

A Brief History of the English New Testament: What every Christian should know about the English language Bible.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Early Years	1
The Canon of Scripture	3
The Greek New Testament	3
Desiderius Erasmus	3
John Mill	4
Text types	4
Critical texts	5
Early English bibles	6
John Wycliffe - 1328-1384	6
William Tyndale - 1494-1536	7
The Geneva bible	8
King James	9
Modern English Translations	11
Conclusion	13

Introduction

Comments and corrections welcome. However before you dash off an email enumerating my errors please bear in mind that I am not a professional historian, just an English speaking Christian fascinated in the story of how the English language bible came about and thankful to the brave men who risked so much to make it possible. This short article looks at a bit of history that every English speaking Christian should know but few do. How did we get the book we read every day and why was much effort spent trying to prevent it? Its a story of politics, oppression and even murder.

The Early Years

We need to start at very beginning. The New Testament is a collection of letters, gospels, some history (Acts) and one apocalypse (Revelation). It was written over about a forty year period in the first century AD. Despite the order in our New Testament the earliest writings are actually Paul's letters - probably 1 Thessalonians about 52AD followed by Galatians, the gospels were written from

about 66AD onwards and Revelation was the last written around 80-90AD. This eclectic mix makes up the New Testament.

The gospels appear, on casual reading, to be written like short histories but we need to be careful not to let our modern views bias how we read documents written two thousand years ago by people who were not necessarily writing documents for historical record. For example there is some evidence that Matthew's gospel was written as a lectionary with readings based around the Jewish year as the order within the gospel can be aligned with the Jewish calendar. The first part of John's gospel was written to mirror the creation story in Genesis.

We know the earliest documents were the letters and we know these and other documents were passed around from Church to Church. Paul's letter to the Colossians says as much.

(16) And when this letter has been read among you, have it read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and see that you read also the letter from Laodicea.

— Colossians 4 NRSV

The letter from Laodicea is probably lost although it might be the letter we call Ephesians. It is possible that the letter to Laodicea was passed on to the Ephesians and it just happens that the copy that survived was the Ephesian's copy.

In passing these documents around they were copied over and over. The people doing this copying in the early days were not usually professional scribes but interested Church members. This brings us to a crucial piece of understanding in the bible story - the texts we have contain variant readings, they are not all the same. The earliest period is when most variations in the texts are found, later documents, professionally copied, were more consistent. So the historical documents we have are not always exactly the same and dealing with these variations is a challenge we are still dealing with today.

What are these variations? The vast majority are simple and obvious errors: spelling mistakes, missing words sometimes a skipped line. Some changes were deliberate to support a specific view point. Some changes are "*corrections*" based on the scribes belief that there was a mistake in the text he was copying which may have been wrong. A classic example of this is in Romans 16.

(7) Greet Andronicus and Junia, my relatives who were in prison with me; they are prominent among the apostles, and they were in Christ before I was.

— Romans 16, NRSV

Junia is a woman's name and this was recognised by the early Church fathers as such. However a medieval scribe thought it must be a mistake, after all how could a woman be an apostle? So he helpfully changed it to the male name (Junias). This change found its way into twentieth century critical texts and hence early versions of the NIV and other translations have the male name. Later in the twentieth century it was noted that the male name Junias didn't actually exist in any Greek literature and was not found in the earlier texts and the "*correction*" was changed back. The latest

NIV is correct and has the female name. A classic example of someone's doctrine and theology getting in the way of their copying or translating correctly.

The Canon of Scripture

So why are the books in the New Testament the ones we have considering there were lots of books and letters that are not in the New Testament that were in circulation in the first and second century?

The first canon of the New Testament was laid down by Marcion around 140AD. However there were quite a few issues. Marcion included only the letters of Paul and the gospel of Luke. Marcion believed the God the Old Testament and God of the New Testament were different and edited the text of the books in his canon to ensure they reflected his views. He was later declared a heretic.

Irenaeus in 180AD was the next major figure to have some form of defined canon. His canon had four gospels, Acts and Paul's letters. He did not include Hebrews or Philemon and he included the Shepherd of Hermas which we don't have today.

The Muratorian fragment is a late second century fragment that is the earliest known record that contains a list of books similar to our current list of 27 books.

