

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

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The Bible is a book which has influence on the lives of every living individual, whether a believer or not. It has braved many dangers and still come through shining, as the true and one Word of God. It is the purpose of this paper to trace some of its history. We will take the story from the original languages and then trace the development of the English Bible.

The first language the Bible was written in was Hebrew, one of the northwest Semitic group of language, which also includes Phoenician, Punic, Moabitic and Aramaic.¹ From the very Beginning until the time of the Israelites' captivity in Babylon, the books were written in this, the traditional language of the Jews.

Tradition stays the same, but people do not. Gradually, the Babylonians injected Aramaic into the mainstream of Jewish religious literature. Thus, parts of canonical Daniel, many of the minor prophets and much of the Apocrypha were written in Aramaic.

After the exile, Aramaic increased in influence. Soon it became the spoken language of the Israelites. It spread, and was the common language up until the time of the Christian era.² The Scripture shows us that Aramaic was the language that Jesus spoke ("Eli, Eli, Lama Sabachthani?")³ We know that Jesus also spoke Greek which was the commonly accepted language of all the known world at the time. The fact that Greek was so widely known probably helped the spreading of the Gospel. And it has not changed much either: Greek is a living language, and has changed less in the last two thousand years than any other spoken tongue!⁴ It should also be noted that the Hebrew language has been revived since the nation of Israel was formed in 1948.

The two primary languages, Hebrew and Greek, are very unrelated. Still, unity abounds throughout the entire Bible. For instance, Hebrew and Greek are the only languages in existence that have no numbering system of their own; they use letters of their alphabet in place of them.⁵

Not only does unity hold true with the numbering system, but in every passage of canonical scripture are repetitions of mathematical patterns as would be humanly impossible to create.

So, with the evidence there, within the texts themselves, let us turn our gaze to the authors of them. The Bible claims about forty different writers, of greatly varied backgrounds. Fishermen, tax collectors, preachers and kings, all with their own unique style, but all very much the same. "So who wrote it? One mind, one author—one God—many different writers, but one Writer."⁶

People have not always seen this grand relationship, however. Men have always doubted God's inspiration, and have tried to force the inspiration on works on warranting it. When the canon of the Old Testament was beginning to be formed, many of the rabbis

¹ R. K. Harrison, *Biblical Hebrew*, p. xi.

² *Ibid.*, p. xi.

³ Matthew 27:46

⁴ ???

⁵ W. Pratney, "Holy Bible—Wholly True," *Last Days Newsletter*, Nov-Dec, 1979, pp. 8, 10+

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

refused the divinity of certain books for various reasons. Song of Solomon, for instance, seemed to be just a love song; the book of Esther doesn't even mention the word "God" once!⁷

But the Old Testament books weren't the only ones under fire, for, many centuries later, the early church fathers debated the inspiration of such books as James, because it is said to contradict Paul; the book of Hebrews, because of the uncertainty of the author; and the book of Revelation, because of its use of vague symbols.⁸

Not only were books that we feel to be divinely inspired debated, but other uncertain books were forced on the rabbis and early church fathers. Of these, the Apocrypha (meaning "hidden") lurks in the background demanding recognition. The books of the Apocrypha were greatly debated until 1596, when the Catholics accepted them as divinely inspired scripture. It was rejected by Protestants because of many historical and geographical errors and the fact that some of the books themselves disclaim divine inspiration!⁹

Apocryphal gospels also tried to disguise themselves as inspired, but they didn't fool the early church fathers at all. They recognized that the false gospels and epistles contained no actual events (or portrayed them incorrectly), and that they all taught some slanted or false doctrines.¹⁰ It took much time and prayer, but eventually, through the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the sheep were divided from the goats. With the canon finally sealed, the Word of God was on its way to becoming a book that all people, everywhere, could read.

