

# **History of the Received Text**

**The History of the Bible in English**  
*Study Pak 7B*

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## The History of the Bible in English

### Study Pak 7B

"... so that every man might read in the tongue wherein he was born the wonderful works of God."  
~~ John Wycliffe ~~

#### I. PARTIAL VERSIONS OF THE SCRIPTURES IN OLD ENGLISH

There are at least ten partial translations of the Scriptures into Old English. These translators included a stable-hand, two bishops, one archbishop, two monks, two priests, a hermit and a king.

The first was a stable-hand named Caedmon (AD 680). He did not translate the Scriptures into writing, but turned Genesis, Exodus and a part of Daniel into long songs in English.

The second known translator was Aldhelm (640-709), a bishop in southern England. In 705, he translated the Psalms into Old English. Another English bishop, Egbert translated the gospels into Old English in 705.

The historian and theologian Bede is often called the Venerable Bede and the Father of English History. Among his many accomplishments was a translation of the Gospel of John into Old English. H.S. Miller tells this story of how he finished his translation work:

"All the day before Ascension Day, 735, the good old monk of Jarrow-on-the-Tyne, North England, had been dictating his translation, for he said, 'I do not want my boys to read a lie, or to work to no purpose after I am gone.' The next day, he was very weak, and suffered much. His scribe said, 'Dear master, there is yet one chapter to do, but it seems very hard for you to speak.' 'Nay, it is easy, take up thy pen and write quickly.' In blinding tears the scribe wrote on. 'And now, father there is just one sentence more.' Bede dictated it and said, 'Write quickly.' 'It is finished, master.' 'Ay, it is finished!' echoed the dying saint, and with the Gloria chant upon his lips, he passed to the great Master whom he had loved and served so long. His name will live always in the story of the English Bible and the History and Literature of England." (*General Biblical Introduction*, p. 320)

Alfred the Great (King of England from 871-901) worked hard to put many books into the English language. He personally translated the Ten Commandments, Psalms and the Gospels into Old English. He also translated parts of the Old Testament Law and proclaimed these laws and the Ten Commandments as part of the law of England. He is

quoted as saying, "that all the freeborn youth of his kingdom should employ themselves on nothing \_\_\_\_\_" (J. Patterson Smyth, *How We Got Our Bible*, p. 52). Winston Churchill credits Alfred with establishing "a common Christian England" (*The Birth of Britain*, p. 122).

Around 950 A.D., an English priest named Alfred wrote an Old-English paraphrase of the gospels between the lines of a Latin text. This is known as the Lindisfarne Gospels. Around 1000 A.D., Aelfric (the Archbishop of Canterbury) translated the Gospels, the first seven books of the Old Testament, Esther, Job and Kings.

During the Norman rule of England, there were at least partial translations. In 1215, a monk named Orm translated the Gospels and Acts. In 1320, a parish priest named William translated the Psalms. In 1340, a hermit named Rolle translated the Psalms.

These few rare portions of the Bible in English were owned by universities and monasteries. The common people rarely had access to them. The few Bibles available in England were in Latin. Only a very few of the English could read them.

## II. THE WORK OF JOHN WYCLIFFE

John Wycliffe was born in Yorkshire, England around 1320 A.D. He became a professor of theology at Oxford University and also served at several churches. His lectures and classes were attended by large crowds. Wycliffe challenged the authority of the Pope in Rome, taught justification by faith and the priesthood of all believers. As a result he instituted and led a group of preachers who went throughout England preaching and teaching the people.

Because of his teaching \_\_\_\_\_, Wycliffe longed for all the English people to be able to read the Bible in their own language. The following statement of Wycliffe on the subject (as reported by Winston Churchill), "Christian men and women, old and young, should study fast in the New Testament, for it is full authority, and open to the understanding of simple men, as to the points that be most needful to salvation ..."

Wycliffe and several associates spent 15 years translating the Scriptures from the Latin Vulgate into English. Despite harsh opposition from church leadership, hand-written copies of this translation spread rapidly throughout England. Historian J.H. Merle d' Aubigne described the influence of Wycliffe's translation this way:

"The reception of the work surpassed all expectations. The Holy Scriptures exercised a reviving influence over men's hearts; minds were enlightened; souls were converted; the voices of the "poor priests" had done little in comparison with this voice; something new had welcomed this new era with acclamations; the highborn curiously examined the unknown book; and even Anne of Bohemia, wife of Richard II, prompted perhaps by the popular interest, began to read the

Gospels diligently. She did more than this: she made them known to Thomas Arundel, archbishop of York and chancellor, and afterwards a persecutor, but who now, struck by the sight of a foreign lady - of a queen, humbly devoting her leisure to the study of 'such virtuous books,' commenced reading them himself, and rebuked the prelates who neglected this holy pursuit. 'You could not meet two persons on the highway,' says a contemporary writer, '\_\_\_\_\_ ' (J.H. Merle d' Aubigne, *The Reformation in England*, p. 90).