The first list of books that matches exactly our current 27 books was from Athanasius in 367AD. Note that for over 300 years there was no definitive list we would recognise, there was no New Testament as we know it today.

The list of 27 books was accepted for over a thousand years and was not really questioned until the reformation. Martin Luther tried to remove Hebrews, James, Jude and Revelation from the bible but the changes were not accepted by his followers. He famously called James "*a right strawy epistle*". Even today, the books Luther tried to remove are at the back of the German language Lutheran bible. He moved them to the back of the bible but didn't quite push them out.

The Orthodox Church has the same New Testament canon as the western Churches. There is surprising unity on the books of the New Testament, where Churches disagree is over what should be in the Old Testament - but that's another story.

The Greek New Testament

Desiderius Erasmus

To understand the development of the English language Bible we need to take a detour and look at the Greek New Testament and particularly a Dutch scholar called Desiderius Erasmus. Erasmus was the first person to publish a Greek New Testament.

Up to this date any attempt to translate the Bible into English had been based on Jerome's Latin Vulgate Bible which was completed in 405AD. But the original texts were in Greek so you ended up with a translation of a translation which simply multiplies problems and misunderstandings. Jerome's Latin Bible was the only Bible recognised by the Church for over a thousand years but it

was a translation into a dead language understood by very few people and had many problems. But you have to give credit to a translation that remains a standard for over a thousand years!

Erasmus was not the first to produce a Greek New Testament, Spanish scholars had produced the Complutensian Polyglot; a scary sounding name but it simply means it came from the town whose Latin name was Complutum and polyglot because it had the Latin alongside the Hebrew for the Old Testament and the Greek for the New Testament. However the polyglot was not yet published and Erasmus, who had thought of publishing a Greek New Testament for many years, saw the opportunity to publish before the polyglot, but he would need to be quick if he wanted to be first.

Erasmus went to Basel in Switzerland looking for suitable Greek texts. He didn't find many but he found enough manuscripts from the late medieval period to cover most of the books in the New Testament. He was missing Revelation and for that he borrowed a manuscript from a German friend, unfortunately the last page was missing so Erasmus filled in the gap by translating the Latin Vulgate back into Greek; this gives Erasmus's text one of its many quirks - the last page in Erasmus's Greek text is not found in any ancient Greek manuscript - Erasmus back worked it from the Latin to fill a gap.

Erasmus's Greek New Testament was published in 1515 and was a parallel Latin and Greek New Testament. Erasmus himself said the text was "*rushed out rather than edited*". The Erasmus Greek New Testament was prepared in a hurry and based on just a few late manuscripts. However it was ground breaking in that it gave scholars access to the original language in an accessible, printed form for the first time and although it wasn't based on the best quality texts it became the basis for all English Bibles for the next three hundred years

The Erasmus Greek Text was based on documents that came to be known as the "*Textus Receptus*".

John Mill

During the sixteenth and seventeenth century several other Greek New Testaments were published but none differed much from Erasmus. Some scholars noted that various ancient texts did sometimes vary but it was not until 1707 that John Mill published a New Testament text that included details of all the variant readings from around 100 different manuscripts. Mill also studied how the early Church fathers quoted the New Testament and he studied early Syrian and Coptic texts. Mill spent thirty years collecting data and finally published a text with 30,000 variants identified.

What Mill showed was that the Textus Receptus was not the definitive and perfect text that many scholars had assumed and the exact wording of the original Greek was not always obvious.

Text types

The original text of the New Testament is not known exactly, there are texts with minor variations, John Mill clearly showed that. This was not a new discovery, Origen noted as early as the third century that different copies of certain texts did not agree. One problem scholars have with the Bible compared to most other ancient documents is that there are *so many* documents - typically orders of magnitude more than any other ancient text. Most ancient texts of famous philosophers, poets or playwrights are known because a handful of texts survived. The Bible is different because

there are hundreds of early copies of the New Testament and thousands of fragments. Recently it was estimated that there were 5800 important Greek manuscripts and about another 20,000 texts in other languages that have been studied and catalogued and more are found every year. A single text can be anything from a few words on a fragment through to a complete bible.

