

A Primer on Bible Translations

Part One

By David F. Sims

The best way to read God's Word is in the original languages (common Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic) in which the books of the Bible were penned. But since most of us can't read these ancient languages, we depend on translations in the language(s) we can read. Using translations means we put a degree of faith into the people who do the translating. With so many translations out there, how do you know which ones you can trust and which ones to avoid? To help you make an informed decision, or simply to amuse you with some facts, here is a brief history of English Bible translations.

Before we go into specific translations, let me insert a note here about the major churches of the 1500s, which is when major English translations began to appear. The Roman Catholic Church was a great power of course. But the Church of England (Anglican Church) was also powerful, largely represented by King Henry VIII, who desired a divorce that the Pope would not grant. Furthermore, Martin Luther launched the Reformation movement in 1517, which paved the way for Calvinism and the Protestant denominations. So in the 16th century, these three great powers offered English translations of the Bible that serve as the forerunners of modern translations.

Greek Compilation: Textus Receptus

One early scholar of note was Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus. In 1512 he began collecting Latin Vulgate manuscripts to create a more refined Latin translation of the New Testament. He also used the Greek manuscripts available to him to perfect his Latin translation. From his small collection of Greek manuscripts (just 6 manuscripts, to be exact, all dated from the 12th century or later), he then produced his first complete Greek New Testament in 1516. His second edition of the Greek (published in 1519) included a 7th Greek manuscript which was also from the 12th century. His third edition was published in 1522. The revised version of his Greek text today is known as the Textus Receptus.

Amazingly, Erasmus' 7 Greek resources have been confirmed accurate in that they have a 95% match with manuscripts discovered since then! (There are exactly 5,309 ancient Greek manuscripts today.) The Textus Receptus is also confirmed to accurately match earlier translations in other languages: the Peshitta (AD 150), the Italic (AD 157), the Gallic (AD 177), and many more. The Textus Receptus served as the standard Greek text from which English translations were made in the 16th century. (Later I'll cover the standard Greek text used by modern translations.)

Early English Translations

The first known complete English translation was by the Oxford scholar John Wycliffe in 1382. Wycliffe stood with the common people against the oppressive Roman Catholic Church, which demanded money from the English believers. One way he resisted the Pope was by creating an English translation that the common people could read. Wycliffe's version was translated from the Latin Vulgate, not from the original languages of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

William Tyndale went one step better by translating from the original languages. He used Erasmus' Textus Receptus as the source of the New Testament. He finished the Greek translation to English in 1525, and then the Hebrew/Aramaic translation to English in 1534. Tyndale believed the Bible should be readable by common people, and written in their own common language.

Miles Coverdale, a friend of Tyndale, revised Tyndale's translation and gained approval from the King Henry VIII to distribute it in 1539. It was called the Great Bible, and was the first translation endorsed by crown to be read in all English churches.

The Geneva Bible, published by Protestant English scholars in Switzerland in 1560, was the most popular Bible of the time. It featured pictures and commentary by the translators. It was the first English translation to print each verse as a stand-alone paragraph, and the first to print in italics those words not specifically represented in the original languages. This was the Bible from which Shakespeare quoted, and the Bible that crossed the ocean with the Pilgrims on the Mayflower. But the Geneva Bible was not popular with Anglican Church leaders...its commentary notes supported Calvinism and the Reformation.

In response to the growing popularity of the Protestant translation known as the Geneva Bible, the Anglican Church produced its own translation known as the Bishops' Bible. It was a revision of the Great Bible and was published in 1568.

The Roman Catholic Church also noted the popularity of the Geneva Bible. So in 1582, the first official Roman Catholic English translation was born: the Rheims-Douai version. However, it was translated from the Latin Vulgate, not from the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek.

The King James Version

In 1604, King James of England summoned scholars from many religious groups to discuss tolerance at the Hampton Court Conference. During this conference, a new translation was suggested. King James laid out the main requirements for this new translation, one of which was there was to be no commentary (as in the Geneva Bible) except as necessary for translation. They chose 48 Greek and Hebrew scholars to accomplish the work. They did not create a brand new translation of the New Testament directly from the original Greek. Instead, they revised the 1602 edition of the Bishops' Bible, which itself was a revision of the Great Bible, which was a revision of Tyndale's translation, which was based on the Greek compilation (Textus Receptus) by Erasmus. More than 80% of Tyndale's original translation is preserved in the KJV. The first KJV was published in 1611.

In the next few articles, I'll provide historical notes on popular translations of the 20th century, including the New King James Version, the American Standard Version, the Revised Standard Version, and the New International Version. I'll also cover newer Greek compilations, including the Westcott & Hort Critical text, the Nestle-Aland Novum Testamentum Graece, and the United Bible Society's Greek compilation. I also cover the most recent translations, including the NASB Update, the English Standard Version, and some denominational translations that are growing in popularity.

The information contained in this article is gleaned from several readily available sources, including books and the internet. If you doubt the accuracy of what I've written, I urge you to dig a little deeper by researching these matters for yourself, starting at your local library. If you find an error in what I've written, please bring it to my attention so that I might be better illuminated.