

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lesson 61

King James and the English Bible – Part One

What “Bible” do you use? The New International Version? New American Standard? Maybe the Good News Bible or The Message? The Jerusalem Bible? The Revised Standard, or the New Revised Standard? One can make a trip to a bookstore and find *many* different English translations of the Bible. Where did they all come from? Why do we have so many different ones? Which one is “right”? Which one is the “best” to use?

These questions are easy and natural for English speaking people to ask. The answers, however, are a little longer and a little more detailed than the questions! The story of the English Bible in its many forms and versions is a fascinating story that properly unfolds over the centuries of the Church. In fact, this subject alone is a good size book by itself. Here, however, it is Church History Literacy we are after, so we fold the subject up into a tidy two-week lesson!

We last studied Scripture from the perspective of the “canon” (see lessons 10-11). By that phrase, we mean the collection of books deemed authoritative and accepted by the church as holy writings from God. In other words, we last studied this subject from the perspective of “What books make up the Bible? Who made that determination? And, when was it made?” We will not rehash those questions, but merely refer anyone interested back to that written or oral presentation available on the class website at www.Biblical-Literacy.com. We will pick up our story from there.

THE BIBLE BEFORE KING JAMES

In the late 300’s, Western civilization was becoming a Latin-speaking people to the exclusion of Greek. Up to that time, the church had generally used scriptures in the Greek language. The New Testament itself (save one Latin and one Aramaic phrase in the gospels) was written in Greek. The Old Testament, while written in Hebrew and its sister language Aramaic, had already been translated into Greek as well, and it was in its Greek form (called the “*Septuagint*”) that the early Church used it. But as fewer and fewer people spoke Greek, more and more scripture was translated into Latin. In the late 300’s, the Bishop of Rome instructed Jerome to officially translate the Bible into Latin from its original Hebrew and Greek.

Jerome's translation was into the common or "vulgar" (from the Latin meaning "popular") Latin spoken and read in his day. Accordingly, it has carried the name *The Vulgate* to this day. Although Jerome's translation was edited and changed some over the years, it became the official Bible for the Western Church for centuries to come. The Church called for Jerome's translation in an effort to have the Bible in the everyday language spoken by the masses. Over time, however, it became the antiquated book in an almost foreign language that few could read or understand. It became the very book it was designed to replace. In no place was that truer than among the peoples of the British Isles who spoke what we now consider the *English* language.

Over the centuries, the Latin language developed several strains or variations that evolved into the Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Romanian languages used today. These are called "Romance" languages because they descend from the Vulgar Latin of the Romans. A different base language was used in the Germanic areas. By the mid-400's, people in parts of what is now England and Scotland spoke in a German dialect known as "Old English." This language continued its use in England through the 1100's.

There were several attempts to put parts of scripture into Old English. King Alfred the Great in the 800's translated parts of the Old Testament (and "Acts" from the New Testament) into Old English to incorporate aspects of the Bible into his Legal Code. There was also a translation of several Old Testament books into this ancient dialect by an English monk named Aelfric (who became Archbishop of Canterbury in 995). Shortly after Aelfric's work, an unknown scholar translated the gospels into Old English as well.

But in 1066, the Norman invasion brought William the Conqueror to the throne, and the Old English dialect the British inhabitants spoke began to transform. William and his crew spoke the French of Normandy. In this time, the Old English dialect transformed¹ into what scholars now call "Middle English." Middle English was the language of Chaucer (*Canterbury Tales*). Middle English was the common dialect of the English Island until the mid-1500's.

In lesson 48, we studied John Wyclif (1320-1384). We noted that he and his associates put the entire Bible into English for the first time. Wyclif spoke and wrote Middle English, and his translation was from the Latin Vulgate into that dialect. An example of Wyclif's Middle English is:

¹ This transformation came not only from the French influence of the Normans but also the Viking/Danish influence, the Latin influence of the Church, the Celtic influence and others.

Be not youre herte affraied, ne drede it. Ye bileuen in god, and bileue ye in me. In the hous of my fadir ben many dwellyngis: if ony thing lasse I hadde seid to you, for I go to make redi to you a place. And if I go and make redi to you a place, eftsome I come and I schal take you to my silf, that where I am, ye be. And whidir I go ye witen: and ye witen the wey.
(John 14:1-4)

The official reaction to Wyclif was not good! After his translation, the English church and government declared it illegal to translate scriptures into English, and further efforts to do so went underground.

Sometime during the 1500's, English was transforming into what scholars call "Modern English"² (Okay, it was not quite what we speak today so many scholars call it "Early Modern English"). In spite of the ban on English Bibles, several scholars worked to translate the Bible into everyone's common tongue.

