

A Brief History of the Bible in English: Translations before *The King James Authorized Version*

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Introduction

The Authorized King James Bible is considered the first official or authorized translation of the Christian Bible into the English language. It is important to note, however, that although the Authorized Version was the first complete version of the Bible, there also existed many earlier translations or versions of this text in English. The committee of scholars who compiled The Authorized King James Bible expressed their intentions as follows:

Truly (good Christian Reader) we never thought from the beginning, that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one; ... but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one. (Bruce, 1970, p. 101)

These scholars referred to earlier translations to assist them in their work. In light of this point, there are many avenues for discussion and investigation relating to the subject of early biblical translation in English. Those versions of the English Bible that went before The Authorized King James version illustrate the process of translation itself, a process that has a traceable yet complicated ancestry worthy of further study.

A History of Translations

The earliest forms of translation of parts of the Christian Bible originated from the oral tradition. Historical accounts describe the efforts of a poet by the name of Caedmon, an illiterate herdsman who had been taught by Celtic scholars at a monastery in Whitby in the Northern region of England. Caedmon lived during the middle of the seventh century, approximately 650 A.D., and created verses on a “variety of Biblical subjects from the creation of the world to the spread of the early church” (Price, 1956, p. 225). He is said to have translated many

Biblical stories into his own language using alliterative verse. Caedmon did not in fact document his translation of these Biblical texts in any written form. Nonetheless, his poems in song represent a principal effort towards translation (Price, 1956). Furthermore, these same Anglo-Saxon poems recounting stories from Genesis, Exodus, Daniel, and Judith were written down after Caedmon’s time although their authorship remains unknown. Another example of the translation of Bible stories into oral form in England is found in the work of Adhelm, an abbot of Malmesbury and later bishop of Sherborne. Like Caedmon, Adhelm sought a practical way to captivate the attention of his Christian community. May (1965) explained:

It is said that when the peasantry did not care for his sermons, he attracted his audience by standing in the garb of a minstrel upon a bridge over which the people had to pass singing to them what they would not listen to in sermon form. (p. 15)

Adhelm made a translation of the Psalms into the Anglo-Saxon dialect of his region near the year 700 for this very purpose. Both Caedmon and Adhelm are prime illustrations of the beginnings of English translations of the Christian scripture. The contributions of early translators such as Caedmon and Adhelm were crucial precursors to the more literary endeavors that were to follow. For several centuries the poetic form of alliterative verse was one of the few ways, if not the only way, to teach the Christian scripture to the common people. Legends of these two influential figures in history are recounted by Bede, who called them the “shining light of learning in Western Europe” (May, 1965, p. 15). Although Bede’s major contributions were written in Latin, this monk played an important role in the process of

translation in English. Concerned for the spiritual welfare of his countrymen, Bede translated selected parts of the New Testament around the year 735 A.D. (Bruce, 1970, p. 6). Bede promoted the translation of the scripture into English for priests and monks who served the Church but had a less than perfect mastery of the Latin language. The life and works of Bede helped form a strong foundation of Christian writings in English based on a history and culture that was slowly beginning to form a unique sense of nationhood.

The transition from Latin to English in written form was first documented in the use of glosses made to accompany the Latin Bible. In these glosses, the English translation was written in between the lines of the Old Latin text in order to supplement understanding of the text itself (Robinson, 1940, p. 140). This translation, more akin to a paraphrase than a direct translation, was intended to assist the reader with the Latin text without necessarily replacing the Latin text itself. These brief translations were somewhat “crudely noted down” and not “intended for the general reader but for the less learned of the clergy” (Butterworth, 1971, p. 23). The interlinear translations (i.e., translation is written in between the lines of the original text), were mostly of the Gospels and the Psalms because of their regular use in church services (Robinson, 1940, p. 130). Price (1956) told of a priest named Aldred who, in about 950 A.D., prepared and wrote between the lines of the Lindisfarne Gospels which had been brought to England in 669. The text is known by three different names: the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Book of Durham,” and the Gospels of St. Cuthbert (Price, 1956, p. 228). This interlinear translation written in the Northumbrian dialect is one of the earliest known versions of the Gospels in the beginnings of what we now know as English. Another important interlineated copy which followed slightly after the Lindisfarne Gospels was the Rushworth Gospels, originating from Yorkshire. The Book of Mark, The Book of Luke, and The Book of John are believed to

be taken from the earlier manuscript, however, the Book of Matthew is written in a different dialect. This additional dialect is thought to be Mercian and it was translated by a priest named Farman (Bruce, 170, p. 8). Some of these earliest translations of the Gospels remain today.