Because there are so many texts scholars group them. All those in a certain group will generally share the same variant readings. The main groups are:

Alexandrian

Also called the Neutral or minority type. These texts tend to be early, usually from the 2nd to 4th century. The readings are generally shorter and less elaborate than later texts. They mainly originate from around the Alexandrian Church. The texts appear to be uniform and the result of careful copying. Most modern translations are based on the Alexandrian text including the NIV, NASB, NRSV and ESV.

Western

Date from the 3rd to 9th century. They are widely spread, less controlled in the copying and sometimes paraphrase passages.

Byzantine

Dating from the 5th to 16th century. This group represents 95% of all texts and hence is known as the majority text. The Textus Receptus is in this group. It is the basis of the King James, Geneva, Tyndale and several modern translations.

Most modern translations are based on Alexandrian type texts. So if the Byzantine (majority) type represents 95% of all ancient texts why are most modern bibles based on Alexandrian type texts instead? Well, the Byzantine texts have one major problem - they are all later and the variants they exhibit are not represented in the earlier texts, the earlier texts are of the Alexandrian type and modern scholars believe the older texts are closer to the original. The Byzantine texts appear to represent a group of variations from the original that was simply copied over and over and the fact it was copied a lot doesn't make it closer to the original. However a few people disagree, hence we have the New King James which is still based on Byzantine texts.

Critical texts

We have noted that variant texts exist, so how do we handle that? Scholars today collect, catalogue and study the various texts and try to come to some decision about what the original said. Scholars take each piece of the New Testament and look at all the available ancient copies, then they try to rate them in order of importance: which are the older documents? which versions are seen in multiple documents? When they come to a conclusion of what they believe is the closest possible version to the original text that becomes what is known as the "*critical text*".

One of the most important and first critical texts was produced by Westcott and Hort. They were two scholars from Cambridge. Hort convinced Westcott to help with a critical text based on a detailed examination of the available texts - they thought it would take about two years - it actually took them 28 years and was published in 1881. Westcott-Hort were the first to give the Alexandrian type texts priority and they were very much the fathers of the modern critical text. Modern critical texts are still remarkably close to Westcott-Hort. Westcott-Hort upset many people because there

was a naive belief that the King James translation was word for word perfect and a critical text that prioritised the Alexandrian text type challenged that and it was not welcome in some circles. You will find plenty of ignorant and venomous comments on the internet about Westcott-Hort.

The best known and most important modern critical text is Nestle-Aland which is currently in its 28th edition. A new edition is issued when scholarship has moved on significantly. Note that over the 120 years since the first edition there have been 28 editions, that averages a new edition every 4-5 years. Considering edition 25 had over 700 changes from the previous edition you can see how fast biblical scholarship has progressed in the last 120 years. The Nestle-Aland critical text is the text on which most modern translations are based.

The other important critical text is the United Bible Societies text which is currently at UBS5. UBS5 has the same base text as Nestle-Aland 28 but the notes and references are aimed at translators rather than academics.

There is a problem with this system. There is no definitive method of rating a text and methods and ideas for rating texts have varied over the years and scholars do not always agree.

Early English bibles

Lets look at how the Bible made its way into English.

Parts of the bible were translated into english from an early date. Bede completed his translation of John's gospel on the day he died in AD735. Parts of the Psalms and parts of the gospels had been translated before. Alfred the Great translated parts of the pentateuch himself. Various other people translated parts of the gospel and parts of the psalms but little else. The Norman invasion in 1066 relegated English to a second class language and that essentially stopped all efforts to translate the bible into English for the next three hundred years.

John Wycliffe - 1328-1384

John Wycliffe was not he first person to translate parts of the bible into English but may have been the first to oversee a complete translation into English, in fact the first complete translation of the bible into any modern European language. Wycliffe was a Catholic priest and the foremost theologian of his day in Oxford. But Wycliffe had some radical views, he denied transubstantiation and rejected all Church hierachy - including the papacy. During his lifetime Rome issued five warrants for his arrest but English anti-papal nobles just ignored the Pope and left Wycliffe alone.

