

Know the Scriptures - Part Six

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Of the many translations of the Bible from the original Hebrew and Greek we, of course, are primarily interested in the English versions because these are the Bibles with which we deal every day. English translations are usually divided into two groups according to age, those before the nineteenth century, and those thereafter.

Ancient Versions

Already since the middle of the seventh century, bits and pieces of the Bible began to be translated into English, but the first real effort was by Wyclif, who translated the whole Bible into his language from the Vulgate. This was in the days when it was considered sinful to think of the Scriptures in any language other than Latin. Consequently, after he died and after his Bible had appeared in 1384, authorities ordered his bones dug up and burned. Wyclif's Bible was first issued in printed form in 1580 in four volumes.

Tyndale translated the New Testament from the Greek and the Pentateuch and the Book of Jonah from the Hebrew. Since Latin was still the "sacred" language and since it was unlawful to translate the Bible into another language in England, this Englishman did his work on the European continent. His version was published at Worms, Germany in 1525. Because Tyndale wanted every English plowboy to understand the Scriptures, copies were smuggled into England in various ways. Tyndale was identified with Luther, who had just finished his monumental translation into the German language. Enemies of the Reformation, therefore, were also enemies of Tyndale. The man was persecuted, jailed and finally strangled and burned before he was able to complete the Old Testament. Most copies of his Bible were gathered together and burned in England.

The Coverdale Bible, published in 1535, was the first English Bible to circulate without official hindrance. In order to protect Coverdale, however, it was originally published outside England; two

years later it was printed on the island. The New Testament and some of the Old is Tyndale's work. From it we get such expressions as "*the valley of the shadow of death*" and "*I will fear no evil, for thou art with me.*"

In 1537, Matthew's Bible (this time authorized by the King of England) was published. Matthew, however, is a pen name used for protection again by a man named John Rogers. Rogers' Bible is about two thirds Tyndale and one third Coverdale. An interesting historical note is that, by 1543, the English Parliament passed a law forbidding women from reading the Bible (except noble or gentle women) under pain of death.

The Great Bible, called so because of its large size, is a revision of Matthew's Bible, published in 1539. This was the Bible for the Church, and that is usually where it was found chained to the reading desks because of its value and popularity. In fact, it was so popular that people, so the preachers sometimes complained, would rather read the Bible than listen to their sermons. Now, it seems, agitation against translating the Bible grew to such heights that Rogers, translator of Matthew's Bible, in 1555 was burned in the sight of "thousands of thrilled spectators."

The next to appear was the Geneva Bible in 1560, for 70 years THE Bible of England. This was the Bible for the family, the Bible of Shakespeare and the Pilgrims. It is also called "Breeches" Bible because of its translation of Genesis 3:7, "*They sewed fig tree leaves together and made themselves breeches.*" It was considered the best translation to that time, but its commentary presented the views of Calvin and the Reformation. It doubted the Apocrypha, used italics for words not in the original, was the first to use verse numberings, and used Roman type rather than Old English. From it the King James Version has, "*The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.*"

The Douay is the Roman Catholic version of the Bible and was translated from the Latin Vulgate. The New Testament appeared in 1582 and the Old in 1609-1610 in two volumes. The work was done by exiles in Douai, France who had escaped from the Protestant Queen Elizabeth.

The King James (KJV) is the classic of English Versions. It was suggested by a Puritan preacher and authorized by the King of England. It was to be a translation for both public and private use. It took a few decades before it was able to replace the Geneva Bible, but when it did, it reigned supreme. The KJV was to be a careful revision of existing translations in comparison with the original languages. Forty-eight men were divided into six groups, and each group's work was to be reviewed by the others. Certain definite rules were to be followed:

1. The Bishop's Bible of 1568 (a version translated by several bishops soon after the Geneva Bible with its Calvinistic leanings, but which failed to replace it) was to be consulted first, then others.
2. Preserve the chapter divisions whenever possible.
3. Omit marginal notes, because they had become a source of bias.
4. Words added for clarification were to be in italics.

The work of translating lasted five years and the publishing date was 1611. About nine-tenths of Tyndale's work is incorporated into the King James Version. Some of the motives for undertaking this translation are:

1. Since Tyndale, great strides had been made in Greek and Hebrew scholarship, so that King James could find a number of men capable to do the work.
2. This was the age of Shakespeare and Spenser when the desire for learning was at a high peak. It was felt that the revisors would endeavor to produce a scholarly work.
3. A good translation was needed.
4. Since this was not to be the work of one man or one group, and therefore not partial to one viewpoint, it could help to calm the religious turmoil that existed at that time.

The KJV had its drawbacks; consequently, a new edition appeared two years later with more than 400 alterations. For us today it also has some drawbacks:

1. It uses many out-dated words, some of which do not at all mean today what they meant in 1611.
2. Several important manuscripts have been discovered (Vatican, Sinaitic, Alexandrian and Ephraem) which were not available to the KJV translators. This will support those who feel that the accepted text from which the KJV was translated is inferior and that, therefore, the result is likewise inferior.
3. There are some mistranslations, but fortunately none which affect the articles of faith. The same cannot be said of some later versions.

One last ancient version, which is really only the New Testament, is Wesley's revision of the King James Version, appearing in 1755. It made some 12,000 changes in an effort to improve the sense by making it stronger, clearer, or more consistent with the context. This version divided the text of the Bible into paragraphs.