To produce one copy of the Wycliffe Bible took \_\_\_\_\_. It took an amount slightly greater than a year's salary for an average English workman to purchase a copy of the Wycliffe Bible.

For 145 years, the Wycliffe translation was the only complete translation into English. It changed a nation. Forty years after his death, the ecclesiastical authorities had his body dug up and burnt at the stake. In 1408, the Catholic Church forbid any new translations.

Wycliffe's translation was in Middle English. It would serve the English people well until the language changed.

### III. THE MINISTRY OF WILLIAM TYNDALE

In 1450, Johan Gutenberg of Germany invented the printing press. In 1454, he invented moveable type. These inventions opened up great new possibilities for the distribution of God's Word.

William Tyndale was born around 1484. Tyndale attended Oxford and Cambridge where he became skilled in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Italian, Spanish and Dutch. He then attended Cambridge where he studied Greek under Erasmus. Erasmus taught him the importance of translating the Scriptures into the common languages so that everyone could read them.

As Tyndale began to promote the idea of a new Bible translation in English, he began to experience opposition from church leadership. One Roman Catholic priest said to him, "We were better without God's law than without the Pope's." Tyndale replied, "I defy the Pope and all his laws; if God spares my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough \_\_\_\_\_."

Tyndale moved to London and took a pastorate there. He began to seek the sanction and protection of the Lord Bishop of London for his translation project. The law forbidding private translation work had been repeated many times but it was legal to do translation work if authorized by the church. Tyndale continued to do translation work but no printer would dare print it. Tyndale chose to move to the European continent to gain a chance to have his translation printed.

Tyndale traveled to Germany and met with Martin Luther. He settled in Cologne, Germany and continued his translation work. He used Erasmus' Greek New Testament, the Latin Vulgate and Luther's German translation as the basis for his English New Testament.

Printing had already started on an order of 3,000 New Testaments when the city council ordered the printers to stop printing. Tyndale and his assistant fled to the German city of Worms. Soon 10,000 New Testaments were in print. Thousands were smuggled into England. They were hidden in bales of cloth, salt-barrels, sacks of flour and corn and in every way possible. There was a ready market for copies of the Bible in English. The English Church began to buy copies for the purpose of burning them. A new printing was made and soon another 18,000 were on their way to England.

The English Church sought to buy up these New Testaments. A friend of Tyndale's named Packington made arrangements to buy them from Tyndale and sell them to the Bishop of London. He reasoned that the Bishop would get them and burn them anyway. This way Tyndale would at least have money to print more. Thousands of copies of Tyndale's New Testament were smuggled into England. Strict laws against reading the Tyndale Bible were issued in England and Bible distributors and independent preachers were persecuted. Still new copies of the New Testament were produced and appeared all over England.

Tyndale began to roam Germany, trying to avoid agents sent to arrest or kill him. He translated several books of the Old Testament.

A secret agent of the Roman Catholic Church, Henry Philips, pretended to be Tyndale's friend. He made arrangements to go to dinner with Tyndale but in reality he led him to several officers who seized him.

Tyndale was put on trial, convicted and sentenced to death. On Friday, October 6, 1536 he was burned alive. His last words were, “\_\_\_\_\_.”

The Old Testament translation was finished by others. Forty editions were published and by A.D. 1566, 50,000 copies of the New Testament were printed.

Tyndale is remembered as “\_\_\_\_\_.”

#### **IV. A RAPID SUCCESSION OF NEW ENGLISH BIBLES**

##### **A. The Coverdale Bible.**

Nine new English versions of the Bible were released during the next 85 years. The Coverdale Bible was released in 1535, under a license granted by Henry the VIII. Coverdale was an evangelical Church of England preacher. He had been Tyndale's friend and proofreader. In 1535, he was asked by the Church of

England to make an English translation of the Scriptures. He used the Itala Bible (Old Latin), Luther's German translation, the new Swiss Bible and Tyndale's translation as his basic sources. He was not familiar with either Greek or Hebrew.