Wycliffe translated the bible from the Vulgate (Latin) and was an advocate of translating the bible into the language of the people. Wycliffe most likely translated the gospels and possibly the whole of the New Testament but his assistant probably translated the Old Testament. Whoever contributed it was complete by 1384. Wycliffe's followers were known as lollards and they attacked the veneration of saints, transubstantiation, the wealth of the Church, monasticism and the very existence of the papacy. Wycliffe wrote that Christians should rely on the bible and not on popes and the clergy and therefore they needed to read the bible in their own language. Note that radical dissenting views from the accepted norms of the Catholic Church were around long before the reformation.

Wycliffe was thrown out of his professorship at Oxford and died two years later. After Wycliffe died in 1384 he was excommunicated, his writings were banned and a law was passed that the translation of the bible into English by unlicensed laity was a crime of heresy. Practically that meant from now on even owning a copy of the bible in English became a crime punishable by execution.

One of Wycliffe's friends, John Purvey, revised the Wycliffe bible and the complete text was out by 1395 but parts were circulating by 1388. This is known as the later Wycliffe bible. We should remember this was over two hundred years before the King James bible.

The anger of the Church should not be underestimated. Owning, copying, distributing or even reading the English bible was illegal and unauthorised bibles were burned. If you were caught and you recanted your *"sin"* you went to gaol, if you didn't you were burnt at the stake. In 1415 the Pope ordered Wycliffe's bones to be dug up, burned and scattered on the river Swift.

Another of Wycliffe's followers, John Hus, promoted Wycliffe's ideas that people should read the bible in their own language and he opposed the Catholic Church for condemning anyone with a non-Latin bible. He was burned at the stake in 1415 and they used copies of Wycliffe's bible as kindling to get the fire going. His last words were *"in one hundred years God will raise up a man whose calls for reform cannot be suppressed"*. One hundred and two years later in 1517 Martin Luther nailed his famous 95 thesis to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral and the reformation as we know it began.

William Tyndale - 1494-1536

We can say that modern English translations of the bible really began in the early 1500's and the reason was simple - the invention printing. Suddenly the price of reproducing books dropped dramatically and were within the reach of middle income families. However the development of the English bible would be dogged by state interference and suppression for hundreds of years.

William Tyndale produced the first printed English bible and, until the twentieth century, every English bible had a basis in Tyndale's work and many still do. However Tyndale's work was regarded as radical and dangerous and the Church and English state went to lengths to stop him..

We must not underestimate how dangerous an English translation of the bible in the hands of the common man was seen to be by the established Church and the state. Tyndale himself said the purpose of his translation was to *"cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more scripture"*. Translating the bible into English was seen as a direct attack on the established Church, the clergy and the state and as such Tyndale was a wanted man.

Tyndale was the ideal man for the job, a true language genius who was fluent in eight languages. Tyndale worked around Europe and was on the run and hiding from Church and state agents for eleven years. Finally he was betrayed, arrested, strangled and burnt at the stake as a heretic. His last words were, *"Lord! Open the King of England's eyes."*

Tyndale completed the New Testament in 1526 and it was the first English translation to be printed and the first translation to be based on the Greek texts rather than the Latin. Tyndale also had a gift for English and his translation was written in clear and lucid English that read well. Several thousand copies of Tyndale's New Testament were smuggled back into England. Tyndale never

finished his translation of the Old Testament which was later finished by his friends.

Tyndale's translation was condemned in England and copies were burned. The Catholic Church in England felt Tyndale had deliberately undermined the Church structure with some of his translation choices of key phrases: For Church Tyndale used congregation, for priest Tyndale used elder or senior, for penance he used repent and for charity love. Translating "*ekklesia*" as congregation in place of Church was seen to undermine the Catholic Church's doctrine on the separation of the priesthood from the laity. The Catholic Church had a vested interest in maintaining a hierarchy between the common man and God and were not about to accept anyone undermining that.

Miles Coverdale and John Rogers completed Tyndale's translation and it was published in 1535. Hence the first complete, printed English Bible is known as the Coverdale Bible. John Rogers went on to re-translate parts of the Coverdale/Tyndale Bible using all Hebrew and Greek texts and published the first English bible based exclusively on the original Hebrew and Greek. It was published under the assumed name Thomas Matthew because of the risks involved if he was caught. Thomas Matthew was a pseudonym used by Tyndale when he was in hiding - a fitting tribute to his murdered friend. It is known as the Matthew-Tyndale Bible. However when Mary came to the throne of England John Rogers would also end up burnt at the stake.