Dating near the period of the creation and use of interlinear glosses is the first collected translation of the four Gospels which dates from about the year 1000 A.D. as the first extant independent Old English version. This version is known as The West Saxon Gospels, written in the West-Saxon dialect (Bruce, 1970, p. 8). The Benedictine Renaissance of Southern England at the end of the classical Anglo-Saxon period is thought to be a major influence in the creation of the West-Saxon Gospels towards the end of the tenth century (Partridge, 1973, p. 20). Of this version, seven manuscripts have survived dating from several different times in history and in several different variations (Butterworth, 1971). These are the only manuscripts to show any evidence of having been “regarded in their own day as anything like a standard version” (Butterworth, 1971, p. 27). Copies of these Gospels were being written up until the year 1150. These different early versions of the Gospels are evidence of the fact that different scholars and religious individuals would make their own translations of the texts according to their needs and abilities. This explains the various editions, dialects, and books that were translated throughout the time period and why there was no immediate need for a standard version nor was there a standard yet in mind.

In the fourteenth century, John Wycliffe initiated the translation of two bibles by the year 1384. The New Testament is estimated to have been finished in the year 1380 and the Old Testament two years later. This would be the first complete English Bible ever to be recorded (Butterworth, 1971). The earlier Wycliffe versions contained certain important and unique characteristics. The first manuscript, that is, the first edition of the Wycliffe Bible, was rather mechanical

and stilted in style and translation. It was written in the Midland dialect, a dialect “not representative of the central strand of development in English” (Price, 1956, p. 235). Vital to the understanding of this particular edition is the knowledge of how the translator approached the project with very literal rendering in mind. Wycliffe held a strong “conception of the Bible as the codification of God’s law” and believed that the verbal accuracy of the translation of this law was extremely important (p. 235). The following is an illustration of the literal translation approach undertaken by Wycliffe in the first complete Bible in the English language. In English, the first few lines of the Epistle to the Hebrews read as follows:

Manyfold and many maners usm tyme God spekinge to fadris in prophetis, at the last in these daies spak to sue in the sone: who he ordeynede eyr of alle thingis, by whome he made and the worldis. (Bruce, 1970, pp. 15-16)

In comparison, the Latin text from the same letter of the Epistles to the Hebrews reads:

Multifariam multisque modis olim Deus loquens patribus in prophetis, nouissime diebus istis locutus est nobis in filio: quem constituit heredem uniuersorum, per quem fecit et saecula. (p. 16)

The two translations correspond almost exactly in terms of word order. As Bruce (1970) noted, in Wycliffe’s early translation, word order seems to supersede the importance of or need for a natural word-order in the English language. In the last clause of the excerpt, the translator models after the idiomatic Latin *et* before *saecula* although the *and* set before *the worldis* is actually unidiomatic in English (Bruce, 1970, p. 16). Another example concerning the issue of word order is the Latin “Deus loquens,” which is translated directly as “God spekinge.” However, once again, the literal equivalent is not necessarily the most appropriate translation since “English idiom very often prefers a subordinate clause to a

participial construction” as in *God, who ...spake* (Bruce, 1970, p. 16). Attention to idiomatic construction and word order would be an integral part of the revision of this first edition.

