

## **Why Are There So Many Bibles?**

### ***Lesson 1: History Of The Translations***

Recently someone placed this question in our Q&A box, “Why are there so many Bibles? In other words, why NIV, New King James, etc? Is there a translation we should not use?” This question, and many like it, have no doubt been asked by many or at least pondered when one walks into their local Christian book store and is overwhelmed by the varieties of Bibles, all claiming to be the Word of God. Even among brethren you will find those who believe that the KJV is the ONLY version, those who claim that the NASB is the best translation, those who have begun using newer translations like the ESV or HCSB and those who are quite happy with their copy of the NIV. It’s no wonder that people question why there are so many Bibles.

It is outside of my authority to forbid someone from using a particular translation of the Bible. However, I hope to show how the variety of translations arose historically, how they differ in their translation philosophy (word for word vs. thought for thought), how they sometimes reflect a theological bias and ultimately give some recommendations for choosing a translation. Paul famously wrote, “*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.*” (2 Timothy 3:16–17 NAS95) Christians firmly believe this to be true, so let us keep this foremost in our mind as we examine the various translations of the Bible.

### **What God wants in a Bible translation**

Some may look at the heading above with some curiosity, after all where in the Scriptures does God say anything about Bible translations? Many may be aware that the Old Testament Scriptures, originally penned in Hebrew, were translated into Greek approximately 250 years before the birth of Christ. This translation, known to us as the Septuagint, was quoted by Jesus and the apostles showing their endorsement of the translation. However, as the New Testament closes we hear nothing of these letters being translated into other languages. Yet, God laid out two major principles that must be kept in mind as any translation of the Scriptures was attempted.

**First, a translation must accurately convey God’s will.** Our Lord commissioned the apostles with these words, “*All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*” (Matthew 28:18–20 NAS95) We must note the connection between Jesus’ authority, the making of disciples and the teaching of “all” that He commanded. The first principle for a translation is simple: it must contain the actual will of the Master, not the opinions of the translator. This point will be significant as our study progresses.

**Second, a translation must be understandable by the audience.** As we have already noted, the Lord commissioned the apostles to teach His word to the nations. It is significant that the first time the word was proclaimed by the apostles was after they were filled with the Holy Spirit, which imparted to them the ability to speak in different languages (Acts 2:1-4). Jews from across the world gathered to hear the apostles proclaim the Master’s will and each could hear the gospel in his “own language” (Acts 2:6,8,11). It should not surprise us that by the Second Century the New Testament had been translated from the original Greek into Latin, Syrian and Coptic. It was essential that the Master’s will be translated into the various languages spoken by the people!

These two principles have historically been the prime motives of those who translate the Word of God. Luther famously maintained that Christians were to be guided by “Scripture alone” and undertook translating the Scriptures into German. Furthermore, the history of English translations is very rich, filled with men who desired that English speaking people hear and understand the will of God! Following are a few important figures in the history of English translations:

- “Caedmon (AD 680) was a laborer at the monastery at Whitby in Yorkshire (Northumbria)... paraphrases and poems sung by Caedmon included the full story of Genesis, the story of Israel’s exodus, the incarnation, passion, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord, the coming of the Holy Spirit, the apostles’ teaching, and so on. His work became the basis for other poets, writers, and translators, as well as the popularized people’s Bible of the day, for his songs were memorized and disseminated throughout the land.”<sup>1</sup>
- “Aldhelm (AD 640-709) was the first Bishop of Sherborne in Dorset, southern England, and he translated the Psalter into Old English shortly after a.d. 700.”<sup>2</sup>
- “Egbert (AD 700) was the first to translate the gospels into English (c. 705).”<sup>3</sup>
- “The Venerable Bede (AD 674-735) translated the fourth gospel, probably to supplement the other three, which were done by Egbert. He was able to finish translating the gospel of John in the very hour of his death. Tradition relates that he was suffering much in his final days, but that he compelled his scribe to take dictation until the very last verse was translated. Then, he is reported to have chanted a “Gloria” as he passed on to the great Master.”<sup>4</sup>
- John Wycliff (AD 1320-84) would translate the entire Bible from the Latin Vulgate into English. His efforts brought him into conflict with the Catholic church and although he died peacefully, his bones were later dug up and burned as a heretic.
- “William Tyndale (AD 1492-1536) would be the first to translate the Bible out of the original Greek and Hebrew into English. “Before Tyndale finished his revision work, he became involved in a dispute wherein a man charged that Englishmen were ‘better without God’s Law than without the Pope’s.’ He replied with his now famous statement, ‘I defy the Pope and all his laws; if God spares my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou dost.’ Shortly after the completion of his revision, Tyndale was kidnapped, conveyed out of Antwerp, imprisoned in the fortress at Vilvorde in Flanders where he continued his translation of the Old Testament (Proverbs, the Prophets, etc.) before he was found guilty of heresy in August 1536. He was then “degraded from his priestly office, handed over to the secular power for execution, which was carried out on October 6 ... crying thus at the stake with the fervent zeal and a loud voice: ‘Lord, open the King of England’s eyes.’”<sup>5</sup>

