decreed that only priests could own a Bible.



*Beguine of Ghent. Excerpt from a manuscript of the beguineage of Sint-Aubertus, Ghent, c. 1840.*

## FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

### ***Vulgate***

[What Is the Vulgate? The Beginner's Guide](#) (Ryan Nelson)

### ***Ulfilas and Mesrop***

[Pre-Reformation Bible Pioneers](#) (Christianity.com)

### ***Alphabet systems***

[Top 10 Missionaries Who Invented Writing Systems to Spread the Gospel](#) (TopTenz)

# CHAPTER 3

## WYCLIFFE AND HUS: EARLY REFORMATION RUMBLINGS

Can you imagine how reading the Bible in English could be considered blasphemy and a criminal act? It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? But that was exactly the case during the time of John Wycliffe.

### 3.1 John Wycliffe (c1330–1384)

John Wycliffe was probably England's most outstanding scholar and thinker of the fourteenth century. He was born around 1330 on a sheep farm in the tiny village of Hipswell in Yorkshire, England. He left home at sixteen to study at Oxford, England's very first and most prestigious university, remaining thereafter to teach, and



*Portrait of John Wycliffe  
by Thomas Kirby c. 1828.*

earning a reputation for being the “flower of Oxford scholarship” and their most brilliant theologian. Being learned in Latin and with access to the Vulgate, Wycliffe became familiar with the Bible's true teachings, where it became clear to him how far the Church had strayed from the teaching of Scripture, both in belief and in practice.

Wycliffe's theological and academic credentials led him to become advisor to the English parliament in its negotiations with papal Rome. The Church of Wycliffe's day had reached the epitome of corruption and powerplay and the more Wycliffe had to deal with the all-powerful Church hierarchy in Rome, the more outraged he became at its pride and self-interest and how far it had departed from the truth of God's Word.

Determined not to remain silent, Wycliffe began publishing pamphlets that spoke out against the established Church of his day. He argued that, rather than pursuing wealth and power, the Church should be looking to the needs

of the poor. The Pope, Wycliffe said, was not God's voice on earth. The Bible was. He spoke out strongly against the corruption he saw in the highest echelons of the Church leadership and even questioned whether certain leaders were destined for heaven!



*Example of a papal bull from Pope Urban VIII (1623-44)*

Needless to say, this did not go down well with the powers-that-be. In 1377, first, the Bishop of London demanded that Wycliffe appear before his court to explain the “wonderful things which had streamed forth from his mouth.” Then the Pope himself issued a papal bull (an official papal statement) in which he accused Wycliffe of “vomiting out of the filthy dungeon of his heart most wicked and damnable heresies.”

Accused of being a heretic – no small matter in a day when the Church held almost supreme power and heresy often came with a death sentence – Wycliffe was put under house arrest and, soon after, ousted from his position at Oxford University.

It was Wycliffe's firm belief that the Bible should be available to everybody in the language they were familiar with and that people should also be taught how to read. “The laity (ordinary people) ought to understand the faith,” Wycliffe said, “and, as doctrines of our faith are in the scriptures, believers should have the scriptures in the language they fully understand.” The laity, who neither spoke Latin nor were able to read, depended on the clergy for their teaching, but sadly much of what they were taught was nowhere to be found in the Bible.



*An Angel Frees the Souls of Purgatory by Ludovico Carracci c.1610.*

Some of these unbiblical teachings included the idea of *purgatory*, the belief of a state or place between earth and heaven where the soul is punished to refine it and make it fit for heaven. Accompanying this teaching was the equally unbiblical teaching of letters of indulgence – or simply, *indulgences*. The Church maintained that they possessed a vast spiritual treasury built up by the good works of Jesus, the Apostles and the saints. The Pope could draw on these resources and issue letters of indulgence that one could purportedly use in the afterlife to lessen one's time in purgatory. They were essentially spiritual fast-pass tickets into heaven. Indulgences could be purchased for oneself or on behalf of already deceased relatives or friends.

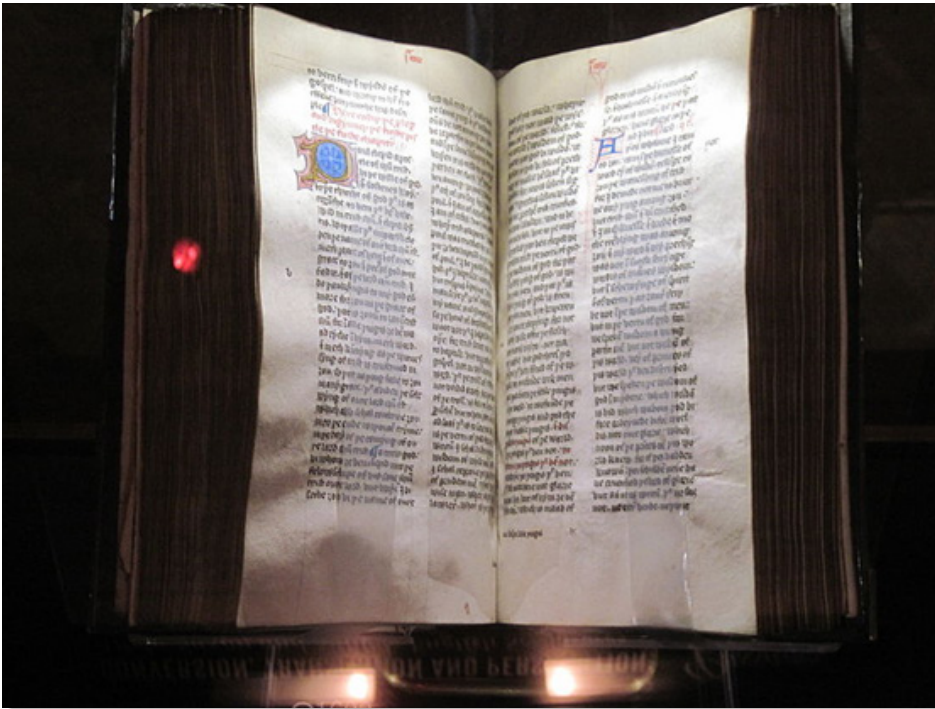
At this time, some parts of the Bible had been translated into English but there was still no complete translation. Wycliffe felt that knowing the Scriptures would liberate the poor. So he established a group of ministers who would travel through the land, reading the Bible in English and teaching its truths to the common folk. These ministers were later derogatorily called the Lollards, which means “mutterers”.



*John Wycliffe speaking to his Lollard preachers.  
Painting by: William Frederick Yeames, 1835-1918.*

With the assistance of others, many of them his Oxford colleagues, Wycliffe worked to produce a complete English Bible over a period of 13 years from 1382. Wycliffe may not have translated much of the Bible himself but he was certainly the motivational force behind the project. Not being familiar with the Bible's original languages Hebrew and Greek, Wycliffe and his team worked from the Latin Vulgate and produced two English translations. The first

was a small pocket edition completed in about 1382 which was a more literal translation of the Latin and therefore hard to read. A surviving copy indicates that Nicholas of Hereford, one of Wycliffe's associates, translated the Old Testament. While it does not indicate the New Testament translator, most have assumed it to be Wycliffe.



*A John Wycliffe Bible in the Green Collection, Oklahoma City, OK.  
Future artifact in Museum of the Bible.*

Wycliffe died suddenly at the end of 1384, a few days after suffering a stroke while at church. After his death, several

further updates were made over the next decade by Wycliffe's secretary, John Purvey, particularly to make the language more reader-friendly.

A backlash was inevitable. The fires of anger had been stoked in the halls of the Church leaders and the political powers. Henry Knighton, a writer of that time, summed up the Church's position in this scathing attack on Wycliffe: "Christ gave his gospel to the clergy and the learned doctors of the Church so that they might give it to the laity. ... Wycliffe, by thus translating the Bible, made it the property of the masses and common to all and more open to the laity, even to women who were able to read. ... And so the pearl of the gospel is thrown before swine. ... The jewel of the clergy has been turned into the sport of the laity."

And so in 1391, a bill was placed before parliament to outlaw Bibles in English and to imprison anyone found possessing a copy. The bill failed to pass. John of Gaunt, a nobleman and politician who had allied himself with Wycliffe earlier – mainly for his own ulterior political interests – put a stop to that bill in parliament. But the Church continued relentlessly in its persecution of the long-dead Wycliffe together with his associates and followers.



*John of Gaunt, Duke of Lancaster (1340-1399) by Lucas Cornelisz de Kock c. 1593.*

During Wycliffe's lifetime, two popes had summoned him to Rome, one of whom had issued five warrants for his arrest! The English Church leaders had tried him three times, but his friends had protected him and he was never in his lifetime officially convicted as a heretic.

But even years after his death, his legacy for reformation in

the Church continued. His writings continued to influence many. His followers continued to carry his message – the true message of the Bible. And of course, the complete Bible was now available for the first time in the English language!

Wycliffe only escaped prosecution and death simply because he died before they could get to him. Many of his colleagues and followers however were burned alive for their part in Wycliffe's "heresies".

Wycliffe was one of the men that God used to be a catalyst for the Reformation that would follow about 130 years after his death. The effects of his passionate commitment to the Word of God and its truth continued to ripple across England and even beyond.



*Portrait of Thomas FitzAlan ("Thomas Arundel") (1353–1414), Archbishop of Canterbury, son of the Earl of Arundel.*

In 1401, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundel, fumed about Wycliffe, “This pestilent and wretched John Wycliffe, of cursed memory, yea, the forerunner and disciple of antichrist who, as the complement of his wickedness, invented a new translation of the scriptures into his mother-tongue.” At the Council of Constance in 1415, Wycliffe was finally denounced as a heretic and retroactively excommunicated from the Church. All his writings – including the English Bible – were to be banned and burned. Since the Church practised the consecration of burial ground, only allowing its own members to be buried in consecrated ground, the Council also decreed that Wycliffe’s bodily remains should be removed. But rather than being buried elsewhere in unconsecrated ground, it was ordered that no grave should exist to the memory of this man. Wycliffe’s corpse was to be exhumed and burned, and the ashes cast into the River Swift.

For reasons unknown, it took another twelve years for that to happen. In 1427, Pope Martin V issued the order to carry out this strange ceremony. Wycliffe had been dead for 43 years, but the lingering aroma of his “offences” still continued to irk the noses of Church powers.

The British historian Thomas Fuller wrote around two

centuries later: “They burnt his bones to ashes and cast them into the Swift, a neighbouring brook running hard by. Thus the brook hath conveyed his ashes into Avon; Avon into Severn; Severn into the narrow seas; and they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrine, which now is dispersed the world over.”



*John Wycliffe's bones being burnt in 1428. From Foxe's Book of Martyrs (1563).*

### 3.2 Jan Hus (c1369-1415)

One of those across the seas who embraced Wycliffe's teachings was a young Bohemian priest by the name of Jan Hus (sometimes Anglicised as John Huss). Hus was another

key catalyst for the Protestant movement a century later.

Hus was born into a poor peasant family around 1369 in Husinec (which means “Goosetown”) in Bohemia (today’s Czech Republic). “Jan of Husinec” later shortened his name to Hus (“goose”) and he and his friends took delight in making puns on his name. Luther later did the same, reminding his followers of the “goose” who had been “cooked” for defying the Pope!



*Jan Hus (c.1369-1415)*

In order to escape poverty, Hus travelled to Prague at an early age, where he supported himself by singing and serving in churches. After earning two university degrees, Hus was ordained as a priest in 1400. He was also a philosopher and Master at Charles University in Prague.

In 1402, Hus was appointed to a church in Prague, the

3,000-seater Bethlehem Chapel. Disturbed by what was happening in the Church in his time and inspired by Wycliffe’s writings, which were now circulating in Europe, Hus used his pulpit to speak out boldly against church corruption and to campaign for reforms in the Church.



*Sigismund (1369-1437)*

In 1407, Hus was forbidden to preach and excommunicated, but only on paper. With local Bohemians backing him, including the emperor, Hus continued to preach and serve at Bethlehem Chapel. In 1410, Pope Alexander V ordered the destruction of Wycliffe’s books and tried to keep Hus from preaching. But Hus kept going.

Just like Wycliffe, Hus believed that reform could only be achieved through literacy and giving the people the Bible in the Czech language instead of Latin. Taking a page from Wycliffe, Hus assembled a team of scholars to work on the translation, which was completed sometime before 1412. It was a direct challenge



*Bethlehem Chapel*

to those he called “the disciples of antichrist”.

The church authorities were furious with what Hus was teaching and doing and in 1415 had him summoned to appear at the Council of Constance – the same one at which Wycliffe would be posthumously declared a heretic – on the pretext that he could “explain” his teachings. The emperor, Sigismund, promised him “safe conduct” (that he would not be arrested or harmed). Hus saw this as an

excellent opportunity to show these Church leaders why his teachings were really based on Scripture.

But in one of the dirtiest tricks of church history, the archbishop had Hus arrested and then put pressure on Sigismund not to reverse the arrest, threatening to excommunicate him if he did not comply. Like in a game of chess, the bishop had checkmated the king!

Hus was imprisoned in a dungeon behind the latrines, where the stench was so dreadful that he became sick and almost died. There he was kept for 73 days, separated from his friends, chained day and night, poorly fed, and ill.

Hus’ trial has gone down as one of the most spectacular in church history. It was more like a carnival – nearly every bigwig in Europe was there. One archbishop arrived in regal fanfare with 600 horses. Hundreds of prostitutes offered their services to the delegates, many of whom had no moral qualms entertaining them.

Hus was not allowed an advocate for his defence. He defended all his teachings himself on the basis of what the Scriptures teach, even offering to recant (repent of his teachings) if he could be proven wrong from Scripture.

The trial was clearly a sham. He was found guilty of heresy and stripped of the symbols of his priesthood. A tall paper hat was then put upon his head with an inscription declaring him to be a heretic. When they committed his soul to the devil, he committed it to Christ.

Hus was led outside to the stake under a strong guard of armed men. After kneeling and praying aloud for God to forgive all his enemies, he was chained by the neck. Wood was piled around him.

Urged one last time to renounce his errors, he refused, replying, “I call God to witness that all I have written and preached has been to rescue souls from sin. There can be no turning back. My Lord walked the path of truth and duty, even though it took him to Calvary. Can I, one of his humble followers, turn back now? To witness to God’s truth is more important than life. Joyfully then will I confirm with my



*Hus burned at the stake.*

blood all the writings and preachings of truths that I’ve held. Into thy hands, O Lord, I commit my spirit.”

When the fire was lit, the brave reformer began to sing to the Lord. He continued singing till his final breath.

Shocked and angered by the way Hus was tried and executed, many Bohemians moved even more rapidly away from papal teachings, prompting an announced crusade against them. Pope Martin V issued a papal edict calling for the slaughter of all supporters of reformers like Hus and Wycliffe. Some two thousand Hussites were thrown down the Kutná Hora mine shafts to their deaths at the hands of pro-Catholic townsmen. Within a few short years, Bohemia had erupted into civil war. The Hussite community continued to fight and defeat a wave of crusades against them until a compromise for peace was finally reached in 1436.



One hundred years after Jan Hus, a German monk rummaging in a library came across a book of his sermons and asked himself, “For what cause did they burn so great a man who explained the Scriptures with so much gravity and

skill?” The monk’s name was Martin Luther. After Luther himself was declared a heretic and went into hiding in 1521, the first project he undertook was one that would have made Hus and Wycliffe smile: Luther translated the New Testament into German, the language of his people.



Even though the Bible had been translated into the common language, it still needed to be hand-copied and copies were therefore few. On top of that, many European translations, including those of Wycliffe and Hus, had depended on the Latin Vulgate rather than the original Bible languages.

But political and technological developments were beginning to take place that would soon open new doors and bring cataclysmic change.

## FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

### *Wycliffe*

[John Wycliffe: The Morning Star](#) (movie) (*Vision Video*)

### *Hus*

[John Hus](#) (movie) (*Vision Video*)

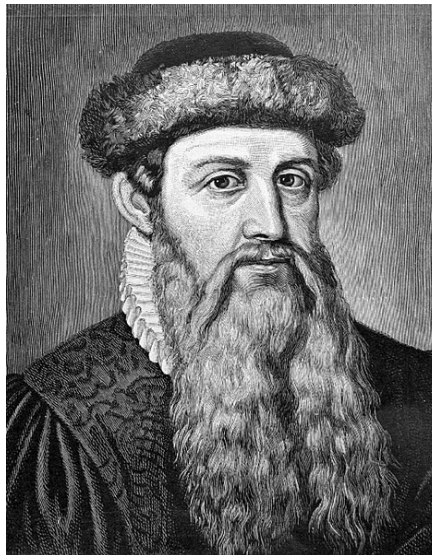
[John Hus: A Journey of No Return](#) (documentary) (*Vision Video*)

# CHAPTER 4

## GUTENBERG AND ERASMUS: REFORMATION MOMENTUM BUILDS

After withstanding attacks for over 1,000 years, Constantinople and the Eastern Roman Empire finally fell to the Muslim Ottoman Turks in 1453. Hundreds of Greek scholars fled to the west, taking with them precious Bible manuscripts and their knowledge of the Greek language. This encouraged a lot of scholars in the west to start studying Greek – and the New Testament in its original language. One such scholar was a Dutchman named Desiderius Erasmus.

Meanwhile, in 1440, Johannes Gutenberg, a German metalworker, had invented the printing press. With this landmark invention, the mass publication of writings became possible in the western world. And this was going to be a game changer!



*Johannes Gutenberg*

### 4.1 Johannes Gutenberg (c1400-1468) and his printing press

Johannes Gutenberg was born and raised in Mainz, Germany. In his thirties, he moved to Strasbourg, France, where he later developed his printing press using cut movable metal letters in a screw-driven wooden press. Returning to Mainz over a decade later, he set up a printing shop.

Although famed for printing Latin Vulgate Bibles, Gutenberg was essentially a businessman rather than a reformer in pursuit of greater readership of the Scriptures. In fact, Gutenberg also printed indulgences for the Church!

In 1455, Gutenberg completed his “42-Line Bible” – a two-volume masterpiece, with a total of 1,282 two-column pages. Each column is 42 lines, hence its name. Only about 180 copies were printed, around 135 on paper and the rest on vellum, a type of parchment made from calfskins. Due to

the sheer volume of the Bible, approximately 170 calfskins were needed to produce just one Gutenberg Bible from vellum!



*Gutenberg Bible*

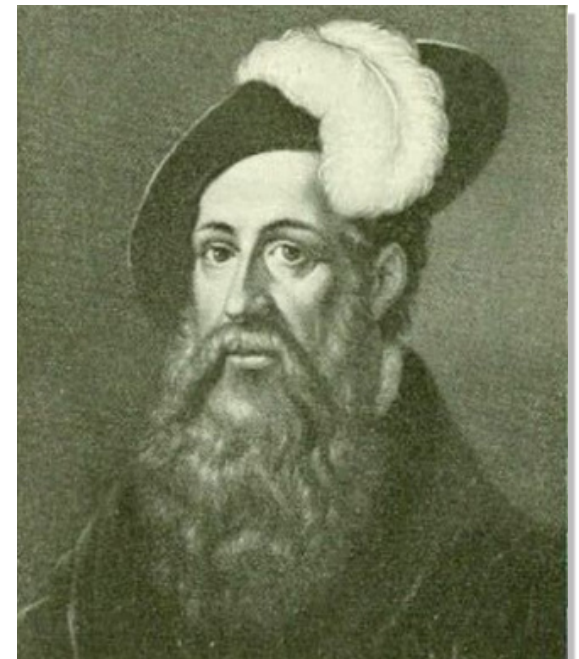
To give the impression that the text was handwritten rather than printed, Gutenberg created several slightly differing designs for each letter of the alphabet or symbol used, ending up with a total of 270 letters plus 125 symbols.

Some copies of the Bible are known to have sold for thirty florins – about three years' wages for a clerk at that time. This made them beyond the reach of most ordinary people.

Most were probably sold to monasteries and universities, as well as some particularly wealthy individuals.

The printing of his Bibles was a rather tumultuous affair for Gutenberg. His business partner Johann Fust sued him over a loan he'd earlier given Gutenberg. Gutenberg lost the case, went bankrupt, and had to turn his printing equipment and half the completed Bibles over to Fust, who eventually sold them himself along with one of Gutenberg's former assistants, Peter Schöffer. Gutenberg later opened a second print shop and printed a 36-line Bible, but it's doubtful he ever made any profits from his most famous work.

Forty-eight copies of the "42-Line Bible", now commonly known as the Gutenberg Bible, still exist today in library, university and museum collections. Most are incomplete, usually only one of the two original



*Johann Fust (1400-1466)*

volumes, and in some cases, just a few random pages.

The last time a complete Gutenberg Bible went on sale was in 1978, where it fetched a cool US\$2.2 million. In 1987, a one-volume partial copy sold for US\$5.4 million. Experts say a complete copy could fetch at least US\$35 million today.

By the beginning of the sixteenth century, printing had become part and parcel of life and printing shops were mushrooming in most cities all over Europe. With economies of scale, printed materials were also becoming much more affordable. The Bible continued to be a popular choice of printers. Over 90 editions of the Latin Vulgate were in print, together with Bibles in some local languages.

While the Gutenberg Bible may have helped introduce printing to the west, printing was actually already well established in the east. The Chinese had invented paper in the second century but kept the paper-making process a secret for centuries, assuring them a monopoly. Soluble fibres of hemp rag, bark or leaves were soaked and hammered in a vat of water until their fibres broke down and became suspended in the solution. A page-sized mould with a fine mesh bottom was then dipped into the vat and the water

drained out, leaving a thin sheet of fibre. The sheet was then squeezed in a press to remove excess water and thereafter hung out to dry.



*Chinese wood blocks*

Right from the time of paper's invention, the Chinese were already manually pressing ink onto it. By the ninth century, they had produced full-length books using wooden block printing. Around the mid eleventh century, a Chinese inventor named Pi Sheng developed a system of movable individual character types made from a mixture of baked clay and glue. Metal movable type was later used in Korea

to create the *Jikji*, a collection of Zen Buddhist teachings first published in 1377, around 75 years before Johannes Gutenberg began producing his Bibles in Germany.

Paper began to be produced in the west in Spain in the twelfth century. Initially the quality was poor, but by Gutenberg's time, papermakers had perfected their art and paper became the dominant medium for printed books from then on.

## 4.2 Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536)



*Painting of Erasmus by Hans Holbein c.1525 in the Louvre Museum.*

One of the greatest scholars of the early sixteenth century was Desiderius Erasmus, a Dutch humanist philosopher and Catholic theologian. He too was very unhappy with what the Church had become, with its focus on power, politics and control of the masses.

Convinced that there were errors in the Latin Vulgate used by the Church, and with access to newly available Greek and Hebrew manuscripts, Erasmus embarked on a new Bible translation project based on the Bible's original languages.

Erasmus collected and collated Bible manuscripts from universities and monasteries all over, and in 1516, he published a new version of the New Testament containing the Greek text alongside a new Latin translation, which improved and clarified the text of the old Vulgate. Erasmus also included his own notes together with the Latin text. While Erasmus advocated for people to have the Bible in their common language, paradoxically his own Bible translation was still in what was considered the “sacred language” of the Church as well as the language of learning – albeit a fast-dying one. Erasmus merely wanted to correct some of Jerome's mistakes in the Vulgate and polish up the language. “It is only fair that Paul should address the Romans in somewhat better Latin,” he declared with a

tinge of sarcasm.

However, some of Erasmus's corrections to the Vulgate challenged church rituals. Jesus' words in Mark 1:15, for example, are translated in the Vulgate as, "Do penance and believe the gospel." But Erasmus translated it as, "Repent, and believe the gospel." Erasmus therefore maintained that Christians did not need to do penance to make amends to God for their sins. He declared that the Greek word meant a change of heart and lifestyle, not an act you perform in order to cover your sin. When one of the sacraments of the Church – the sacrament of penance – was being challenged, the Church authorities were understandably unhappy with Erasmus!

But it was never Erasmus' desire to start a theological revolution. He never left the Roman Catholic Church and he even later opposed Luther's reforms, which he viewed as too radical. But unwittingly, he played a key role in setting things in motion for the Reformation just a year after he published his New Testament. As one of his contemporaries quipped, "Erasmus laid the egg and Luther hatched it."

Erasmus himself probably never realised the significance of his accomplishment! His work had a profound effect on

Luther and became the basis for his German translation of the New Testament, William Tyndale's English translation and the later King James Version of the English Bible, as well as other European language translations.

## FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

### ***Gutenberg***

[Johannes Gutenberg and the Printing Press](#) (Waltraud Pausup)

[How a Gutenberg Printing Press Works](#) (Sabrina Huyett)

### ***Erasmus***

[Erasmus and the Bible](#) (Icons of Insight)

### ***Chinese and printing/paper***

[The Invention of Writing, Paper and Print! | History of China](#) (It's History)

# CHAPTER 5

## LUTHER: THE REFORMATION

### 5.1 Introduction

During the Middle Ages (500 to 1400-1500), the Church had degenerated into the depths of corruption. Many people saw it as a hostile institution focused at all costs on its own wealth and prestige and willing to do anything to protect that.

One example of how low it had sunk was when a well-known philanderer with a reputation for corruption and opulence, Roderigo Borgia, was elected Pope (dubbed Alexander VI) in 1492. Borgia was the father



*Roderigo Borgia*

of ten illegitimate children through his various mistresses and had bribed his way into office. He was succeeded by Pope Julius II, who was no better. Julius was obsessed with political power and opulent wealth. He dressed his troops in silver armour and financed his wars and massive building projects by selling indulgences and positions within the Church. Julius was so well known for his warring spirit that



in *Julius Excluded from Heaven*, Erasmus critically described him in the afterlife planning to storm heaven when he is denied entry!

*Portrait of Pope Julius II by Raphael c. 1511.*

With growing unhappiness at all that was happening in the Church, the political and technological developments of the day, plus the foundations laid by people like Wycliffe and Hus about 150 years earlier and the availability of Erasmus' new Greek and Latin New Testament, the seeds sown for the Reformation in the west were ready to sprout in the early sixteenth century.

Wycliffe, Hus and others had questioned Church beliefs and practices on biblical grounds earlier, and pushed for reforms. But their impact was local and short-lived. Their fire did not spread.

But one man's reform message however would spread like wildfire. His name? Martin Luther, a German monk. The reason? Luther used the new technology of the day – Gutenberg's printing press – to print and spread his

*John Foxe (c.1516-1587)*



message and a new translation of the Bible in German, the common language of the people. The Bible and the writings of the Reformers could reach a much wider audience now. In fact, the Reformers so heavily used the printing presses that one third of everything that was being printed during Luther's time were the writings of Luther himself!

The historian and martyrologist (yes, this is an actual word!) John Foxe, born just at the cusp of the Reformation, later wrote in his book *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*: "God hath appointed the press to preach, whose voice the pope is never able to stop."

## 5.2 Martin Luther (1483-1546)

Martin Luther was without doubt the chief instigator and propelling force of the Reformation, which begun in 1517.

Luther was born the son of a copper miner and in spite of his humble beginnings, did well enough in his studies to earn a master's degree, financed by his father, who had pinned his hopes on young Martin becoming a lawyer.

In 1505, aged 21, Luther was returning to university on horseback after a trip home. A violent thunderstorm

erupted and a lightning bolt struck near him. Terrified of death and divine judgment, he cried out to the patron saint of miners, “Help me, Saint Anne, and I will become a monk!”

Luther took his vow seriously. He immediately quit university and, just 12 days later, entered an Augustinian monastery.



*Martin Luther*  
(c. 1483-1546)

Sometime later, Luther was assigned to teach Scripture at the University of Wittenberg. His study of the Bible opened its truths to him, particularly that Christians are saved not through their own effort – following church regulations, doing penance, confessing their sins to a priest,

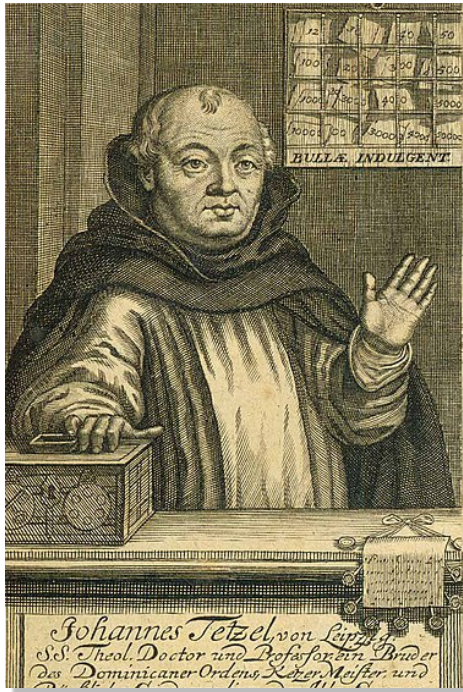
buying indulgences, and so on. Rather, they are saved by their simple trust in God and the completed work of Jesus on the cross.

Romans 1:17 was the verse that particularly convicted Luther: “The one who is righteous will live by faith.” It was like a light was switched on for him in his heart. Luther was convinced that the Bible was clear: God’s salvation could never be earned by anyone. All it took was to simply accept it as a gift.

A burden of guilt had been lifted from him and a newfound freedom from condemnation filled his soul. All his life, he had always felt he was never good enough for God, struggling with all his own strength to win God’s favour. And now, he finally understood that his sins had been paid for fully by Christ’s death and all he had to do was trust in God’s grace to him by faith.

At the time of Luther’s epiphany, the ruling pope was Pope Leo X, successor to Julius II. In order to pump finances into the Church, Leo created and sold over 2,000 church positions and approved the sale of indulgences, mostly through travelling salesmen who hawked the indulgences like snake oil, complete with dramatic visuals of people

suffering in purgatory and a salesman's patter designed to stir the emotions of the gullible crowd.



*Johann Tetzel*

One key man assigned to this task across Germany was a hard-selling, smooth-talking monk named Johann Tetzel. Tetzel would plead, "Listen to the voice of your dear dead relatives and friends, beseeching you and saying, 'Pity us, pity us.' We are in dire torment from which you can redeem us for a pittance [small sum of money]." In true

performer mode, Tetzel would end his pitch with a jingle: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."

The trusting masses would swarm forward, clamouring for Tetzel's indulgences, obediently dropping their hard-earned money into the coffers. About half the money raised went

to the Pope himself to help fund opulent building projects, including rebuilding the famed St Peter's Basilica in Rome. With the Pope's approval, the other half went to a German prince, to enable him to pay off massive debts he had earlier incurred buying some of the church positions the Pope had sold, including the position of Archbishop of Mainz.



*St. Peter's Basilica in Vatican City by Didier Moïse.*

Luther was enraged by the corrupt political manipulations of the Church and Tetzel's indulgences roadshow, using

unbiblical teachings to con the poor masses to fill the already-full pockets of the Church and its clergy. So he wrote, in Latin, his famous Ninety-Five Theses – statements against indulgences and their sale, Church abuses, and unbiblical teachings. He famously nailed these to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg on 31 October 1517, hoping to stir debate that would move the Church toward reform. Instead, the Church responded by promptly excommunicating him.



*Painting of Martin Luther posting his 95 Theses by Ferdinand Pauwels c.1872.*

Three months later, some of Luther's friends translated the Theses from Latin into German. Within just two weeks, copies of the Theses had been printed and distributed widely across Germany. By the following year, his writings had reached Italy, France and England. The press was preaching right across Europe, and the message was Luther's call for reform!

Three and a half years after posting his Theses, Luther's story began to bear striking parallels with that of Jan Hus a century earlier – but thankfully ended differently.

Luther was summoned to the Diet of Worms (which actually means, “meeting in Worms (a German city)” and not what you may have initially thought!). He was promised safe conduct there and back by the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. Luther thought he would finally get a chance to debate and defend his theses. Instead, he was put on trial by the emperor and asked to recant all his statements. Luther replied with deep conviction, “Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot

and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. May God help me. Amen.”



*Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms by Emile Delperée (1850-1896)*

The emperor ruled that a single priest who goes against all that Christianity has believed in for the past 1,000 years, must be wrong. Luther was clearly in trouble, but at least, unlike in Hus' case, the emperor kept his word regarding safe conduct and allowed him to return home – at least for a time.

Realising however that Luther's life was in danger, Frederick III, a local prince and supporter of Luther, had him intercepted and “kidnapped” on his way home by masked horsemen pretending to be highway robbers. Under their safety, Luther was escorted to Frederick's residence at Wartburg Castle where he was provided protection for the next ten months.

While in confinement there, Luther used Erasmus' Greek New Testament to translate the New Testament into German, a feat he completed in record time, taking just eleven weeks to produce the first draft!