The second, revised edition of Wycliffe’s Bible exemplifies a sense of the native English idiom and thus is said to have made a “greater appeal to his fellow-countrymen than a word-for-word rendering of the Vulgate could make” (Bruce, 1970, p. 17). The edition is partly attributed to John Purvey, a scholar and close friend of Wycliffe himself. Purvey took responsibility for the translations after Wycliffe’s death under strict Church ruling of heretical writings. Referring to himself as a “simple creature” in his prologue, Purvey listed the critical steps taken in order to assure a worthy translation. First it was necessary to make “one Latin Bible some deal true,” and then to “study it anew, the texts with the gloss” (as cited in Price, 1956, p. 236). After this, it would be necessary to “counsel with old grammarians and old divines, of hard words and hard sentence, how they might best be understood and translated.” Finally, the fourth step according to Purvey was to “translate as clearly as he could to the sentence, and to have many good fellows and cunning at the correcting of the translation” (as cited in Bruce, 1970, p. 17). As Purvey indicates, what was most unique about this second version is the fact that scholars worked to retrace the Latin vulgate books in order to form one cohesive and whole manuscript from which to translate. These scholars found that “the common Latin Bibles have more need to be corrected (...) than hath the English Bible late translated” (p. 18). Clearly, the second translation or revision of Wycliffe’s Bible was made in an effort towards uniformity and consistency of language. This meant returning to older Latin texts and forming one dependable Latin Vulgate Bible from which to translate. Wycliffe’s manuscripts were in this way actually “translations of a translation, done into the half-formed and transitional dialect of the day” (Hamilton-Hoare, 1901, p. 99). Many Bible translations were to follow that

of Wycliffe's in the years to come, but Wycliffe's translation has indelibly stamped authorship in the current day Bible in several ways. Such expressions and phrasing as *strait gate, make whole, compass land and sea, son of perdition, and enter thou into the joy of the Lord* were, as Price (1956, p. 238) documents, introduced in the translation and have remained in the English Bible to this day. As a predecessor to the two revisions of Wycliffe's version, there appeared during the fifteenth century a new translation: the first printed New Testament in 1525.

William Tyndale's New Testament version was translated from the original Greek while the Old Testament Scriptures were translated from the original Hebrew. He utilized Erasmus's Greek and Latin New Testament, Luther's German translation of this document, and the Vulgate (Partridge, 1973). Tyndale purposely avoided Wycliffe's Bible since his goal was to focus on the use of more current English, one "uninfluenced by pre-Renaissance styles" (Partridge, 1973, p. 38). Reportedly, Tyndale was not concerned with retaining the important phrases and terminology but instead chose more free translations of the Greek into English. Partridge explained Tyndale's efforts as showing a conviction that the "Hebrew tongue agreeth a thousand times more with the English than with the Latin" (p. 37). Thus Tyndale sought to revisit the Aramaic origins behind the Greek translation (Price, 1973). Historians note the fact that the work of this scholar and translator would determine the character, form, and style of The Authorized Version, since in the Book of John alone, nine-tenths of Tyndale's translations were retained (Price, 1956, p. 251). These translations were important in that they were the first to translate the New Testament directly from Greek to English, hence the translator's description as the pioneer of translation. The Old Testament books were not all translated by Tyndale himself. In texts that he did have opportunity to translate, his style was described as "free, bold and idiomatic; he indulges to the limit his preference for translating the same original

word by a variety of English synonyms" (Bruce, 1970, p. 42). Such freedom of language can be seen in several noteworthy examples. In Genesis 3:4 the Serpent speaks to Eve saying: "Tush, ye shall not die" (Bruce, 1970, p. 42). Yet another example comes from Genesis 39 in which Tyndale wrote: "The Lorde was with Ioseph and he was a luckie felowe" (p. 42). Yet another example is cited from Exodus 15:4: The Pharaohs drowned in the Red Sea are referred to as "jolly captains." Tyndale's choice of creative synonyms was an active avoidance of monotonous and repetitious language. In 1 Corinthians 1:14 Tyndale wrote: "Were ye baptized in the name of Paul? I thanke God that I christened none of you," using the word "christen" as a substitution for "baptize" and thus interpreting and assigning interchangeable definitions of these words (Partridge, 1973, p. 51). Tyndale showed an apprehension of overusing trite clichéd language and expressions and instead used the resources of a fluid vocabulary in order to express the same intended message in a different manner. His translations were, in this respect, unique and particular to the given time period and language styles. This fact would cause a later need to revise this translation once more to appeal to different readers and audiences.