### “Wait, that’s not in my Bible...”

Most of us have probably been in a Bible class when the teacher reads a passage and someone pipes up saying that a particular word or phrase is not in their Bible. In fact, this could happen quite often in a class where various translations (KJV, NASB, NIV, etc.) are being used. Most of these are inconsequential differences. Take Matthew 8:29 as an example:

- KJV, “And, behold, they cried out, saying, What have we to do with thee, Jesus, thou Son of God? art thou come hither to torment us before the time?”
- NAS95, “And they cried out, saying, ‘What business do we have with each other, Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?’”

However, there are a few occasions where the differences are more substantial. Phillip’s words to the Eunuch in Acts 8:37 serve as an excellent example. In the KJV this reads, “*And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.*” If one were reading from the NASB he would find vs. 37 in brackets with a footnote saying “early mss do not contain this

<sup>1</sup> Geisler, N. L., & Nix, W. E. (1996). *A general introduction to the Bible* (Rev. and expanded.) (544). Chicago: Moody Press.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

v.” Other translations such as the ESV and NIV do not include the verse in the main text, including it only as a footnote. Why is this? Why do our translations differ?

The answer to this question is found in the differences in the Greek manuscript families that lie behind the various translations. Note this explanation of a manuscript family: “In the process of examining sources to establish the true original Greek text of the New Testament, an interesting feature emerges. The differing readings tend to group themselves into ‘families’ or ‘text-types’ in accordance with the way the sources agree with each other. ‘Agree’ means that in numbers of passages where manuscript sources retain different readings, manuscripts of the same text-type will agree with each other in supporting the same readings, but they will differ from manuscripts of other families in the readings they support.”<sup>6</sup> The differences in these manuscript families were due to scribal errors. Sometimes a scribe would accidentally make a mistake in copying from the original, or he might consciously change the text thinking there was a mistake in the original. Sometimes a scribe might even add to the text of one gospel, to bring it into harmony with something that is written in another of the gospel accounts. It is important to note that these scribal errors and additions do not change any of the theological truths of the New Testament, but they do explain why the over 5000 discovered Greek manuscripts contain some differences. Now, if a scribe made changes to a manuscript as he copied, it is highly likely that other scribes would eventually copy his (now altered) copy. This would result in any number of manuscripts containing the same errors and changes, hence a “manuscript family.”

There are several manuscript families that can be grouped by geographical setting, but for the purpose of this study we will focus on two families. The first is the Alexandrian family of manuscripts. While relatively few manuscripts of this family have been found, they are the oldest manuscripts available to us. Manuscripts of the Alexandrian family include the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus. Both manuscripts contain almost all 66 books of the Bible and date to approximately AD 350. The second manuscript family that we will note is the Byzantine. While manuscripts of the Byzantine family are not as old as the Alexandrian, they are far more numerous. “This dominance is explainable perhaps by the relocation of the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to Asia Minor in the fourth century, and perhaps by growing disuse of the Greek languages in areas outside the Byzantine area (Turkey and Greece in modern times) in these early centuries of the Christian era. In other words, the only Greek manuscripts being produced were in the territory where the Byzantine family was influential.”<sup>7</sup> As we shall see, the existence of these different manuscript families would ultimately result in the numerous translations we have today.