*Portrait of Frederick III by Lucas Cranach the Elder. c. 1530-1535.*

Luther wanted the Scriptures to speak plainly and sound as conversational as possible. “To translate properly,” he said, “is to render the spirit of a foreign language into our own idiom. I try to speak as men do in the marketplace. In rendering Moses, I make him so German that no one would suspect he was a Jew.”

Luther’s handsomely printed German New Testament cost the average person about a week’s salary. Published in 1522, it sold over 100,000 copies in Luther’s lifetime alone.

Luther then set about translating the Old Testament into German. Compared to his work on the New Testament, this was a mammoth task. Not only was there a lot more text to cover, Luther had to work from various Hebrew manuscripts instead of having them all readily collated for him, as Erasmus had already done with the Greek New Testament. He was also not as proficient in Hebrew as he was in Greek.

Furthermore, he was meticulous about trying to understand the nuances of what he was writing about. It seems that when he was translating passages about sacrificial rituals, he asked a butcher to cut up a sheep, so he could inspect its innards!

Luther’s Old Testament labour of love took twelve years to complete, and was published in 1534. “If God had wanted me to die thinking I was a clever fellow,” he once said, “he would not have got me into the business of translating the Bible.”

Although he considered his German translation of the complete Bible to be his greatest accomplishment, Luther remained resolutely humble. “I’d like all my books to be destroyed, so that only the sacred writings in the Bible would be diligently read,” he declared.



*Martin Luther's  
German Bible c. 1541.*

Luther understood that the greatness of his German Bible lay not in the lowly man God had chosen for its translation, but rather, in the greatness of the God behind it and the message of his salvation for humankind that it proclaimed – a salvation that is by grace, through faith in Christ alone.

It was a message that was now spreading like wildfire across Europe – and there was no stopping it.

## FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

### ***Luther***

[Luther](#) (movie) (*JDS Christ Media*)

[The Torchlighters: The Martin Luther Story](#) (*Vision Video*)

[A Return to Grace: Luther's Life and Legacy](#) (docudrama)  
(*Vision Video*)

[Rick Steves' Luther and the Reformation](#) (*Rick Steves' Europe*)

[Martin Luther: Translating the Bible in the Face of the Catholic Church](#) (*Cody Crouch on TBN*)

# CHAPTER 6

## TYNDALE: THE BIRTH OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

### 6.1 Introduction

In the first half of the sixteenth century, Henry VIII ruled on the throne of England. Wycliffe's translation was still banned, and although some manuscript copies were available on the black market, they were elusive, and always extremely expensive. So the average so-called "Christian" in England really had no idea of what the Bible truly said, attending a Latin mass and hearing a Latin Bible read that they did not understand.

The Church in England was just as power-hungry and politically-motivated as it was elsewhere in Europe. It owned, for example, a whopping one third of all the land in England just prior to



Thomas Wolsey (1473-1530)

the Reformation!

Thomas Wolsey was a bishop who became right-hand man to Henry, and by 1514, he had become the controlling figure in almost all matters of state. The following year, he was appointed a cardinal by Pope Leo X, which made him supreme over all other English clergy. That same year, Henry appointed Wolsey to Lord Chancellor, the king's chief adviser. In many ways, it is said Wolsey held more power than the king himself!

Wolsey oversaw the building of opulent palaces for himself, including the grandiose Hampton Court Palace, later bequeathed as a gift to Henry to try and



Pope Leo X (c. 1475-1521)

curry favour with him at a time when favour was no longer on his side.

In the midst of all this, the common English people lived in poverty. Spiritually, they were just as malnourished, dependent on the mostly corrupt clergy to spoon-feed them what they said the Bible taught, and to hold their salvation ransom through the threat of excommunication if they refused to comply.

It was understandable therefore why the Church was against the translation of the Bible into English, especially at a time when the printing presses could now produce and disseminate it quickly all across the land. Apart from genuine concerns that uncontrolled translation into the common language could result in various misinterpretations or even heresies due to inaccurate translation, as well as a pompous elitism that decried any language other than Latin as “worthy” of being used for sacred matters, there were those who saw the Bible being available in the common language as a threat to their own position and power. This fear was particularly intensified by the way the Reformation was spreading rapidly in continental Europe. As such, it was considered a crime punishable by death to read any part of the Bible in English let alone own a copy, translate or

distribute it.

The stage was set for a head-to-head war between English reformers determined to get the Bible to the English people in their native language and the established Church, committed to protect its authority, power and control – as well as its immense income! Neither side would give up without a fight.

## 6.2 William Tyndale (c1494-1536)

If getting the English Bible translated and distributed was a war to be fought, William Tyndale was its commanding general.



*William Tyndale, from Foxe's Book of Martyrs.*

Tyndale was born around 1494 into a middle-class family in Gloucestershire, England. He became a scholar at Oxford University. After completing his Masters in Arts, he studied theology, and then moved to Cambridge University where he added to his growing knowledge of languages and became a leading professor of Greek. (Interestingly, Erasmus had taught Greek at Cambridge some years earlier, and even though their paths had not crossed at Cambridge, Erasmus had a great influence on Tyndale's life.)



Cambridge University

Tyndale was a gifted linguist. In addition to English, he became fluent in French, Greek, Hebrew, German, Italian,

Latin and Spanish.

After leaving Cambridge in 1521, he became a chaplain, but he was soon criticised by fellow churchmen for his radical pro-Reformation viewpoints. According to John Foxe in *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, at one meeting where he was called to explain his views, Tyndale had an argument with a "learned but blasphemous clergyman," who allegedly asserted, "We would be better off without God's laws than the Pope's," to which Tyndale responded, "I defy the Pope, and all his laws. And if God spares my life for a few years, I'll see to it that a boy pushing the plough knows more of the Bible than you do."

Printing was now becoming common, and Tyndale firmly believed that the time was right for an accessible, up-to-date English Bible translation. With his scholarly background and his linguistic prowess, he knew he had the capability to make it happen. All he needed was the funding and the blessing of the Church.

So Tyndale left for London in 1523 to seek what he needed for his translation. He approached his friend Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall for help. Tunstall had been a supporter of Erasmus and had even worked with him on his Greek New

Testament. Erasmus had written in his preface to his Greek New Testament that it was his desire that the Scriptures be translated into every known language. Tunstall seemed like the ideal ally. Instead, Tunstall was horrified at Tyndale's request, told him he could not be involved, and that Tyndale was also no longer welcomed in his home.

It didn't take Tyndale long to realise that if even a trusted friend, the Bishop of London no less, wanted nothing to do with him, nobody else in London would be prepared to help him either. Church politics would make sure of that.

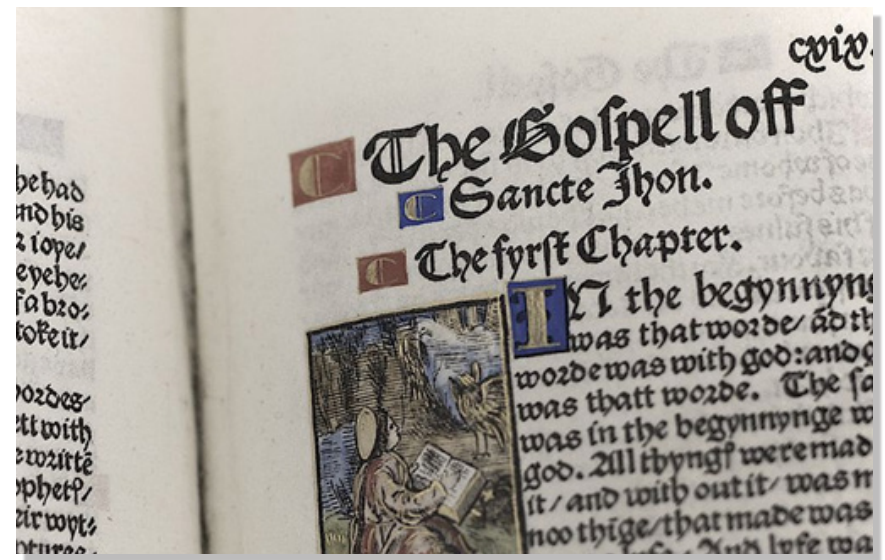


*Cuthbert Tunstall (1474-1559)*

When word of Tyndale's desire to translate an English Bible got around, he was roundly condemned. Since he knew England was a dead end for support for his project and that he risked death if he went ahead with it in England, Tyndale left in 1524 for Hamburg in Germany. He felt he had a better chance of materialising his project there, since Protestantism was gaining ground and the religious climate seemed to be less oppressive. He never set foot in England again.

Tyndale wanted to use Erasmus' 1516 Greek New Testament text as a source for an English translation, just as Luther had done with German. Tyndale visited Luther in 1525, and by the end of that year, he had completed translating the English New Testament. When it was printed shortly after, it became the first-ever printed edition of the Scriptures in the English language. Later printings of the Tyndale New Testament in the 1530s were often also elaborately illustrated.

When Tyndale began printing portions of the English New Testament in Cologne, Germany, the city was still under the control of an archbishop fiercely loyal to Rome. While



*The beginning verses of the Gospel of John, from a facsimile edition of William Tyndale's 1525 English translation of the New Testament.*

printing one day, Tyndale got word that the print shop was about to be raided. He grabbed his materials and fled in the nick of time.

This was to become the story of Tyndale's life for the next few years. Apart from papal loyalists in Germany, the Church powers in England had caught wind of what Tyndale was up to and there was a bounty on his head. Tyndale lived as a wanted man, dodging English spies and Roman agents, always looking behind his back wherever he went.

Tyndale finally printed his finished New Testament in the city of Worms. At a time when the average print-run of a book was 1,000-1,500 copies, Tyndale went into personal debt to finance a run of 3,000 copies. Another 3,000 copies were pirated. These 6,000 copies were over time smuggled by merchants and sailors into England in barrels of flour and bales of cloth, and sold openly on the streets of London.

Tyndale's now-former friend Tunstall, the Bishop of London, was furious and in October 1526 ordered that all copies of Tyndale's New Testament be burned. Cardinal Wolsey officially condemned Tyndale as a heretic in January 1529.



*Sir Thomas More by Hans Holbein c. 1527.*

Sir Thomas More, Lord High Chancellor of England, poured scorn on Tyndale: "The devilish drunken soul ... this drowsy drudge hath drunken so deep in the devil's dregs that if he wake and repent himself the sooner he may hap, ere aught long, to fall into the mashing-vat, and turn himself into draf, as the hogs of hell shall feed upon." Paraphrased in modern English: "This devilish man is stone drunk from drinking so deep from the Devil's cup. The sooner the better that he wakes from his drunken stupor, falls into the pot for mashing garbage for pig-feed, and becomes food for the pigs of hell." You have to give More props for being so magnificently poetic even in his slander!

In spite of the war against Tyndale's New Testament in England, there was still a high demand for it and copies still got around on the black market. One risked being burnt at the stake if caught with any of Tyndale's banned writings, including his New Testament, but as is often the case, the more something is resisted, the more fascinated people become by it. Ironically, a copy even ended up in King Henry's bedroom!

Tyndale was a marked man. Tunstall, Wolsey and More sent agents from England to the continent to aggressively track him down and arrest him. Aware that his life was in danger even on the continent, Tyndale was careful. He moved constantly from place to place in Germany, Belgium and Holland, taking on fake identities, trusting only people he knew well.

Aware that Tyndale was using Antwerp in Belgium as his supply route into England for his Bibles, another concerted attempt was launched by the English authorities in September 1528 to deal with Tyndale once and for all. John West, a friar, was sent to Antwerp. Dressed in civilian clothes, he began hunting for Tyndale, scouring Antwerp and nearby cities and interrogating printers. Fortunately, Tyndale was in Marburg, Germany, at the time, and catching wind of West's

pursuit of him, decided to lay low in Marburg for the time being, spending the time teaching himself Hebrew and then beginning work on translating the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) from Hebrew into English.



*Marburg, Germany*

In 1529, when the coast seemed clear, Tyndale returned to Antwerp and completed his translation of the Pentateuch. Sensing that Antwerp was still on England's radar, he decided to print his English Pentateuch elsewhere. So Tyndale boarded a ship, intending to sail to the mouth of the Elbe River in Germany and then upriver to Hamburg. However,

en route, the ship encountered a violent storm and was wrecked off the coast of Holland. Although Tyndale himself survived the shipwreck, tragically, all his books and writings, including the Pentateuch translation, were lost at sea. He had to start the work all over again from zero.

In the words of the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:9, Tyndale was “struck down, but not destroyed.” When he finally arrived in Hamburg, Tyndale picked himself up and immediately began the laborious task of retranslating the Pentateuch. By the end of the year, he was done, and a month later, in January 1530, English copies of the Pentateuch were flooding the shores of England.

With so many unsuccessful attempts to get Tyndale extradited, the English authorities decided to change strategy and instead tempt him with an offer of safe conduct if he would return to England. But Tyndale wouldn't buy it.

Enraged at their inability to contain Tyndale and his Bibles, that same year, the English authorities upped the ante in their crusade against him. From burning books, they progressed to burning people. No one with any connection to Tyndale or his writings was safe. His closest friend, John Frith, was arrested in London, tried by More and burnt

alive, aged only 28. Thomas Hitton, a priest who had met Tyndale in Europe and smuggled two New Testaments into the country, was charged with heresy and burnt alive. So was Thomas Bilney, a lawyer only loosely connected to Tyndale. Richard Bayfield, a monk who had been one of Tyndale's early supporters, was tortured incessantly before being burnt at the stake. And a group of pro-Tyndale Oxford students were left to rot in a dungeon. These were but a few whose death warrants were signed simply because of their affiliation with or support for Tyndale and his writings.

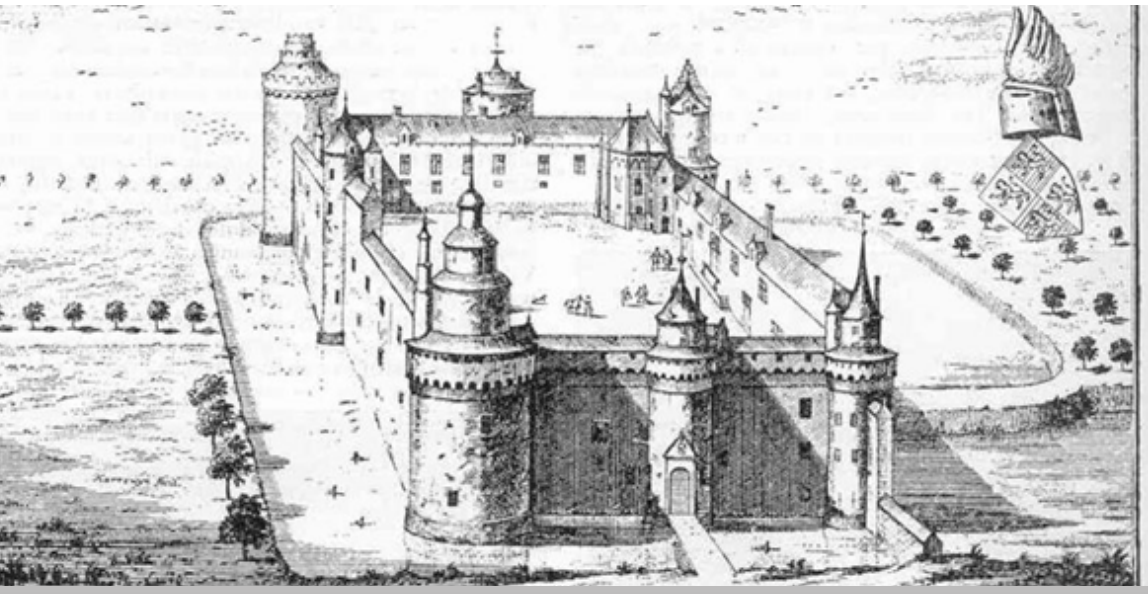
Tyndale's end was no less tragic.

Henry Phillips was a young aristocrat and a slimy scoundrel who had been given a large sum of money by his father to pay someone in London but had instead gambled it away. Desperately needing money, he entered into an agreement with the English authorities in early 1535, where he was promised a princely sum for bounty-hunting Tyndale. Phillips, who was as charming as he was despicable, eventually tracked Tyndale down in Antwerp and deviously developed what seemed to be to Tyndale a deep friendship, even being invited to stay overnight with Tyndale on one occasion.

