

ENGLISH BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

Curt Daniel

1. OLD ENGLISH. The NT and parts of the OT were translated into Gothic in the 4th century, and this in turn affected the Germanic and English languages. Small parts of the Bible were translated or paraphrased from Latin into early Anglo-Saxon by the Venerable Bede and Caedmon in the 8th and early 9th centuries, but very little remains of their work. Then there were the Lindifarne Gospels, translated into an early dialect of Anglo-Saxon by Eadfrith about the year 700. Later, there were rough translations of the Gospels into the Northumbrian dialect of north England, and a version into Old Irish. There were also a few sentences translated by Aelfric, Richard Rolle, and others. The Anglo-Saxon version once contained the whole NT, but we only have part of it in manuscripts.

2. JOHN WYCLIFFE, aided by John Purvey and the Lollards, saw the importance of having the whole Bible available in English. They produced several editions about the year 1380, from the Latin Bible. This was in Middle English - not the Old English of Beowulf or even Chaucer, but not the English we would recognize as that of Shakespeare. Still, most of it is readable to us today. The Catholic Church strongly disapproved, and many of Wycliffe's helpers were burned at the stake with the Bible around their neck.

3. WILLIAM TYNDALE was influenced by Martin Luther to translate the entire Bible from the original Greek and Hebrew. He completed the NT and parts of the OT, adding useful notes and a translator's introduction which would greatly influence the English Reformation. This was the big breakthrough, for Tyndale's translation was actually printed and published (Gutenberg invented the printing press some 80 years earlier), whereas Wycliffe's was handcopied by scribes. Because of persecution, Tyndale had to flee England and hide out in different parts of Europe, mainly Holland. Copies were smuggled back into England in bales of cloth or barrels of merchandise; when found, they were burned by the Catholic authorities. Tyndale once said, "I defy the Pope and all his laws. If God spares my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plow shall know more of the Scriptures than thou dost." The note to Ex.32:35 in his translation read: "The Pope's bull slayeth more than Aaron's calf." Eventually he was caught and burned at the stake, while praying, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes". His death in 1536 inspired many.

4. OTHER BIBLES OF THE ENGLISH REFORMATION quickly followed as the demand grew and Henry VIII took the English Church out from the authority of Rome. MILES COVERDALE was granted royal permission to translate the Bible and publish it in 1535. He mainly revised Tyndale's version, with help from Luther's German translation and the Latin Bible. But after Henry died, he fled to Europe. His Bible contained the Apocrypha, but separate from the OT and NT. Among his quaint renderings was Psa. 91:5, "Thou shalt not nede be afrayed for eny bugges by night." A revision followed in 1537 by John Rogers, known as the MATTHEW'S BIBLE. Still another revision was authorized in 1539, known as the GREAT BIBLE. It was great in size, too (about 16 by 11 inches). Copies were ordered to be placed in every church in England. It contained the Apocrypha, again set in a separate place to show that it was useful but not inspired.

5. THE GENEVA BIBLE was translated by English reformers who fled persecution in the 1550's by moving to Geneva, Switzerland. There they were greatly influenced by John Calvin and Theodore Beza, whose theology appears in the large marginal notes and introductions. It was mainly the work of William Whittingham. Published in 1560, it was dedicated to Elizabeth I and immediately became the most popular version (used by Shakespeare, the Puritans and the Pilgrims to America). Gen.3:7

has "breeches" for aprons. The last major Reformation Bible was the BISHOP'S BIBLE of 1566, in which the monarchialists and Anglicans sought to tone down the strongly Calvinistic and Presbyterian notes and renderings of the Geneva Bible. Mainly the work of Matthew Parker, it was a revision of the Great Bible and was made the official Bible of the Church of England.