The Coverdale Bible was largely a reproduction of Tyndale's Bible.

B. The Matthews Bible.

The Matthews Bible was released in 1537. The primary editor was John Rogers. He became acquainted with William Tyndale in Holland. He produced an edition of the Bible under the name Thomas Matthews. He used Tyndale's New Testament. He took some books of the Old Testament from Tyndale's translation and some from Coverdale's. The King authorized the sale of this new English edition of the Scriptures (probably without realizing that much of it was \_\_\_\_\_).

J.H. Merle d' Aubigne described the influence of the Matthews Bible:

"In many places, there were meetings for reading; poor people clubbed their savings together and purchased a Bible, and then in some remote corner of the church, they modestly formed a circle, and read the Holy Book between them. A crowd of men, women and young folks, disgusted with the barren pomp of the altars, and with the worship of dumb images, would gather round them to taste the precious promises of the Gospel. God Himself spoke under the arched roofs of those old chapels or time-worn cathedrals, where for generations nothing had been heard but masses and litanies. The people wished, instead of the noisy chants of the priest, to hear the voice of Jesus Christ, of Paul and of John, of Peter and of James. The Christianity of the apostles reappeared in the Church". (Aubigne, *The Reformation in England*, p. 90)

John Rogers was eventually burnt at the stake by "Bloody Mary," during her attempt to restore Roman Catholicism in England.

Eleven years after Tyndale's New Testament was publicly burned, one year after he was burned at the stake, his New Testament and parts of his Old Testament \_\_\_\_\_.

C. The Great Bible.

The Great Bible was released in 1539. Miles Coverdale was asked by the King of England to prepare another edition of the Bible. He took the Old Testament from the Matthews Bible and the New Testament from Tyndale's. Both were slightly revised after consulting the work of Erasmus. It was called the Great Bible because of its size. Its pages were 13 1/4 inches by 7 1/2 inches. Henry VIII

licensed this new Bible, decreed that it be read publicly, ordered every church to have a copy and make it available to be read to the people. \_\_\_\_\_

D. The Geneva Bible.

The Geneva Bible was released in 1560 (the New Testament in 1557). In 1543, Henry VIII had given into pressure and agreed to limit the English Bible to persons considered "highly - educated" by the Church. Three years later, Coverdale's Bible was outlawed and hundreds of Tyndale's and Coverdale's Bibles were publicly burnt. In 1554, Mary became Queen of England and began to persecute all the non-Catholic elements of English religion. Bibles in English were outlawed and hundreds of people were put to death.

The Geneva Bible was edited by William Whittingham, (an Englishman related to John Calvin by marriage). He was aided by many able scholars meeting in Geneva, Switzerland. Many were exiles from England. Members of the translation committee included Miles Coverdale, John Knox, Theodore Beza and John Foxe (author of "*Foxe's Book of Martyrs*"). They studied Greek and Hebrew manuscripts and revised the Great Bible. It was dedicated to Queen Elizabeth (who had succeeded her sister Mary as Queen). It was the first English translation \_\_\_\_\_ Queen Elizabeth gave consent to its distribution and over 160 editions were released between 1560 and 1644.

The importance of the Geneva Bible has been described this way, "The Scriptures had always been chained to reading stands in churches and libraries. But the Geneva Bible quickly became 'the people's Book.' It was used at home by the English common folk; and it became the backbone of the newly developing Puritanism, a movement to simplify or 'purify' the liturgy, vestments, and government of the Church of England. Some Puritan shopkeepers even kept an open copy of the Geneva Bible on their counters for all to see."

E. The Bishops Bible.

The Bishops Bible was released in 1568. Since the Geneva Bible was being recognized as the Bible of the common man, some of the church leaders felt that the clergy should have its own Bible. A committee of nine bishops was formed to undertake a revision. The Great Bible was compared with some Greek, Hebrew and Latin manuscripts. Many maps, lists and tables were added. This edition was issued in 40 printings from 1568 to 1606. It was the least popular of the English Bibles with the people.

F. The Rheims Douay Translation.

The Rheims Douay Bible was released in 1609 (the New Testament in 1582). It was produced by professors from a college for English Roman Catholics in France. This was primarily a translation of the Latin Vulgate. The Rheims Douay Bible has been re-translated several times but it has never found acceptance outside of Roman Catholic circles.

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