One evening, Phillips invited Tyndale out for a dinner treat.

Just as they were leaving the house, Phillips pretended that he had lost his purse and asked Tyndale if he would kindly lend him two pounds (enough then for a poor family to live on for two months) so that he could pay for dinner and some other things, promising to return the money as soon as he could. Tyndale willingly obliged his friend. Taking a page out of Judas' book, Phillips betrayed him only moments later, signalling to a couple of waiting thugs who then seized the shocked Tyndale.

After over eleven years on the run as a fugitive, Tyndale had finally been captured.



*Vilvorde Castle by Jacobus Harrewijn c. 1696.*

He was imprisoned for 500 days in a filthy dungeon in Vilvorde Castle outside the city and then tried for heresy. Ironically, his crime was not Bible translation but his pro-Reformation views, for which he was found guilty.

Just a few weeks later, on 6 October 1536, Tyndale was tied to a huge wooden cross in the castle yard, garrotted by his executioner and then burnt. On the surface, it had seemed that the powers of the English throne and Church had triumphed in their war against Tyndale and his English Bible.

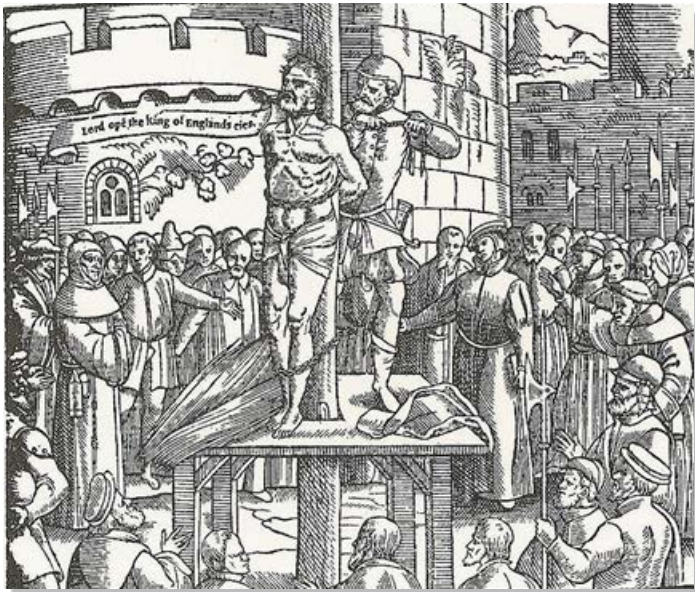
But that was not the end of the story.

Tyndale's final words just before he was garrotted were, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."

It was to be a prayer that God would answer within just a few short years – and through the strangest of circumstances.

Tyndale is often called the "Architect of the English Language." Like William Shakespeare, through his writings, and probably more so, so many of the phrases that Tyndale coined to use in his English New Testament have become a part of our everyday English today. For example, "fight the

good fight,” “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak” and “salt of the earth.”



*Preparations to burn the body of William Tyndale, from Foxe's Book of Martyrs.*

Tyndale's reverence and commitment to Scriptures was clear. “I never altered one syllable of God's Word against my conscience,” he wrote, “nor would do this day if all that is in earth, whether it be honour, pleasure, or riches, might be given me.”

His driving passion of his life was to see the Word of God, which he so richly treasured and revered, translated

from its original languages into ordinary English and made available for every person in England to read. For that cause he paid with his life.



*William Shakespeare by John Taylor c. 1610.*

## FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

### ***Tyndale***

[God's Outlaw: The Story of William Tyndale](#) (movie)  
(Jen Nufuar)

[The Torchlighters: The William Tyndale Story](#) (movie)  
(Vision Video)

[William Tyndale: A Man With a Mission](#) (documentary)  
(Vision Video)

[Battle for the Bible](#) (documentary) (Alan Hemenway)

[William Tyndale: Translating the Bible to English Meant the Death Penalty](#) (Cody Crouch on TBN)

# CHAPTER 7

## KING HENRY VIII AND THE ENGLISH REFORMATION

### 7.1 Introduction

In a curious twist to the plot, the English Bible would soon be legalised and sanctioned by the very king who had hunted down and sentenced Tyndale to death – Henry VIII.



Henry VIII (c. 1491-1547) by  
Hans Holbein the Younger.

Within a year of Tyndale's execution, Bibles that drew heavily on his work were circulating in England with Henry's approval. And within just five years, churches could be fined if they did not have English Bibles available for their people. The dead Tyndale was not just the king's new hero. Tyndale's Bible also became the most popular book in England.

But what happened to bring about this bizarre turnaround in such a short time?

It wasn't that Henry had a change of conscience about Bible translation or a conversion of heart to Protestantism. His motives were much more carnal and selfish and had more to do with political powerplay. It involved a mistress and a



Catherine of Aragon  
(1485-1536)

convenient divorce, proving once again that God is able to use even our worst sins to bring about his kingdom purposes and glorify his name.

Henry was married to Catherine of Aragon but she had failed to provide him a male heir to the throne. His only child with Catherine was a girl, Mary. Well known for his promiscuity, Henry had a mistress, Anne Boleyn, whom he decided he wanted to marry. In order to do so, he had to first divorce Catherine. However, the Catholic Church prohibited divorce. Henry made a special appeal to Pope Clement VII to make an exception for him, but the Pope, under pressure from Catherine's nephew, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, refused. Henry defied Clement by going ahead and marrying Anne anyway. (He later had her and another of his many wives executed for various grievances

against them. Execution was yet another avenue to end a marriage for Henry, it seems!)



*Miniature of Anne Boleyn, attributed to John Hoskins (c. 1590–1664).*

Henry also pushed through the Act of Supremacy in 1534, which made the king – not the Pope – “the only supreme head in earth of the Church of England.” This was him basically making himself his own “Pope” and breaking all ties with the Roman Church while thumbing his nose at Clement. Now he could set the rules himself and not have to be subservient to Rome! Clement finally responded after some time by excommunicating Henry from the Catholic Church. Not that it made any difference to Henry now that he could call his own shots!

Even though Henry had formally cut England's ties with Rome, his beliefs still remained basically Catholic. The English Church became known as the Anglican Church or the Church of England, which swung back and forth between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism for some time before settling into a Reformed Protestant theology.

As its self-proclaimed head, and as a way of further defying Rome and spiting them for excommunicating him, Henry arranged in 1539 to fund the printing of an English Bible known as the “Great Bible.” Talk about irony!

Had Tyndale survived a little longer, he might have been free to return to England. But nevertheless his dying prayer

was now being answered.

After Tyndale's capture, two of his loyal disciples, Myles Coverdale and John "Thomas Matthew" Rogers continued the work of translating the full English Bible, making great progress in a relatively quick time. Tyndale had only completed the Pentateuch and some other books and passages when his work was halted.



*Miles Coverdale*



*John Rogers by Gustavus  
Ellinorpe Sintzenich.*

Coverdale finished translating the Old Testament, using Luther's German text and the Latin Vulgate as his sources. In October 1535, while Tyndale was still imprisoned, Coverdale printed the first complete English Bible in the English language – including a later version of Tyndale's New Testament – in Antwerp. This Bible, for obvious reasons, became known as the Coverdale Bible, but had a limited reach.

Rogers did not translate the whole Bible anew. Instead he replaced sections of Coverdale's Old Testament with further unpublished translated portions that Tyndale himself had completed from the Hebrew texts earlier, as well as some portions Rogers himself had translated from Hebrew. His edition went to print, also in Antwerp, in 1537, printed under the pseudonym "Thomas Matthew," an alias that Tyndale had actually used at one time while on the run. He chose this name as a homage to Tyndale since a considerable part of this Bible was really Tyndale's work. It is known as the Matthew-Tyndale Bible or sometimes Matthew's Bible. A nearly identical second edition was printed in 1549.



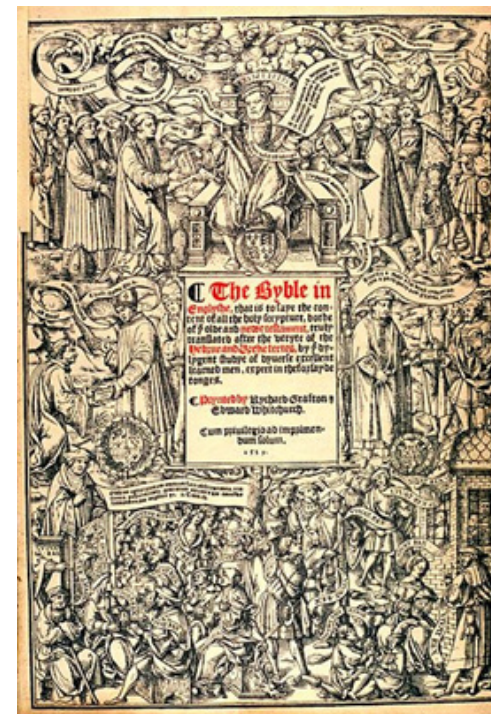
*The Great Bible on display in St. Andrew's Cathedral of Sydney. The Bible was printed in 1539 and donated to the Sydney parish in 1953 in gratitude for their donations at a difficult time.*

*Photo courtesy of C.S. Chai.*

So, when Henry VIII commissioned the “Great Bible” in 1539, Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, hired Myles Coverdale to do the work, which was based almost entirely on Matthew’s Bible. The “Great Bible,” named for its large size (42 x 28 cm), became the first English Bible authorised for public use. Seven editions of this version were printed between April 1539 and December 1541. Copies were distributed to every church, so that anyone could enter and read the Word of God. They were chained

to the pulpit so that no one could steal them. Churches also provided a reader so that those who were illiterate could hear the Word of God read to them in plain English.

*Title page from the Great Bible published by Grafton and Whitchurch in 1539. It depicts an enthroned Henry VIII receiving the Word of God and bestowing it upon his bishops and archbishops (top third), who in turn deliver it to the priests (middle third). Finally, the laity hear the Word and loyally recite, “Vivat Rex” and “God save the kyng” (bottom third).*



Just three years after Tyndale’s martyrdom, his dying wish had been granted.

But all was not smooth sailing right away. Throughout the next twenty years or so, the freedom to access the Word of God in English ebbed and flowed, depending on who was on the throne of England.

When Henry died, he was succeeded by his only legitimate male heir, his son by his third wife Jane Seymour, Edward VI. Edward was a sickly nine-year-old boy, so as per royal protocol, Edward's rule was to be carried out by a council of advisors until Edward reached the age of eighteen. Edward's advisory council were mostly Protestants. Edward died before his sixteenth birthday, but during the six and a half years of Edward's short rule, the Church of England moved from Catholicism toward Reformed Protestantism.



*Edward VI (1537-1553)  
by William Scrots.*

Since Edward had no offspring, he was succeeded in 1553 by his much older stepsister, Mary Tudor, the girl Catherine

of Aragon had borne Henry before their divorce. Mary was staunchly Catholic and was obsessed in her quest to restore England back to the Roman Catholic Church, so she pushed for changes in the law, as well as burning more than 300 prominent Protestants, including the top man, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, at the stake, along with John "Thomas Matthew" Rogers – all for the "crime" of being a Protestant. Because of this, she was given the nickname "Bloody Mary," which is from where the popular cocktail today gets its name! During her reign, Mary also opposed the printing of the Bible in English.



*Mary I by Antonis Mor c. 1554*



*Bloody Mary by William Clifford*

Mary ruled for only five years, and since she was childless, was then succeeded in 1558 by her half-sister Elizabeth I, Henry's daughter by Anne Boleyn. Elizabeth had been declared illegitimate at her birth by the Catholic Church, since they had never recognised Henry's marriage to Anne. Elizabeth reinstated Protestantism as the state religion and finally approved a Reformed Protestant statement of faith in 1571 that would continue throughout the Church of England thereafter.



*Elizabeth I*

## FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

### *Henry VIII and the English Reformation*

[Henry VIII and the English Reformation](#) (*The Northern Historian*)

[The English Reformation Part I: Henry VIII and the Church of England](#) (*Tom Richey*)

[The English Reformation Part II: Edward VI, Bloody Mary, Elizabeth I](#) (*Tom Richey*)

# CHAPTER 8

## ENGLISH BIBLES FROM EXILE REFORMATION

### 8.1 Introduction

As England bounced back and forth between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism during the 1550s-1560s, those who were not of the theological flavour of the time were sadly oppressed to one degree or another. During Bloody Mary's reign, many persecuted Protestants, especially scholars, fled from England as refugees, mostly to parts of continental Europe that were more Protestant-friendly. This period was known as the Marian Exile. Similarly, during Elizabeth's reign, threatened Catholics fled to more Catholic-friendly parts of Europe.

It was out of these exiles that further English translations were born.

### 8.2 The Geneva Bible for Protestants

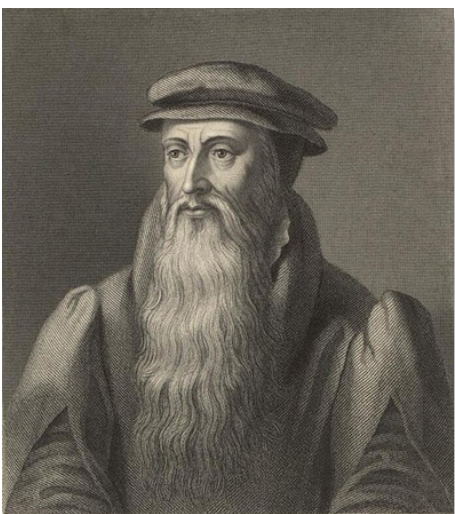
One of the great centres of early Protestantism was the city of Geneva in Switzerland. This was the base for

another significant pioneer of the European Reformation, John Calvin. Calvin was also a mentor-teacher to the Scotsman John Knox, who was pastoring an English congregation there and later went on to become the reformer of the Scottish Church and the founder of Presbyterianism.



*John Calvin (1509-1564)*

The Church at Geneva was understandably very sympathetic to the English Protestant refugees and so Geneva became one of the few safe havens for them when they fled England. Because Mary had outlawed the English Bible, these refugees determined to produce their own. With Calvin's protection and Knox's encouraging presence, the Church of Geneva set out to translate another English Bible.



John Knox

Most of the translation was done by William Wittingham, an Oxford scholar in their midst. He completed the New Testament in 1557 and published the complete Bible in 1560. Wittingham's translation became known as the Geneva Bible. Over 90% of the wording though is borrowed from Tyndale.

For the first time ever in an English Bible, numbered verses were included for each chapter for easier referencing of specific passages. Wittingham used the system developed by Robert Estienne (also known as Stephanus) of Paris, who had developed it for a French Bible just a few years earlier, and who was at that time living in Geneva himself. Estienne's numbering system continues to be the one we use in our Bibles today.



Geneva Bible

Also, alongside every chapter were extensive marginal notes and references so thorough and complete, together with beautiful illustrations and maps, that the Geneva Bible is considered to be the first English “study Bible.”

For over a hundred years after its release, the Geneva Bible became the popular choice of English-speaking Christians. In its first sixteen years of use, more than 144 editions were published. It was the Geneva Bible that the Puritan Pilgrim Fathers took to America and it was also the Bible that William Shakespeare quoted from prolifically in his

plays. It was also the preferred Bible of many other great writers of the seventeenth century, like poet John Milton and author John Bunyan.



*John Milton c. 1629*

When the King James Bible was later released in 1611, it was obvious its translators were influenced much more by the Geneva Bible than by any other source. The Geneva Bible continued to remain highly popular, outselling the King James Bible for many decades to come.

After Mary's bloody reign ended, many of the exiles returned to England, taking the Geneva Bible back with them and even printing and distributing it there. The Anglican Church, now under Elizabeth I, reluctantly tolerated this, even though they found some of the marginal notes of that Bible somewhat uncomplimentary towards the royalty and Church powers.

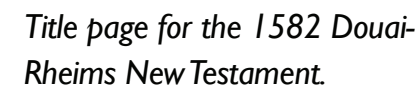
With copies of the Great Bible getting to be old and tattered after decades of use, a revised version, called the Bishops' Bible, was commissioned. A group of sixteen scholars worked on it and it was introduced in Anglican churches in 1568. It proved to be an inferior translation compared to the Geneva Bible, and with people still favouring the Geneva Bible, the Bishops' Bible never really took off.



