

“A History of the English Bible”

Various passages

Tonight’s session will conclude our series on how we got the Bible. Over these past eight weeks, we have considered how God’s Word was given by **revelation**. God revealed His Word to man, which means that we didn’t stumble upon the knowledge of God. He chose to reveal Himself. We also considered how His Word was given through **inspiration**. God moved the authors of Scripture to write as His Spirit directed. We spent some time looking at the subject of **canonization**, which simply refers to the list of books that make up authoritative Scripture. Beginning last week and concluding tonight, we’ve considered the field of **translation**. How did the Bible make it from those original manuscripts all the way to me?

The goal of translation is to transfer the meaning of a text from one language (source) to another language (receptor).

The Bible wasn’t originally written in English; when it was originally written, the English language didn’t even exist! The original languages of the Bible were Hebrew and Greek. Thus, if you own a Bible in English, it is because someone translated the text of Scripture for you. Two things to keep in mind:

- Transmission means that God’s Word has been sufficiently **preserved** for future generations.
- Translation means that God’s Word can be sufficiently **understood** by future generations.

In consideration of the subject of God’s Word in English, we need to go back in time about 1,300 years...

Nearly seven centuries after the Holy Spirit empowered the first disciples in Jerusalem, a cow-herding monk named Caedmon began singing the storyline of Scripture in English. Now, it wasn't the English that you and I presently speak, but it was a more ancient form of it known as Old English.

Caedmon would start with the creation of the world and sing his way through the Bible and tell the story of how God sent Christ into the world. The songs that Caedmon sang across the countryside of England would eventually mark the beginning of a determination to make the Scripture accessible in English.¹

Up until this time, the only officially recognized translation of Scripture was the Latin Vulgate that had been translated by Jerome in the late fourth century. In 382 AD, Jerome was commissioned by the Bishop of Rome to translate the Bible into Latin, and his translation became standard for the medieval Catholic Church.

Not many years after Caedmon started singing the storyline of Scripture, there was another monk who actually began translating Scripture into Old English. His name was Bede, and history refers to him as 'The Venerable Bede.' He was born in 672 AD and was an English Benedictine monk. He was widely regarded as perhaps the greatest of all Anglo-Saxon scholars.

Bede was bothered by the fact that many pastors didn't know enough Latin to be able to understand the Bible or to teach it to their people. At the very least, he wanted anyone whom the church ordained for ministry to know the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer in English, but he didn't stop there. Bede longed for pastors to be able to understand God's Word for themselves. Thus, he began translating parts of the Latin Vulgate into Old English. He kept himself devoted to this task all the way to his deathbed!

¹ Timothy Paul Jones, *How We Got the Bible* (Peabody, MA: Rose Publishing, 2015), 124.

It wasn't very long after Bede that in the late ninth century, Alfred—king of the West Saxons—was taking portions from the Old Testament and translating them into English prose. He even translated the first fifty psalms from Latin into Old English. Jones writes:

“He faced a dilemma then that translators of the Bible still face today. How tightly should a translation be tied to the original language? Should the translation be word for word or idea for idea? Alfred’s solution was simple, if not particularly helpful: ‘Sometimes I translated word for word, sometimes sense for sense.’”²

Nearly a century after Alfred the Great translated the psalms, an unknown English scholar translated the gospels from Latin into English. They are known as the ‘Wessex Gospels’ and date back to 990 AD.

Here’s a sample of a very familiar text:

Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum;
Si þin nama gehalgod
to becume þin rice
gewurpe ðin willa
on eorðan swa swa on heofonum.
urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us todæg
and forgyf us ure gyltas
swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum
and ne gelæd þu us on costnunge
ac alys us of yfele soþlice

The text is from Matthew 6 and contains the familiar Lord’s Prayer. Here is an example of a line by line translation of the Old English into our modern:

Father our thou that art in heavens
be thy name hallowed
come thy kingdom
be-done thy will

² Jones, 126.

on earth as in heavens
our daily bread give us today
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those-who-have-sinned-against-us
and not lead thou us into temptation
but deliver us from evil truly

English sure has changed a lot over the centuries, hasn't it? During this same time period, a scholar named Aelfric continued what Alfred the Great and others had done and helped turned the first seven books of the Old Testament into Old English. He placed a high value on not only translating the Scriptures from Latin into English, but also on preaching from the Scriptures in sermons.

