

Lost in Translation: Reading the Bible in Translation

Session 5: Battle of the Bibles: Politics and the King James Version

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1. Non-Jewish Bible Translation in Europe

Date	Language	
Before 380 CE	Latin	'Vetus Latina' (Old Latin) translations
382-405	Latin	Vulgate, translated from Hebrew & Greek by Jerome
4 th century	Ge'ez, Gothic	Ethiopia and Bulgaria
5 th century	Armenian, Syriac, Georgian, Coptic, Old Nubian	Often translated from Septuagint
864-5	Slavonic	Used by Russian Orthodox church
8 th -10 th centuries	Various partial translations in Old High German, <i>Old English</i>	
12 th century	'Heretical' Waldensian movement starts translating Bible into French	
1199 Pope Innocent III bans all unauthorized translations of the Bible		
13 th century	Catalan, Spanish (both authorized), Polish, Portuguese	Catalan & Spanish full translation commissioned by king; others are partial translations
1383	<i>English</i>	<i>Wyclif translation; banned 1408</i>
14 th century	Czech, Old Norse	Several Czech versions
1436-39	Hungarian	Influenced by 'heretical' Hussite movement
1471	Italian	Printed; translated from Vulgate
15 th century	Welsh, German	From Vulgate
1517 Martin Luther sets off the Reformation		
1517	Belarusian	
[1522]	[German, New Testament]	Luther's translation from Greek]
[1524, 1526]	[Danish, <i>English</i> NTs]	<i>[English NT translated by Tyndale]</i>
1526	Dutch	
1530	French	
1534	German, complete	Martin Luther's translation finished
1535	Danish	Torah only
1541	Swedish	
1550	Danish	King Christian III commissioned it
1571	Basque	
1579-80	Lithuanian	
1584	Icelandic, Slovene	
1588	Welsh	
1590	Hungarian	
17 th century	Finnish, Irish Gaelic, Latvian, Romanian	

2. English translations of the Bible, and the King James Version

English Bible translations

Date	Common name	Main translator(s)	Source language(s)	Description
1382	Wycliffe's Bible	John Wycliffe	Latin	Controversial, esp about church hierarchy; banned
1536	Tyndale's Bible	William Tyndale	Hebrew, Greek, Latin	Finished after Tyndale's execution; controversial, banned
1537	'Matthew Bible'	Tyndale and Coverdale	Earlier translations	Permitted by the king; published by John Rogers
1539	Great Bible	Miles Coverdale	Latin, English, German	Authorized; based on Tyndale, omitted controversial parts
1560	Geneva Bible	William Whittingham & Antony Gilby	Hebrew, Greek	Calvinist and anti-establishment; scholarly, annotated
1568	Bishops' Bible	Matthew Parker	English, some Hebrew & Greek	Authorized; based on the Great Bible, low quality
1582/1609	Douai-Rheims	Gregory Martin	Latin	Catholic, produced outside England, polemical notes
1611	King James	Richard Bancroft & c. 49 others	Hebrew, Greek, English	Authorized; produced by 6 teams and revised by committee

Convocation of Oxford, 1408

The Holy Scripture not to be translated into the vulgar tongue, nor a translation to be expounded, until it shall have been duly examined, under pain of excommunication and the stigma of heresy.

Moreover it is a perilous thing, as the Blessed Jerome testifies, to translate the text of Holy Scripture from one idiom into another, inasmuch as in the translations themselves it is no easy matter to keep the same meaning in all cases, like as the Blessed Jerome, albeit inspired, confesses that he often went astray in this respect.

Henry VIII, Proclamation, 1530

And furthermore, for as much as it is come to the hearing of our said sovereign lord the King, that report is made by divers and many of his subjects, that as it were to all men not only expedient, but also necessary, to have in the English tongue both the New Testament and the Old: and that His Highness, his noblemen, and prelates were bounden to suffer them so to have it: His Highness hath therefore semblably thereupon consulted with the said primates