### **How did the King James Version become so popular?**

It is only within the last generation that the KJV has been replaced as the dominant English translation, a dominance that traces back to the prevalence of the Byzantine manuscript family. “When Erasmus edited the first printed Greek New Testament in the early sixteenth century, the only manuscripts available to him were late ones of a Byzantine type. Tyndale depended on this Greek New Testament when he translated his New Testament, the first to be translated from Greek to English. Hence, it was inevitable that Tyndale’s work carried this family resemblance. From then on, practically all new English translations were simply revisions of works done earlier. The Tyndale tradition of dependence on the Byzantine text-type continued through the King James

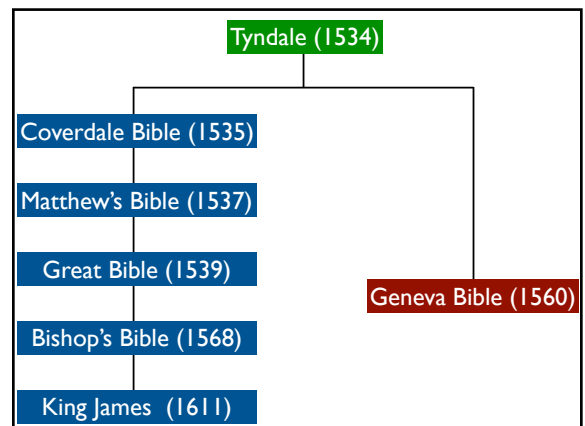
<sup>6</sup> Thomas, R. L. (2000). *How to choose a Bible version : An introductory guide to English translations* (56). Fearn, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

Version of 1611. The King James Version continued its exclusive reign in the English-speaking Protestant church for approximately three and a half centuries.”<sup>8</sup>

While the KJV has fallen out of favor among many English speakers, we must pause to consider the importance of this translation. Yes, the language sounds foreign to younger generations, but it is the language of Shakespeare and a beautiful text that has survived 400 years. More importantly, the KJV was born out of the desire to present the will of God in a manner understandable to its audience. As was stated earlier, Tyndale was the first to translate the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into English. Through the following years his work was amended resulting in numerous translations. By the start of the 17th Century two English translations had become dominant: the Bishop’s Bible and the Geneva Bible. The Bishop’s Bible was the standard bible found in English churches, while the Geneva bible was preferred by the common people. The Geneva Bible also contained marginal notes that were highly calvinistic, thus unacceptable to the church of England and the King. King James came to the throne in 1603 and in 1604 he commissioned 54 scholars to revise the Bishop’s Bible. It is important to note that this was not a completely new translation from the Greek, but a revision of the Bishop’s Bible which itself was a revision of Tyndale’s earlier work. “To illustrate how minor their changes were, it has been estimated that ninety to ninety-two percent of the King James New Testament is still the work of William Tyndale, even after revisions represented in Matthew’s Bible, the Great Bible, and the Bishops’ Bible.”<sup>9</sup>

While many retained their preference for the Geneva Bible, the KJV slowly overtook its place in the affections of the English people until it became the dominant translation in both England and America. It achieved this prominence because of the sincerity of motive behind its translation. “The need to which the King James Version responded is interesting. The famous Hampton Court conference in 1604 had as its purpose to determine what was wrong with the church. The only significant action of the conference was the following resolution: ‘That a translation be made of the whole Bible, as consonant as can be to the original Hebrew and Greek; and this to be set out and printed, without any marginal notes, and only to be used in all Churches of England in time of divine service.’ The resolution passed, but not unanimously. The king received the motion with great enthusiasm.”<sup>10</sup> The translators of the KJV succeeded in giving the English speaking people a Bible that was both faithful to the original Byzantine manuscripts and that could be read and understood by the people.



## So, why are there so many translations now?

When Erasmus printed the first Greek text he had only manuscripts from the Byzantine family at his disposal, but there were older manuscripts in existence that Erasmus knew nothing about. As we noted earlier, manuscripts from the Alexandrian family are older than the Byzantine manuscripts, but Erasmus (and by extension Tyndale and the King James translators) knew nothing about these. The two most important Alexandrian manuscripts, the Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus, were not available to scholars until the late 19th Century. As these became available, scholars and translators began comparing these manuscripts with the Byzantine text at the heart of the KJV. The two most important of these were B.F. Westcott and F.J.A. Hort. These men compiled what is known as a “critical text” of the New Testament. The Greek text they produced did not rely on any one manuscript family, but where the Alexandrian and Byzantine texts differed, they generally

<sup>8</sup> Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, R. L. (2000). *How to choose a Bible version : An introductory guide to English translations* (19). Fearn, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications.

