

HOW THE BIBLE CAME TO US

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HOW DID THE BIBLE COME TO US?

The Bible is not one book, but a collection of books, which have come to be used and loved by people all over the world. But how did the Bible come to us? Where did it come from? How old is it? Who wrote it?

What follows is the background of Bible translation, from the earliest days until now.

1. THE HEBREW OLD TESTAMENT

The books that make up the Old Testament are part of the history, laws, poetry and prophecies of the Jewish people. At first, much of this material was passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. Although scholars are not sure when the books were first written – various dates are suggested – it seems certain that the period of writing covered several centuries. By the first century AD, Jewish religious leaders had laid down that certain books were “holy” – directly inspired by God – and it is these books which now make up the Old Testament.

Although no original manuscripts of the Old Testament have been found – we have only copies of copies of copies – the Jewish scribes were always aware they were writing out a holy text, and took great care not to make mistakes. Despite this, some differences do occur between one manuscript and another, and scholars today carry on the task of re-constructing as accurately as possible the original Hebrew text.

DISCOVERY OF THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS

1947: Old Testament scholars were helped considerably when shepherds found some stone jars in caves at Qumran on the Dead Sea. Inside the jars were tightly rolled pieces of parchment and bronze, and in the next few years many more were found in nearby caves. They became popularly known as the “Dead Sea Scrolls”. The pieces of parchment belonged to the library of a group of Essenes (a Jewish religious sect, who lived at Qumran from the second century BC to about AD 70) and Carbon 14 dating tests confirm that the scrolls were written during this time. Among the writings found were parts of every book of the Old Testament except Esther, and though some of them were very fragmentary, the copy of Isaiah is almost complete. These are the earliest Hebrew Bible manuscripts known and have helped enormously in the continuing search for the original Hebrew text.

The Old Testament was written mainly in Hebrew, but some Jewish people, when they came back from exile in Babylon, spoke the language in use there, Aramaic. By the third century AD, Hebrew had been completely replaced by Aramaic. In order that everyone could understand the Scriptures, particularly when they were read out in the Synagogue, a series of commentaries in Aramaic called “Targums”, were compiled by various scholars. Some early manuscripts of these still exist and these too give a pointer to the original Hebrew text.

2. THE GREEK NEW TESTAMENT

We know a little more about the beginnings of the New Testament. As with the Old Testament, no original New Testament manuscripts survive, but some that do exist are very close, in time, to the first writing down of the New Testament. Scholars generally agree that the first New Testament books to be written were Paul’s letters. They were kept by the churches that received them, but other churches soon wanted copies. Before the end of the first century AD they were collected together, copied and circulated, along with some other New Testament letters, and Acts and Revelation.

Of the Gospels, Mark’s is usually thought to be the first to be written, followed by Matthew’s and Luke’s. All three, usually called the Synoptic Gospels, seem to be based on more or less the same oral tradition about Jesus’ life and teaching. Some scholars say John’s Gospel was the last to be written in about AD 100, but many now believe that John’s was written very early on and maybe even as early as Mark’s.

The earliest New Testament manuscript still surviving is a fragment of John's Gospel, written on papyrus. It is now in the John Ryland's University Library in Manchester. In the Shrewsbury Library, in Dublin, is a collection of papyrus manuscripts from about AD 250 which were found in the Nile Valley, Egypt, (and given to the Irish nation by an American, Chester Beatty). These manuscripts cover most of the New Testament and some parts of the Old Testament. A fourth-century Coptic papyrus of St John's Gospel is housed at Bible Society's Historical Archive and Scripture Collection, in Cambridge.

HOW DID THEY WRITE?

These early New Testament writings were on papyrus. The Egyptians were first to use stems of papyrus reeds – which grew along the Nile – as a writing surface. They pressed out the fibres of the stems lengthways, laid another layer crosswise on top, and stuck them together with glue and water. Our word “paper” comes from “papyrus”, and the word Bible comes from the Greek word for a book “biblos”, which in turn comes from the name of a port, called “Byblus” from which papyrus was exported.

However, papyrus was difficult to produce, not easy to write on, and not very durable. Parchment, or Vellum, was found to be more satisfactory. The skins of sheep, goats, calves or antelopes were scraped and stretched to make this. Sometimes, for reasons of economy, a piece of parchment would be used twice with the scribe scraping off the writing and putting something different on top. Manuscripts with “two layers” of writing like this are called palimpsests and often the writing underneath is more important to scholars than the later writing on top. Nowadays, the half-erased under-writing can be read easily using ultra-violet photography. We have a palimpsest from the eighth/twelfth centuries – the Codex Zacynthius.

Papyrus and parchment were stored in rolls (as the Dead Sea Scrolls) or in book form, called “codices”. Most of the main early New Testament manuscripts are in codex form.

NEW TESTAMENT CODICES

Codex Sinaiticus is one of the most important. In 1844 a German scholar, Konstantin von Tischendorf, visited St Catherine's Monastery near Mt Sinai where he found some sheets of very early Greek writing on parchment. These turned out to be part of the Old Testament, dating from the fourth century. After several visits to the monastery, he found more sheets, making up almost a complete Bible in Greek. It was acquired by the Tsar of Russia and eventually sold to the British Museum in 1933.

Another fourth-century manuscript of the Bible in Greek is Codex Vaticanus, which has been in the Vatican Library in Rome since at least the fifteenth century. Where it originally came from, no one knows.