6. THE KING JAMES VERSION, also known as the Authorized Version, was made in 1611 in order to finally overcome the influence of the Geneva Bible. After Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603, James I, King of Scotland, was made King of England as well. He was by no means a true believer (he was probably a homosexual and paedophile) and believed in the Divine Right of Kings. He summoned the Hampton Court Conference of 1604 to produce a new translation, without explanatory notes (though it would contain brief translational notes in the margin). Among the very able translators were John Reynolds (a Puritan) and Lancelot Andrewes (evangelical but not a Puritan). Some translators were very High Church in their theology and sacramentalism; some were also rather dissolute in their lifestyles.

The KJV contained no quotation marks, put the holy name of God in capital letters as LORD, again placed the Apocrypha in a separate place (by this time, some editions of the Geneva Bible were omitting it entirely), and by mid-17th century overtook the Geneva Bible in popularity. It was later slightly revised in 1613, 1629, 1638, with more extensive revisions in 1762 and 1769, which form is that usually used in printings today. Some 90% of its wording is directly traceable back to Tyndale's version. It has been far and away the most popular translation in English. Only in recent years has any other translation (the NIV) out-sold it in a given year. In 1701, the chronological dating of Archbishop James Usher, a leading Puritan, were placed in the margins of most printings of the KJV.

Some interesting misprints have occurred. The so-called "Wicked Bible" omitted "not" from the 7th of the 10 Commandments. A 1717 edition had vinegar instead of "vineyard", known as the "Vinegar Bible". A 1795 misprint had, "Let the children first be killed" instead of "filled" in Mark 7:27. Another had, perhaps appropriately, "Printers [instead of princes] have persecuted me without a cause." Even a 20th century misprint had, "Women should be adorned in modern [rather than modest] apparel." The original KJV of 1611 has been reproduced exactly recently.

Still, its beautiful language has changed in meaning over the centuries. Some KJV archaisms: ounces of gold, woe worth the day, naughty figs, wimple, sith, vain jangling, I trow not, I wot not, we do you to wit, Solomon loved many strange women, shamefacedness, ye are straitened in your bowels, etc. Some words have changed so as to mean something quite different, such as corn (grain in general), meat (food in general), peculiar (distinctive, not weird), prevent (precede), let (prohibit), suffer (allow), conversation (behavior), mean man (lowly person), etc. It needs to be updated, for the KJV translators themselves realized that God's Word needs to be understood. Unfortunately, some extreme fundamentalists not only prefer the KJV, but contend that it is as inspired as the original Greek and Hebrew, if not more so. They are wrong. Paul, Moses and the others were inspired by God to write in Greek and Hebrew, not English. Otherwise, there really was no Bible until 1611. It is a good translation, but it is neither inspired nor infallible.

7. THE REVISED VERSION (1881) was meant to update the KJV's archaic language, but ended up as a considerable revision. Some of the greatest British scholars labored for several years to revise it. However noble their aim, it has been deemed "a failure, though a splendid one." The English is very stilted and wooden. A Unitarian was on the committee. It also revised the underlying Greek and Hebrew texts. It never really became popular.

8. THE AMERICAN STANDARD VERSION (1901) was put together by 30 of the RV translators who were from America, incorporating their suggested renderings, such as "Jehovah" for the name of God. Its English is somewhat more American and a bit easier to follow. Its major reviser was Philip Schaff. It has been copyrighted by Thomas Nelson Publishers and was more popular here than the RV was in Britain. However, it too did not finally displace the KJV.

9. THE REVISED STANDARD VERSION (NT in 1946, OT in 1952) was another step in revising the KJV, and one which has received far more and lasting success than the RV or the ASV. It is the translation generally used by scholars today. However, it was sponsored by the National Council of Churches, and most of its translators were liberal. Their changing "virgin" to "young woman" in Isa. 7:14 caused no small controversy. One fundamentalist minister burned a copy of the RSV with a blow-torch and sent the ashes to the RSV committee chairman. (Yet the RSV kept "virgin" in Matt. 1:23). It used "only Son" in John 3:16 instead of "only begotten Son". It has been a best-seller (12 million in the first 10 years), and is even available in a Catholic version - the first Protestant Bible to win Catholic approval. It was later revised again as the NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION.