The first to be interested in the scripture were the Greeks, who, with a band of seventy Hebrew scholars, translated the Old Testament into Greek. This translation is called the Septuagint.¹¹

This was the language of the people, and all the world had the writings which God himself had given to man, until man began to speak other languages.

The language was Latin. With the influence of Rome on world affairs, its language influenced also. The church, meanwhile, had grown, and made its headquarters in Rome. One man, Jerome, saw that the people had trouble accepting scripture that they could not read. So, this man, Jerome, took upon himself to translate the entire Bible into the Latin or the "vulgar" tongue.¹²

The clergy was shocked. It was blasphemy! So, they tried everything to get rid of the scandalous translator. We call him "Saint Jerome" today, but they certainly didn't call him that when he was alive. It wasn't even until one thousand years later, at the Council of Trent, that his translation was accepted,¹³ but by this time the language had changed again.

⁷ H. L. Willmington, *That Manuscript From Outer Space*, p. 69.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

¹⁰ E. M. Yamauchi, "Word from Nag Hammadi: Apocryphal Gospels," *Christianity Today*, Jan. 13, 1978, pp. 19-22.

¹¹ William N. McElrath, *Bible Guidebook*, p. 135.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 135

¹³ Bruce Barton, *The Book That Nobody Knows*, p. 286.

With ignorance of the scripture came dominancy. The Catholic Church loomed high and tall, and proclaimed to a trembling world, who was freely giving her homage: "We know that the Catholic Church is the true church of Christ."¹⁴ This was great, except that power corrupts, and the Catholic Church had begun to crumble. After all, if the people could not get into the Bible to find out what is true, then one could say anything and the people would believe it. Some scholars tell us that many priests didn't even know Latin very well!¹⁵

Toward the end of the middle ages, many people had become dissatisfied with the church, and wanted to correct its faults from within. Many tried, and failed, when finally, there arose a leader strong enough to do it: Martin Luther. Luther decided to break from the church when it refused to change.¹⁶ His theology stressed a literal interpretation of the Bible, and this meant that the people themselves would have to get back into the Book.

The first English translators were every bit as persecuted as Jerome was. Wiclif, living from 1324 to 1384,¹⁷ made a shaky translation from the Latin. Though this translation never got that far, it stirred up considerable interest.

Especially interested was the next major translator, who didn't appear until nearly a century later. This time, it was a more accurate translation, since it was taken from the original languages. His name was William Tyndale, and because of his efforts, persecutors drove him from his home. In 1524 he fled to Hamburg. After his New Testament was complete and published in 1525, he was arrested.¹⁸ After spending eighteen months in jail, he was put to death on October 6, 1536,¹⁹ for no other reason than giving people a truer version of the scripture.

People caught on to the idea of a Bible common to all people, and, sparked on by Wiclif and Tyndale, began the grassroots distribution of the illegal book. By this time, King James I of England saw that he could not keep the Bible from the people, so he ordered that at least a dependable translation be produced.²⁰ The result was the most popular book in history. The most beautiful passages ever rendered are found here, and it was also the most accurate to date. Now, finally, the Bible was available to clergy and layman alike.

The King James Version was the commonly accepted English Bible for over three hundred years. But, as they must, languages change. The long revered passages ceased to carry all the meaning that they once did. The King James Version is beautiful, but beauty also lulls. For example, does the word "scourged" (John 19:1) really come home like "flogged?" Does "mocked Him" sting like "jeered at Him"?

C. S. Lewis once wrote, "There is no such thing as translating a book into another language once and for all, for a language is a changing thing. If your son is to have

¹⁴ Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, *A Catechism of Christian Doctrine*.

¹⁵ Jack M. MacLeod, *Theirs is the Kingdom*, p. 115.

¹⁶ Irene Cumming Kleeberg, *Christianity*, p. 36.

¹⁷ Barton, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 286–287.

¹⁹ "The New English Bible and Its Development," *Holy Bible, New American Standard Version*, p. 1250.