The Codex Alexandrinus (probably written, as the name suggests, in Alexandria), is an important fifth-century manuscript. Now kept in the British Museum, it was given to James I by the Patriarch of Constantinople in what is now Turkey.

These, together with hundreds of less complete manuscripts, even with their many variant readings, give more evidence for the original text of our Bible than exists for any other ancient writings (such as those of Homer or Julius Caesar).

3. EARLY TRANSLATIONS

SEPTUAGINT

In the third and second centuries BC the first translation of the Old Testament was made, into Greek. Many Jewish people, particularly merchants and seafarers, had moved to various parts of the world around the Mediterranean and, because Greek was the common language, they gradually forgot most of their Hebrew. This translation, known as the Septuagint was made by Jewish scholars at Alexandria in Egypt, for the great library founded by King Ptolemy II. "Septuagint" comes from the Latin for "70" and legend has it that 70 or 72 people worked on the translation.

THE MIDDLE EAST

Another early translation from Hebrew was made into Syriac – a dialect of Aramaic spoken in countries whose cultural centre was Edessa (now in Turkey). Jews had lived in this area since the Exile and some local people had converted to Judaism. The Old Testament was probably translated into Syriac by the end of the first century AD. When Christianity spread to the region, a translation of the New Testament was also needed. Several versions were made, but not until the beginning of the fifth century was an "authorised" version of the whole Bible produced according to tradition by Rabbula, Bishop of Edessa at the time. This is called the Peshitta, or "simple" version.

The Syriac church sent its missionaries far afield – as far as India and China. One ancient historian wrote that a Gospel of Matthew in Syriac was being used in India in AD 180. The Syriac missionaries also went north into Armenia and there is some evidence that an Armenian translation of part of the New Testament from Syriac was made in the fifth century AD. North of Armenia, the Georgians were next to be evangelised and the very earliest Georgian manuscripts of part of the Bible seem to be translated from Armenian. It is probable that both the Armenian and Georgian alphabets were specially devised so that Bible translation could be made into these languages. Today we still find that many languages are being written down for the first time by missionaries who want to translate the Bible.

The early Christian Church in Egypt spoke Coptic, a late form of the Egyptian language which was spoken a little after the time of Christ. A translation of the New Testament was made into the southern or Sahidic dialect in the third century, and later into other dialects. Coptic is now no longer a living language but is still the language used in the worship of the Coptic Church in Egypt.

4. THE LATIN BIBLE

The Bible translation which had the most effect on Europe was the Latin version. As the Roman Empire spread, so too did the language of Rome. Even so, for the first two centuries of its life the young Church in Rome spoke Greek, which was the language of culture within Italy. It was only when Christianity reached provinces like Africa (present-day Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria), where the local educated classes spoke Latin, that the need for a Latin translation was felt. There is evidence that translations of part of the Bible existed both in Africa and Europe by the end of the

second century AD and a whole Bible probably by the third. Indeed, the trouble seemed to be that there were too many Latin translations. By the middle of the fourth century, the situation had become so confusing that Pope Damasus commissioned his secretary Hieronymus to make an “official” version to be used by the Church throughout the Latin-speaking empire.

Hieronymus, or Jerome as he is called in English, was a highly educated and well-travelled man who set about revising the existing texts of the Gospels by comparing them with the Greek. He produced his version in AD 383.

In 386 Jerome went to Bethlehem and spent the rest of his life there as a monk. He started a translation of the Old Testament from the Greek Septuagint but abandoned this to translate direct from the Hebrew, which he studied with the help of a Jewish Rabbi.

His translation met with considerable opposition from many conservative people in the Church, who clung to the familiar text of the “Old Latin” versions and thought Jerome “too revolutionary”.

Only some centuries later did Jerome’s Vulgate become accepted throughout the Church in Europe.

5. EUROPE: BEFORE AND DURING THE MIDDLE AGES

For more than a thousand years, Latin was the international language of Europe; the language of politics, scholarship, the Church – and the Bible. For centuries, St Jerome’s translation – known as the Vulgate, meaning “common” or “belonging to the people” – was the only version used by the Roman Church. By the Middle Ages, however, Jerome’s Bible was far from living up to its name. Latin was no longer the language of ordinary people. In southern Europe it had developed into French, Spanish, Italian. In northern Europe early forms of Germanic languages like English, German and Norse were spoken. Latin was understood only by the rich and educated.

The Bible was written by hand in expensive books which poor people couldn’t afford and in a language they couldn’t understand. But as they did not read anyway, it didn’t seem to matter – especially if most people who didn’t read the Bible had to accept the Church’s interpretation of what the Scriptures said. At that time, many church leaders thought it would be dangerous if everyone could read and interpret God’s word for themselves.

To the north were various Germanic tribes, called “barbarians” by the Greeks and Romans, but some – like the Ostrogoths – had been Christians from as early as the third century. Their bishop, Ulfilas, made a translation of the Bible in the middle of the fourth century but not many manuscripts remain and all are incomplete. The most famous is the Codex Argenteus or “Silver Codex” kept in Uppsala in Sweden, written in silver and gold on purple vellum.

The Latin Vulgate came to Britain in the sixth century, with early missionaries like Columba and Augustine. A century later Caedmon, a monk at Whitby, wrote poems based on passages from the Bible in Anglo-Saxon, the language of the common people. The Venerable Bede, abbot of the monastery at Jarrow, translated part of John’s Gospel into Anglo-Saxon before his death in 735.

