

## TREDTRI (Monday & Wednesday Class)

### 6. Translations of the Bible

**Introduction:** The Bible was *not* written in 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**. Thus, what most people today read is *not* the original text, but other people's *translations* of the Bible.

But why are there so many different English translations of the Bible? And why can't churches or scholars agree on just one translation? The following reasons can be given:

#### 6.1 Reasons for the variety of translations

6.1.1 ***No original manuscript of any biblical book has survived.*** All of the texts written by the biblical authors themselves have been lost or destroyed over the centuries. All we have are copies of copies of copies, most of them copied hundreds of years after the original texts were written.

6.1.2 ***The extant manuscripts contain numerous textual variations.*** 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).

6.1.3 ***Important old manuscripts were found in the last 200 years.*** Recent discoveries of older manuscripts (esp. the Dead Sea Scrolls) have helped scholars get *closer* to the original text of the Bible, so that modern translations can be more accurate than medieval ones.

6.1.4 ***The meanings of some biblical texts are unknown or uncertain.*** Some Hebrew or Greek words occur only once in the Bible, but nowhere else in ancient literature, so their exact meanings are unknown; and some biblical phrases are ambiguous, with more than one possible meaning.

6.1.5 ***Ancient languages are very different from modern languages.*** Not only do Ancient Hebrew and Greek use completely different alphabets and vocabularies, but their grammatical rules and structures (word order, prepositions, conjugations of verbs, etc.) are very different from modern English.

6.1.6 ***Every "translation" is already inevitably an "interpretation".*** Anyone who knows more than one modern language realizes that "translations" often have meanings that are slightly different from the original, and that different people inevitably translate the same texts in slightly different ways.

6.1.7 ***All living languages continually change and develop over time.*** Not only is "Modern English" very different from 16th century English, but the language used in Great Britain, America, Australia, and other countries are slightly different from each other (in spelling, grammar, idioms, word meanings, etc.).

6.1.8 ***Cultural developments require new sensitivities in language.*** Recent awareness of the evils of racism, sexism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of discrimination have shown that certain language is slanted or biased, with corresponding efforts to develop more "inclusive" language alternatives. Thus, ***no***

*translation is "perfect"* (none of them can be completely "literal" or 100% identical to the original texts) and *there is **no** "best" translation* (all of them have some advantages and some drawbacks).

## 6.2. Translations and Editions of the Bible

**6.2.1 Itala, or Old Latin** - Christians in the Western Roman Empire (Italy & environs) began translating the Christian scriptures (both OT & NT) into their own native language, Latin, during the 3rd and 4th centuries. The OT books were usually translated from the LXX (the Greek translation and expansion of the HB - see above), while the NT books were translated from the original Greek texts.

**6.2.2 Vulgate** - a Latin version of both the Old and New Testaments, translated in the late 4th and early 5th centuries by St. Jerome at the request of Pope Damasus; it became the "official" Latin version of the Catholic Church for many centuries (i.e., the one used for the readings proclaimed during the Mass, as found in the official "Lectionaries"), intended to replace the various different "Old Latin" versions.

**6.2.3 Medieval Translations** - Since the Vulgate was the dominant edition of the Christian Bible in the West from the 5th century onward, the earliest translations of the Bible into Anglo-Saxon, German, English, and other European languages were all translations of the Latin Vulgate, rather than being produced from the original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek for the various books of the OT; Greek for the books of the NT). In other words, they were translations of translations!

**B.4 Modern Translations** - From the time of the Reformation onward (16th century), scholars have stressed the need to translate each biblical book from its original language, as far as possible. That is, rather than translating the book of Isaiah from its version in the Latin Vulgate or the Greek Septuagint, one should use the original Hebrew version of Isaiah. One serious difficulty still remains, however, when there are several significantly different Hebrew versions of certain books, as is the case with Isaiah. There is not only the "Masoretic text" (medieval Jewish text), but several different Hebrew versions were discovered in the 20th century among the Dead Sea Scrolls.

