

'THE B.I.B.L.E.' ("Yes! That's The Book for Me!")

English Bible History

Author: John L. Jeffcoat III. This page may be freely reproduced or quoted, in whole or in part, in print or electronically, under the one condition that prominent credit must be given to "WWW.GREATSITE.COM" as the source. The fascinating story of how we got the Bible in its present form starts thousands of years ago... Our starting point in this discussion of Bible history is the advent of the scripture in the English language with the "Morning Star of the Reformation", John Wycliffe.



The first hand-written English language Bible manuscripts were produced in the **1380's AD** by **John Wycliffe**, an Oxford professor, scholar, and theologian. Wycliffe, was well-known throughout Europe for his opposition to the teaching of the organized Church, which he believed to be contrary to the Bible. With the help of his followers, called the Lollards, and his assistant Purvey, and many other faithful scribes, Wycliffe produced dozens of English language manuscript copies of the scriptures. They were translated out of the Latin Vulgate, which was the only source text available to Wycliffe. The Pope was so infuriated by his teachings and his translation of the Bible into English, that 44 years after Wycliffe had died, he ordered the bones to be dug-up, crushed, and scattered in the river!



One of Wycliffe's followers, **John Hus**, actively promoted Wycliffe's ideas: that people should be permitted to read the Bible in their own language and they should oppose the tyranny of the Roman church that threatened anyone possessing a non-Latin Bible with execution. Hus was burned at the stake in **1415**, with Wycliffe's manuscript Bibles used as kindling for the fire. The last words of John Hus were that, "*in 100 years, God will raise up a man whose calls for reform cannot be suppressed.*" Almost exactly 100 years later, in **1517**, Martin Luther nailed his famous 95 Theses of Contention (*a list of 95 issues of heretical theology and crimes of the Roman Catholic Church*) into the church door at Wittenberg. The prophecy of Hus had come true! Martin Luther went on to be the first person to translate and publish the Bible in the commonly-spoken dialect of the German people; a translation more appealing than previous German Biblical translations. *Foxe's Book of Martyrs* records that in that same year, **1517**, seven people were burned at the stake by the Roman Catholic Church for the crime of teaching their children to say the Lord's Prayer in English rather than Latin.



Johann Gutenberg invented the printing press in the **1450's**, and the first book to ever be printed was a Latin language Bible, printed in Mainz, Germany. **Gutenberg's Bibles** were surprisingly beautiful, as **each leaf Gutenberg printed** was later colorfully hand-illuminated. Born as "Johann Gensfleisch" (John Gooseflesh), he preferred to be known as "Johann Gutenberg" (John Beautiful Mountain). Ironically, though he had created what many believe to be the most important invention in history, Gutenberg was a victim of unscrupulous business associates who took control of his business and left him in poverty. Nevertheless, the invention of the movable-type printing press meant that Bibles and books could finally be effectively produced in large quantities in a short period of time. This was essential to the success of the Reformation.



In the 1490's another Oxford professor, and the personal physician to King Henry the 7th and 8th, **Thomas Linacre**, decided to learn Greek. After reading the Gospels in Greek, and comparing it to the Latin Vulgate, he wrote in his diary, "Either this (the original Greek) is not the Gospel... or we are not Christians." The Latin had become so corrupt that it no longer even preserved the message of the Gospel... yet the Church still threatened to kill anyone who read the scripture in any language other than Latin... though Latin was not an original language of the scriptures.



In 1496, **John Colet**, another Oxford professor and the son of the mayor of London, started reading the NT in Greek and translating it into English for his students, and later for the public at Saint Paul's Cathedral in London. The people were so hungry to hear the Word of God in a language they could understand, that within six months there were 20,000 people packed in the church and at least that many outside trying to get in! (Sadly, while the enormous and beautiful Saint Paul's Cathedral remains the main church in London today, as of 2003, typical Sunday morning worship attendance is only around 200 people... and most of them are tourists). Fortunately for Colet, he was a powerful man with friends in high places, so he amazingly managed to avoid execution.



In considering the experiences of Linacre and Colet, the great scholar **Erasmus** was so moved to correct the corrupt Latin Vulgate, that in **1516**, with the help of printer John Froben, he published a Greek-Latin Parallel NT. The Latin part was not the corrupt Vulgate, but his own fresh rendering of the text from the more accurate and reliable Greek, which he had managed to collate from a half-dozen partial old Greek NT manuscripts he had acquired. This milestone was the first non-Latin Vulgate text of the scripture to be produced in a millennium... and the first ever to come off a printing press. The 1516 Greek-Latin NT of Erasmus further focused attention on just how corrupt and inaccurate the Latin Vulgate had become, and how important it was to go back and use the original Greek (NT) and original Hebrew (OT) languages to maintain accuracy... and to translate them faithfully into the languages of the common people, whether that be English, German, or any other tongue. No sympathy for this "illegal activity" was to be found from Rome, with the curious exception of the famous **1522 Complutensian Polyglot Bible**, even as the words of Pope Leo X's declaration that "the **fable** of Christ was quite profitable to him" continued through the years to infuriate the people of God.