*Coloured title page from the Bishops' Bible quarto edition of 1569, the British Museum. Queen Elizabeth sits in the centre on her throne. The words on the four columns read justice, mercy, fortitude and prudence, attributing these traits to the queen. Text at the bottom reads "God save the Queene".*

In the Bible's preface, the translators claim to have used only the Catholic-approved Latin Vulgate as their source text – which actually could result in poorer accuracy since it is therefore a translation of a translation. However, detailed examination of their translation against various texts indicates clearly that they also made use of the Greek

The Douai-Rheims Bible went through some revisions over



the later centuries but continued to remain the official Catholic English translation until well into the twentieth century.

## 8.4 Other Reformation-era vernacular European Bibles

Ironically, it was Luther's Bible that became the driving force for German Catholics to publish their own Bible in German. Luther's Bible had become hugely popular and widely used. The Catholic Church however held that it was full of errors and so they wanted a Catholic-sanctioned one of their own. Funnily enough, their work was largely an adaptation of Luther's Bible. Hieronymus Emser first sought to bring Luther's translation to be more in line with the Latin Vulgate in 1527. Johann Dietenberger later revised Emser's work in 1534, using Luther's Old Testament, a translation by the radical Protestant Anabaptists and the Bible that had been



Ulrich Zwingli c. 1531 by Hans Asper.

published by Swiss Puritan Reformer, Ulrich Zwingli, in Zurich in 1529. Dietenberger's version went on to become the standard German Catholic Bible.

France, though a staunchly Catholic nation, also saw French Bibles popping up in the years following the Reformation. A French New Testament was published in Paris in 1523 and a French Old Testament appeared in Antwerp, Belgium, in 1528. These were then combined and published together in 1530 as the Antwerp Bible. A truly Protestant version, the Olivetan Bible, was published in 1535, which went through several later revisions, and in 1550, the Catholics published their own official French Bible, the Louvain Bible.

In Holland, spurred on by the Reformation, a number of Dutch Bibles were born. One, published by Jacob van Liesveldt in 1526, was illustrated. In one of his editions, he went a step too far and depicted Satan in the guise



Louvain Bible c. 1550

of a Catholic monk, with goat's feet and a rosary. He was arrested, charged with heresy and put to death. Nevertheless his Bible became so popular that, in 1548, the Catholics decided to publish their own Dutch Bible.



*Satan in the guise of a Catholic monk. Published by Jacob von Liesveldt.*

By the end of the 1500s, complete vernacular Bibles were also available in Danish, Swedish, Icelandic, Hungarian, Polish, Serbo-Croatian and Slovene. Italy got its first Protestant Bible in Italian in 1607, with a revised edition in 1641. A

Spanish Bible had been published in Basel, Switzerland, in 1569, but since the Spanish Inquisition forbade publication of the Bible in Spanish, no Spanish Bibles were published in Spain itself until 1790. Likewise the Portuguese Inquisition prevented publication of the Bible in Portuguese for many years. The New Testament became available in 1681 but a complete Portuguese Bible did not appear until 1753.

# CHAPTER 9

## KING JAMES AND HIS BIBLE

### 9.1 Introduction

Even though Elizabeth I's reign ushered in the era of Protestantism in England, it was merely the start of a long and messy evolution towards any sense of full reformation. Catholicism was not dead – even in the Church of England.

So it was a case of staunch – and even sometimes militant – Catholics and Protestants on either side of the spectrum, and those who were still trying to sort things out with where they stood in the muddled middle, or that had opted for a more moderate stance.

Another big area of conflict was about what Bible should be used in churches. Even though more people were now owning personal copies of the Bible, large Bibles were still chained to the pulpit in every church for all to read, and that version would be the Bible that would be publicly read in churches as well.

While much of the wording of the Scriptures was almost identical in existing versions since they had borrowed extensively from the same root sources, what differentiated these Bibles was that they also had commentary – notes printed in the margins of the Bible explaining certain verses – and that commentary was always reflective of where the translator stood on the Catholic versus Protestant scale.

So which Bible was “worthy” to be used in the Church became a contentious issue, with more versions being issued, each reflecting the compiler's own theological views.

With the death of Elizabeth I, James I ascended to the throne of *James I by John de Critz c. 1606.*



England in 1603. James himself was still very Catholic in his thinking. The Protestant clergy approached him in 1604 and, among other matters, expressed their desire for a new English Bible translation to replace the Bishops' Bible from 1568. Protestants found the Bishops' Bible not Protestant enough, and James hated the ever-popular Geneva Bible because its commentary was too Protestant and was also critical of the royalty in some places!

## 9.2 The King James Version

James therefore decreed that a new and accurate translation of the Bible should be commissioned to replace all other English versions and to become the only “authorised” version read in church. This was to be “the translation to end all translations” – and for a while at least, that was so.

James provided the Bishop of London, Richard Bancroft, a list of 54 of England's best Bible scholars and linguists, who were to work in six teams on the translation project. A committee of twelve scholars – two from each of the six teams – would then review the work of the teams. Fifteen rules for translating were listed, including, more importantly:

1. They were to follow the Bishops' Bible as much as possible.
2. They could draw from any other versions in trying to best convey the message of the original Hebrew and Greek.
3. Most significantly, all commentary and marginal notes were to be dropped, except where needed to clarify Hebrew and Greek words or to cross-reference related Bible passages. This was to ensure the Bible was not biased to either Catholic or Protestant teaching and acceptable to both, and to let Scripture speak for itself.
4. Traditional terms long used in the Church of England were to be retained rather than substituting them with terms that many Protestants preferred, for example, ‘priest’ rather than ‘elder,’ and ‘church’ rather than ‘congregation.’

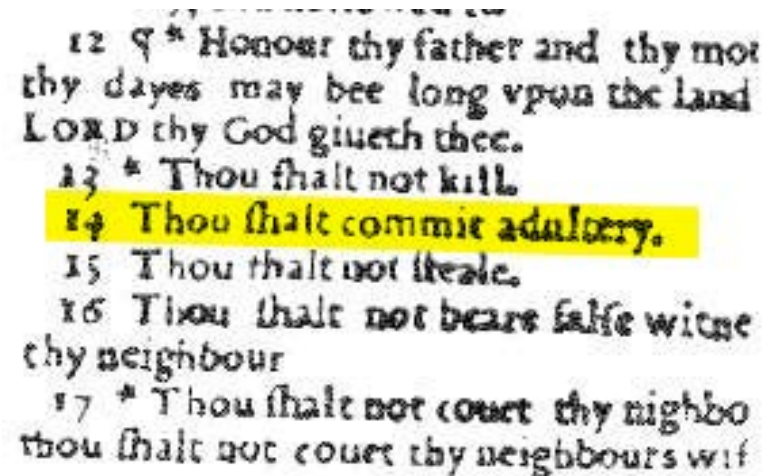


*Richard Bancroft after 1604.*

The scholars spent about three years working on the translation and a further three years were spent reviewing and revising. In 1610 their work went to press, and in 1611 the first of the huge pulpit Bibles came off the printing press in London and were chained to every church pulpit in England. The following year, printing began on the earliest normal-size printings of the Bible, designed for personal purchase and use.

Since James had commissioned its translation, the Bible was dedicated to him and has become known since as the King James Version (KJV), or, because it was “appointed to be read in Churches” as it says on its title page, the Authorised Version (AV).

Early editions of the Bible suffered from typos and errors which were later corrected. One of the most scandalous was in a 1631 edition, where due to the accidental omission of the word “not,” the seventh commandment in Exodus 20:14 read as, “Thou shalt commit adultery”! There were a lot of red faces when this was realised and this edition was dubbed the “Wicked Bible” or the “Adulterer’s Bible.”



12 ¶ Honour thy father and thy mother  
thy dayes may bee long vpon the land  
LORD thy God giueth thee.  
13 \* Thou shalt not kill.  
14 Thou shalt commit adultery.  
15 Thou shalt not steale.  
16 Thou shalt not beare false witnes  
thy neighbour  
17 \* Thou shalt not couet thy neighbo  
thou shalt not couet thy neighbours wif

*A section of a page from the Wicked Bible of 1631.*

The King James Bible turned out to be an excellent and accurate translation for its day. However, it was still viewed with some measure of distrust by many Protestants, in spite of the fact that it actually bore much more resemblance to the Geneva Bible than the Bishops’ Bible that it was supposed to try to follow as much as possible. In fact, the King James Bible borrowed 95% of its text from the Geneva Bible! The Geneva Bible continued to enjoy great popularity for many decades to come, and it was only towards the end of the seventeenth century that the King James Bible had overtaken it in popularity and become the Bible of choice in the English-speaking world.

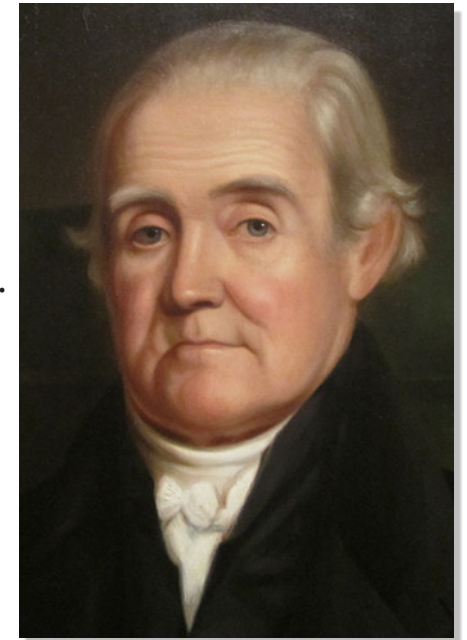
### 9.3 The First Bibles in America

The Pilgrim Fathers who fled England as Protestant refugees and settled in Massachusetts in the New World (America) in 1620 brought Geneva Bibles with them. But by 1700, their descendants had switched to using the King James Bible. Due to copyright issues, Bibles could not be printed in America and had to be imported. The first American-printed King James Bible only appeared in 1782.

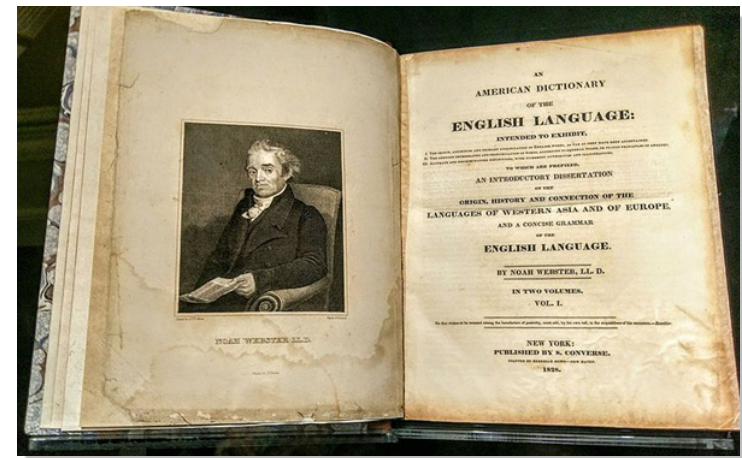


*The departure of the Pilgrim Fathers for America (1620).*

Noah Webster, shortly after producing his famous *Dictionary of the English Language*, attempted to produce his own version of the English Bible in America in 1833. It was basically an attempt to update the language and spelling of the King James Bible to the American English of the day. His project met with lukewarm response. It was hard to shake people's loyalty to the original King James Bible.

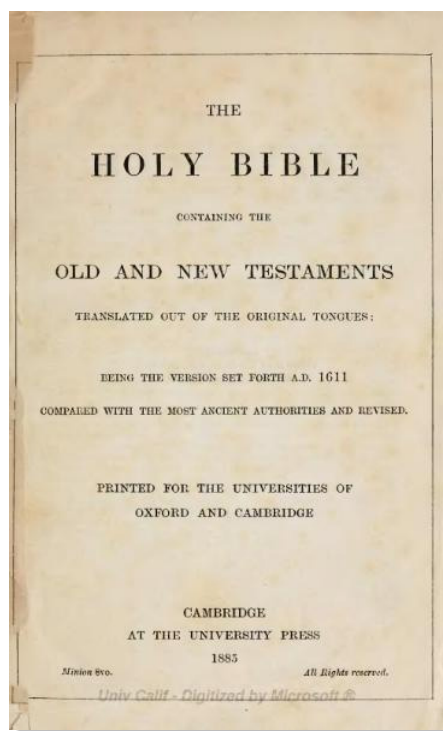


*Noah Webster, by James Herring (c. 1833)*



*Title page of Noah Webster's 1828 edition of the American Dictionary of the English Language.*

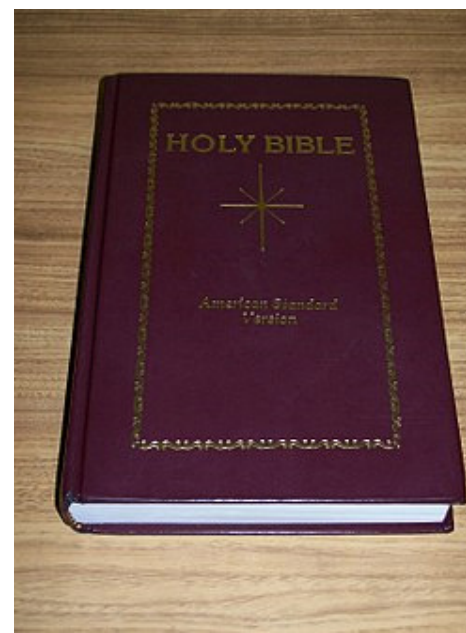
For 270 years, the King James Version reigned unrivalled in the English-speaking world – until the appearance of the English Revised Version (ERV) of 1881-1885, which updated the language in keeping with the times.



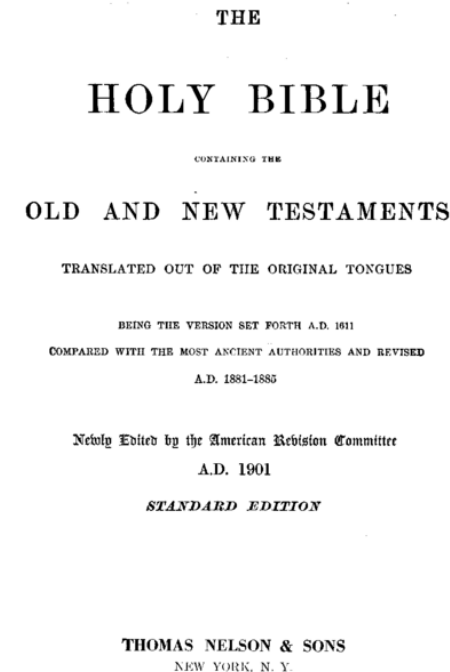
*English Revised Version of the Bible*

## 9.4 The American Standard Version

The Americans responded to England's ERV by publishing the nearly-identical American Standard Version (ASV) in 1901 – an American English version of its English counterpart. It was likewise widely-accepted and embraced by churches throughout America for many decades as the leading modern English version of the Bible.



*American Standard Version*



*Title page of the American Standard Version of the Bible, published in 1901.*

In 1952, the ASV was revised as the Revised Standard Version (RSV), and further revised as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) in 1989. The English Standard Version (ESV) published in 2001, while translated from the original Bible languages, was also an attempt to follow the style and wording of the RSV as much as possible.

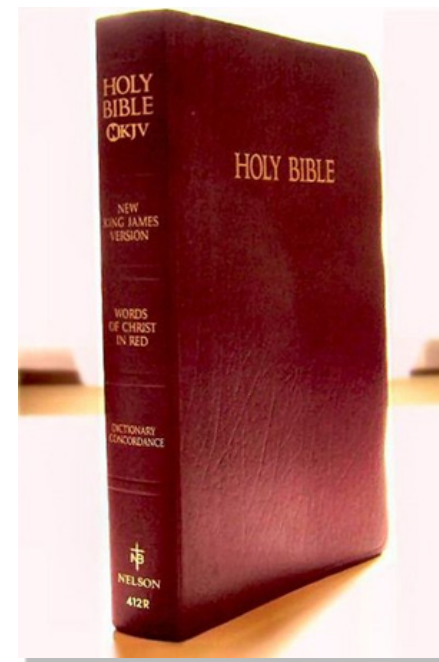
Meanwhile back in 1971, the New American Standard Bible (NASB, or sometimes NASV) was released. While considered a revision of the ASV, it was also translated from the original Bible languages, and is considered one of the most accurate English translations available.

## 9.5 Newer Versions of the King James Version

In 1982, a brand-new revision of the King James Version itself, the New King James Version (NKJV), was released.