### Summary Chart

Full Name	Abbrev.	Language	Origin	Contents	NT?
<b>Hebrew Bible</b>	HB, or TaNaK	mostly <b>Hebrew</b> originals; some later parts in Aramaic	Hebrew-speaking Ancient Israel (between ca. 1300 and 300 BCE)	24 books	no
<b>Septuagint</b>	LXX	mostly <b>Greek</b> translations of HB books; some additional books written in Greek	Greek-speaking Jewish Diaspora (Alexandria, Egypt - ca. 250 BCE)	46 to 53 books	no

<b>Old Testament</b>	OT	originally <b>Hebrew</b> , Aramaic, & Greek; later Latin and <b>all other translations</b>	Christian name for Jewish Scriptures (Cath & Orth use LXX; Prots use HB)	39 to 53 books	No
<b>New Testament</b>	NT	all originally <b>Greek</b> ; later Latin and <b>all other translations</b>	Greek-speaking early Christians (Eastern Roman Empire; 1st century CE)	27 books	yes
<b>Vulgate</b>	Vulg.	<b>Latin</b> translations from the various originals	Latin-speaking Western Christianity (St. Jerome; ca. 380-420 CE)	OT & NT	yes

### 6.3. Basic Stages in the Development of the English Bible

#### 6.3.1 John Wycliffe

The first complete English version dates to around 1382 and is the work of John Wycliffe, who worked from the Latin Vulgate translation rather than the original Hebrew and Greek. Although it was enthusiastically received by the public in England, church and state authorities responded by banning Wycliffe's Bible and condemning to death any who used it. Nevertheless, 170 copies have survived.<sup>1</sup>

#### 6.3.2 William Tyndale

About 150 years later, William Tyndale translated the New Testament and parts of the Old Testament from the original languages. Denied support by the Bishop of London, Tyndale received funds from a London civic official. He had to complete his work in Germany due to church pressure. When the translation reached England it was attacked by church authorities, who said that it would lead to vice, corruption, and moral depravity. Only a few copies of the original Tyndale translation have survived. However, until the advent of modern translation, all English versions of the New Testament were essentially revisions of Tyndale's work.<sup>2</sup>

#### 6.3.3 Miles Coverdale

The first complete English Bible to be printed was translated by Miles Coverdale and published, with the apparent blessing of King Henry VIII, in 1535. Coverdale then published the Great Bible (1539) under the license of the king and with a foreword by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer. Under King Henry's daughter, the Catholic Mary Tudor, Cranmer and other advocates of the Great Bible were executed, and Coverdale was forced to flee. However, the Great Bible gained

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<sup>1</sup> Hauer, *Introduction to the Bible*, 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

popularity and was revised by Protestant refugees from Mary's persecution as the Geneva Bible (1560) and the Bishops' bible (1568).<sup>3</sup>

#### 6.3.4 Douay Version (1606-1610)

In response to the growing popularity of English translations, Roman Catholic leaders joined together in support of a new English version, the result being the Douay Version.<sup>4</sup>

#### 6.3.5 King James Bible

In an effort to bring unity to an increasingly divided English church, King James I ordered a new translation of the Bible by the best scholars in the land. Apparently, forty-seven were involved, divided into several working groups. The result was a work based on the Tyndale-Coverdale versions, but with greatly heightened literary polish. The new Bible was not immediately accepted, but gradually the King James Bible (Authorized Version, 1611) acquired the status as the most widely used English Bible among Protestants.<sup>5</sup>

#### 6.3.6 Authorized Revised Version (1885) and American Standard Version (1901)

In the nineteenth century, important new manuscripts of the Bible in the original languages were discovered, making new translations desirable. A revision of the Authorized Version (AV), based on new evidence, was produced by an interdenominational group of scholars in England and published as the Authorized Version in 1885. An American revision, called the American Standard Version, appeared in 1901.<sup>6</sup>

#### 6.3.7 Today's English Version

The discovery of papyrus letters and other everyday documents of Greco-Roman life showed that the Greek of the New Testament was nonliterary and conversational. This sparked a surge of translations in the twentieth century that attempted to use a simpler style than the AV. For example, in 1976 the United Bible Societies published the Bible in *Today's English Version*.<sup>7</sup>

#### 6.3.8 The Revised Standard Version (RSV)

A revision of the 1885 and 1901 Standard versions was carried out in America during the 1930s and 1940s and published in 1952 by the National Council of Churches of Christ in America. Intended to embody the best results of modern scholarship while retaining the classic English style of the King James Version, the Revised Standard Version (RSV) was an immediate success and continues to be widely used. A committee of Roman Catholic scholars deemed the RSV appropriate for Catholic use. An ecumenical edition was issued in which Catholic authorities requested only the insertion of a note in the gospels defending the doctrine of the