Very often an Anglo-Saxon word-for-word translation was written in between lines of a Latin text. One striking example is the Lindisfarne Gospels, written about 700 in Latin, beautifully illuminated with Celtic designs, and with a translation added 300 years later by a priest called Aldred. There is a story that King Alfred translated parts of the Bible, but no evidence remains. It is certain, however, that he encouraged translation, anxious that his people should read Scripture in their own language.

In ninth-century Europe the Slavic empire was extensive and two brothers, Cyril and Methodius, left Thessalonica to be missionaries among the Slavs. They devised an alphabet based on Greek letters in order to write the Bible translation. (Most Slavic languages today, like Russian and Croatian, use this “Cyrillic” alphabet.) The language of Cyril and Methodius’ translation is “Old Church Slavonic”, now no longer spoken but still used in the Orthodox Church in Eastern Europe.

In the twelfth century, Peter Waldo, a French merchant, gave away all his possessions and founded a religious community, known as Waldensians. They were much persecuted, and bitter opponents of the Roman Church. One of their concerns was that people should be able to read the Bible in their own language. Little evidence of their translation work survives, but it is probable they undertook translations in Italian, German, Provençal (a language of southern France), Piedmontese (spoken at that time in Northern Italy) and Catalan (of north-east Spain).

Not until the fourteenth century did England have a complete Bible in its own language. At that time John Wycliffe and his followers, often called Lollards, voiced many criticisms of the Church. One of their chief complaints was that the people could not understand the priests’ mumbled Latin, and worse, that the priests themselves could not understand it. Under Wycliffe’s leadership, some of the Lollards translated the complete Bible from Latin into English, so that the ordinary people could read or hear it in their own tongue and understand it. To circulate their Bible, they had to write each copy out by hand and, laborious though this must have been, many such Bibles were circulated: about 170 copies still survive.

THE GREAT CHANGE

The efforts at Bible translation in Europe during the Middle Ages were sincere and dedicated, but few. The power of the Church, with its opposition to Bibles in the vernacular, hindered Bible translation by hand and hindered Bible distribution. In the following centuries the Reformation and the invention of printing were to change this picture completely.

The Roman Church’s insistence that it alone could explain the Word of God was one of the main controversies of the Reformation. People like Martin Luther in Germany, and William Tyndale in England, claimed that everyone should have the chance to read the Bible in their own language and understand it for themselves.

Although printing had been known in China several centuries earlier, it was 1455 when Johannes Gutenberg of Mainz in Germany printed the first book – using moveable type – in the West. A new era in communications began – books were easier to obtain and more people wanted to read. The demand for Bibles grew, and particularly for Bibles which could be understood by someone who was not a scholar.

During the great revival of interest in the arts and sciences (particularly in Greek and Roman culture), that we call the Renaissance, scholars found many Greek and

Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible and early Church writings which were previously unknown or ignored. The Reformers, and progressive people in the Roman Catholic Church, were anxious to give the people the chance to read the Bible. All these factors helped spark the sudden interest in Bible translation in the sixteenth century.

6. EUROPE: SIXTEENTH-CENTURY TRANSLATORS

We will mention just a few of the great Bible translators of the sixteenth century. In most cases they are the founders of modern Bible translation in their language and often helped change the language itself. Their influence lasted far beyond their lifetime and continues to the present day.

Most of these men based their New Testament translations on the work of Europe's greatest contemporary scholar, Desiderius **Erasmus**. Born in Rotterdam in 1466, he became an Augustinian monk but was later released from his Order to study and travel – at one time he was a Greek and Latin professor at Cambridge. Though Erasmus attacked corrupt practices in the Church, he never actually joined the Protestants. In 1516 he produced the first published edition of the Greek New Testament with his own Latin translation. His Greek text, with its several later revisions, became the basis for translation in many languages, including English.

Martin **Luther**, the most important name in **German** Bible translation, was born in Saxony in 1483, the son of a miner. He was an Augustinian monk, who studied at Erfurt University, and eventually became a professor at Wittenberg University in 1511.

He also spoke and wrote bitterly against what he felt were wrong practices and beliefs in the Roman Catholic Church and was excommunicated by the church and exiled from the Holy Roman Empire. His patron, Freidrich III of Saxony, gave him refuge in his fortress of Wartburg and, while there, Luther began translating the New Testament into German.

Luther believed that a good Bible translation must be made directly from the original languages and in words everyone would understand. The existing German versions had been translated from Latin in the Middle Ages and used old-fashioned and often incomprehensible language. Although he had disagreed violently with Erasmus about some theological matters, he was much impressed by Erasmus' Greek text and translated from it.

We have a copy of Luther's New Testament, which was published by Hans Luft in Wittenberg in September 1522 and became immensely popular. The Old Testament appeared in sections over the next few years and in 1532 the whole Bible was published by Melchior Lotther, again in Wittenberg. It remains the standard German Protestant Bible (with revisions from time to time). Its beauty and clarity of style have probably done more than any other published work to shape the modern German language.