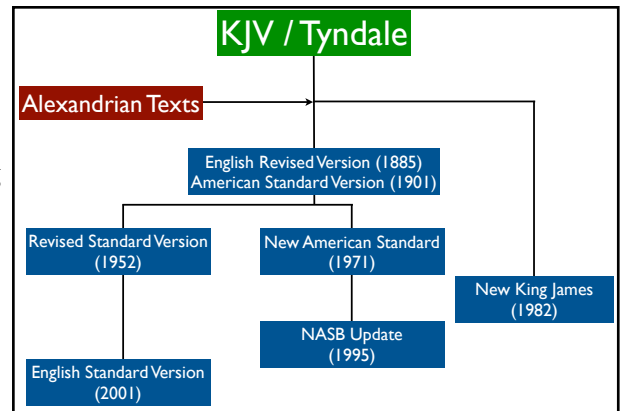
<sup>10</sup> Ibid (25)

preferred the Alexandrian. Their philosophy was that older texts were to be trusted more than the more numerous texts produced later. While some, mainly “King James only” advocates, are critical of their efforts, these men were sincere in their efforts to provide the people with a “restored” text of the New Testament. “To be faithful to such light as could be enjoyed in our own day was the utmost that we could desire. how far we have fallen short of this standard, we are well aware: yet we are bold to say that none of the shortcomings are due to lack of anxious and watchful sincerity... Critics of the Bible, if they have been taught by the Bible, are unable to forget that the duty of guileless workmanship is never superseded by any other. From Him who is at once the supreme Fountain of truth and the all-wise Lord of its uses they have received both the materials of knowledge and the means by which they are wrought into knowledge: into His hands, and His alone, when the working is over, must they render back that which they have first and last received.”<sup>11</sup>

It was also during this time that new English translations of the Bible began to appear. The goal of the translators was twofold. First, they took advantage of the manuscripts that had been discovered since the publication of the KJV. Second, since the English language had changed over the centuries, they determined to present God’s word in language more easily understood by the people. These translators were motivated by the same noble aspirations that had prompted the translators of the KJV: to deliver the will of the Master to the people in language they could understand!

Many of our new translations are not completely new, but the result of amending the King James text.

The English Revised Version (1885) and American Standard Version (1901) were the first major revisions of the KJV, amending it with revisions from Greek manuscripts not available to the translators of the KJV. The Revised Standard Version appeared in 1952, and it was amended in 2001 resulting in the English Standard Version. The American Standard Version was amended in 1971 resulting in the New American Standard Version, which was updated in 1995. If one reads the prefaces of these modern translations, you see how they descend from the work of Tyndale and the subsequent work of the KJV translators:



- “In the history of English Bible translations, the King James Version is the most prestigious. This time-honored version of 1611, itself a revision of the Bishops’ Bible of 1568, became the basis for the English Revised Version appearing in 1881 (New Testament) and 1885 (Old Testament). The American counterpart of this last work was published in 1901 as the American Standard Version. The ASV, a product of both British and American scholarship, has been highly regarded for its scholarship and accuracy. Recognizing the values of the American Standard Version, the Lockman Foundation felt an urgency to preserve these and other lasting values of the ASV by incorporating recent discoveries of Hebrew and Greek textual sources and by rendering it into more current English. Therefore, in 1959 a new translation project was launched, based on the time-honored principles of the ASV and KJV. The result is the New American Standard Bible.”<sup>12</sup>
- The English Standard Version (ESV) stands in the classic mainstream of English Bible translations over the past half-millennium. The fountainhead of that stream was William Tyndale’s New Testament of 1526; marking its course were the King James Version of 1611 (KJV), the English Revised Version of 1885 (RV), the American Standard Version of 1901 (ASV), and the Revised Standard Version of 1952 and 1971 (RSV). In that stream, faithfulness to the text and vigorous pursuit of accuracy were combined with

<sup>11</sup> Westcott B.F. and F.J.A. Hort (1888). *Introduction To The New Testament In The Original Greek* (323-324). Hendrickson Publishers.

<sup>12</sup> *New American Standard Bible : 1995 update*. 1995. LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

simplicity, beauty, and dignity of expression. Our goal has been to carry forward this legacy for a new century.<sup>13</sup>

In 1982 the New King James was published. This translation was based on the same Greek texts as the KJV, but the language was modernized. Furthermore, footnotes of other possible readings were included.