William Tyndale was the Captain of the Army of Reformers, and was their spiritual leader. Tyndale holds the distinction of being the first man to ever print the NT in the English language. Tyndale was a true scholar and a genius, so fluent in eight languages that it was said one would think any one of them to be his native tongue. He is frequently referred to as the “Architect of the English Language”, (even more so than William Shakespeare) as so many of the phrases Tyndale coined are still in our language today.



Martin Luther had a small head-start on Tyndale, as Luther declared his intolerance for the Roman Church’s corruption on Halloween in **1517**, by nailing his 95 Theses of Contention to the Wittenberg Church door. Luther, who would be exiled in the months following the Diet of Worms Council in **1521** that was designed to martyr him, would translate the NT into German for the first time from the 1516 Greek-Latin NT of Erasmus, and publish it in September of **1522**. Luther also published a German Pentateuch in **1523**, and another edition of the German NT in 1529. In the 1530’s he would go on to publish the entire Bible in German.

William Tyndale wanted to use the same 1516 Erasmus text as a source to translate and print the NT in English for the first time in history. Tyndale showed up on Luther's doorstep in Germany in 1525, and by year's end had translated the NT into English. Tyndale had been forced to flee England because of the wide-spread rumor that his English NT project was underway, causing inquisitors and bounty hunters to be constantly on Tyndale's trail to arrest him and prevent his project. God foiled their plans and in **1525-1526** the Tyndale NT became the first printed edition of the scripture in the English language. Subsequent printings of the Tyndale NT in the 1530's were often elaborately illustrated.

They were burned as soon as the Bishop could confiscate them, but copies trickled through and ended up in the bedroom of King Henry VIII. The more the King and Bishop resisted its distribution, the more fascinated the public at large became. The church declared it contained thousands of errors as they torched hundreds of NTs confiscated by the clergy, while in fact, they burned them because they could find no errors at all. One risked death by burning if caught in mere possession of Tyndale's forbidden books.

Having God's Word available to the public in the language of the common man, English, would have meant disaster to the church. No longer would they control access to the scriptures. If people were able to read the Bible in their own tongue, the church's income and power would crumble. They could not possibly continue to get away with selling indulgences (the forgiveness of sins) or selling the release of loved ones from a church-manufactured "Purgatory". People would begin to challenge the church's authority if the church were exposed as frauds and thieves. The contradictions between what God's Word said, and what the priests taught, would open the public's eyes and the truth would set them free from the grip of fear that the institutional church held. Salvation through faith, not works or donations, would be understood. The need for priests would vanish through the priesthood of all believers. The veneration of church-canonized Saints and Mary would be called into question. The availability of the scriptures in English was the biggest threat imaginable to the wicked church. Neither side would give up without a fight.

Today, there are only two known copies left of Tyndale’s 1525-26 First Edition. Any copies printed prior to 1570 are extremely valuable. Tyndale's flight was an inspiration to freedom-loving Englishmen who drew courage from the 11 years that he was hunted. Books and Bibles flowed into England in bales of cotton and sacks of flour. Ironically, Tyndale’s biggest customer was the King’s men, who would buy up every copy available to burn them... and Tyndale used their money to print even more! In the end, Tyndale was caught: betrayed by an Englishman that he had befriended. Tyndale was incarcerated for 500 days before he was strangled and burned at the stake in **1536**. Tyndale’s last words were, *"Oh Lord, open the King of England's eyes"*. This prayer would be answered just three years later in **1539**, when King Henry VIII finally allowed, and even funded, the printing of an English Bible known as the “Great Bible”. But before that could happen...



Myles Coverdale and John “Thomas Matthew” Rogers had remained loyal disciples the last six years of Tyndale's life, and they carried the English Bible project forward and accelerated it. Coverdale finished translating the OT, and in **1535** he printed the first complete Bible in the English language, making use of Luther's German text and the Latin as sources. The 1st complete English Bible was printed on **October 4, 1535**, and is known as the **Coverdale Bible**.



John Rogers printed the 2nd complete English Bible in **1537**. It was the 1st English Bible translated from the original Biblical languages of Hebrew & Greek. He printed it under the pseudonym "Thomas Matthew" (an assumed name that had been used by Tyndale at one time) as a considerable part of this Bible was the translation of Tyndale, whose writings had been condemned by the English authorities. It is a composite made up of Tyndale's Pentateuch and NT (1534-1535 edition) and Coverdale's Bible and some of Roger's own translation of the text. It remains known most commonly as the Matthew-Tyndale Bible. It went through a nearly identical 2nd edition printing in 1549.



