

The Bible in English

The origin of the English Bible can be traced as far back as the fourteenth century. It is true that before this there were some few English parts of the Bible. We are able to trace these as far as the years 600 and 700. Then, the monk Jarrow and the Venerable Bede, called the "Father of the English learning," were endeavouring to give the people God's Word in the vernacular. At the time of his death Bede was translating the Gospel of St John. Work on translating the Bible into English was progressing.

Big changes were taking place in England during the fourteenth century. At this time John Wyclif began to translate the Bible into English. He was convinced that the Bible ranked above all the traditions of the schools. Dr. Krauth said of Wyclif, "He appealed to the Word, and to sustain his appeal translated the Word. He put into the hands of the people the Book divinely given to shape their convictions. The translation of the Scriptures as a whole into English first came from his hands or under his supervision."

Wyclif's completed Bible appeared about 1380. It is commonly held that at least one copy of the Wyclif Bible is still extant, also a later version by John Purvey, Wyclif's curate at Lutterworth.

All of the early attempts, though they were faulty and fragmentary, served an excellent purpose and helped to pave the way for better versions. They did not come from the original Hebrew or Greek, but from the Latin, and thus thereby were subject to previously faulty translations and errors of the penmen. Because of the fear of the Roman authorities, the editors were largely anonymous. Wyclif did much to stay corruption in the Church and state and to awaken a conviction of the importance of the Word of God for a real Christian life. At this time the Bible was divided into chapters. The division into verse came later with the Geneva Bible in the sixteenth century.

The earliest pioneer work was now done, and we come to William Tyndale. Tyndale's attitude to the Bible may be summed up in the words, "All that is between God and man in the Scripture is for man's necessity, and not for any need that God has thereof." he was labelled the "Father of the English Bible." All succeeding translations are practically but revisions of his. .

Tyndale first attempted to translate the Bible in London, 1523. This was a failure. Ecclesiastical hostility was too strong. He spent the next year in Wittenberg and Worms, and in 1525 published his manuscripts. He met with strong opposition, especially from Cardinal Wolsey. But thousands of copies of his translation were smuggled into England, packed in sacks of flour, in bales of clothing, or any other convenient hiding spot. Tyndale did not live to complete his work. He was burned at the stake on October 5, 1536. He had published the New Testament, the Pentateuch, and the Book of Jonah. He had ready in manuscript form nine other books.

While Tyndale was in prison before his death, Miles Coverdale (AD 1488-1569) upon the request of Thomas Cromwell and Thomas More, published a complete Bible. Dedicated to King Henry VIII, it never gained royal authorisation, but it was not prohibited. It was inferior to Tyndale's. It came from Latin and Swiss-German, and the New Testament was taken from Tyndale. It had one distinct advantage; it was complete, while Tyndale's was not. Coverdale's translation was not opposed by the authorities, while Tyndale, because he was mixed up with Lutheranism, was looked upon by the Catholic party as a revolutionist and not as a reformer. The King was against him because he had written against divorce.

The next Bible to appear was the Matthew Bible. No one seems to know who Thomas Matthew was. John Rogers edited it. He was a personal friend of Tyndale and he compiled the Matthew Bible from Tyndale's printed books, from his manuscripts and from the Coverdale Bible. Archbishop Cranmer was very pleased with it, and it became the first authorised version.

Coverdale was urged by Thomas Cromwell, Earl of Essex, to release the Great Bible (so called because of its size). Its text was that of Matthew's, revised by Coverdale. It was being printed in Paris, where progress was made until the Inquisitor General interfered. The printers fled for their lives. The manuscripts were sold as waste, but were craftily recovered. In 1539 the first edition was brought to England, then more than six editions were published.

After this version of the Bible was released, there was a pause of about thirty years. Internal strife in England had much to do with this. Cromwell was going too fast to make England Protestant, and northern England turned against him. He was beheaded in July 1540.

When Elizabeth began her reign, the Geneva Bible was released in 1558. It had for the first time the division of chapters into verses. It soon became the real people's Bible, and was the first to be printed in Scotland.

The next Bible was the Bishops' Bible. The editors borrowed largely from previous versions, including

Tyndale's and the Genevan. This particular version was said to lack unity. In January 1604, King James I was petitioned to give the popular Geneva Bible preference over the Great and the Bishops' Bible, or else authorise a new version. The King was pleased with the latter suggestion and a new translation began. Fifty-four translators were appointed. Nothing was spared to make this version perfect. When a translation was made from the Hebrew and Greek, it was read to others, and they made corrections if necessary. When the revision was complete it was sent to the three large universities of Westminster, Oxford, and Cambridge. Two men from each company reviewed the whole work. The revision lasted nine months. The first edition appeared in 1611. It soon became the most popular version.

Many schemes for further revision were made in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In 1870 it was resolved to revise the King James Version because of the change of the language. Two committees did the work, one English, the other American. The latter was to be advisory only. The so-called Revised Edition appeared in 1881. It was subject to severe criticism. While some improvements to a more literal translation had been made, changes elsewhere seemed to take away from the sacredness of the divine writings. Familiar passages, dear to every Christian heart, had been so changed as to lose not only their beauty, but also their familiarity. In 1901 members of the American Committee published a revised edition, which embodied their suggestions, but which was overruled by the British.

May the Bible become dearer to us because it was rendered into English at such a great cost of effort and life, as well as because it is the word of our Father to us, His children. It tells us of His Son, our only Saviour. By being translated into English, God's saving Word was able to reach those people whose native tongue was English.