In **France** the Reformation did not take hold as widely as in Germany, but the figure who started modern French Bible translation was a Roman Catholic priest, **Jacques Lefevre d'Étaples** (or Faber Stapulensis as he is called in Latin). He had much sympathy with the Reformers' point of view, but was in favour of reform within the Catholic Church itself. Lefevre, like the Protestants, believed that ordinary people should be able to read the Scriptures and his translation of the New Testament was

published in Paris in 1523, followed by the Old Testament in 1528. They were put together and issued as a whole Bible in 1530 in Antwerp in Belgium – by this time, the Church had become suspicious of Lefevre’s sympathy with the Reformers, and it was safer to publish outside France. Although he translated from the Latin Vulgate, he also checked with the Greek text of the New Testament and a more modern Latin text of the Old Testament.

The Reformation was making rapid progress and French-speaking Protestants owed their Bible to the **Swiss Reformers**. **Pierre Robert Olivetan**, a cousin of John Calvin (leader of the Reformers at Geneva), was well respected as a scholar and appointed to make the translation. His real name was Pierre Robert and there is a story that he was nicknamed Olivetanus from his habit of sitting up late studying and “burning the midnight (olive) oil”.

His translation appeared in 1535, published by Pierre de Wingle at Neuchatel in Switzerland. Several revisions were later made, some by Calvin himself. The edition, published in Geneva in 1560, became the standard French Protestant Bible, usually called the French Geneva Bible.

Meanwhile, Lefevre’s translation had been put on the Church’s **Index of Prohibited Books** in 1546, but still the need for a Roman Catholic translation was felt. The Theological Faculty at the University of Louvain produced a translation in 1550 which (with later revisions) became widely accepted in the Roman Church. Roman Catholic and Protestant versions were not as far apart as Rome and Geneva liked to think – Olivetan was influenced very much by Lefevre; the Louvain Bible relied on Olivetan, and so on.

In Spain the picture was different. In 1551 the **Spanish Inquisition** put on their Index of Prohibited Books “the Bible in Castilian romance or in any other vulgar tongue” (“vulgar” here meaning “vernacular” not Latin) and this meant that although Bible portions already existed in Spanish they could not be widely circulated. The most important translation work was therefore done outside Spain.

Cassiodoro de Reina was a monk from Seville who left Spain in 1557 because his ideas did not agree with those of the Roman Catholic Church. The following year, when the Protestant Elizabeth I came to the throne in England, de Reina went to London where he was minister to a Spanish congregation. He began translating the Bible into Spanish soon after leaving Spain, working as much as he could from the original languages and checking other translations. In 1563 he left England and finally settled in Germany. His translation was published in Basel, Switzerland in 1569 by Thomas Guarinus. It is often called the “Bear Bible” (Biblia del Oso) because the title page carries a printer’s device showing a bear looking for honey in a hollow tree.

Cipriano de Valera, a monk from the same monastery as de Reina, also escaped religious persecution in Spain by travelling to England. He studied at Cambridge and Oxford, eventually settling in London, and in the 1580s began revising de Reina’s translation. By 1596 he had finished the New Testament and in 1602 the whole Bible was published in Amsterdam. The Reina-Valera version became the standard Spanish Protestant Bible.

7. EARLY ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS

In 1526 the first New Testament was produced in English. Although Gutenberg had printed a Latin Bible in 1456, and leading fifteenth century European printers were producing Bibles in both Latin and vernacular languages, no one in England printed the **Wycliffe** Bible: probably because it had been banned by the Church since 1408.

The Church still banned English Scriptures when William **Tyndale** translated his New Testament which was printed in Germany. The books were smuggled into England by sympathetic merchants in bales of wool and wine casks with false bottoms.

A complete copy of the first edition is now at the British Museum. The only other surviving copy, which is incomplete, is in St Paul's Cathedral library in London. This illustrates the Church's efficiency in tracking down and destroying Tyndale's Testaments.

Tyndale, who was a scholar of considerable reputation, started translating the Old Testament, but only managed to finish the Pentateuch and Jonah before he was betrayed, arrested, tried, and finally burned for heresy at Vilvorde in Belgium in 1536. His work was continued by faithful friends, such as John Rogers.

Miles Coverdale produced his Bible – the first complete printed Bible in English – in 1535, basing his New Testament and Pentateuch on Tyndale's work and translating the rest from Latin and German. Although the Bible had no royal licence it was not suppressed, perhaps because Coverdale had the sympathy of Thomas Cromwell who, as Secretary of State at the time, had influence on the King, Henry VIII.

In 1537 another Bible appeared, edited by "Thomas Matthew", probably the pen-name of Tyndale's friend John Rogers, with whom Miles Coverdale was later burned to death during Queen Mary's persecution of Protestants. "Matthew's" edition combined what he believed to be the best of Tyndale and Coverdale's work. Thomas Cromwell succeeded in having a licence granted by the King, despite the fact that Henry had banned all translations under Tyndale's name – and this Bible obviously contained much of Tyndale's work.

Cromwell then commissioned Coverdale to produce a revision of Matthew's Bible and the printing of this "Great Bible", began in Paris. When the French authorities responded to the Inquisition and stopped the printing, the press, paper and compositors had to be shipped hurriedly to England.

The Bible appeared in 1539 with Henry's blessing and command that it should be in every church so that everyone could read it. These Great Bibles were quite expensive, and often chains were bought to fasten these precious Bibles to the lecterns.

During the reign of Mary I, Protestants were persecuted as heretics, and many fled to Geneva, a strongly Protestant city. One such refugee, William Whittingham, produced a New Testament in 1557. He was also one of the main contributors to a complete revision of the Bible, published in 1560 and known as the Geneva Bible. This was the first English Bible printed in roman type, with verse divisions, and it was immediately welcomed, remaining the most popular English Bible for over 70 years.

