

40 Days To Understanding The Bible In 15 Minutes A Day

Day 23

When and How Was the Bible Translated Into English?

Christians very quickly embarked on the task of translating the Bible into other languages. After all, even though God's Word was for all people, not all people spoke Hebrew and Greek. Jesus had commanded his followers to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19), communicating the gospel to unbelievers and educating new believers in Jesus Christ; therefore, Christians understood the importance of immediately translating the Bible into the languages of the people around them. That work continues even today as many ethnic groups do not yet have the Bible, or even parts of it, in their own languages.

Probably the earliest translation of the entire Bible was the Old Latin produced in the early second century, if not the late first century. Latin was the native language of the Romans and was the marketplace language in the Western Roman Empire. The Old Syriac translation, also known as the *Peshitta* (meaning "simple"), was produced from the middle second century to early third century. Syriac was a common marketplace language in the Eastern Roman Empire. Other important translations were created in the following centuries in Coptic (Egyptian), Gothic (early German), Ethiopic, and Arabic.

Another important reason to translate Scripture is that, since all languages evolve, there is always the need for updated, modernized versions. Even though God has blessed English speakers with many good English translations of the Bible, new translations are also legitimate because the English language has changed, sometimes dramatically. This is obvious if you try to read literature in Old English. It is almost like reading another language! So even though the King James Version of the Bible remains one of the most important and influential, the English language has seen considerable changes since 1611.

For example, in the King James Version, Philippians 1:27 reads, "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ." What do you think of when you hear the word *conversation*? No doubt, what comes to mind is how we communicate, or speak, to other people. But the Greek word used here in Philippians has to do with conduct, behavior, or lifestyle, which certainly includes how we speak to others, but is much broader. The New International Version translates this verse as follows: "Whatever happens, conduct

yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” The word *conversation* in the 1600s had the broader meaning of conduct or behavior, but now is restricted to verbal communication. So an inherent danger in using older translations is misunderstanding.

Even though there were earlier attempts at translating parts of the Bible into the English language, the first complete translation was overseen by John Wycliffe. He was a first-rate scholar and pastor who was critical of the state of the Church and the clergy in England and longed for revival among Christians there. For this to happen, they needed the Bible in their own language. The Wycliffe translation was not based on the original Hebrew and Greek texts, since they were simply not available at the time. Rather, it was based on the Latin Vulgate (meaning “vulgar” or “common”).

This was an immensely important translation produced by Saint Jerome in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. It was the commonly used Bible for nearly one thousand years, and is still, as it was in Wycliffe’s day, the official version used by the Roman Catholic Church. The Wycliffe Bible, then, is a translation based on a translation, which is less than ideal. It was published in the 1380s and immediately banned by the church authorities, not because it was in English, but because Wycliffe was considered to be a heretic due to his criticism of the Church and clergy.

The first English translation of the Bible to be based on the original Hebrew and Greek text was the work of William Tyndale. Like Wycliffe, he was an accomplished scholar, critical of the Church and clergy, and much opposed for his views. As a result, he had to go to Germany to finish his translation of the New Testament, which he completed in 1525. He was able to have it printed in Germany and then smuggled back into England. He continued translating the Old Testament, but before he could complete it, he was arrested, found guilty of heresy, and executed in 1536. The influence of Tyndale’s work is clear in that around 90 percent of his translation continued into the King James Version and on into revisions of that version.

The work of finishing the translation of the Old Testament was carried on by a disciple of Tyndale, John Rogers, who wrote under the name Thomas Matthew. In 1537, one year after Tyndale’s death, Henry VIII authorized an English translation of the Bible to be printed in England. That version was the work of Tyndale and Matthew, and was the first Bible in Modern English.

Other English translations came along in the tradition of Tyndale's work (e.g., the Great Bible, the Geneva Bible, the Bishop's Bible), but the most influential was the Authorized Version of 1611, better known as the King James Version, named for James I who authorized it. It was the first English translation to be produced by a team of noteworthy scholars. They also had the advantage of significant advances in scholarship, making it the most reliable English translation to date. It quickly became the Standard English version for the next three centuries and had a profound influence on the English language itself.

The twentieth century produced an explosion of new English translations. Some of the more well-known were intentional revisions of the King James Bible. For example, the Revised Version (1885) was created in England, and the American Standard Version (1901) and the New King James Version (1982) were created in the United States. Later translations were revisions of these revisions, such as the Revised Standard Version (1952) and the New Revised Standard Version (1989), as well as the New American Standard Version (1971) and its updated edition (1995). One of the newer translations, the English Standard Version (2001), seems to be a more evangelical alternative to the New Revised Standard Version.

Some modern versions are intentional "fresh starts," as opposed to revisions of previous translations, such as the New English Bible (1970, more non-evangelical), the New International Version (1978, more evangelical, and subsequent updates in 1984 and 2011), *God's Word Translation* (1995, evangelical), and the New English Translation (the NET Bible, 2001, evangelical). The twentieth century also introduced a new category of translations: the paraphrase. These sound very fresh and new. Examples include the New Testament in Modern English (also known as the J. B. Phillips Version, 1958, revised 1972), the Berkeley Version (1959), *The Living Bible* (1971), and *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (2002).

FUN FACT

In the early sixteenth century, Bishop Tunstall hated William Tyndale's New Testament so much that he paid someone to purchase copies to destroy them. What he did not know was that this individual was a friend of William Tyndale, and he used the money Tunstall gave him to finance the printing of more copies. For every copy that was paid for and destroyed by Tunstall, four more were produced.

FUN FACT 2

“Wycliffe missionaries don’t evangelize, teach theology, hold Bible study or start churches. They give (preliterate people) a written language,” Edwards said. “They teach them to read and write in their mother tongue.” The missionaries develop alphabets. They create reading primers. They translate the Bible.

About 2,200 languages remain without a Bible today. About 350 million people, mostly in India, China, sub-Saharan Africa and Papua New Guinea, speak only these languages. Working on this “to-do” list are about 6,600 career and short-term missionaries with training in the Bible and linguistics.

They are following the New Testament directive of Jesus in the Book of Matthew: *“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded of you.”*