Following the work of Tyndale, Miles Coverdale began a translation a year after Henry VIII had broken away from Rome and the Pope. The translation was completed in 1535. Partridge (1973) states that four of the six parts of Coverdale's version of the Bible were from earlier sources. For the translation of the other two, it is believed that Coverdale translated these sections out of his own literary skill and resource. This translator's style and approach to translation showed "temperance and chastity in the language, a spirit of piety" as opposed to some of the work of Tyndale (Partridge, 1973, p. 62). This moderate approach was called for precisely at this point in history in the now Anglican Church. Coverdale's version of the Bible, however, had not been given the royal license by Henry VIII. This honor was

to be assigned to the author of the Great Bible, Thomas Matthew, Chamberlain of Cochester, although the real editor was actually John Rogers of London (Partridge, 1973, p. 70). The Great Bible was first printed in 1539, and was actually a revision of Matthew's version of the Bible, which was in turn Coverdale's revision of Tyndale's version of the Bible. In other words, the licensed Bible at that time had been revised by several different translators previously. From Tyndale's Pentateuch and New Testament translation, Coverdale issued more conservative changes and locutions. The name the Great Bible attributed to the Bible's physical size. Several different revisions of the Great Bible came about; these were reviewed and adapted according to the Anglican Church's need. Partridge (1973) noted that Coverdale's influence on the revisions involved several principles of translation, such as avoiding words of a contentious nature, eliminating constructions that tended to confuse or obscure meaning, and implementing the use of Tyndale's work whenever the translations were superior to his own. For example, he used *elders* in the place of *Ancients* in an earlier version and *hye Prestes* to mean *cheefe Priestes* (Partridge, 1973, p. 72). The history of the Great Bible in England is somewhat encrypted in that there were at least seven editions published between July 1540 and December 1541 (Bruce, 1970, p. 70). The intention was for this version to be used in the churches throughout England.

At this point the ancestry of the English Bible evolves into what some linguists and historians have termed the Trinity of Bibles between the years 1557 and 1609: the Geneva Bible, the Bishops' Bible, and the Douai-Rheims Bible. The Geneva Bible, published in 1560, was a thorough revision of the Great Bible and of the books which Tyndale had not translated himself. The translators expressed the desire to restore the integrity of the original Greek and Hebrew of the New Testament and the Old Testament: "We have in many places reserved the Hebrew phrases, notwithstanding that they may seem somewhat hard

in their ears that are not well practiced and also delight in the sweet sounding phrases of the holy scriptures" (Bruce, 1970, p. 89). William Whittingham and other Calvinistic scholars were responsible for the Geneva Bible's famous notes and commentaries on the scriptural text. As a general rule, this version/translation attempted a more "idiomatic and vigorous style" like that of Tyndale's earlier work (Partridge, 1973, p. 76). The translation was received favorably because of its quarto size (a more portable size) and its use of roman type, verse division and italicized words (Partridge, 1973, p. 76). The Anglican Church embraced this particular edition because of its clear removal from the Vulgate tradition although perhaps it was too much to the opposite extreme for the English Church. On account of its Calvinistic and Puritanical bias, especially in its marginal notes, the Geneva Bible was never officially adopted by the Church of England, but its thorough scholarship was generally conceded. In addition to this, its plainness of language was appealing to the common people (Butterworth, 1970, p. 165). It was quoted in many literary works of the time. Shakespeare quoted from forty-two books of the Bible and preferred to use the Geneva version in his major plays (p. 77). This edition serves as a close predictor of the King James Bible. In a brief study of Deuteronomy 32:8-10, Butterworth (1971) compared several versions of the same scripture focusing on six places where the King James Bible followed the Geneva Bible, and preferred an earlier translation over the Geneva translation in only one instance. The Geneva Bible had many and varied readers. Following the first version, there were two other revisions in 1562 and in 1570, but these did not make any substantial alterations from the first.