Coverdale's translation of the psalms was eventually incorporated into the 1662 book of common prayer and is also in the 1926 Irish book of common prayer; it is still in use today. The psalms in the book of common prayer were simply never updated when the King James Bible became the standard. Coverdale's bible was also the first to move the Apocrypha to the end of the Old Testament.

Although Tyndale's Bible was outlawed his work was used as the basis of most of the English translations that followed. Many of the biblical phrases we accept today were invented by Tyndale when there was no suitable English phrase. The phrase "*passover*" was actually invented by Tyndale to translate the Hebrew phrase "*pashka*" which had no equivalent in English. Other phrases Tyndale invented include scapegoat, peacemaker, atonement and even the word beautiful.

After Tyndale there were three bibles: Coverdale, Matthew and the Great Bible (which was a revision of the Matthew bible) but the next important Bible was the Geneva.

The Geneva bible

When Queen Mary came to the throne she went on a rampage of murdering protestant reformers, many left England for the safety of the continent. Queen Mary burned 300 reformers in her short five year reign and earned the sobriquet "*bloody Mary*."

The Church in Geneva, Switzerland was very helpful to the reformers so many settled there and the Geneva Bible project was born. Ironically the persecution of the reformers meant the best Bible scholars from England were all living together in Geneva at the same time and they had access to the best European Bible scholars such as John Calvin, Théodore de Bèze and Henry Bullinger. William Whittingham was one of the main contributors and was also John Calvin's brother-in-law.

The Geneva Bible is not well known these days but it is probably the most important English Bible ever printed. The New Testament Geneva Bible was published in 1557 and the complete Bible in

1560. It was the most widely used translation in the 16th and into the 17th century. It was the Bible used by Oliver Cromwell, John Bunyan, Shakespeare and the pilgrim fathers on the Mayflower.

It was popular because it was the first English Bible that was mass produced and came with cross-references, maps, explanatory tables and study notes - it was the first study Bible. It was also illustrated and came in a handy size - not the massive octavo size of Church Bibles and it was the first Bible to use numbered verses. It was the first ever Bible printed in Scotland where it was popular partly because Knox and Calvin contributed some of the commentary. The Geneva Bible was the first to use the Roman type fonts, as used today, instead of Gothic fonts making it easier to read. The Geneva Bible also used italics to note English words that were added to aid the understanding but were not present in the Greek text. The Geneva Bible was years ahead of its time.

The Geneva Bible was based heavily on Tyndale but it was the first English Bible where the whole of the Old Testament was directly translated from the Hebrew.

The official English Bible at the time was the Great Bible which was badly named because it had little great about it apart from its size. One commentator of the time noted *"the Geneva Bible drove the Great Bible off the field by the sheer power of its excellence"*.

The style of English in the Geneva Bible is similar to what we are used to in the King James Bible, however it is more direct, forceful and ironically sounds more modern than the King James despite predating the King James by over fifty years. Today the 1560 Geneva Bible is still easier to read than the 1611 King James.

So, if the Geneva Bible was so good why do we not hear about it today? The short answer is that it was suppressed. There were things about the Geneva Bible that the ruling authorities did not like. The commentary in the Geneva Bible was strongly puritan in nature and contained notes that challenged the state and the official church. King James specifically disliked what he saw as seditious margin notes in the Geneva Bible and maybe he was right, the English civil war would resolve the question of the divine right of kings forever and the parliamentarian forces all read the Geneva Bible - Oliver Cromwell even issued Geneva Bible tracts to his troops.

The demise of the Geneva was heavily tied up with the rise of the King James.

King James

The Great Bible was the official Bible of the Church, but it was obviously inferior to the Geneva Bible. The Church brought out a new version in 1568, the Bishop's Bible but the English was poor and it was never popular.

The King James Bible was the next important version and it came out of a conference between puritans and King James. The idea was a new Bible translation acceptable to both puritans and the state to help unify the nation. The King James Bible was not a new translation but a revision of older translations, particularly the Bishop's Bible. King James quickly hijacked the project and issued specific instructions for the translators to follow to ensure the new translation reflected the structure of the Church of England with the implied supremacy of the King. Something King James felt the Geneva Bible attacked. The King issued a list of restrictions to the translators which included:

- The translators were to follow the bishops' Bible as the main reference.
- "*Ekklesia*" was to be translated church and not congregation.
- There will be NO marginal notes.