The “original” King James Bible is still being printed today, but all copies in the past 250 years have actually been that of Benjamin Blayney’s 1769 revision joint-commissioned by the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, in which he updated spelling and punctuation to the English standards

*The New King James Version is a modern Bible translation, published by Thomas Nelson, Inc. The Anglicised edition was originally known as the Revised Authorised Version, but the NKJV title is now used universally.*



of the day and removed further printers’ errors in the text.

The King James Bible has been the most printed book in the history of the world, and the only book with one billion copies in print.

Much like Shakespeare’s plays from the same era, it is a vast source of story, thought and speech, and testimony to the skill of the people who shaped it to become one of the pinnacles of English literature. It has contributed many phrases and expressions to modern English, including “skin of my teeth” (Job 19:20); “you cannot take it with you”

(Ecclesiastes 5:15); “a leopard cannot change its spots” (Jeremiah 13:23); “at wit’s end” (Psalm 107:27); and “blind leading the blind” (Matthew 15:14); to name but a few.

But hovering over this landmark translation of the English Bible – and indeed every other English translation that had gone before – was the spirit of the man whose dying prayer at his martyrdom was, “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes” – William Tyndale.

In 1998, a complete analysis of the King James Bible against Tyndale’s translation of the Bible was conducted, showing that of those portions of the Bible that Tyndale translated (the entire New Testament and part of the Old Testament), 84% of the New Testament and 75.8% of the Old Testament wording in the King James Version were Tyndale’s words.

Joan Bridgman writes that, “[Tyndale] is the mainly unrecognised translator of the most influential book in the world. Although the Authorised King James Version is ostensibly the production of a learned committee of churchmen, it is mostly cribbed from Tyndale with some reworking of his translation.”

## 9.6 The evolution of the English Bible text

English, like every other language, has been an evolving language. Over time, new words have been coined while others have fallen into disuse or have changed their meanings. The spelling and pronunciation of words has also changed, particularly because English has borrowed from so many different European language influences in the past, each with their own orthography (spelling convention based on pronunciation).

In spite of attempts to standardise things, English orthography today still remains a terribly confusing hotchpotch of its historical leftovers, inconsistent in the way words are spelled against how they are pronounced. Some simple examples are ‘bear’ versus ‘fear’; ‘side’ versus ‘scythe’ versus ‘science’; ‘enough’ versus ‘cough’ versus ‘though’ versus ‘plough’; and so on.

All you have to do is read the King James Version of the Bible today (or any work of Shakespeare) to realise how much the English language has changed in the past 500 years.

Here’s a look at a well-known Bible passage, Psalm 23:1-2,

from some of the earliest English Bibles we have discussed. Notice the disparity in spelling and also how the text evolved over just a couple of centuries from John Wycliffe's first English translation?

### Wycliffe Bible (1388)

*The Lord gouerneth me, and no thing schal faile to me;  
in the place of pasture there he hath set me.  
He nurshide me on the watir of refreischyng.*

### Geneva Bible (1560)

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shal not want  
He maketh me to rest in grene pasture  
& leadeth me by the stil waters.*

### Bishops' Bible (1568)

*God is my sheephearde, therfore I can lacke nothing;  
he wyll cause me to repose my selfe in pasture full of grass,  
and he wyll leade me vnto calme waters.*

### King James Version (1611)

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie downe in greene pastures;  
he leadeth me beside the still waters.*

## FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

### History

[Brief History of the King James Bible](#) (ABLEYouth)

[The King James Bible: A Translation Littered with Mistakes](#) (Cody Crouch on TBN)

### Impact on modern English

[English, In the Beginning](#) (Laurence Marks)

[Professor David Crystal: The Influence of the King James Bible on the English Language](#) (British Council)

# CHAPTER 10

## CATHOLIC RESPONSE TO THE REFORMATION

### 10.1 The Council of Trent

With Protestantism spreading quickly across Europe as a result of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church in the mid-1500s was forced to reassess itself, pressured by the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, as well as many grassroots Catholics. Attempts to persuade Pope Clement VII and his successor Paul III to call for a Church council fell on deaf ears as both feared that their own power – and possibly, income – might suffer as a result of any reforms initiated.



*Pope Clement VII by Sebastiano del Piombo c. 1526.*

Paul finally caved in to Charles' continuing pressure and called for the Council of Trent in 1545, which dragged on till 1563 with two long hiatuses in between.

Unfortunately, the Council of Trent retained almost all existing Catholic theology and practices and continued to condemn Protestant teaching. They did however rid themselves of some of the abuses of Church power, focusing more on the spiritual rather than political leadership of the Pope, and forbade the collection of money for indulgences.



*Pope Paul III by Titian, 16<sup>th</sup> century.*



*Council of Trent, painting in the Museo del Palazzo del Buonconsiglio, Trento.*

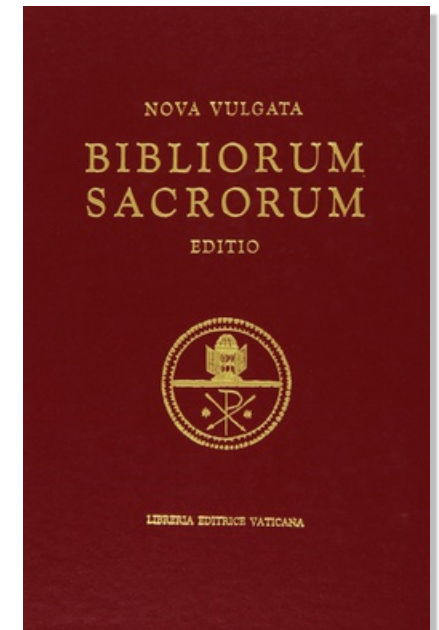
In regard to the Bible, however, they continued to affirm that Scripture could only be properly interpreted by the Catholic Church and that the Latin Vulgate was to be the only authoritative Bible text for the Church. They did however concur that the Vulgate needed to be corrected of some of its imperfections and commissioned Catholic scholars to commence revising it. It was finally published during the time of Pope Clement VIII in 1592 and was therefore referred to as the Clementine Vulgate. It remained the official Latin version of the Catholic Church until 1979 when another revision, the Nova Vulgata (“new Vulgate”),

was released, later revised in 1986. It is the official Catholic Latin Bible today.

The Council of Trent also raised the status of the Apocrypha from that of humanly written books helpful for Christian instruction to that of divinely inspired Word of God.

The Apocrypha are books that appear in the Greek Septuagint but not in the standard Hebrew Bible.

When Jerome was compiling the Latin Vulgate, while he translated these books too, he grouped them together under the label of “Apocrypha” (literally, “to hide away”), indicating that they were of dubious authority and should not be considered part of the Old Testament canon. Unfortunately, Jerome’s misgivings had been forgotten over the centuries and the Council of Trent made it official that Catholics would now treat the Apocrypha as God-breathed Scripture. Catholics also refer to it as the Deuterocanon,



meaning “second canon.”

To be clear, even though Protestants didn't see the Apocrypha as God-breathed Scripture, they still considered these books as additional writings helpful for teaching Christians. And so, in much the same way Bible translators' notes were included in printed Bibles for Christian instruction, the Apocrypha was also included in printed Protestant Bibles, including those of the Reformation years and beyond.

It was only in the 1880s with the release of the English Revised Version that Protestants began omitting the Apocrypha from printings of the Bible. There does not seem to be any clear reason why this happened, but it is presumed that Protestants wanted to avoid confusion and make a clear delineation between what they considered God's holy Word and writings merely of human origin, no matter how edifying – especially when the Catholic Church now viewed the Apocrypha as canon.

## 10.2 The Jerusalem Bible

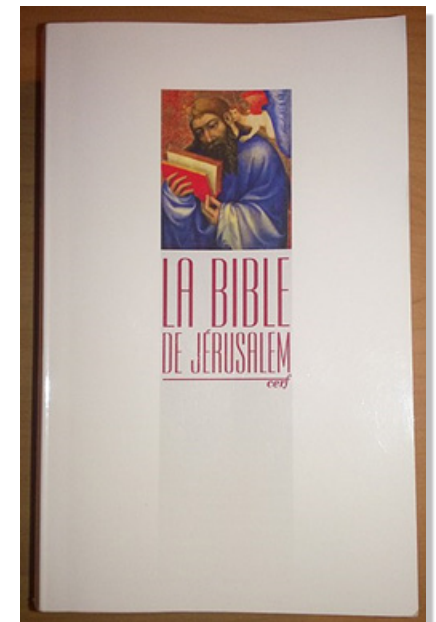
While the Council of Trent did not outrightly ban the translation of the Bible into other languages, it still insisted

that Latin be retained as the only approved language of the Bible and all Church services and proceedings.

It was only in the twentieth century that new reforms took place in relation to the Catholic Church and Scripture.

In 1942, Pope Pius XII called for scholars to get back to the historical manuscripts of Scripture and make that their basis for a more accurate translation rather than only referencing Jerome's Vulgate as their source text. He also encouraged Catholics to read and study Scripture for themselves rather than relying entirely on the Church.

Seizing this opportunity, Father Thomas George Chifflet, a Dominican priest and publisher in Nazi-occupied Paris, contacted French scholars at the École Biblique in Jerusalem, asking them if they would undertake a French translation based on the original Hebrew and Greek biblical texts. The Second World War delayed



*The Jerusalem Bible*

progress of the project but the excellent new translation, *La Bible de Jérusalem* (the Jerusalem Bible), was finally published in 1956, with a further revision released in 1973. It included many helpful scholarly notes and other features and served as a model for future study Bibles in many other languages across the world.

The English version of the Jerusalem Bible was completed in 1966 and revised in 1985 (as the New Jerusalem Bible) in order to include the changes made in the revised French version. Like the French version, it was translated from the original Hebrew and Greek texts rather than the French translation, but the supplementary notes were based on those in the French.

### 10.3 The Second Vatican Council

In 1962, the Second Vatican Council, or Vatican II, was held in Rome, called by Pope John XXIII. A number of major reforms were agreed upon, including allowing the use of vernacular languages in the Catholic Mass instead of Latin. Scripture awareness grew as the Bible was read in the people's own languages at mass and Bible education programmes were initiated in Catholic churches, contributing to Catholics reading and becoming more familiar with the Bible.



*Second Vatican Council*

## FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

### ***Catholic counter-reformation***

[The Catholic Counter-Reformation](#) (Tom Richey)

### ***Apocrypha***

[What is the Apocrypha? Bill Mounce Responds](#) (Seedbed)

# CHAPTER 11

## THE BIBLE SPREADS ACROSS THE WORLD

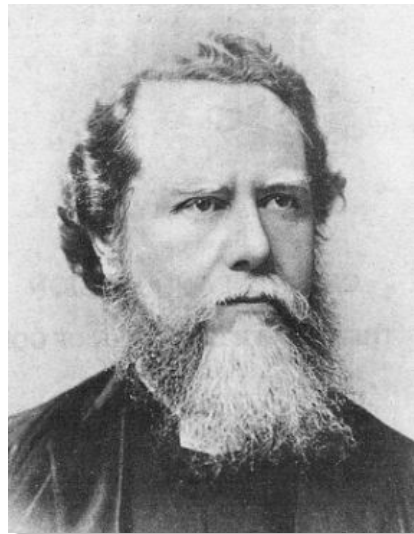
### 11.1 Missionary translators

In the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, new innovations in maritime technology made it possible to make journeys of much longer distance across the seas. As a result, missionary work grew in leaps and bounds across the world.

Missionaries realised that in order to root and establish people in their faith, it was imperative that the Scriptures be made available to them in the language they knew.

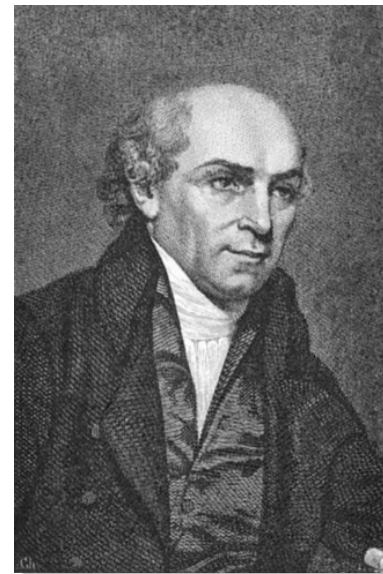
And so began an age of Bible translation that continues to this day.

Two pioneer missionaries whom God used powerfully were William Carey and Hudson Taylor. Carey was an English cobbler who went to



*Hudson Taylor*

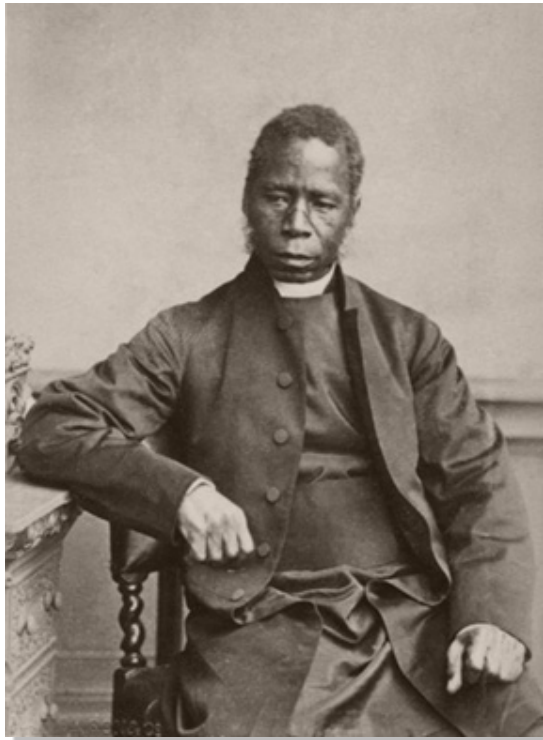
India in 1793, where he translated the entire Bible into six Indian dialects and parts of the Bible into 29 other languages! Taylor, on the other hand, carried Chinese Bibles all over China, dressed in Chinese clothes, and also translated the Bible into the Ningbo dialect he had learned. In 1865, he founded the China Inland Mission, now called the Overseas Missionary Fellowship International, which continues to operate in many East Asian countries.



*William Carey (1761-1834)*

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, missionaries and Bible translators penetrated into Africa. The first scriptures in modern African languages appeared in Sierra Leone and Ethiopia. The first complete Bible in an African language was in Malagasy, the language of Madagascar. Not all translators were foreign missionaries.

Samuel Ajayi Crowther, a Nigerian rescued from slavery, ended up being educated by Christians, studying theology in London, and then becoming the first African Bishop in the Anglican Church in Africa in 1864. Crowther translated most of the New Testament into his native language, Yoruba. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were complete Bibles in fourteen African languages, and by the end of the twentieth century, there were at least partially completed Bibles in over 500 African dialects.



*Samuel Ajayi Crowther. Photo by: Ernest Edwards*

## I 1.2 Bible societies

Mary Jones was a poor fifteen-year-old Welsh girl who walked 26 miles barefoot across the countryside to buy a copy of the Welsh Bible from Thomas Charles because she did not have one. Moved by this, and others like her, Charles then used her story to propose to the Religious Tract Society that it set up a new organisation to supply Wales with Bibles.

So in 1804, 300 ordinary Christian folk met in a London pub to see how they could help print and distribute the Bible not just to Wales but also other parts of Britain. One of them was William Wilberforce, the great British



Member of Parliament who brought about the abolition of slavery in England.

*William Wilberforce by Anton Hickel c.1794.*

In spite of their diverse denominational and theological backgrounds, they worked together to form The British and Foreign Bible Society, printing and distributing copies of the Bible on a non-profit basis.



*British and Foreign Bible Society logo*

Within a decade, it had spawned hundreds of similar societies in Europe, Canada and the United States. By 1900, nearly 2,000 distributors were working for Bible Societies in almost every country in the world.

Over the years, these Bible societies have also translated Scripture into a vast array of languages.

In 1946, fourteen European, British and American societies merged to form the United Bible Societies, to synergise the planning and coordination of the work of Bible translation and distribution worldwide. Despite initial resistance from the Catholic Church, with Pope Pius XII opening the Catholic Church in 1942 to Bible translation in vernacular

languages, Catholics too began to join Bible societies in their work.

As of 2021, the United Bible Societies comprises 160 national societies. Between 2015 and 2019, they collectively distributed over 1.8 billion Bibles or portions of it, and completed Bible translations in 270 languages used by 1.7 billion people.