The Geneva Bible has also been called the "Breeches Bible" because in Genesis 3.7 we read that Adam and Eve "made themselves breeches".

Elizabeth I's reign saw yet another revision, this time by a group of bishops and biblical scholars under the leadership of Matthew Parker, then Archbishop of Canterbury. The Bishops' Bible first appeared in 1568 and had several editions, but never became as popular as the Geneva version.

The **Roman Catholic** Church produced its own translation of the Bible made from the Latin Vulgate. At the English Roman Catholic College at Douai in France, Gregory Martin and other refugees from Oxford translated the New Testament. The college moved to Rheims in 1578 where the New Testament was published in 1582. The Old Testament appeared in 1609-1610 in Douai after the college returned there. The Douai-Rheims Bible remained the standard Roman Catholic version for many years, and a 1750 revision by Richard Challoner is still widely used.

In 1604, at a conference between the Bishops and the Puritans at Hampton Court, a new revision of the Bible was proposed, and this was welcomed by King James I. Fifty translators were appointed to work in six groups, each responsible for a section of the text. They were to follow the Bishops' Bible as much as possible, correcting any errors. Their work was submitted to a committee for final editing and was published in 1611. Because James I had commanded it, it became known as the **King James Version**, or the **Authorised Version**. For more than 300 years it remained the most widely read book in the English language. Even today, the Authorised Version is what many English-speaking people think of as "The Bible".

8. MISSIONARY TRANSLATION WORK

The enthusiasm for Bible translation, started by the Reformation, lasted well into the seventeenth century – but it all happened in Europe. The Protestant Churches were still looking inward and putting themselves in order, and were not particularly concerned about missionary work. The Roman Catholic Church (especially the Jesuits, founded in 1540) soon had missionaries in America, Asia and Africa, but they did not make Bible translation a priority.

In North America

One of the earliest opportunities for "missionary" translation work was among the indigenous Americans of New England, the Pilgrim Fathers' new neighbours. At this time some people in England – called "Puritans" – felt that worshipping God should be much simpler than the Church of England's services and that everyone should rely much more on the Bible's teachings. Many of them, including John Eliot, sailed to the newly colonised east coast of America to find religious freedom.

Eliot was born in Hertfordshire, graduated from Cambridge and became a Church of England priest – but soon found himself sympathising with the Puritans. He sailed with them to Boston, in what is now the State of Massachusetts, in 1631, and for over 50 years worked with the Massachusetts indigenous Americans.

Eliot felt very strongly that native Americans should be able to hear God's word in their own language so he learned to preach in the Massachusetts language, then began writing grammars and reading books.

In 1661 his translation of the New Testament was published by Samuel Green in Cambridge near Boston and in 1663 the whole Bible appeared – the first Bible produced in the Americas, and really the first "modern" translation for missionary use.

The reports of Eliot's work sparked so much enthusiasm in England that the first English Missionary Society was formed in 1649, a group usually known as the New England Company. In helping with the printing of Eliot's translation by raising money, they were setting a pattern for many missionary societies to come.

In the East

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the Protestant missionaries followed traders to their established settlements. The Dutch and Danish were busy trading in the East Indies, Malaysia, Indonesia, Formosa (Taiwan), Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and South India. Wherever they went, the missionaries translated Scripture. The earliest Malay Gospel translations were in fact the work of a Dutch East Indies Company director.

These pioneer missionaries did not translate just for Asians. There was quite a large community of Portuguese settlers in South India, and, as the Church in Portugal had been violently opposed to the Bible in Portuguese, very little translation had been done. Strangely, the Portuguese Bible was first printed in 1753, in Tranquebar in southern India, half a world away from Portugal.

One of the great translations of the eighteenth century was into Tamil, the first language of India to have a Bible. By 1715 Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg, a Danish missionary who worked in Tranquebar, and a missionary colleague were printing the New Testament using paper given by the recently formed English missionary society, the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK). However, they almost ran out of paper, mainly because the letters they started with were "so very large that they consumed an Abundance of Paper". After creating a smaller typeface, they finished the book with paper to spare.

THE EXPANSION

Before 1800 less than 70 languages had any translation of even part of the Bible. By 1900 more than 500 had at least one book of the Bible. Why was there such a sudden surge of interest in Bible translation – an interest which grew even more rapidly in the twentieth century? The reasons are many and varied.

At a time when explorers were travelling further afield, trade was being established with countries which were previously little known, and a lot of interest in "foreign lands" was aroused in Europe. Also at this time the Church in Britain was finding new life in what is usually called the Evangelical Revival. One result of the Revival was the founding of the British and Foreign Bible Society in 1804, and later our sister societies in the United States and Europe. These Societies encouraged Bible translation, supplied funds for printing, published translations and helped with distribution at home and abroad.