Some of the terms in the King James were rendered in a technical latinised English which also made the translation appear distant from commonly used English even when it was first published.

The translation was by 47 scholars, all from the Church of England. Originally published in 1611 and also known as the "*authorised version*".

The original King James included a preface from the translators that discussed certain alternative renderings, controversial points and specifically denied the version was perfect.

No cause therefore why the Word translated should be denied to be the Word, or forbidden to be current, notwithstanding that some imperfections and blemishes may be noted in the setting forth of it.

Unfortunately this was dropped from later versions leading some people to believe the King James was perfect in every way.

Another quirk of the King James - there is no real first edition. During the printing of the first edition the second, revised edition was rushed out and was being printed at the same time. Some of the pages got mixed up at the print shop. So what we have is a mixed first and second edition and they are not all the same depending on which bits of the first and second edition went into each book.

The King James Bible did not sell well for several decades. The Geneva remained more popular with its cross-references, notes and strong, clear language. To increase the acceptance of the King James Bible the King banned the printing of the Geneva Bible. This explains why Geneva Bibles published as late as 1625 have a false publication date on them of 1599. If challenged the publisher would simply claimed they were old stock - they weren't.

Another quirk of the Geneva Bible is that a lot of the copies that survive are missing the first page. The militia in England searching suspect peoples houses for illegal Bibles often recognised the Geneva Bible by its front page illustration - so if you ripped the first page out the illiterate militia wouldn't know its was a Geneva Bible and you might not end up at the stake.

When the King James Bible became the official, state sanctioned Bible printing of the Bishops Bible was stopped and the Geneva Bible was banned. The King James Bible finally became popular simply because it was the only version you could buy legally. The Geneva Bible continued to be imported illegally from Amsterdam up to 1644. In 1637 both the printing and import of the Geneva Bible was made illegal. The state went to extreme lengths to suppress the Geneva Bible and replace it with their own version - the King James. Ironically the original King James Bible had various biblical quotes in the preface and they were all from the Geneva, not from the King James. The influence of the Geneva on the King James was clear.

By 1769 the wide variety of King James texts being printed and the notorious accumulation of mistakes and misprints had reached the point of being scandalous. Over the period 1760 to 1769

several updates and standardisations were issued leading up to the 1769 edition. There are 24,000 updates and corrections between the 1611 and 1769 edition. Today when people say King James Bible they invariably mean the 1769 edition. People are often not aware that *"The King James Bible"* was not one version, but many versions spreading over decades.

There are some classic errors in the King James Bible that were never corrected. Acts 7:45 which says *"Which also our fathers that came after brought in with Jesus into the possession of the Gentiles"* - it should say Joshua. Joshua and Jesus are also mixed up in Hebrews 4:8.

The King James is not a bad translation, despite being told to base the translation on the bishops' Bible the translators were not stupid and about 80% of the King James was based on Tyndale and the Geneva, which they knew were better. However despite its exalted position in certain circles we must recognise that it was born out of political interference and motivations. It finally became popular, not because of its merits, but because it was forced on the English speaking world until it became such a part of everyday life and tradition that people forgot that it was forced upon them.

Modern English Translations

The King James was practically the only English Bible up until 1881 when an updated King James, the Revised Version was published. It was supposed to be a literal translation, like the King James but in more modern English, unfortunately it did not read well and was never popular.

The American translators who worked on the RV published their own version in 1901, the American Standard Version (ASV), it was better recieved than the RV, was very literal but still not very readable.

The next major version was the Revised Standard Version in 1952. It was based on the King James, just like the RV and ASV. Unlike the RV and ASV it was a great success and sold a million copies on its first day of release. We finally had a worthy successor to the King James. However the RSV was hated by some fundamentalists. The famous senator McCarthy even accused it of being communist! One thing that caused outrage amongst fundamentalists was the translation of the word *"almah"* in Isaiah 7:14 which the KJV translates as *"Behold, a virgin shall conceive"* but the RSV translated it as *"Behold, a young woman shall conceive"*. Technically the RSV is correct but the gospels of Matthew and Luke quoted the verse and used *"virgin"* so where they wrong? The meaning of *"almah"* shifted over time and the gospels writers simply used the commonly understood meaning from their time, but it was not the original meaning in Isaiah.