and virtuous, discreet, and well learned personages in divinity forsaid, and by them all it is thought, that it is not necessary, the said Scripture to be in the English tongue, and in the hands of the common people: but that the distribution of the said Scripture, and the permitting or the denying thereof, dependeth only upon the discretion of the superiors, as they shall think it convenient. And that having respect to the malignity of this present time, with the inclination of people to erroneous opinions, the translation of the New Testament and the Old into the vulgar tongue of English, should rather be the occasion of continuance or increase of errors among the said people, than any benefit or commodity toward the weal of their souls. And it shall now be more convenient that the same people have the Holy Scripture expounded to them, by preachers in their sermons, according as it hath been of old time accustomed before this time. Albeit if it shall hereafter appear to the King's Highness, that his said people do utterly abandon and forsake all perverse, erroneous, and seditious opinions, with the New Testament and the Old, corruptly translated into the English tongue now being in print: And that the same books and all other books of heresy, as well in the French tongue as in the Dutch [German] tongue, be clearly exterminate and exiled out of this realm of England for ever: His Highness intendeth to provide, that the holy scripture shall be by great learned and catholic persons, translated into the English tongue, if it shall then seem to His Grace convenient so to be.

John Standish. *A Discourse Wherein Is Debated Whether It Be Expedient that the Scripture Should Be in English*, 1554

Thousands have been brought from the true meaning of God's word through the English bible; therefore away with it; it hath killed too many souls already ... Wherefore away with the English damnable translation, and let them learn the mysteries of God reverently by heart ... Even the good and catholic people, which would do good and no hurt with the bible in English, yet may not be permitted to keep it in the English tongue ... The universal church of Christ did never allow nor approve scripture to be in the vulgar tongue, weighing the manifold inconveniences that have issued thereof; but ever from time to time, among other errors, did tread that down and suppress it ... The well must be covered, lest the younglings fall into it and so be drowned.

Geneva Bible (1560)

Shemot 1:19

And the midwiues said unto Pharaoh, Because the Ebrewe women are not as the women of Egypt; for they are liuely, and are deliuered yer the midwife come at them.

Marginal note: Their disobedience in this was lawful, but their deception is euil.

Shemot 1:22

And Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, Euery man childe that is borne, cast yee into the riuer, but reserue euery maide childe alive.

Marginal note: When tyrants cannot preuail by craft, they burst forth into open rage.

Devarim 16: 18

Judges and officers shalt thou make thee in all thy cities.

Marginal note: He gaue authority to that people for a time to choose themselues magistrates.

Cardinal William Allen, *Letters and Memorials* (1532-94)

We preach in English, in order to acquire greater power and grace in the use of the vulgar tongue ... In this respect, the heretics, however ignorant they may be in other points, have the advantage over many of the more learned Catholics, who having been educated in the universities and the schools do not commonly have at command the text of Scripture or quote it except in Latin. Hence when they are preaching to the unlearned and are obliged on the spur of the moment to translate some passage which they have quoted into the vulgar tongue, they often do it inaccurately and with unpleasant hesitation ... Our adversaries on the other hand have at their fingers' ends all those passages of Scripture which seem to make for them and ... produce the effect of appearing to say nothing but what comes from the Bible. This evil might be remedied if we too had some catholic version of the Bible, for all the English versions are most corrupt.

William Barlow's account of King James' speech at the Hampton Court conference

His Highnesse wishes, that some especiall pains should be taken in that behalf for one vniforme translation ... and this to be done by the best learned of both the Vniversities, after them to be reuiewed by the Bishops, and the chiefe learned of the Church; from them to be presented to the Priuy Councell; and lastly to bee ratified by his Royall authority; to be read in the whole Church, and no other.

The division of work for the King James translation

Company	Books
1 st Westminster	Torah; Joshua, Judges/Shoftim, Ruth, Samuel 1 & 2, Kings/Melakhim 1 & 2
1 st Cambridge	Chronicles 1 & 2, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job/Iyov, Psalms/Tehilim, Proverbs/Mishlei, Ecclesiastes/Kohelet, Song of Songs
1 st Oxford	Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations/Eikha, Ezekiel, Daniel, 12 Minor Prophets/Trei-Asar
2 nd Cambridge	Apocrypha
2 nd Oxford	New Testament: Gospels, Acts, Revelation
2 nd Westminster	New Testament: Epistles

King James Bible, preface

Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most Holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water, even as *Jacob* rolled away the stone from the mouth of the well, by which means the flocks of *Laban* were watered [Genesis 29: 10]. Indeed without translation into the vulgar tongue, the unlearned are but like children at *Jacob's* well (which is deep) without a bucket or something to draw with; or as that person mentioned by *Isaiah*, to whom when a sealed book was delivered, with this motion, *Read this, I pray thee*, he was fain to make this answer, *I cannot, for it is sealed*. [Isaiah 29: 11]