### 11.3 The Gideons International

Independent of the Bible Societies, two American businessmen, John Nicholson and Samuel Hill, met in 1899 and founded an organisation to distribute Bibles – The Gideons International, named after the Old Testament hero Gideon. Their aim was to put free copies of the Word of God, or portions of it, into the hands of non-believers. Approximately 70 million Bibles are placed annually in hotel and hospital rooms, schools and prisons all over the world. On average, that's more than two copies of the Bible distributed every second! As of 2015, The Gideons International has distributed over two billion Bibles!



*Gideons member distributing scripture in motel room.*

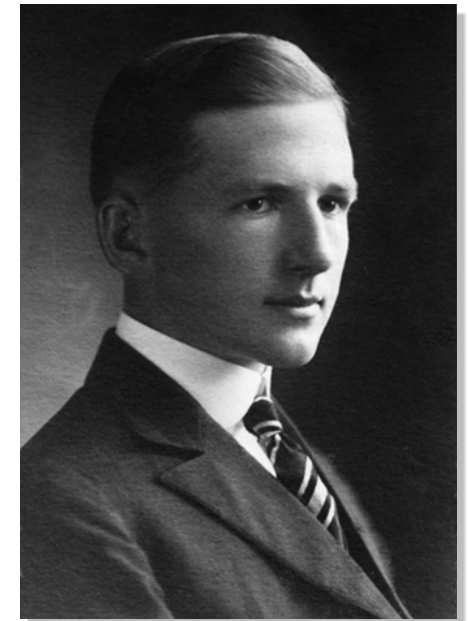
## 11.4 Wycliffe Bible Translators and the Wycliffe Global Alliance

While working among Guatemala's Kaqchikel Indians in the 1930s, missionary William Cameron Townsend was asked by a local, "If your God is so great, why doesn't he speak my language?" Challenged by this, Townsend started a linguistic school to train Bible translators. He named it Wycliffe Bible Translators, after John Wycliffe, with the sole aim of providing Bibles to people in their own language for the first time.



*A Kaqchikel family in the hamlet of Patutzun, Guatemala in 1993.*

Many people groups have no written alphabet system for their language. Like Ulfilas, Mesrop and others in fourth century Europe, Bible translators have had to first create these in order to translate the Bible into a written form, and then teach the people how to read it.



*William Cameron Townsend*

Translating for different cultures can be a complicated and challenging business. First off, translators need to formulate a way of expressing a language's unique sounds, creating symbols for sounds not found in European languages. Examples of these include a sound in West Africa made by flapping one's lip, rather than moving the tip of the tongue; the clicking sounds used in other African languages; and a sound in Pirahá, a Brazilian dialect, made with one's tongue sticking out!



*Don Richardson, by Embassy Media*

Cultural differences also present problems. Not all words in Hebrew and Greek have an equivalent in the language it is being translated into. Missionary Don Richardson, working amongst the Sawi tribe in remote

Papua New Guinea found that “the Lamb of God” made no sense to them as they had never seen a sheep before. Neither did Jesus’ words in Revelation 3:20, “I stand at

the door and knock,” as the Sawi people had no doors on their homes nor was knocking anywhere an indication of a desire to enter!

Sometimes the cultural divide goes a step further, where certain concepts that seem basic and essential to us – and the corresponding words expressing them – just do not exist in the people’s consciousness. For example, the concepts of “before” and “after” have no meaning for many people groups in Papua New Guinea. Translators have the challenge of needing to find a way to suggest a sequence of events without being able to outrightly say so!

Some languages also have multiple words for the same thing, each with a particular shade of meaning. Eskimos, for example, have many different words for snow. How should you translate Isaiah 1:18 then, where it says that our “sins shall be like snow”? Bible translators need to be sure they are picking the right word for the biblical context involved.

In spite of the challenges, Wycliffe Bible translators, together with over 100 affiliated Bible translation organisations coming together under the Wycliffe Global Alliance umbrella – similar to the way the United Bible Societies operates – have joined hands to work towards translating

the Bible into all the languages of the world.

It is still a vastly unfinished task. As of 2021, of the 7,379 known world languages, the complete Bible is available in only 717 languages. The New Testament is available in 1,582 more languages, and portions of Scripture have been completed in a further 1,196 languages, bringing a total of 3,495 languages with some of the Scriptures translated. About 1.5 billion people in the world today still do not have the full Bible in their first language.

Like many of the pre-Reformation and Reformation Bible translators, some Bible translators even today also pay for their commitment to their task with their lives. In 1993, Edmund Fabian was murdered in Papua New Guinea, killed by a local man who had been helping him to translate the Bible. In March 2016, four Bible translators were killed by militants in an undisclosed location in the Middle East.

They gave their lives for their love for God and his Word, and his desire to see the gospel reach the ends of the earth, so that someday, every people group from every language will stand before the throne of the Lamb in worship (Revelation 5:1-14).

Truly, as Hebrews 11:38 describes such men and women of faith who suffered, sacrificed and even died for their commitment to the Lord, “the world was not worthy of them.”

## FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

### **William Carey**

[Candle in the Dark: The Story of William Carey](#) (movie)  
(Vision Video)

### **Hudson Taylor**

[Hudson Taylor](#) (movie) (Christian Movies)

[Hudson Taylor: Into the Heart of the Dragon](#)  
(documentary) (Vision Video)

### **Samuel Crowther**

[Bishop Before His Time](#) (Ted Olsen)

[The Black Bishop: The Story of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther \(1809-1891\)](#) (Tomi Adediji)

### **Bible translators and distributors**

[United Bible Societies](#) (website)

[Gideons International](#) (website)

[Wycliffe Global Alliance](#) (website)

### **Challenge of Bible translation**

[The Challenge of Bible Translation](#) (Douglas Moo)

# CHAPTER 12

## ENGLISH BIBLE VERSIONS TODAY

There is a smorgasbord of different Bible versions available to us in English today. But how are they different from one another? And how can we discern whether it is faithful to the Bible's original text?

Well, there are basically three types of Bible versions available. Two of them I would classify as translations of Scripture, and the third I would consider to be paraphrases since they deviate considerably from the original text.

### 12.1 Translations

There are two approaches to translation: a word-for-word approach, or a thought-for-thought approach.

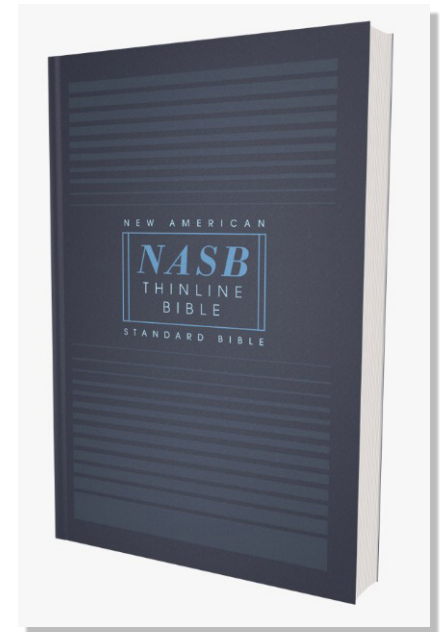
Bible translation doesn't just pose problems for translating Hebrew and Greek into the language of some remote tribe. Even when translating into English, similar problems exist, and Bible translators have had to ask themselves just how

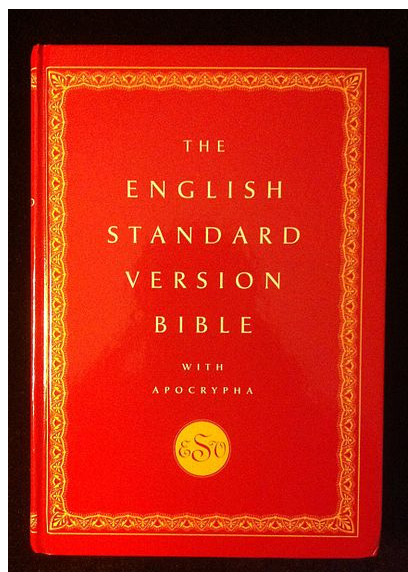
exact, or literal, they want to be to the original language.

So, *word-for-word* translations (also known as *formal* translations) are those that do their absolute best to accurately translate the original text. However, they sometimes give rise to expressions that are hard to understand, or awkward phrasing and flow, resulting in unnatural – and therefore confusing – reading.

Examples of word-for-word translations include the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the King James Version (KJV), the New King James Version (NKJV), the Revised Standard Version (RSV) and the English Standard Version (ESV).

*The Open Edition of the New American Standard Bible (NASB) by Jayz Nebre-Villafania.*

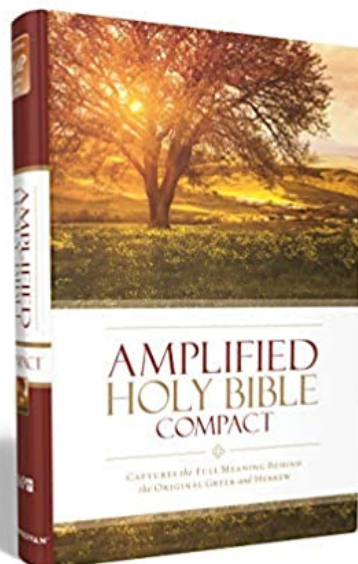




*English Standard Version (ESV)*

One particularly interesting word-for-word translation is the Amplified Bible (AMP), which “amplifies” the meaning of the original Hebrew or Greek word to bring out its many facets and nuances. Look for example at how John 3:16 reads in the AMP:

*Amplified Bible  
(AMP) Amazon*



*For God so [greatly] loved and dearly prized the world, that He [even] gave His [One and] only begotten Son, so that whoever believes and trusts in Him [as Saviour] shall not perish, but have eternal life. (AMP)*

Perhaps a better description for the AMP is “many-words-for-one-word” rather than “word-for-word”!

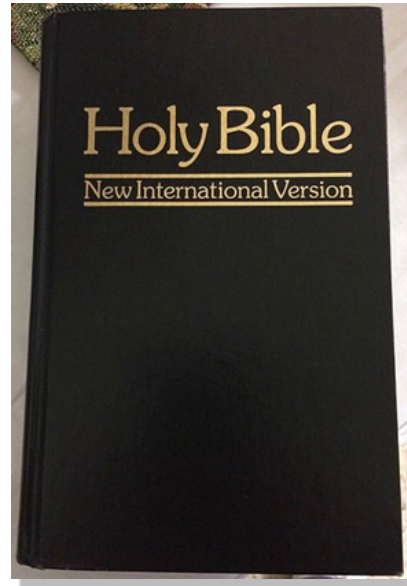
On the other hand, *thought-for-thought* translations (also known as *dynamic equivalent* translations) consider the meaning behind the original text and try to convey that same meaning in the translated text. For that reason, they are sometimes also called meaning-for-meaning translations. These arose in the mid-1900s when Bible scholars began to feel that the most important concern in Bible translation is not to preserve its literary structure but to communicate clearly what it means.

Probably the most popular thought-for-thought translations today are the New International Version (NIV), the New Living Translation (NLT) and the Good News Translation/ Bible (GNT/GNB).

New International Version (NIV)



New Living Translation (NLT) logo



Let's look at a couple of examples of translations as they appear in the NASB, a word-for-word translation, and the NLT and NIV, both thought-for-thought translations.

In Romans 12:20, the image of heaping fiery coals on an enemy may seem to suggest torture, when in actual fact the inference is of an enemy feeling shame for what they did.

*But if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head. (NASB)*

*If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads. (NLT)*

*If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. (NIV)*

In Luke 1:69, the Hebrew metaphor of a horn is used to describe Jesus. While bewildering to English speakers, the footnote in the NIV explains that “horn here symbolizes a strong king.” Notice how the NLT conveys the ideas of strength in “mighty”, and king in “royal.”

*And has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of His servant David. (NASB)*

*He has sent us a mighty Saviour from the royal line of his servant David. (NLT)*

*He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. (NIV)*

You will realise from comparisons of just these two examples that there is also a spectrum of accuracy within both word-for-word and thought-for-thought translations. The NIV, while largely a thought-for-thought translation, leans closer towards word-for-word than the NLT does.

*For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother. (KJV)*

*For I have had great joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother. (NASB)*

Even within the word-for-word translations, some measure of thought-for-thought still appears. Take this example from Philemon 7:

To the Greeks, the seat of one's emotions were the bowels. To English speakers, it is the heart. So while the KJV has been closer to a word-for-word translation, the NASB – along with almost every other word-for-word translation – has opted for thought-for-thought in this verse, probably because you have to admit that hearing about the “bowels of the saints [being] refreshed” would likely elicit a laugh-out-loud from most people, since it sounds more like their indigestion has been relieved!

So which kind of translation should we go for? And which translation?

There really isn't a textbook answer to that.

If you prefer a Bible that reads easily in a style closer to what you are used to, I'd recommend a thought-for-thought translation, particularly the NIV, which leans a little more towards a word-for-word without sacrificing readability, and has become the best-selling modern-English translation of the Bible ever published.

If you'd like to push it a step further in the word-for-word direction, the ESV is a good choice which has been growing in popularity in recent years.

That having been said, you'll find that most thought-for-thought Bible versions will include footnotes to indicate what the literal translation was, and some word-for-word Bible versions will include footnotes to clarify something they've translated literally and might be somewhat obscure to the reader. The NLT footnote to Luke 1:69, for example, indicates that the literal Greek is "raised up a horn of salvation for us." So either way, most good Bible translations are trying to help you know what it literally says as well as what it means. So both word-for-word and thought-for-thought translations are still good for Bible study as well as reading.

Other reassuring factors are that all the above translations were made by a large panel of Bible scholars, thereby eliminating any personal bias, and that they used the original texts, including all recently discovered manuscripts that might shed further light on the occasional passage that might seem unclear.

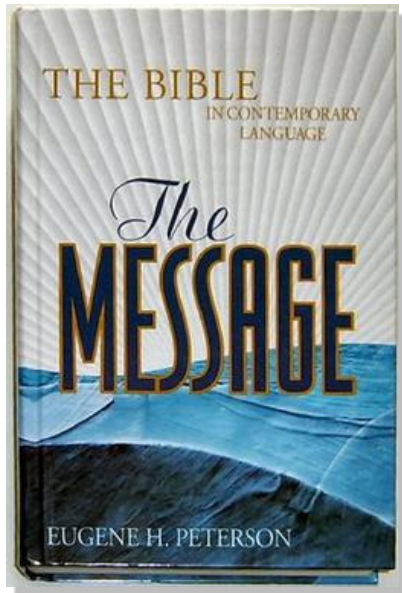
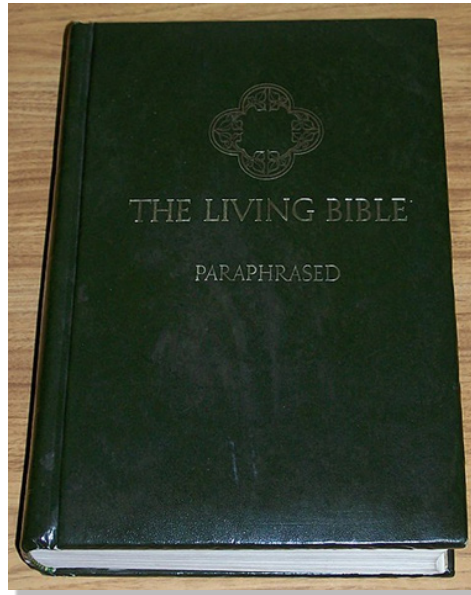
## 12.2 Paraphrases

The goal of paraphrased Bibles is to make the language even easier to understand than thought-for-thought Bibles. Rather than being an accurate version of the text, they usually freely incorporate elements of what the paraphrasers think the text is trying to say. As a result, they often add things not found in the original text, weave their own ideas, beliefs or preconceptions into the passages, or water down the meaning of "heavier" theological terms – like "justification," "sanctification" and so on – by replacing them with oversimplified or more popular words.

Many paraphrased Bibles are also one-man shows, which opens the door for more bias in interpreting Bible passages, and not all these writers are necessarily experts in Hebrew and Greek. Sadly, some of these versions are heavily marketed as "translations" when strictly speaking, they are not.

Examples of paraphrased Bibles include The Living Bible (TLB), The Message (MSG) and The Passion Translation (TPT (Old Testament still incomplete as of 2021)).