The incident also showed how emotive it could be to change a commonly accepted translation in the light of modern scholarship. Unfortunately people often put doctrine first and expect their Bible to reflect their doctrine, this is bad thinking of the first order. Your Bible should be the best and most accurate translation you can achieve and if it does not reflect your doctrine then change your doctrine - not the Bible. This sort of thinking has gone on since the beginning: Marcion, through the middle ages, down to King James and this warped thinking is alive and well today. Bible translators are routinely accused of all sorts of crimes because the latest biblical scholarship questions someones favourite verse.

Up to this point in history there was generally one or two Bibles that were available at any one time, now there would be an explosion of versions, partly as a reaction to the RSV. Some of the most

important are:

NASB

New American Standard Bible (1963). A revision of the ASV, very literal but not very easy to read. The quality of translation is not as good as the RSV but it can be a useful study tool.

NEB

New English Bible (1970). There was growing concern about the poor reception of the RV in England and it was felt the King James was beyond repair and a new translation and approach was required. The NEB was the first new translations into English since Tyndale. A literal translation is known as formal equivalence and although it conveys the text accurately it often produced poor English which does not communicate the message. The approach pioneered by the NEB was dynamic-equivalence. How do we phrase this sentence to communicate the message in good English. The NEB was a very readable version with excellent English which communicated the feel of the original as well as the words. It was updated and released as the Revised English Bible (REB).

NIV

(1973) New International Version. An evangelical response to the RSV. Very popular and very readable but not regarded as elegant and sometimes readability has been allowed to get in the way of meaning. The new (2011) edition seems to read very well.

NRSV

New Revised Standard (1989). A revision of the RSV. Widely regarded as an excellent translation and the one you will normally find used in seminaries and colleges. Unlike many other translations it was not undertaken with any specific denominational or doctrinal bias. It has wide acceptance among the major churches of the world. Since 2017 there has been a major effort to update the NRSV and in 2021 we can expect a new version to be released called the NRSV-UE - New revised Standard Version - Updated Edition.

NLT

New Living Translation (1996). Moves away from the idea of word for word accuracy and focuses on conveying the entire thought of a sentence into everyday, natural English. The idea was to produce a translation that would be read and understood as easily as the original text would have been read and understood by the original readers. It has proved very popular.

ESV

English Standard version (2001). An update of the RSV. Quite formal and aiming to be essentially literal and in line with the King James tradition.

There are many other worthy versions around: the ISV tries to retain the poetic quality of certain texts that is lost in most translations, the Lexham makes the translation process transparent so you can see the choices they made and why, the Amplified and Extended Bibles embed expansions of certain words to aid a fuller understanding. The New American Bible and Jerusalem Bibles are specifically Catholic.

A massive effort by hundreds of people has produced a confusing array of versions. Which should you use - well amazingly, with all those versions and their agendas we can sit in a Bible study with

half a dozen different versions and switch from one to another with little problem. So its actually not a major issue what version you use. Don't believe the naysayers who claim that version X or Y is in-errantly evil - such talk is nonsense. Pick a version you like, maybe a couple of versions, just understand what they are and why.

We are likely to see lots more versions in the future: the critical texts are updated regularly, some people still prefer the Majority texts, there are plenty of options on the scale of purely literal right through to paraphrase and there are plenty of agendas around to add some extra interest.

Conclusion

I was taught Shakespeare at school, nobody was burnt at the stake for copying Shakespeare, the government never hunted people across Europe and had them murdered for Shakespeare, the ruling elite never feared Shakespeare. The Bible is unique, the people who wrote it were inspired by God. We are blessed to be in living in an era where we have more accurate texts than anyone for the last 1500 years and if you don't read Greek - English has the best translations.

What do I use? Generally the NRSV, sometimes the NIV and NLT but when checking a verse for a study I will often flip through several versions just too see how they line up. Today we can even go online and pull up a parallel English:Greek interlinear version. Tyndale would have been amazed.