10. THE NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE (1971) was an Evangelical attempt to revise the ASV of 1901 along more conservative lines than the RSV. Like the RSV, it removed most of the "thees and thous" and archaic words, except for use with God. Divine pronouns are capitalized. Like the RSV, it went back to "LORD" instead of "Jehovah". It is a very literal and accurate translation, and has been popular mainly with very conservative Evangelicals and Fundamentalists, though it has declined in popularity in recent years. There is no doubt it is one of the best.

11. THE NEW KING JAMES VERSION (1979, 1982) was the last major revision of the KJV, and is closer to it in language and underlying text than the others. Sponsored by Thomas Nelson and revised by very conservative Evangelicals and Fundamentalists, it has sold very well and deserves our attention, though it is ignored by liberals. It is the version used in the New Geneva Study Bible, which is not a new translation but a study Bible with Calvinistic notes like the original Geneva Bible (it is also known as The Reformation Study Bible).

12. THE NEW ENGLISH BIBLE (NT 1961, OT 1970) was an attempt by British scholars, mainly from Oxford and Cambridge, to start all over afresh. Its language is nothing like the KJV tradition; rather posh and upperclass English. Its translators were almost all very liberal, and it shows in their work. The poet laureate John Masefield said it was "greatly planned, manfully done", while T.S. Eliot called it a work of "dignified mediocrity". It caused a sensation, but rapidly declined.

13. THE NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION (NT 1973, OT 1978) was the conservative counterpart to the NEB, even as the liberal RSV had its counterpart in the NASB and the good but ignored MODERN LANGUAGE BIBLE (1969, also known as the Revised Berkeley Version, mainly the work of Gerrit Verkyl and other Evangelicals). The NIV was a fresh translation, with no thees and thous, but no rank liberalism either. It is not as literal as the RV, ASV, RSV or NASB, and contains a little paraphrase and interpretation, as does the NEB. Sponsored by the International Bible Society and later by Zondervan Publishers, its translators were very conservative, such as its chairman Edwin Palmer. Liberals ignore it, but the NIV has enjoyed great success and is the first translation to outsell the KJV in a given year. It is certainly one of the best. Like all others except the NKJV, it revised the Hebrew and Greek texts, too.

14. THE DOUAI BIBLE (or Rheims-Douai, 1582) was the first Roman Catholic English translation, mainly to counteract the various Protestant versions. Done in France, it is actually not as bad as some think. Yet it definitely has a Romish bent ("Do penance" instead of "Repent", etc), especially in its marginal notes. The CONFRATERNITY-DOUAI was a major revision of it in 1941, following other lesser revisions, such as that by Bishop Challoner in 1749. It might be called the KJV of Rome.

Other Catholic translations include that by Ronald Knox (1945, 1949), an Englishman who translated from the Latin and employed considerable paraphrase. Kleist and Lilley translated the NT in 1954. THE JERUSALEM BIBLE (1966) is based on the work of French RC archeologists working in Jerusalem. It is like the NEB in many ways: liberal, paraphrastic, much emendation and speculation, etc. It is the first major translation to use "Yahweh" for the name of God. Lastly, perhaps the best Catholic translation is the NEW AMERICAN BIBLE (1970), not to be confused with the New American Standard Bible mentioned above. Its first version was from the Latin (1941), but a complete reworking in 1970 from the Greek and Hebrew and Vatican II encouragement for Catholics to read the Bible ensured that it is the most popular Catholic Bible today.

15. THE GOOD NEWS BIBLE (NT 1966, OT 1976), formerly known as "Good News For Modern Man" is one of the two main popular paraphrases of recent years. Sponsored by the American Bible Society and mainly the work of liberal Robert Bratcher (who once publicly stated that no intelligent person believed in Biblical inerrancy), it attempts to use modern linguistics in a meaning-for-meaning way. 50 million copies of the NT alone were sold, mainly in cheap mass-produced forms, in the first 10 years. It contains cartoons. It aims at a lower level of intelligence among its readers, such as a junior high student or someone for whom English is a second language. Fundamentalists were outraged, especially for replacing "blood" with "life" or "death" in some places. Its Dynamic Equivalence linguistics are certainly understandable, but also negate it as a reliable translation.