In 1522, William Tyndale sought permission from London's Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall to translate the Bible from its original Hebrew and Greek into English, but permission was denied. Tyndale responded by moving to Germany and working on his translation there! In Germany, Tyndale's first attempt was burned while at the publisher's and in 1524 he started a second attempt. While working on the Old Testament, Tyndale was arrested North of Brussels and imprisoned awaiting trial. While in prison, Tyndale continued working on his Old Testament translation. He had finished his New Testament and it was published in 1526. But in August 1526, Tyndale was convicted of heresy and was strangled first then burned at the stake. Foxe, in his book of martyrs, records Tyndale's last words as, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."

When given a choice, Tyndale translated a number of terms in very non-Catholic ways. For example, instead of translating *ἐκκλησία* (*ekklesia*) "Church," Tyndale would use the word "congregation." Similarly, Tyndale would use "elder" instead of "priest" and "repentance" instead of "penance." Tyndale translated the same John passage given earlier from Wyclif's translation as follows:

And he sayd vnto his disciples: Let not youre hertes be troubled. Beleve in god and beleve in me. In my fathers housse are many mansions. If it were not so I wolde have tolde you. I go to prepare a place for you. And yf I go to prepare a place for you I will come agayne and receave you eve vnto my selfe yt where I am there maye ye be also.

² Modern English contains words that come from a lot of the strains of early influences on the language. We have "pig" from Old English but "pork" from the Norman influence. "Wood" is from Old English, but "forest" from Norman.

Tyndale's prayer did not take long for an answer. Just a decade later, Miles Coverdale was working on a translation of the Bible into English. Coverdale's version was not a translation from the original Hebrew and Greek, but rather a translation of the Latin Vulgate into English. When Coverdale's version went to print in 1535, he dedicated the translation to King Henry VIII.³ The very next year, King Henry ordered that one of the Bibles be placed in each church.

Coverdale translated John 14:1-3 as follows:

And he sayde vnto his disciples: Let not youre hert be afrayed. Yf ye beleue on God, the beleue also on me. In my fathers house are many dwellinges. Yf it were not so, I wolde haue tolde you: I go to prepare the place for you. And though I go to prepare the place for you, yet wil I come agayne, and receaue you vnto myself, yt ye maye be where I am.

Meanwhile in Geneva, Calvin (see lessons 58-59) and his followers were publishing the Bible into a number of European languages for sale and distribution. In 1560, a Bible was published in English and was called the Geneva Bible.⁴ The John 14:1-3 passage in the Geneva Bible read:

Let not your heart be troubled: ye beleue in God, beleue also in me. In my Fathers house are many dwelling places: if it were not so, I would haue tolde you: I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I wil come againe, and receiue you vnto my selfe, that where I am, there may ye be also.

KING JAMES VERSION

Although there is no precise date ascribed to "Modern English," it is clearly the label used for the language spoken during the reign of Queen Elizabeth (see lesson 60). After Queen Elizabeth died, the throne of England passed to James, King of

³ Coverdale's dedication page states, "I haue nether wrested nor altered so moch as one worde for the maytenaunce of any maner of secte: but haue with a cleare conscience purely and faithfully translated this out of fyue sundry interpreters, hauyng onely the manifest trueth of the scripture before myne eyes."

⁴ This Bible is nicknamed the "Breeches Bible" because of its translation in the Garden of Eden story about God making clothing for Adam and Eve. The Geneva Bible translated that God made "breeches" for Adam.

Scotland.⁵ King James ascended the throne of England on March 24, 1603, at the age of 36.

Early in James's reign, he decided to have an official English version of the Bible translated from the original languages. Under James's oversight, 54 translators were selected for the job and work commenced in 1604. The process took 7 years, but in 1611, the King James Version was "authorized" and printed. Since James was head of the church in England, the version was dedicated to him and he was the one who "authorized"⁶ its printing from the King's publishers.

We should take a look at the same John 14:1-3 passage from the King James:

Let not your heart be troubled: yee beleue in God, beleue also in me. In my Fathers house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would haue told you: I goe to prepare a place for you. And if I goe and prepare a place for you, I will come againe, and receiue you vnto my selfe, that where I am, there ye may be also.

The King James Version was an effort to take the Greek and Hebrew scriptures and place them into the dialect of the common people. It was the era of William Shakespeare, and people spoke with the "thee's" and "thou's" we read in the King James version.⁷

Over the next 250 years, the King James Version stayed consistent and unchanged. Spelling would vary, especially until Noah Webster produced his dictionary in the 1780's providing a common reference for spelling English words.