All of this was done on a small scale. The vast majority of English-speaking people had never heard the Scriptures in a language they could understand. They had heard it only in Latin, and no one considered the possibility of providing ordinary people with access to the Bible.³

Timothy Paul Jones — *“These first small steps toward a complete English Bible lurched to a halt in 1066. That’s when Duke William of Normandy led the French-speaking Normans across the English Channel and defeated the English in the Battle of Hastings. As the Normans conquered England, French mingled with Old English, and a new dialect—known today as ‘Middle English’—emerged.”*⁴

It would be some 300 years before anyone would attempt to translate the Bible into the English language again!

In 1374, a man by the name of John Wycliffe became a pastor in an English hamlet known as Lutterworth. He sent out young men that he himself had

³ Jones, 126.

⁴ Ibid.

personally trained to teach the truths of Scripture in villages throughout England. He would provide them with sermon outlines and paraphrases of the Biblical text and encourage them to teach the common people in English.

Wycliffe said:

“Therefore, the doctrine should be not only in Latin but also in the common tongue.”⁵

He wasn't content to simply teach others in their common language. Instead, he became determined in his belief that the ordinary people of England should have access to the Word of God themselves in a language that could understand. He then took up the laborious work of translating the Latin Vulgate into their common English language.

The first edition of the Wycliffe Bible began to circulate in 1382. It was a rough word by word rendering of the Latin Vulgate into English. But for the first time since the birth of the English language, it was possible to read the entire Bible in English! Wycliffe had a team of men and women who were committed to the circulation of these texts, and they were known as the 'Lollards.'

Timothy Paul Jones — *“The Lollards didn't hand out Bibles to people, of course. That would have been far too expensive! This was the fourteenth century, and the printing press hadn't yet been invented. Each Wycliffe Bible was copied by hand and cost about six months' wages to produce. Even so, copies of these Bibles circulated widely. Today, more than 600 years later, 176 copies or partial copies of Wycliffe's New Testament survive; twenty of these are found in complete copies of the Wycliffe Bible.”⁶*

⁵ Dyson Hague, *The Life and Work of John Wycliffe* (London: Church Book, 1935), 94.

⁶ Jones, 129-130.

Wycliffe's 'Lollards' would meet secretly and learn the Scriptures in English. In addition to memorizing it, they would preach in public places and minister to the poor. This was not well received by leaders of the Catholic church, who felt that "Christ gave His Gospel to the clergy and the learned doctors of the Church so that they might give it to the laypeople. But this John Wycliffe translated the Gospel from Latin into English...by thus translating the Bible, made it common to all, even to women!"⁷

Wycliffe would be accused of heresy by church leaders, but nothing formally was ever carried out, though they tried.

Timothy Paul Jones — *"In 1384, Wycliffe suffered a stroke while celebrating the Lord's Supper. He died a few days later, still officially in good standing with the church. Twenty-four years after Wycliffe's death, the Archbishop of Canterbury and an assembly of English bishops forbade any translation of any biblical text into the English tongue or into any other tongue."*⁸

In 1415, Wycliffe's body was exhumed and his bones were burned and dumped in the river. Yet a spark had been lit that would ignite an inferno. A priest by the name of Jan Hus was someone "whose thinking was transformed when he read the words of Wycliffe for the first time."⁹

Jan Hus was greatly influenced by Wycliffe. He preached from the Scriptures and even viewed biblical preaching as the distinguishing characteristic of the true church. His views led to his condemnation by the church at the Council of Constance in 1414 where he was burned at the stake.

⁷ Jones, 130.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, 131.

I'm sure you have used the expression, "So-and-so's goose is cooked!" Well, it is an expression that comes right out of history. The name 'Hus' means goose. As the branches were lit beneath his feet, Jan Hus said to his accusers,

*"Today you will roast a lean goose, but a hundred years from now you will hear a swan sing, whom you will leave unroasted and no trap or net will catch him for you."*¹⁰

Little did he know then that 100 years from that moment, a young German monk would come across a book full of Hus' sermons and wonder why the church would have burned so great a man. That monk's name was Martin Luther, someone who would translate the New Testament into German and thereby launch the Protestant Reformation.