16. THE LIVING BIBLE (NT 1967, OT 1971) is the other major recent popular paraphrase, by Kenneth Taylor, a Moody Press employee who did most of the work on a commuter train for his children. When Moody rejected it, he self-published it, sold over 40 million complete Bibles, has become wealthy (but has set up a foundation with the profits to distribute the translation), and lost his voice as a result of what he himself thinks might be because he tampered with God's Word. Billy Graham promoted it in the 1960's. It contains vulgarisms and silly paraphrases (Barny the Preacher, Israelis for Israelites, etc). Rev. 18:22 has "no more pianos, saxophones or trumpets". Mass-marketed as THE BOOK, THE WAY and other names, it was revised as THE NEW LIVING TRANSLATION (1996). It is unreliable in spite of its popularity.

17. THE HOLY SCRIPTURES ACCORDING TO THE MASSORETIC TEXT (1917) was the first major Jewish translation into English, and is quite good. It was sponsored by the Jewish Publication Society of America. There have been several OT translations by individual Jews, such as Leeser and Harkavy, and Hugh Schonfield even did the NT as THE AUTHENTIC NEW TESTAMENT (1951). Two Messianic Jews translated the NT by themselves: David Stern's THE JEWISH NEW TESTAMENT and Heinz Cassirer's GOD'S NEW COVENANT. The major Jewish translation of the OT is TANAKH, done by a team of leading Hebrew scholars, rather liberal but not as much so as most Protestants.

The above constitute the most important English translations. But there have also been a stream of others. Many were by a single person, some by committees. Some were based on the KJV, others were very eccentric and downright bizarre. A few were done by first-rate scholars while others were

done by those who knew little or no Greek or Hebrew. Some have been literal, others extremely paraphrased. Some were by conservative evangelicals, others by cults, weirdos and even a few by those who did not even claim to be Christians. There have been far more of the NT than of the whole Bible, and most are not notable except to Bible collectors. The following deserve some sort of mention here.

Richard Baxter (1685), Henry Hammond (1653), Daniel Whitby (1703), Philip Doddridge and others have produced 1-man "expository" translations, which are more commentary and paraphrase than translation. This goes back to the work of Desiderius Erasmus, Luther's nemesis, who did an interesting expositional paraphrase in Latin which was translated into English in the 16th century. More recently, THE AMPLIFIED BIBLE (1965) is a similar expository version. These all admit to being expositional in nature and are not to be used as translations per se, but more like brief commentaries. Most of these, except Whitby, have been evangelical, though others have been less so.

Others have been more paraphrases, such as the recent THE MESSAGE by Eugene Peterson, and the one by WILLIAM BARCLAY, a popular Scottish preacher-theologian. F. F. Bruce did an "expanded" version of Paul's epistles which is something of a scholarly paraphrase by a leading Evangelical scholar, worth reading. KENNETH WUEST, a Greek teacher at Moody Bible Institute, also did an expanded version of the entire NT, concentrating on bringing out the nuances of Greek tenses. Such versions are useful in their own way, as long as one realizes their limitations.

JOHN WESLEY (1755) corrected the KJV in some 12,000 places and added notes, but it is still basically the KJV. J.N.DARBY (1871, 1890), the leading figure among the Plymouth Brethren, translated the entire Bible, though much of it still is akin to the KJV tradition. Rotherham's EMPHASIZED BIBLE (1872, 1902) is another Brethren work, and tries to bring out nuances in the Greek verbs to a small degree.