A key to understanding English Bible versions stems from the exclusive printing rights the crown granted to the publishers of the King James Version. The version was authorized and printed with certain particular styles and forms. It had two

⁵ Queen Elizabeth was a "Tudor" monarch, descending from a family that took its name from the Welsh father of the lineage, Owen Tudor, the great grandfather of Henry the Eighth. Upon her death, the throne passed to James because Elizabeth had no children. James ruled Scotland as James VI although he was James I as a ruler of England. James is considered a "Stuart" rather than a "Tudor." His great-grandmother had been sister to Henry VII (Father of Henry VIII).

⁶ "Authorized" is a reference to the privilege and right to print the version, not a reference to the authorization of the version itself. There was an exclusive monopoly granted by the crown to print the version. This monopoly took several incarnations and was transferred (bought and sold) multiple times over the centuries, but the "authorization" and publishing monopoly existed well into the 20th century.

⁷ Interestingly, the Pilgrims came to America with the Geneva Bible rather than the King James. For the Pilgrims, the King James Version was too modern and untrustworthy!

columns of text each page. Roman numerals were used for the chapters and standard numbers for the verses. Each chapter began with cryptic notes about the contents of the chapter. Words not in the original text but necessary for the English to flow well were printed in Italics. The margin contained a few sparse notes on possible translation differences as well as Scripture references. The Bible contained elaborate woodcuts of calligraphied first letters at the start of each chapter, but there were no pictures in the Bible itself beyond the title page.

One printer had the monopoly on printing the King James Version (From this authorization, the version also carries the name “Authorized Version” which is more commonly used in England while in America it is more commonly called the “King James Version”). In the 1600’s, the authorization to print the King James Version was extended to Oxford, Cambridge, and Edinburgh.

Needless to say, other printers and booksellers wanted access to the King James Version for their own selling. But with a monopoly, that was difficult to do legally! So, ingenuity came into play. Early on (in the 1600’s), booksellers would buy the KJV sheets from the authorized publishers and then add illustrations on free sheets that they would insert and then bind the whole production for sale calling it a “Picture Bible”.

By the 1700’s, several other ideas surfaced to provide independent printers a way to make and sell Bibles that used the KJV. Publishers would add notes in the margins, the foreword or afterword and claim the finished product was a commentary rather than unauthorized Bible publication. Other publishers would add family tree and wedding inserts into the Bible with the KJV text and publish the book as a “Family Bible.”

American independence in 1776 brought about the inability to import British Bibles, and hence authorized copies of the KJV. At first, this was a problem but then American publishers (with government approval!) were granted the right to disregard the King’s publishing authorization and Americans were allowed to print the King James Version without regard to copyright.

In 1816, the American Bible Society was set up with a goal of taking the profit margin out of Bible printing in an effort to get the Scriptures into as many households as possible. They began publishing Bibles in America with the lowest prices ever seen! They were publishing the King James Version and it spread throughout America as the “must have” version of Scripture.

In the 1800’s, the age of the King James Version and its limitations were significant. In 1870, the Church of England (see lesson 60) authorized a revision of the King James. Scholars in England and America undertook the project. In

England, the final product was produced in 1885 with the agreement the Americans could print a later version with more “Americanized” English. The version in England was called simply The English Revised Version. John 14:1-3 reads in the English Revised Version:

Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, [there] ye may be also.

In 1901, the American revision of the King James was produced under the name “American Standard Version.” The same passage in the American Standard Version reads virtually the same, save only eliminating the first “ye”.

Let not your heart be troubled: believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, [there] ye may be also.

The American Standard Version was copyrighted to prevent unauthorized tampering with the text and that copyright eventually passed to the International Council of Religious Education. In the 1930's, the Council appointed a committee to see whether the text might need further revisions. As we will see next week, scholarship and archaeology had produced new insight and information that contributed to a better understanding of what the original scriptures said and meant. The English language itself was also changing in certain ways that suggested a more modern translation.

In 1937, the Council authorized a new version and a board of advisors from many denominations oversaw a new translation called “The Revised Standard Version.” It was published as New Testament in 1946 and as an entire Bible in 1951. Our sample passage reads in the RSV:

Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

Meanwhile in 1942, F. Dewey Lockman and his wife Minna set up a foundation to further Biblical study. The Lockman Foundation in 1958 produced the *Amplified New Testament*. This was followed in 1971 with a translation modeled after the accuracy and approach of the American Standard Bible. The foundation named this version *The New American Standard Version*. The NASV gives the John 14:1-3 passage as:

Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so, I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also.