Between the days of Wycliff, Hus, and Luther, something happened "that made Luther's process of translation far superior to Wycliffe's."¹¹ Whereas Wycliffe had translated from Latin into English, Luther would translate from the original Greek.

How did he have such access?

A young Dutch priest by the name of Desiderius Erasmus had made it his goal to learn Greek so well that he would be able to use his knowledge and publish an improved Latin Bible. In 1516, he achieved his goal and produced the first published Greek New Testament. Also by that time, Johannes Gutenberg had developed the moveable metal-type printing press, which made mass printing possible for the very first time. These new realities set the stage for the publication of the New Testament in Greek. The second edition of Erasmus' Greek New Testament became the source text for Luther's German translation.

¹⁰ Thomas Fudge, *The Magnificent Ride* (Surrey: Ashgate, 1998), 1.

¹¹ Jones, 131.

The third edition of Erasmus' Greek NT was perhaps the most important. It was the tool that a man by the name of William Tyndall used to make the New Testament available to every common person in England.

After he graduated from Oxford University, William Tyndale began working toward his doctorate in theology, but became frustrated when he learned that his curriculum didn't include study of the Scriptures. His response was to lead a Bible study of his own. He went to Cambridge in 1517 and remained there until 1521. By the time he left Cambridge, William Tyndale was fluent in eight languages.¹² He vowed that he would make the boy behind the plow more well versed in Scripture than the pope himself! This became his driving passion.

Tyndale requested permission to translate the Greek New Testament into English, but the local bishop rejected his request. What did he do? He fled to the German provinces and began translating the Scriptures anyway.

Unlike any English translator before him, William Tyndale worked **directly** from the Greek and Hebrew texts. We're not talking about a translation from Latin; we're talking about a legitimate translation in English from the original languages.

He would smuggle copies of his translated New Testament into England.

Eventually, Tyndale would be tracked down by a bounty hunter and arrested by the authorities. He was condemned to burn at the stake in 1536. His last words were these: "Lord, open the king of England's eyes!"

Within one year after the martyrdom of William Tyndale, King Henry VIII had even sanctioned a version of the Bible in the English language. In 1539, he required a copy of "The Great Bible" to be purchased by every church in England.

¹² Jones, 135.

The next 70 years or so were quite tumultuous throughout England. After Henry VIII died, his son Edward became king in 1547 at the age of nine and reigned until his death at age 15. Upon Edward's death, the oldest daughter became the queen. Mary I, known in history as 'Bloody Mary' because of her vicious opposition to the Protestant Reformation in England. She vowed to reunite the Church of England with the Roman Catholic Church.

After her death, Mary's half sister Elizabeth I became queen and reversed the reestablishment of Roman Catholicism and set a new course for the Church of England. She was queen for the next 45 years. When she died in 1603, her cousin James VI of Scotland headed to London to be crowned as **King James I** of England.

One his immediate concerns was a petition that had been handed to him that was signed by 1,000 Puritan pastors. "From the perspective of these pastors, too many Roman Catholic practices still persisted in the Church of England. King James responded by inviting the Puritans to a conference in 1604 in London.¹³

The Puritan leaders had a number of requests, one of which was a call for a new translation of the Bible. Jones writes:

*"Forty-seven scholars—some from among the Puritans and some from those who were satisfied with the Church of England as it was—began working on this project. They translated the New Testament primarily from a text that had been adapted from the third edition of Erasmus' Greek New Testament—the same text that Tyndale had used to translate his New Testament. The new translation, published in 1611, became known as the 'King James Version.'"*¹⁴

¹³ Jones, 138.

¹⁴ Ibid, 139.

Listen—only **75 years** after William Tyndale had been burned at the stake for his work of putting the Bible into the hands of every English man, woman, and child, the King James Version was introduced and the rest is history.

The KJV went through various revisions and updates. The Revised Standard Version, the American Standard Version, the New International Version, and the English Standard Version have all followed in its footsteps.

Truly, we are blessed beyond measure to have the Bible in a common language we can understand and read for ourselves. And we owe it to those who paid the ultimate price for us to have a copy of our own.

Two things to keep in mind about translation:

- Scripture is **TIMELESS**
- Translations are **TEMPORARY**

The Word of God is unchanging; it always remains the same. However, as we have seen, human language changes over time. As long as language continues to change, there will always be a need for fresh translations that are true and accurate when compared to the original.