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

perpetual virginity of Mary. A continuing Standard Bible Committee of outstanding scholars periodically revises the RSV to keep it current with recent findings. It is dominated by Protestant scholars' representative of the member churches of the National Council of Churches. However, it also includes Representative Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Jewish scholars. The committee produced a complete revision of the RSV entitled the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) in 1989.<sup>8</sup>

### 6.3.9 Other Current English Translations

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls was another impetus for new translations. In the past few decades there have been a number of new English translations by scholars, none of which has yet attained the popularity of the AV or the RSV.

## 6.4. Translation Philosophies:

Generally, there are two basic philosophies or styles of *translation*, “formal correspondence” and “dynamic equivalence.”

**D.1 Formal Correspondence Translations** try to stick as closely as possible to the original wording and word-order of the Hebrew and Greek texts. Thus they may seem more accurate or "literal," but often require detailed explanations in footnotes to avoid being misinterpreted by modern readers. They are good for in-depth academic study of the Bible, but may be less suited for public proclamation, since they can be difficult to understand when heard or read aloud.

**D.2 Dynamic Equivalence Translations** try to put the sense of the original text into the best modern English, remaining close to the ideas expressed but not always following the exact wording or word-order of the Hebrew or Greek originals. Thus they may seem less “literal” than the formal correspondence translations, but can be just as “faithful” to the original text, and are therefore generally better suited for public proclamation or liturgical use.

For example, the system of measuring time in ancient Israel was very different from our own. They counted twelve hours from sunrise to sundown, and subdivided the night into three (or sometimes four) "watches." Thus the same time that is called "the eleventh hour" in a formal correspondence translation would be translated "five o'clock in the afternoon" in a dynamic equivalence version.<sup>9</sup>

### An update on the revision of some English translations of the Bible:

Older Translations:	Updated Translations:
Douay-Rheims (no abbrev. - 1582 NT; 1609-10 OT)	(some revisions 1749 and 1941, but no recent revision)

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

King James Version (KJV - 1611)	New King James Version (NKJV - 1979-82)
Revised Standard Version (RSV - 1946 NT; 1952 OT)	New Revised Standard Version (NRSV - 1989)
Amplified Bible (AB - 1958 NT; 1964-65 OT)	(combined edition reprinted in 1987, but not revised)
New English Bible (NEB - 1961)	Revised English Bible (REB - 1992)
Today's English Version (TEV - 1966)	Contemporary English Version (CEV - 1996)
Jerusalem Bible (JB - 1966)	New Jerusalem Bible (NJB - 1985)
New American Bible (NAB - 1970)	(only the NT & Psalms revised so far - 1987)
New International Version (NIV - 1973 NT; 1978 OT)	(not yet revised)

### 6.5. Translations Grouped by "Translation Philosophy":

6.5.1 "*Formal Correspondence*" translations: Douay-Rheims, KJV/NKJV, RSV/NRSV, NAB, NIV

6.5.2 "*Dynamic Equivalence*" translations: NEB/REB, TEV/CEV, JB/NJB

6.5.3 The Amplified Bible is neither (or both); it "amplifies" the text by adding lots of extra words & phrases.

### 6.6. Translations Sponsored/Approved by various Churches:

6.6.1 "*Catholic*" translations: Douay-Rheims, JB/NJB, NAB, CCB

6.6.2 "*Protestant*" translations: KJV/NKJV, TEV/CEV, NIV

6.6.3 "*Ecumenical*" translations (approved and used by *both* Catholics and Protestants): NEB/REB, RSV/NRSV

### 6.7 Additional Information:

6.7.1 The Authorized Version (AV) is another name for the KJV; the Good News Bible (GNB) is exactly the same as TEV.

6.7.2 If you use other translations, try to find out *when* they were translated, by whom, and what translation philosophy was used.

6.7.3 Many other **editions** of the Bible are based on the above **translations**; the *Oxford Annotated Bible* uses the RSV, the *Catholic Study Bible* uses the NAB, and the *HarperCollins Study Bible* uses the NRSV.