In **1539**, **Thomas Cranmer**, the Archbishop of Canterbury, hired Myles Coverdale at the bequest of **King Henry VIII** to publish the "Great Bible". It became the first English Bible authorized for public use, as it was distributed to every church, chained to the pulpit, and a reader was even provided so that the illiterate could hear the Word of God in plain English. It would seem that William Tyndale's last wish had been granted...just three years after his martyrdom. Cranmer's Bible, published by Coverdale, was known as the **Great Bible** due to its great size: a large pulpit folio measuring over 14 inches tall. Seven editions of this version were printed between April of **1539** and December of **1541**.



It was not that **King Henry VIII** had a change of conscience regarding publishing the Bible in English. His motives were more sinister... but the Lord sometimes uses the evil intentions of men to bring about His glory. King Henry VIII had in fact, requested that the Pope permit him to divorce his wife and marry his mistress. The Pope refused. King Henry responded by marrying his mistress anyway (later having two of his many wives executed), and thumbing his nose at the Pope by renouncing Roman Catholicism, taking England out from under Rome's religious control, and declaring himself as the reigning head of State to also be the new head of the Church. This new branch of the Christian Church, neither Roman Catholic nor truly Protestant, became known as the Anglican Church or the Church of England. King Henry acted essentially as its "Pope". His first act was to further defy the wishes of Rome by funding the printing of the scriptures in English... the first legal English Bible... just for spite.



The ebb and flow of freedom continued through the 1540's...and into the 1550's. After King Henry VIII, King Edward VI took the throne, and after his death, the reign of **Queen "Bloody" Mary** was the next obstacle to the printing of the Bible in English. She was possessed in her quest to return England to the Roman Church. In **1555**, John "Thomas Matthew" Rogers and Thomas Cranmer were both burned at the stake. Mary went on to burn reformers at the stake by the hundreds for the "crime" of being a Protestant. This era was known as the Marian Exile, and the refugees fled from England with little hope of ever seeing their home or friends again.



John Fox



John Calvin



John Knox

In the 1550's, the Church at Geneva, Switzerland, was very sympathetic to the reformer refugees and was one of only a few safe havens for a desperate people. Many of them met in Geneva, led by **Myles Coverdale** and **John Foxe** (publisher of the famous **Foxe's Book of Martyrs**, which is to this day the only exhaustive reference work on the persecution and martyrdom of Early Christians and Protestants from the first century up to the mid-16th century), as well as Thomas Sampson and William Whittingham. There, with the protection of the great theologian **John Calvin** (author of the most famous theological book ever published, *Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion*) and **John Knox**, the great Reformer of the Scottish Church, the Church of Geneva determined to produce a Bible that would

educate their families while they continued in exile. The NT was completed in **1557**, and the complete Bible was first published in **1560**. It became known as the **Geneva Bible**. Due to a passage in Genesis describing the clothing that God fashioned for Adam and Eve upon expulsion from the Garden of Eden as "Breeches" (an antiquated form of "Britches"), some people referred to the Geneva Bible as the Breeches Bible.

The **Geneva Bible** was the first Bible to add numbered verses to the chapters, so that referencing specific passages would be easier. Every chapter was also accompanied by extensive marginal notes and references so thorough and complete that the Geneva Bible is also considered the first English "Study Bible". William Shakespeare quotes hundreds of times in his plays from the Geneva translation of the Bible. The Geneva Bible became the Bible of choice for over 100 years of English speaking Christians. Between **1560** and **1644** at least 144 editions of this Bible were published. Examination of the **1611** King James Bible shows clearly that its translators were influenced much more by the Geneva Bible, than by any other source. The Geneva Bible itself retains over **90%** of William Tyndale's original English translation. The Geneva in fact, remained more popular than the King James Version until **decades** after its original release in **1611**! The Geneva holds the honor of being the first Bible taken to America, and the Bible of the Puritans and Pilgrims. It is truly the *Bible of the Protestant Reformation*. Strangely, the famous Geneva Bible has been out-of-print since 1644, so the only way to obtain one is to either purchase an original printing of the Geneva Bible, or a less costly facsimile reproduction of the original 1560 Geneva Bible.

With the end of Queen Mary's bloody reign, the reformers could safely return to England. The Anglican Church, now under Queen Elizabeth I, reluctantly tolerated the printing and distribution of Geneva version Bibles in England. The marginal notes, which were vehemently against the institutional Church of the day, did not rest well with the rulers of the day. Another version, one with a less inflammatory tone was desired, and the copies of the Great Bible were getting to be decades old. In **1568**, a revision of the Great Bible known as the **Bishop's Bible** was introduced. Despite 19 editions being printed between **1568** and **1606**, this Bible, referred to as *the rough draft of the King James Version*, never gained much of a foothold of popularity among the people. The Geneva may have simply been too much to compete with.