However, other translations do not stand in the tradition of Tyndale and the KJV, but are completely new translations. The New International Version, New Living Translation, Holman Christian Standard, The Message, etc. are all translated from critical Greek texts like the one originally produced by Westcott and Hort. The preface to the NIV states, “The complete NIV Bible was first published in 1978. It was a completely new translation made by over a hundred scholars working directly from the best available Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts.”<sup>14</sup>

## King James only?

For centuries, The King James Version was the dominant English translation, so it is not surprising that some still prefer this grand translation over its more recent counterparts. However, some of its more radical devotees maintain that the KJV is the only translation that should be used. Following are some brief responses to their main arguments.

- The manuscripts behind the KJV are more numerous. While true, these Byzantine manuscripts are not the oldest manuscripts. Furthermore, the political climate of the Byzantine Empire explains the abundance of manuscripts belonging to the Byzantine family.
- The providential care of God. “Another reason advanced to support the Textus Receptus is God’s providential care. His providence provided for the preservation of this family in English in the form of the King James Version. The other families were not translated into English early because they were not inspired, says this theory. This line of reasoning is one-sided. It fails to notice that God’s providence provided for the preservation of the Alexandrian and Western families too, text-types preserved in languages other than English. People in other parts of the world have preserved and used those two continuously since the second century. We must accept that God in His providence has seen fit to preserve several families of readings, not just one.”<sup>15</sup>
- Older Byzantine texts do not exist because they were worn out from frequent use. While this could be true, it is pure speculation and not based on fact.

Furthermore, the text of the KJV has been revised numerous times over the years. “the old King James Version underwent many revisions after its initial publication. The edition of 1769, which became the standard of the King James Version used today, differed from the 1611 edition in an estimated 75,000 details.”<sup>16</sup> If the KJV is the only version we should use, which edition? Is the 1611 edition the one to use, or the 1769? What about the people who used the 1611 edition, did they miss out on some truth that was not made clear until 1769? What about people who don’t speak English? Are they missing out on God’s truth since they cannot read the KJV? Such questions have no answers, but are real questions for those who maintain that a Christian should only read the KJV.

Finally consider the words of the men who translated the KJV. They were under no illusion that their work was definitive, acknowledging the work of translation that had occurred before them, and certainly would continue to be done after them.

- “And to the same effect say we, that we are so far off from condemning any of their labours that travailed before us in this kind, either in this land, or beyond sea, either in King Henry’s time, or King Edward’s, (if

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<sup>13</sup> *The Holy Bible : English standard version.* 2001. Wheaton: Standard Bible Society.

<sup>14</sup> *The New International Version.* 2011. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas, R. L. (2000). *How to choose a Bible version : An introductory guide to English translations* (62). Fearn, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* (29)

there were any translation, or correction of a translation, in his time) or Queen Elizabeth's of ever renowned memory, that we acknowledge them to have been raised up of God for the building and furnishing of his Church, and that they deserve to be had of us and of posterity in everlasting remembrance."<sup>17</sup>

- "Truly, good Christian Reader, we never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one; (for then the imputation of Sixtus had been true in some sort, that our people had been fed with gall of dragons instead of wine, with whey instead of milk;) but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones one principal good one, not justly to be excepted against; that hath been our endeavour, that our mark."<sup>18</sup>
- "the very meanest translation of the Bible in English set forth by men of our profession (for we have seen none of theirs of the whole Bible as yet) containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God: as the King's speech which he uttered in Parliament, being translated into French, Dutch, Italian, and Latin, is still the King's speech, though it be not interpreted by every translator with the like grace, nor peradventure so fitly for phrase, nor so expressly for sense, every where."<sup>19</sup>

Later in our study we will observe some principles that will help us choosing a Bible translation and place some caution on the use of some newer versions. There are some translations that I believe have changed the teaching of the Master, but several of our English translations adhere faithfully to the principles of giving the Master's will to the people in language they can understand. The KJV is a wonderful translation with a rich history, but it is NOT the only translation that conveys the will of God.

**Our next lesson will focus on the difference between "word for word" and "thought for thought" translations.**

Joshua Creel  
March 20, 2011

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<sup>17</sup> *The Cambridge Paragraph Bible: Of the Authorized English Version*. 2006 (cxi–cxii). Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid* (cxv)

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* (cxiii)