²⁰ Barton, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

clothes, it is no good buying him a suit once and for all; he will grow out of it and have to be re clothed."²¹

So, again, it is time for a change. But some people cannot bear to see the Bible rendered in any but the King James Version. It seems offensive and even blasphemous to change it.²² Thus, we end up running into the same wall encountered by Wiclif and Jerome before us.

Nevertheless, the need was there, and when God moves, men of God respond. A group of translators met, and on February 10, 1870, a decision was made to begin the new translation of the scriptures. Their result was the English Revised Version. It was immediately accepted and was a tremendous improvement over the King James Version. Professor F. F. Bruce stated, "The Revised Version...is the most useful edition of the Bible for the careful student who knows no language but English."²³

But not everybody was happy with the English Revised Version, because, since then (in order of their Biblical accuracy), there have been others, such as New American Standard Bible; Amplified Bible; Revised Standard Version; Jerusalem Bible; The Living Bible; and the Good News (TEV) Bible.

So, as one can easily see, the Bible is a *very* available book to any English-speaking person in the world, and through the efforts of other Christian workers, to people who speak almost any other language as well. Its importance has stretched from our system of dating, to the basis of our morals and values of living, and, most importantly, from a decision of eternal life to eternal death.

Voltaire, 100 years ago, held a copy of the Bible in his hand and said, "In 100 years, this book will be forgotten, eliminated." What is hilarious is that 100 years later, to the day, his house was made the headquarters of the Geneva Bible Society, who are distributing Bibles out of his house!²⁴

The Bible is definitely here to stay: "The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of God stands forever." (Isaiah 40:8) Many a foolish conqueror has made the mistake of thinking that because he had forced the Word of God out of sight, he had stilled its voice and snuffed out its life, but the Word of God never returns void! The powerful current of a rushing river is not diminished because it is forced underground; the purest water is the stream that bursts crystal clear into the sunlight after it has forced its way through solid rock! It is the Book of the powerful Army of God, who cannot be bought, flattered, murdered or stilled! On through the ages it marches: The Bible! God's Holy Word, is alive and well!²⁵

²¹ C. S. Lewis, "Modern Translations of the Bible," *God in the Dock*, p. 231.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 229.

²³ "The English Bible and Its Development," *op. cit.*, p. 1253.

²⁴ Pratney, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

²⁵ Bill Gaither and Gloria Gaither, "The Church Triumphant," *The Best of the Very Best*.

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The Bible was written over a span of 1500 years, by 40 writers. Unlike other religious writings, the Bible reads as a factual news account of real events, places, people, and dialogue. Historians and archaeologists have repeatedly confirmed its authenticity. Using the writers' own writing styles and personalities, God shows us who he is and what it's like to know him. There is one central message consistently carried by all 40 writers of the Bible: God, who created us all, desires a relationship with us. He calls us to know him and trust him. The Bible not only inspires us, it explains. The Bible is a collection of religious texts or scriptures sacred to Christians, Jews, Samaritans, Rastafari and others. It appears in the form of an anthology, a compilation of texts of a variety of forms that are all linked by the belief that they are collectively revelations of God. These texts include theologically-focused historical accounts, hymns, prayers, proverbs, parables, didactic letters, erotica, poetry, and prophecies. Believers also generally consider the Bible to be a product of divine inspiration.

Introduction: The Bible was not written in English -- not even "King James English"! Most of the books of the Old Testament were originally composed in Hebrew (with a few portions in Aramaic), while the entire New Testament was originally written in Greek (although some books may also incorporate Aramaic sources). Thus, what most people today read are not the original biblical texts, but other people's translations of the scriptures. But why are there so many different English translations of the Bible? There are literally thousands of differences in the surviving biblical manuscripts, many of them minor (spelling variations, synonyms, different word orders), but some of them major (whole sections missing or added). Important old manuscripts were found in the last 200 years!