By the **1580's**, the Roman Catholic Church saw that it had lost the battle to suppress the will of God: that His Holy Word be available in the English language. In **1582**, the Church of Rome surrendered their fight for "Latin only" and decided that if the Bible was to be available in English, they would at least have an official Roman Catholic English translation. And so, using the corrupt and inaccurate Latin Vulgate as the only source text, they went on to publish an English Bible with all the distortions and corruptions that Erasmus had revealed and warned of 75 years earlier. Because it was translated at the Roman Catholic College in the city of Rheims, it was known as the **Rheims NT** (also spelled Rhemes). The **Douay Old Testament** was translated by the Church of Rome in **1609** at the College in the city of Douay (also spelled Doway & Douai). The combined product is commonly referred to as the **"Doway/Rheims" Version**. In **1589**, Dr. William Fulke of Cambridge published the "Fulke's Refutation", in which he printed in parallel columns the Bishops Version alongside the Rheims Version, attempting to show the error and distortion of the Roman Church's corrupt compromise of an English version of the Bible.

The Rewards of Righteousness

(“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled” Lord Jesus)

Psalm 119:137-144

Section: 18th Hebrew letter ‘tse-de’; ‘t/s’ sound (*‘tsedek’ = righteousness, perfect holiness*)

Probable historic connection of this section with the life of David: **2 Samuel 7:1-8:14** – After David moved the ‘ark of the Covenant’ into the newly prepared tabernacle in Jerusalem (**2 Samuel 6**), he sought to build an elaborate permanent temple in which the glory of God could reside. Nathan the prophet impulsively told him to proceed, but God corrected Nathan and David about their plan and negated the idea (**2 Samuel 7:1-17**). Instead of being discouraged about this David praised God for His righteous plan to build the temple during the time of a son yet to born to him (**2 Samuel 7:12-17**). In response to this news, David praised and glorified God for His sovereign and righteous eternal plan (**2 Samuel 7:18-29**). David then channeled his zeal for God into military conquests extending Israel’s borders northward, eastward and southward, amassing materials that would be used for building of the future temple of God (**2 Samuel. 8:1-14**). It seems that these **8** verses of **Psalm 119** express David’s great thanksgiving for God’s righteous, sovereign plan and purpose for those who love His word.

The LORD’s Righteousness

(Yahweh alone, and all He says or does is perfect holiness)

*“**Righteousness are You, O LORD**, and **upright are Your judgments**.*

*Your testimonies, which You have commanded, are **righteous and very faithful**.” **119:137-138***

- If this is the time God told David not to build Him a temple, these are tremendously mature words of response to correction. But ‘a man after God’s own heart’ sees even God’s prohibitions as good.
- Imagine a child praising a parent as great and perfect who just told him or her to stop something?
- Are there parts of God’s Word that prohibit you from something? What would be a David-like way of praising God for not letting you do as you please? (*Hebrews 12:11-13*)
- Why is praise and worship such a good way to prevent wrong attitudes at correction? (Examples?)

The Word’s Righteousness

(God’s Word alone is inspired, infallible, inerrant and authoritative)

*“**My zeal has consumed me**, because **my enemies have forgotten Your words**.*

*Your word is very pure; therefore Your servant loves it. **I am small and despised**, yet **I do not forget Your precepts**.*

***Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness**; and **Your law is truth**.”*

119:139-142

The first line of this section expresses *righteousness indignation* felt toward those who backslide from God. Talk about how *righteous indignation* shows spiritual maturity.

- Should this holy zeal be expressed, or is it just a feeling you share with God?
- Talk about the inner contradiction believers feel about loving God’s holy Word so much, but being so personally inferior to its holy standards. How does this feeling about the Bible help us grow?
- Verse 141 must be about before David expanded Israel’s borders. Even though his realm was so small at the time and disrespected God’s precepts kept him satisfied and content. When times are lean in your life, how does the Word of God help you cope until you’re inspired to ‘go on’?

The Believer’s Righteousness

(God’s people alone are delighted, changed and enlivened by Him & His Word)

*“**Trouble and anguish have overtaken me**, yet **Your commandments are my delights**.*

*The righteousness of Your testimonies is everlasting; **Give me understanding and I shall live**.” **119:143-144***

- Discuss the power of God’s Word to ‘delight’ you when there’s ‘trouble and anguish’ in your life.
- How does studying God’s testimonies (*biblical ways He acted in situations similar to yours*) help you know what to do with your adversities?
- David prayed for understanding as to what God wanted him to do instead of build a temple. It was important for him to know God’s purpose for his life, now that it wasn’t to do that. God answered with David’s new aspiration (*expand borders and stock up building materials*). The next time your plans are stopped, how can these verses help you get new *righteous* direction for your life?