This version used only red ink for the words of Jesus and so this section is printed in red in the NASV.

We have left out a number of translations⁸ in this brief review. After these core translations, a number of others have come out (NIV, English Standard Version, New King James, New Revised Standard, etc). Additionally, we have a number of translations of individuals (Moffatt, Philips, The Message, etc.). These will be probed more extensively next week.

Next week, our goal is to look at the scholarship behind the translations. How do we know which are more “accurate”? What are the limitations of each and what are the advantages? How do we know what the original scriptures said and what are the oldest copies of the Bible?

POINTS FOR HOME

1. God is a God of language. He spoke the world into existence, and he then created man in his image. Man himself named the animals as man (made in God's image) was also a being of language. God revealed himself to man through words. The words he spoke and the actions he took are secured for us in the scriptures. These books culminate in the accounts of Jesus on earth, the full Word of God made flesh. It is fully expected that God, a being of language, would communicate to mankind through language.

⁸ We should distinguish between translations and paraphrases. Some publishers have put out paraphrases of the Bible which, rather than give a word for word translation, give phrases which try to deliver the meaning of the passage rather than the meaning of each word (An example here is *The Living Bible*.)

2. Understanding Scripture is important.
 - A. In Scripture, we have God’s revelation of himself, so the Bible is more than a translation. In some paradoxical way, through the words of Scripture, we get a glimpse of the majestic God who is so much more than the words used in Scripture to reveal him!
 - B. In Scripture, we have God’s direction for us in life. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Ps. 119:105, NIV).
 - C. Without Scripture in our language with accurate translation, we are left without the great disclosure of God and his love. The great shame of many is the ready availability of God’s revelation in easy to read and handy Bibles that sits on a shelf rarely opened and studied. It becomes God’s revelation that man chooses to ignore. God’s great desire is to speak to us, and yet we often don’t bother to read or listen to his revelation.
3. When the church was established on Pentecost, the first miracle was the Holy Spirit, with tongues of fire, speaking through the apostles in a way where everyone heard the message in their own tongue. God has always reached to humanity where humanity can hear. His word is complete with stories and teaching that people of every age can understand, once it is in the known language. We should always work to make Scripture available to people, not hidden or cloaked in mystery and disguise.
4. Because “all scripture is inspired by God” it profits man to study and learn from it. Or, as Paul said to Timothy:

For al scripture inspirid of God is profitable to teche, to repreue, to chastice, to lerne in riytwisnes, that the man of God be parfit, lerud to al good werk. (1 Tim. 3:16-17, Wyclif translation)

For all scripture geve by inspiracion of god is proffitable to teache to improve to amende and to instruct in rightewesnes yt ye man of god maye be perfect and prepared vnto all good workes. (1 Tim. 3:16-17, Tyndale translation)

For all scripture geue by inspiracion of God, is profitable to teach, to improve, to amende, and to instructe in righteousnes, that a man off God maye be perfecte, and prepared vnto all good workes. (1 Tim. 3:16-17, Coverdale translation)

For the whole Scripture is giuen by inspiration of God, and is profitable to teache, to conuince, to correct, and to instruct in righteousness, That the man of God may be absolute, being made perfect vnto all good workes. (1 Tim. 3:16-17, the Geneva Bible).

All scripture is geuen by inspiration of God, and [is] profitable to doctrine, to reprove, to correction, to instruction which is in ryghteousnesse, That the man of God may be perfect, instructed vnto all good workes. (1 Tim. 3:16-17, Bishop's Bible⁹)

All Scripture is giuen by inspiration of God, & is profitable for doctrine, for reproofe, for correction, for instrution in righteousness, That the man of God may be perfect, throughly furnished vnto all good workes. (1 Tim. 3:16-17, King James Version).

Every scripture inspired of God [is] also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work. (1 Tim. 3:16-17, English Revised Version).

Every scripture inspired of God [is] also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness. That the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work. (1 Tim. 3:16-17, American Standard Version).

All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (1 Tim. 3:16-17, Revised Standard Version).

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work. (1 Tim. 3:16-17, New American Standard Version).

⁹ We didn't go into detail on this translation. In the 1560's, the Church of England authorized this translation in response to the Geneva Bible in an effort to stem the growth of Calvinism. This Bible never really displaced the Geneva Bible in terms of popularity with English speaking people. The version was harder to understand and lacked the footnotes and cross-references of the Geneva Bible. The translators of the King James version used the Bishop's Bible as their starting point.