All these things inspired more missionaries to set out from Europe and America to settle in India, China or Africa, and many of them felt their most important task was to translate the Scriptures for the people among whom they were working. There were hundreds of dedicated men and women who, with the help of native speakers, made and revised their Bible translations all over the world. Here are just a few:

India: William Carey

William Carey, born in a village in Northamptonshire in 1761, became an apprentice shoemaker. When he was 21 he became a Christian, and began preaching in the villages around his home. Although he did not have much education, he was extremely clever and taught himself Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French and Dutch. He was one of the founders of the Baptist Missionary Society and one of its first missionaries. He went to Bengal in India in 1793 and there set up a college at Serampore which still flourishes today. Attached to the college was a printing press and Serampore became the most famous missionary printing press in the world. In 30 years William Carey and his colleagues translated and printed in 45 languages and dialects – in 35 of these they were the first people to print Scriptures. Carey himself learned Sanskrit (the old “classical” Indian language), Bengali, Marathi, and even some Sinhalese – spoken hundreds of miles away in what is now Sri Lanka. His dream was that all the peoples of the East should have the Bible. He translated, or helped to translate, into over 20 languages, of which his Bengali Bible is the most famous.

China: Marshman & Morrison

One of William Carey’s colleagues, Joshua Marshman, was particularly interested in Chinese and with the help of John Lassar, an Armenian born in Macao, China, he began translating the Bible into Chinese. Matthew’s Gospel was published in 1810 at Serampore and the whole Bible was finished by 1822.

At the same time another man was translating the Bible in China itself. Robert Morrison was born in Morpeth near Newcastle in 1782. Becoming an apprentice to a man who made lasts for shoes, he studied in his spare time as much as he could and went to London in 1803 to train as a missionary with the London Missionary Society (LMS).

LMS sent him to Canton in 1807 where his progress was fraught with danger. China was not friendly to foreigners, and any national discovered teaching Chinese to a foreigner could be tortured and put to death. Morrison’s teacher always carried poison with him in case he was caught.

Robert Morrison began translating the Bible, working on the New Testament with the help of a Chinese manuscript he had found and copied at the British Museum in London. It was part of the New Testament, the work of an eighteenth-century Jesuit missionary called Jean Basset. Morrison wrote that he found it a great help and inspiration that someone had worked so hard at translating before him.

Another LMS missionary, William Milne, joined Morrison in 1817 and in 1823 their complete Bible was published.

The South Seas

In India and China – countries with cultures more ancient than the West – the languages had been written down for centuries. However, in many parts of Africa and on the Pacific Islands, the languages were not written down and this meant that before Christian missionaries could translate the Gospel, they first of all had to decide what letters were to be used for the sounds, and how words were to be spelled. Then they could teach people to read.

In Tahiti in 1817 the LMS set up a printing press run by William Ellis, and the King of Tahiti himself, Pomare II, in his eagerness to see what his language would look like when written, pulled the first pages of the first printed book in Tahitian off the press. This first book was a spelling book. Some parts of the Bible followed, translated by LMS missionaries with King Pomare's help. People were anxious to have these, and if they had no money they paid for the books with coconut oil – three gallons bought a copy of Luke!

South America

Ever since the Spanish and Portuguese colonised South America, Roman Catholic priests had set up missions. They may have made Scripture translations in languages of the indigenous South Americans, but no traces remain. So it was left to the Protestant missionaries, who arrived in Latin America in strength, 250 years after the Catholics.

The first printed Scripture in a language of South America was Luke's Gospel in Aymara, which the British and Foreign Bible Society published in 1829. This attracted strong interest from Vincente Pazos-Kanki, a professor at Cuzco in Peru whose mother was one of the Aymara people and lived around Lake Titicaca. He then went on to translate the rest of the New Testament into Aymara and the Psalms into Quechua – the language used by the Incas – but they were never published.

Africa

Before the nineteenth century most of Africa, beyond a narrow coastal strip, was unknown to Europeans. It was thanks to the many missionaries and explorers (some, like David Livingstone, were both), that so much became known about Africa in the nineteenth century, and so many Africans came into contact with Christianity.

One of the first missionaries to South Africa was Robert Moffat, born in East Lothian, Scotland, in 1795. He trained as a gardener, but decided to become a missionary and sailed to South Africa in 1817. Most of his work was in what is now Botswana and his most famous achievement was the translation of the Bible into Setswana. He acted as an inspiration for many other African missionaries, including David Livingstone (his future son-in-law), whom he persuaded to come out to Africa. The early translations in Africa were not all the work of white missionaries. The story of the first man to translate Scriptures into Yoruba (the main language of Western Nigeria) is one of the most exciting in the history of Bible translation.

In the first part of the nineteenth century the slave trade between West Africa and the Americas still flourished and in 1821 an 11-year-old Yoruba boy (called Adjai), his mother and two little sisters, were kidnapped by slave traders in their village of Ochugun. Taken to Lagos, Adjai – now separated from his family – was bought and sold several times within a year. Eventually his fifth master sold him aboard a Portuguese slave ship, ironically named *Esperance Feliz* ("Happy Hope"), bound for Brazil or Cuba. One day out from Lagos, however, a British boat intercepted the slave trader and took the 1,987 captives to Freetown in Sierra Leone, which was a refuge for freed slaves – many of whom were Yorubas like Adjai. Adjai was sent to a Christian school, where he proved to be very intelligent, and learned about Christianity. He was baptised in 1825, taking the name Samuel Crowther after a famous London clergyman of the time.

Crowther studied in Freetown and in England at the Church Missionary Society colleges. He was ordained in 1843, later becoming the first African bishop. He

returned to his own people in Nigeria and began to translate the Bible into Yoruba. The epistle to the Romans was published in 1850 and by 1884 the complete Bible was finished, after being translated by a committee of Europeans and Yorubas, supervised by Samuel Crowther.