As a representative of the Anglican Church, the Bishop's Bible was published in October 1568 and was a conglomerate of many versions. The revision was called for by Queen Elizabeth to come up with an English Bible of more "Anglican character," unlike the Great Bible and the Geneva Bible (Bobrick, 2001, p. 181). The Great Bible

was used as a basis, deviations from it were made only when the translation was not accurate to the original. Thus, it took the place of the Great Bible as used in English churches, although neither of these were actually proclaimed the official or authorized version of the Church of England (Bruce, 1970, p. 94). Under the leadership of the Archbishop Matthew Parker, in 1564, the group of selected bishops and archbishops were to translate assigned sections of the scripture. Their instructions were

to mark 'genealogies' and other 'unedifying' passages so that readers could skip them if they wished; to amend 'with more convenient terms and phrases' any passage thought to give offense through 'lightness or obscenity'; and not to mar their margins with 'bitter notes.' (Bobrick, 2001, p. 182)

Some of its renderings remain intact in modern day versions of scripture translations such as, "the voice of one crying in the wilderness (Matthew 3:3) and "overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21) (Bobrick, 2001, p. 183). Other translations particular to this version did not prove to be improvements from the Great Bible. For example, instead of "Cast thy bread upon the waters" the bishops wrote "Lay thy bread upon wet faces," a curious phrasing to say the least (Bobrick, 2001, p. 183). The bishops however, did not meet regularly to confer or compare their work with their colleagues (Bobrick, 2001). Hence, the Bishop's Bible lacked uniformity seeing that at least sixteen translators collaborate on this project.

In the Catholic response to fervent translation, the Douai-Rheims Bible was finished and published. The New Testament was completed in 1582 and the Old Testament in 1609-10 (Bruce, 1970, p. 114). This translation of the Bible in English was intended for Catholic readers as a "sincere Catholic translation" (Butterworth, 1971, p. 192; Bobrick, 2001, p. 189). Its origin dates back to the work of Bishop Richard Challoner in 1749. Bishop Challoner had translated from the earlier work of Gregory Martin, a member of the

English College at Douai in northern France, a century and a half earlier (Bruce, 1970, p. 113). The Douai-Rheims Bible used the old approved Latin rather than the Greek text and translated scripture word for word for fear that the translators might "mollify the speeches or phrases" (p. 189). In passages where the Douai-Rheims Bible differed from other more common renderings, the translators explain: "We add the Latin word sometimes in the margin, when either we cannot fully express it, or when the reader might think it cannot be as we translate" (Bruce, 1970, p. 115). This was the most extraordinary feature of the work. Butterworth (1971) explains that it used the device of "carrying over into the English version a variety of theological terms without really translating them" (p. 115). Indeed, they hoped that English readers would grow accustomed to Latin and Greek terms being transliterated rather than translated" (Butterworth, 1971, p. 194). In this way this version had an identifiable influence on the future King James Bible in terms of vocabulary (Butterworth, 1971).

Conclusion

In summary, from oral tradition to the first completed English Bible in the 17th century A.D. there are a number of important contributions and changes to consider carefully. This brief review serves as an overview of the transitory movement of scripture translation during the given time frame. To focus singly on the King James Authorized Version of 1611 would deter from fully understanding the efforts of hundreds of scholars prior to that date in history. Each of the translations had a unique approach, style and purpose. As the leadership, culture, and language evolved, so would the translated versions of the Bible itself. Clearly, each version, each translation was a progression towards and witness to the constant changing and adaptation of language. It is interesting to note that each translator on the timeline of Bible translation sought to make a principal and final version of the English Bible – one that would be used by all English people. Perhaps, what these linguists and

theologians did not quite realize was the reality that as language is in constant flux and movement, so in turn is its literature. The English Bible changed as its people did,

and for this reason, even today there remains an overabundant selection of translations of this Christian sacred scripture.

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