J.B.PHILLIPS (1958) produced an extremely popular paraphrase of the NT when he found that English youth in World War II couldn't understand the KJV. He has some remarkable renderings, such as Rom. 12:2, "Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold", or "Tighten your belts" for "Gird up the loins of your minds". C.S.Lewis endorsed it. JAMES MOFFATT also produced a paraphrase, this one of the whole Bible. It shows his Scottish background as well as his liberalism, such as when he moves whole paragraphs around in the text. He uses "The Eternal" for the name of God. The NT appeared in 1913, the OT in 1928, and was the first paraphrase to really gain popularity. He has bagpipes in Dan.3:10 and linen kilts in 2 Sam.6:14. Incidentally, there have also been a number of translations into Scots, or Scots/English.

Similarly, there have been "translations", if you can call them that, into questionable dialects such as Scouse (of Liverpool) or Ebonics (Black street talk). Worse still, there have been those which take extreme liberties, such as THE WORD MADE FRESH (Bible selections which has Nazis for Philistines, and worse). GOD IS FOR REAL, MAN is also street-cool nonsense, mainly for convicts: "The Lord is like my probation officer" (Psa. 23:1), or "God is a good hideout". LETTERS FOR STREET CHRISTIANS was a similar paraphrase, this one for early 1970's "Jesus Freaks", or converted hippies. THE COTTON PATCH VERSION by liberal Clarence Jordan is set in the racist south in the civil rights struggle.

Then there is THE NEW TESTAMENT - AN INCLUSIVE VERSION, a modern politically correct version favorable to Feminism. There have been a few Feminist versions, too, none of which match the true skill of earlier 1-woman translations by Helen Montgomery (THE CENTENARY NT, 1924), or the whole OT by Helen Spurrell. FERRAR FENTON, a lay person, translated the entire

Bible without, she says, consulting other versions. It is noted for strange renderings and has been chosen by certain far-right "Identity" cults. Such cults also like the several "Sacred Name" translations, usually employing "Jehovah" or "Yahweh" as God's name. By far the most popular of these is the NEW WORLD TRANSLATION (1960) by the Jehovah's Witnesses, with its notorious translation of John 1:1 as "The Word was a god". It is very unscholarly and biased in favor of their distinctive heresies, though it does have one or two colorful phrases, such as "undeserved kindness" for "grace" in Eph.2:8. But it also has "torture stake" instead of cross, tries to eliminate Hell, etc.

One-man translations of the NT were done by RICHARD WEYMOUTH (1903), an English school-master; Edgar Goodspeed (1923), a leading American liberal scholar (J.M.Parvis Smith, also of the University of Chicago, did the accompanying OT in 1927; together they form THE BIBLE: AN AMERICAN TRANSLATION); GEORGE NOYES (1869), a Unitarian; SAMUEL SHARPE, also Unitarian; SAMUEL WAKEFIELD, still another Unitarian. On the other hand, very orthodox Scottish ROBERT YOUNG (1862) translated the entire Bible in an extremely literal version still respected today. THE CONCORDANT VERSION (1957) is overly literal, since it insists on always using the same English word for its matching Greek counterpart, resulting in some strange and confusing renderings. There have also been quite a few "interlinears" of both testaments, in which the exact English is placed under each Greek or Hebrew word on the page. These have less value than many think, and often have a major translation in a parallel column.

RICHARD LATTIMORE was a classical Greek scholar who did an original translation of the NT. THE AMERICAN BIBLE UNION produced a Baptist NT last century, using "immerse" for "baptize". There have also been English translations of individual Greek manuscripts, and even of ancient versions such as Latin. The most well-known is that by GEORGE LAMSA of Assyria, who took the KJV and revised it in light of the Syriac version, which he thinks was the original language. Results are unusual at times, such as "rope" going through "the eye of a needle". THE TRANSLATOR'S NEW TESTAMENT (1973) was mainly to help those who are translating the Bible into other languages, based on linguistic principles. Jay Adams did THE CHRISTIAN COUNSELLOR'S NEW TESTAMENT, employing his distinctive counseling approach in certain places and notes. JOSEPH SMITH, founder of the Mormons, produced a really bizarre INSPIRED VERSION OF THE NT, which only one branch of Mormons accept. THE BIBLE IN BASIC ENGLISH is meant for those who have English as a second language, and uses a vocabulary of only some 800 "basic" English words. THE SIMPLE ENGLISH BIBLE is a more recent effort along similar lines. Some commentary series have their own translation, such as the liberal ANCHOR BIBLE. Jay Green produced the popular CHILDREN'S KING JAMES VERSION in 1960, with pictures, but none of Christ. He later did the KING JAMES II and other literal translations which are but revisions of the KJV. THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY NEW TESTAMENT (1898-1901) was done by an anonymous team of non-scholars who did a better job than one would expect of laymen.