9. ENGLISH BIBLE TRANSLATION CONTINUES (1903 – PRESENT)

Convocation of Canterbury

After the Reformation, and the rush of Bible translation that accompanied it, little was done in Britain for some 250 years. However, in the mid- nineteenth century a number of discoveries of very old manuscripts were made – particularly of New Testament manuscripts older than those on which the Authorised Version was based.

Because of this, among other reasons, it was decided at the Convocation of Canterbury in 1870 to make a revision of the King James Version. Its aims would be to: correct some mistakes in translation, replace some obsolete words, and reflect the new discoveries in the field of Bible scholarship, while at the same time changing as little as possible from the 1611 Bible text. The New Testament of the Revised Version was published in 1881 and the complete Bible in 1885.

A group of American scholars added their comments, and alternative readings. In 1901 the Americans published their own Revised Version, which became known as the American Standard Version.

In 1903 Richard **Weymouth** published his translation of the New Testament “in Modern Speech ... every-day English”. By 1924 James **Moffatt** had translated the whole Bible into modern English, a version which became very popular and was often reprinted. At the same time, in the US, Edgar J **Goodspeed** was translating the New Testament into “simple straight-forward” English, which was first published in 1923.

The **American Standard Version of 1901** was revised in 1930 by representatives of most of the Protestant churches in the United States. They published their New Testament in 1946 and Bible in 1952, under the name **Revised Standard Version**. This became very popular, not only in America, but in Britain too, and in other English-speaking countries. In 1989 the **New Revised Standard Version** was published – this was a revision of the RSV but took into account discoveries from the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The Revised Version, and American Standard Version were not new translations, but revisions of the Authorised Version text, using the Hebrew and Greek as a check. The Revised Standard Version also took into account manuscripts which were discovered later. But, particularly since the beginning of the twentieth century, the number of people making their own new translations has been so large that only a few of them – those most widely known – can be mentioned.

An Anglican clergyman in London, J B Phillips, found that young people of his parish could not understand the Authorised Version, so he set about paraphrasing the New Testament in words they could understand. The first part, **Letters to Young Churches**, appeared in 1947 and the whole New Testament in parts by 1957. Another paraphrase which became extremely popular was Kenneth Taylor's **Living**

Bible, first published in America. From 1964 to 1970 this was published in parts and in 1971 as a complete Bible in one book.

In England Ronald A **Knox**, a Roman Catholic priest, was asked by the Cardinal of Westminster to produce a translation in modern English. The Old Testament was published in 1949; the whole Bible – known as the **Knox Version** – in 1956. He had previously published a New Testament for private circulation in 1944.

In the United States, Roman Catholic scholars worked on a revision of **Challoner's Bible** and published a New Testament in 1941 and most of the Old Testament between 1952 and 1961. This is usually called the **Confraternity Version**. In the 1960s the project was expanded to become a new translation from Hebrew and Greek, rather than a revision, and in 1970 the **New American Bible** was published.

In 1966, an official Roman Catholic translation – the **Jerusalem Bible** – was published, based on the Hebrew and Greek rather than Latin. It was revised in 1985 and is now known as the New Jerusalem Bible.

An interdenominational team of more than 100 English-speaking scholars from around the world translated the **New International Version**. Based on the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts, it uses contemporary language, and is designed to have clarity and literary quality. It was published in 1978.

The **New King James Version** was published in 1982. It uses the AV as its source, but some passages have been re-translated in the light of more recent scholarship.

In 1988 the **New Century Version** was published. This was a faithful translation from original manuscripts, with an emphasis on easy language, short sentences and appropriate vocabulary.

A suggestion, made at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1946, to provide a completely new Bible translation in modern language led to a series of conferences between church representatives, the University Presses and the Bible Societies. Committees were set up to translate the Old and New Testaments, and the Apocrypha/Deuterocanon, working from Hebrew and Greek, and drafts of the translation were submitted to a panel of literary experts. The New Testament of this **New English Bible** was published in 1961 and the whole Bible in 1970. The **Revised English Bible**, published in 1989, took account of further changes in the use of the English language, and extensively refined the NEB text.

The **Good News Bible** is a translation which aims to give readers maximum understanding of the content of the original Hebrew and Greek texts, by presenting them in everyday English. Originally published by the American Bible Society, it was first published in England by the British and Foreign Bible Society and HarperCollins in 1976, and quickly became the most widely used version in the UK.

The **Contemporary English Version** (1997) translation was published to meet the needs of the many people who hear the Bible rather than read it for themselves. To ensure its accuracy, the Old Testament was translated directly from the Hebrew and Aramaic texts, while the New Testament was translated directly from the Greek texts. It was designed particularly for those seeking to explore Christianity and avoids traditional religious terminology.

10. HOW THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE HAS CHANGED

To show how the English language has changed down the centuries, the same two verses from some of the versions mentioned earlier are printed below. The verses are Hebrews I. 1 – 2:

Wycliffe (14th Century)

God that spake sumtyme bi profetis in many maners to oure fadris, at the last in these daies he hath spoke to us bi the sone, whom he hath ordeyned eir of alle thingis and bi whom he made the worldis.

Tyndale (1526)

God in tyme past diversly and many wayes, spake vnto the fathers by Prophetes: but in these last dayes he hath spoken vnto vs by his sonne, whom he hath made heyre of all thinges: by whom also he made the world.

Coverdale (1535)

God in tyme past dyuersly &, many wayes, spake vnto ye fathers by prophetes, but in these last dayes he hath spoken vnto vs by h is sonne, whom he hath made heyre of all thinges, by whom also he made the worlde.