*The Living Bible (TLB), first published in 1971*



*The Message (MSG)*

Compare how Ephesians 2:1-2 reads in the ESV (word-for-word), the NIV (thought-for-thought) and two popular paraphrases, the MSG and the TPT:

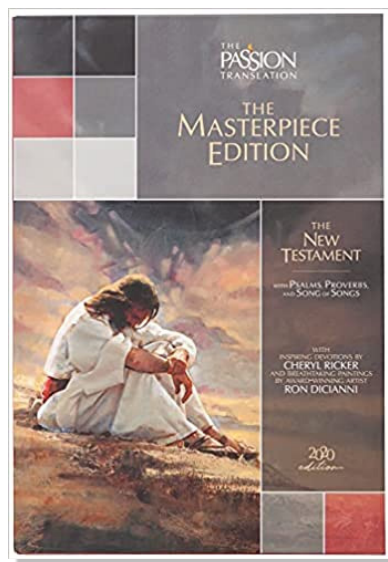
*And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. (ESV)*

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. (NIV)*

*It wasn't so long ago that you were mired in that old stagnant life of sin. You let the world, which doesn't know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. (MSG)*

*And his fullness fills you, even though you were once like corpses, dead in your sins and offenses. It wasn't that long ago that you lived in the religion, customs, and values of this world, obeying the dark ruler of the earthly realm who fills the atmosphere with his authority, and works diligently in the hearts of those who are disobedient to the truth of God. (TPT)*

Paraphrased Bibles should never be your go-to for Bible study or sound biblical doctrine. They have value more as devotional reading, the way you might read a devotional commentary by a respected Bible teacher: it may help to shed some light on a Bible passage or to see it in a fresh way, but it is only one person's view on a passage and not in itself to be taught or preached from as divine truth.



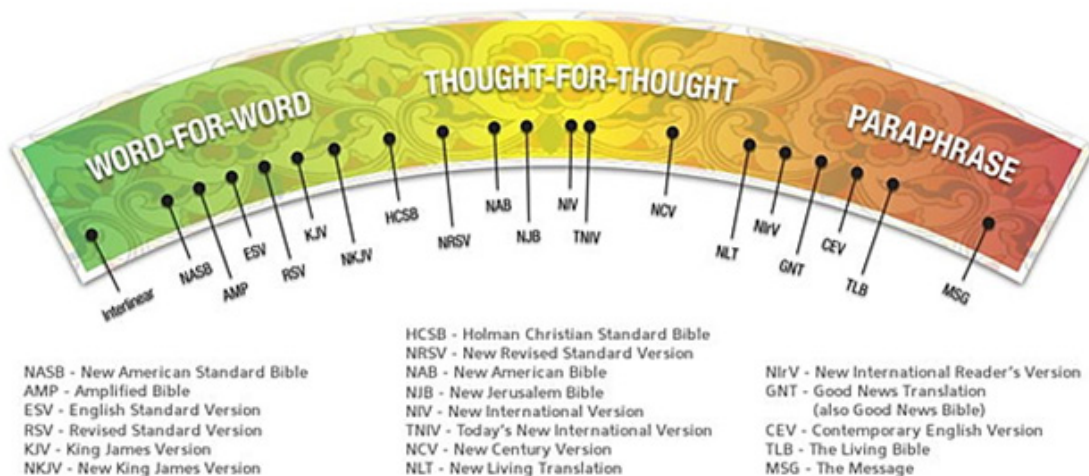
*The Passion Translation (TPT)*

There are some Christians today who unfortunately look down on modern English translations and insist that the only “accurate” version of the Bible is the KJV and therefore the one that all true Christians should use. This is really nothing new. In precisely the same way, the Catholic Church insisted for centuries that the Vulgate was the most “accurate” Bible around, and even though nobody could understand it anymore, they doggedly continued to insist on its usage.

Yes, as Christians, we must be careful to make intelligent and informed decisions about what versions of the Bible we choose to study or read – and admittedly not all new translations are equally good (and some can be quite bad!).

But equally dangerous is the other extreme of blindly rejecting modern English translations, especially those that have taken great pains to be faithful to the original text.

Remember that one of the key aims of the Protestant Reformation was to get the Bible out of being trapped in the chains of an ancient language that few could understand and into the modern, spoken, conversational language of its day. William Tyndale and so many others like him fought and died for it! Let us learn from our history and not seek



to imprison God's Word once again exclusively in archaic translations.

The eternal Word of God is unchanging from generation to generation. But language is a dynamic and ever-changing form of communication. Christians therefore have a God-given responsibility to ensure that every generation to come will be able to access and read God's Word in an accurate translation that they can easily understand.

## FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

***Translations: word for word or thought-for-thought***

[What Bible Translation Should I Read? | History of Translations, Differences, and How to Choose](#) (Biblicalish)

***Paraphrases***

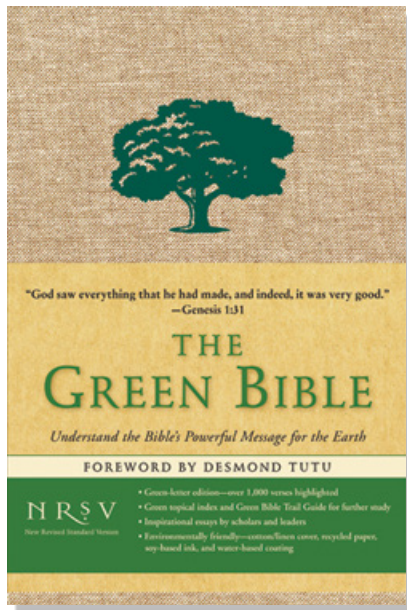
[What About Bible Paraphrases? | Paraphrases vs Translations, and Should We Read Them?](#) (Biblicalish)

# CHAPTER 13

## THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY BIBLE READER AND STUDENT

### 13.1 Bibles for every taste

When advertising and marketing began to boom in the mid-1900s, Bible publishers began producing specialty Bibles targeted at specific markets, with – for better or worse – a Bible for almost every “flavour” of person out there!



*The Green Bible*

Typically, the Bibles contain the complete text of Scripture – in whatever version – plus additional notes and commentary alongside the text, written for the particular target group.

These could be based on theological or denominational slant, e.g. Catholic, evangelical Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Messianic Jew, Charismatic,

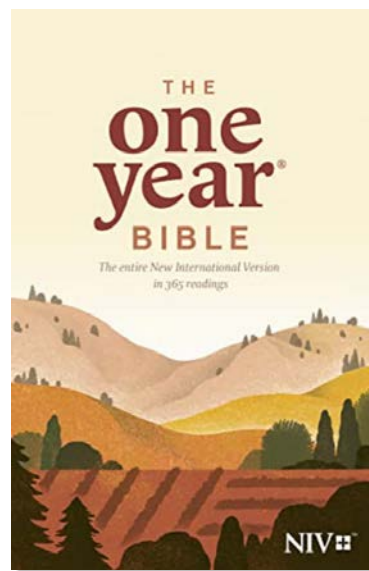
etc. In one sense, this is not too different from the early post-Reformation Bibles, all of which contained commentary slanted either towards Protestant or Catholic theology until the vanilla-flavoured King James Bible was commissioned without commentary.

Speciality Bibles could also be for a particular demographic, e.g. children, teens, students, young married couples, mums or dads, senior citizens, etc.

Or they could be focusing on a particular topic, e.g. apologetics, worship, doctrine, promises of God, etc. One woke publisher even released *The Green Bible in 2008*, with a focus on environmental sustainability! The problem with topical Bibles is that they can often divert attention away from the Bible's central themes by focusing on just one theme, and almost always a lesser one.

## 13.2 Devotional Bibles

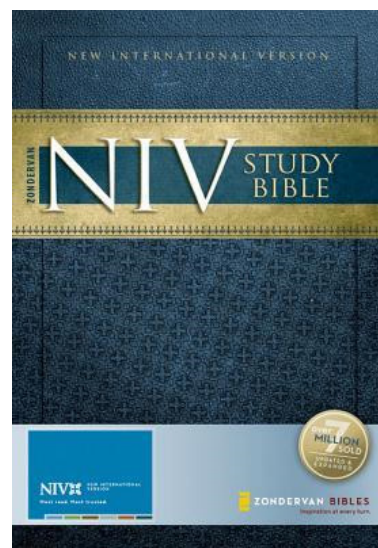
Devotional Bibles usually provide a short devotional thought and application from each passage of Scripture while the *One-Year Bible* arranges passages into fifteen-minute readings designed to enable the reader to cover the entire Bible in one year.



*The One Year Bible*

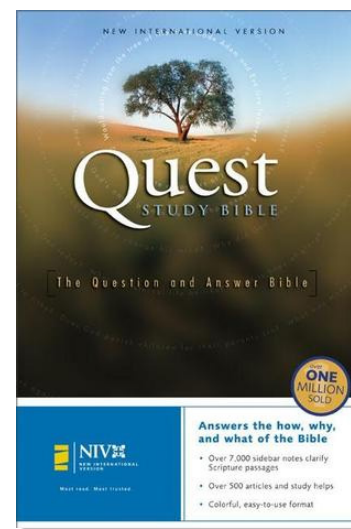
## 13.3 Study Bibles

Study Bibles are designed for more serious Bible study. They provide explanatory notes prepared by Bible scholars that help readers understand Bible words and concepts, as well as historical and cultural contexts, so that the meaning of a passage becomes clearer. The *NIV Study Bible* and the *ESV Study Bible* are



*NIV Study Bible*

two great study Bibles available today.



*Quest Study Bible*

The *Quest Study Bible*, on the other hand, anticipates the questions readers may ask as they read a passage, and then lists those questions together with their answers in the margin.

Other study Bibles go a step further and not just help the reader understand the meaning of a passage, but also how it may be applied in their own lives. The

excellent *Life Application Study Bible* is a good example of such a Bible and is available in different editions for six popular Bible versions.

## 13.4 Bible study tools

There are also other Bible study tools that help those reading and studying the Bible to navigate its pages and appreciate its depths even more.

A **concordance** is a book that lists common words found in the Bible and shows the places where they occur. Some Bibles include an abridged concordance as an appendix. A concordance helps you do word studies as well as locate verses you vaguely remember. Concordances are fast becoming redundant though. With Bibles moving to digital platforms, a word search enables you to do the same thing, and way quicker too!

A **topical Bible** is a guide to different subjects addressed in the Bible. Under “faith,” for example, it will list not only the most important verses where the word “faith” is found but also verses that talk about faith without using the word itself.

A **Bible dictionary** or **encyclopaedia** gives more detailed information about people, places, words, events and topics in the Bible. It is alphabetically arranged and enables you to look up anything that is dealt with in the Bible and to dig into it in more detail.



*English Bible dictionaries, photo by Peter Unseth.*

A **commentary** is a single or multi-volume work that explains the meaning of Bible passages in much greater

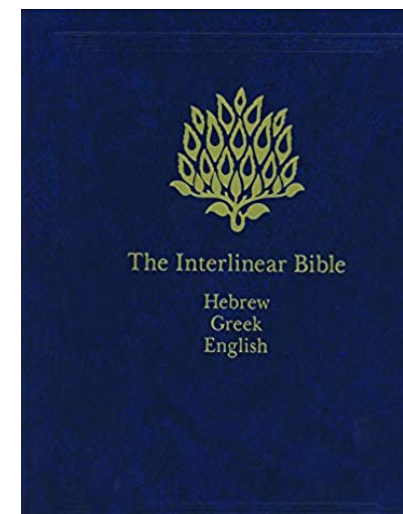
depth than the notes in a study Bible. Some of these are entirely from great Bible teachers past and present. Matthew Henry (1662-1714) has a 6-volume commentary on the entire Bible while pioneer Reformer John Calvin has a 22-volume commentary covering most Bible books. The old-school English of these men may be hard to follow today but there are now versions of these classics in updated modern English. More recent commentaries tend to feature various contributors, with each writer usually being an expert in a particular Bible book. Two of the best modern commentaries are the 48-volume *New International Commentary on the Old and New Testaments (NICOT/NICNT)* and the thirteen-volume *Expositor's Bible Commentary (EBC)*, also available in a two-volume abridged version.

A **Bible atlas** will give you much more information than the maps often added at the back of many Bibles.

An **interlinear Bible** simply contains the text of the entire Bible in one or more English versions side-by-side with the Bible's original languages of Hebrew and/or Greek. Beneath each Hebrew or Greek word is the literal meaning in English. Interlinear Bibles also often provide links to other places where that particular word is found elsewhere in Scripture. This can be a help to those wanting to dig into

the possible layers of meaning of particular words.

*A Hebrew, Greek and English  
interlinear Bible.*



### 13.5 Digital resources

As we have moved in the last couple of decades into a digital world, the unchained, eternal Word of God has followed. The rise of the internet and electronic media now means that people all over the globe with internet access can easily access the Bible in an instant wherever they are – very often in their own language.

A few years ago, while hiking on an Italian mountain, an elderly Italian lady fellow-hiker struck up a conversation with me. Unfortunately she spoke no English, and I, no Italian! The conversation, translated falteringly back and

forth by her daughter, whose English was limited, somehow entered into spiritual matters, and I wanted to share a Bible passage with her to encourage her. With a few clicks, I was able to access an Italian Bible online up on that remote mountain and let her read for herself – in the only language she knew – the verses I wanted to share. What a blessing to have that available quite literally at my fingertips!

I used *BibleGateway.com*, a free online portal that allows you to read, search and even study the Bible in a whopping 62 English versions and a further 73 other languages in 170 versions! The paid “pro” version provides you also with access to online versions of plenty of helpful Bible tools.



*Bible Gateway logo*

Many Bibles and accompanying tools are also available

digitally today through e-books, websites or apps on various digital devices. Some are free while others require a purchase or subscription.

Some popular digital resources you could check out are:

**YouVersion** – <https://www.youversion.com/>

YouVersion has a companion product for children, the Bible App for Kids (<https://bibleappforkids.com/>), complete with engaging cartoons, to introduce them to God’s Word.

**Logos** – <https://www.logos.com/>

**E-Sword** – <http://www.e-sword.net/>

**The Word** – <https://theword.net/>

**Olive Tree** – <http://www.olivetree.com/>

**Glo** – <http://globible.com/>

**The NET Bible** – <https://netbible.org/>

# EPILOGUE

Well, there you go!

From its origins on tablets of stone and clay thousands of years ago to tablets of a digital kind today, the Bible has been passed down and translated into our language of English as well as a myriad of others – and that journey continues into the future.

It's been an amazing, crazy journey for sure, but God's purposes have prevailed and triumphed in spite of the odds, and we can only stand in awe of his sovereign hand over it all.

So what does this all mean for you and me today? Is it just another interesting story, like a movie we might watch and then forget about later?

Let me suggest a couple of things for us to consider as we close.

Firstly, as we look back at the story of how the Bible came to us in our language, we see men and women who were so committed to a return to God's truth that they willingly gave their lives to make the Bible available to all. In other words, the Bible you and I hold in our hands today was bought with the blood of martyrs. We are the beneficiaries of their great sacrifice. Do you and I take that lightly? Do we take our Bibles for granted? Gifts that cost dearly must be dearly treasured.

Secondly, beyond just treasuring God's Word, we need to study and know it for ourselves. In Ephesians 4:11-16, Paul urges us to grow in our knowledge of God through his Word so that we will become mature in Christ and not be "tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching" (verse 14 NIV). We may be able to read the Bible for ourselves today, but if we don't read it, we will be just as ignorant and gullible as those illiterate Christians in the Middle Ages who swallowed wholesale whatever they were told. Make sure

your knowledge and understanding of God's Word is not second-hand. Know it and own it for yourself so that you will be able to discern truth from error – and then to live in the light of that truth.

Praise God for the gift of his eternal life-giving Word so freely available to us today in the language we speak!

*The grass withers and the flowers fade,  
but the word of our God stands forever.*  
– Isaiah 40:8 (NLT)

## FOR FURTHER REFERENCE

### BOOKS

*The One-Stop History of the Bible*, Robert V Huber & Stephen M Miller, Lion Books, 2016

*The Bible: A History*, Stephen M Miller & Robert V Huber, Lion Books, 2015

*The Forbidden Book*, Craig Lampe, Craig Lampe, 2004

*How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth*, Gordon D Fee & Mark L Strauss, Zondervan, 2007

*Bible Translations Comparison*, Gary Burge, Vincent Botticelli et al, Rose Publishing, 2011

### VIDEOS

[Bible Translation History](#) (*Museum of the Bible*)

[The Forbidden Book](#) (documentary) (*Christian Movies*)

[The Bible Explored – A Brief History](#) (*Canadian Bible Society*)