The list goes on and accelerates every year, each claiming to be the best ("Finally we have one which people can understand!"). But most only add to the confusion and are worthwhile only to collectors.

(Added note by Scott Harris in 2010. A new translation, the ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION, was produced in 2001 by a team of more than 100 scholars. It is a literal translation using the Masoretic text (183 2nd edition) and UBS Greek New Testament, 4th edition (1993). It is being used by an increasing number of conservative Bible expositors and has been noted for its clarity and accuracy).

CHOOSING A BIBLE TRANSLATION

The following points should be considered in choosing which Bible translation to use.

- (1) Personal taste or feelings ought not be the standard, nor reasons such as "My mother gave me this Bible," "I like the pictures," "The Holy Spirit told me this is the one," etc.
- (2) Good as they are, some older translations suffer because the English language has changed over the centuries. Thus, the King James Version and Geneva Bible were and are still very good, but care must be given to understanding the vocabulary as it was used in the 16th & 17th centuries. (Use a Webster 1828 dictionary)
- (3) Use a Bible that is translated from the original languages of Greek and Hebrew, not one based on the Latin or Syriac, etc.
- (4) Use a reliable translation that uses the best Greek and Hebrew texts. There are two general lines of thought concerning the text types that best represent the original manuscripts. 1) Bibles such as the KJV and NKJV rely on the later and more plentiful Byzantine Greek text types. 2) Bibles such as the NASB and ESV rely on the older text types (Alexandrian & Western).
- (5) The best translations were produced by Bible-believing Evangelicals. Avoid ones done by liberals, Catholics or cults, except for collecting or consultation purposes.
- (6) Committees have produced better translations than individual translators.
- (7) Literal (word for word) translations (KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV) are more reliable translations and better for study. Paraphrases, semi-paraphrases and dynamic equivalent translations are good for general reading (Living Bible, NIV, etc), but not as reliable in translation of the original languages, and so are not good for study.
- (8) Avoid Bibles that use cheap slang, liberal or evangelical gimmicks, and the like. These degrade the dignity of God's Word. The best translations will stand the test of time. They are timeless standards, not timely fads. "Cool" translations are quickly outdated.
- (9) Interlinear and expanded or amplified expository Bibles are helpful for serious study, but can be difficult for reading or general study
- (10) It can be useful to own and use several different translations for personal study. However, it is best to stick with one as your primary Bible for purposes of familiarity.
- (11) Using only one translation in a church reduces some confusion among the congregation and makes it easier to follow the preacher. However, having a variety of translations in a Bible study can be helpful in bringing a better understanding of the underlying Hebrew or Greek (if the more literal translations are being used).
- (12) Bible collecting can be an interesting, but expensive and never ending hobby.
- (13) "Study" Bibles include study aides such as concordances, dictionaries, maps, tables, charts and explanatory notes. Most include commentary by a particular scholar or according to a particular theology. They vary widely in quality and usefulness. Pick according to the quality of the study aides included and the theological reliability of the authors of the notes and commentary. (Better ones include The MacArthur Study Bible, Zondervan Hebrew-Greek Key Word Study Bible, Thompson Chain Reference, NASB Inductive Study Bible)
- (14) Print size may need to be considered by those needing strong reading glasses
- (15) Quality of binding and paper will be a factor depending on the daily usage of the Bible. Better quality will be needed for a Bible used daily compared to one used only for reference