Great Bible (1539)

God in tyme past diuersly and many wayes, spake vnto the fathers by Prophetes: but in these last dayes he hath spoken vnto vs by hys awne sonne, whom he hath made heyre of all thinges by whom also he made the worlde.

Geneva Bible (1560)

At sondrie times & in divers maners God spake in ye olde time to our fathers by the Prophetes: In these last dayes he hath spoken vnto vs by his Sonne, whome he hathe made heir of all things, by whome also he made the worldes.

Rheims (1609 – 10)

Diverely and many vvaies in times past God speaking to the fathers in the prophets: last of al in these daies hath spoken to vs in his Sonne, vvhom he hath appointed heire of al, by whom he made also the vvorlde.

Authorised Version (1611)

God who at sundry times, and in diuers maners, spake in time past vnto the fathers by the Prophets, Hath in these last daies spoken vnto vs by his Sonne, whom hee hath appointed heire of all things, by whom also he made the worlds.

Revised Version (1881)

God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom also he made the worlds.

Moffatt (1924)

Many were the forms and fashions in which God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets, but in these days at the end he has spoken to us by a Son – a Son whom he appointed heir of the universe as it was by him that he created the world.

Revised Standard Version (1952)

In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.

Jerusalem Bible (1966)

At various times in the past and in various different ways, God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets; but in our own time, the last days, he has spoken to us through his Son, the Son that he has appointed to inherit everything and through whom he made everything there is.

New English Bible (1970)

When in former times God spoke to our forefathers, he spoke in fragmentary and varied fashion through the prophets. But in this the final age he has spoken to us in the Son whom he has made heir to the whole universe, and through whom he created all orders of existence.

Good News Bible (second edition 1994)

In the past, God spoke to our ancestors many times and in many ways through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us through his Son. He is the one through whom God created the universe, the one whom God has chosen to possess all things at the end.

Contemporary English Version (1997)

Long ago in many ways and at many times God's prophets spoke his message to our ancestors. But now at last, God sent his son to bring his message to us. God created the universe by his Son, and everything will some day belong to the Son.

11. HOW BIBLE SOCIETIES ARE INVOLVED IN **BIBLE TRANSLATION TODAY**

Translators today make use of the latest technologies and techniques in presenting the Word of God in such a way that people may hear it more clearly and respond to it more fully. The Bible Societies help by:

- giving technical assistance to translators through over forty translation consultants and advisors at work around the world. These experts are highly trained in biblical studies and linguistics and usually have some training in anthropology and sociology.
- publishing books on translation, and providing them free of charge to those engaged on recognised projects.
- arranging seminars and other forms of training, where translators can learn of recent developments in the art of translation and also gain practical experience.

- financing the production and distribution of completed Scriptures — making the work of translators available for all.
- publishing two quarterly journals, *The Bible Translator* and *The Bible Distributor*, for use by translators.

Protestants have been particularly active in Bible translation but in recent years Roman Catholics have increasingly shared this work, and in some areas Orthodox translators are also co-operating. When significant church groupings ask for it, a Bible Society also produces one edition of the Bible with Deuterocanonical Books (in a clearly separate section between the Old and New Testaments). This is used by Roman Catholics and some Protestants. In these cases there will always be a parallel edition without the Deuterocanonicals (Apocrypha), so readers will always have the option of an edition without these extra books. The extra costs involved with Deuterocanonical editions come from sales or contributions by local churches and not from Bible Society funds.

12 THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY

Bible text is extensive and, together with its cross-references, guidance notes and general information, is always a complex book (actually a collection of books) to produce.

Computer technology has done much to improve the accuracy, speed and cost of producing this text for use in its many translations. Translators now type their first draft directly into laptop computers. Other translators and speakers of the language can check and amend the text electronically.

When an approved text is agreed, this can be programmed to a computer system and held electronically. Subject to copyright and royalty agreements, it becomes easy to view or use. The Bible text can then be formatted to suit its specific print purpose (for example, a standard Bible or a pocket New Testament).

From initial keyboard input of text translation, technology offers the opportunity to all involved with Bible production to use the original text input files:

- A typographic designer makes decisions about how the text will look on the page.
- A programmer takes the text and codes it accordingly to give it a technical language the computer understands.
- A typesetter uses the programmed files to format to text pages.
- A proof-reader sees and checks the formatted text files.
- The technical pre-press team receives a CD or digital transfer of the pages at the printers.

The files will then be electronically transferred to printing plates ready for printing and binding.

13. WHAT HAPPENS NOW?

- Bible Societies are currently working on over 600 Scripture translation projects throughout the world.
- The national Bible Societies become involved in a project at the request of the local churches or a group of Christians requiring help. In areas where there is a church,

the type of translation – whether of a traditional nature or a “common language” version (in the language of current everyday use) – is decided upon by that church.

- When agreement is reached, a committee is formed to fulfil the task, and appropriately qualified members are appointed, including national speakers. This involves men and women with a deep understanding of the Bible and expertise in Hebrew, Greek, linguistics, culture and anthropology. They need to show a concern to communicate the message of the Bible to all, but they especially need to know the “receptor” language (the tongue of a particular group) inside out.
- Bible Societies work involves further revision and translation into other languages, combating illiteracy so people can read the Word, financing, distributing, and printing new projects in order to provide Scriptures where they are needed.