

History of the Bible in English

Introduction: The Bible and its history begin with the *Wycliffe Bible* published in 1382. There were no printing presses and Wycliffe's Bible was produced by hand. The first printed form of the Bible began with the *Tyndale Bible* published in 1525. The following history will demonstrate there are seven editions of the English Bible in printed form. The *Wycliffe Bible*, if included in this list, would make it eight editions of the Bible in English. When considering the supernatural preservation of the Word of God (see [Psalm 12:6-7](#)) there would be seven editions of the Bible prior to the King James Bible. It would be the eighth Bible. Eight is the number of new beginnings and the King James Bible demonstrates a new beginning where God has supernaturally provided His word to men in a preserved form. If one presses the issue in [Psalm 12:6-7](#) where it says, “[6The words of the LORD are pure words: as silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. 7Thou shalt keep them, O LORD, thou shalt preserve them from this generation for ever](#)” the purifying of the words of God took place in the first seven and the eighth was the “new beginning.” If you take only the printed editions, you still have seven. Either way, God has demonstrated to us historically that He supernaturally preserved His word for the English-speaking people.

Another matter needs to be addressed. English has become the “trade language” of the world. That is the reason the world is clamoring to learn English. To illustrate this consider the occupation of “air traffic controllers.” This work is done worldwide. Most of the flights are known as international, a flight between two countries. Any pilot who flies internationally must know how to speak English because a person speaking English controls all international flights. For instance: if a person flies from the United States to Russia, then the pilots must be able to speak English because when they land in Russia they will be directed by an air traffic controller in English.¹

Since English has become the “trade language” of the world, do you not think God would have his *perfect word* available in English to a world that understands English? This emphasizes the importance of understanding the matter of preservation of the Word of God. This did not sneak up on God and he was forced to go to plan B to meet the need of the world to provide His word to them. God knew all along what would happen historically.

This is why we say that the Bible has been historically preserved and tried in a furnace of earth seven times to the place of purification. No other translation of the Bible in English can make this claim. This is why the following illustrates the historical account of God preserving His word. The King James Bible is the perfect, preserved Word of God for you and me today.

- 1. The Wycliffe Bible.** John Wycliffe (sometimes spelled “Wyclif) was not the first person to translate the Bible into English. There were portions of the Bible that had been translated into English prior to his work. The language that gave birth to English, Anglo-Saxon, had several portions of the Bible translated into its dialect. John Wycliffe was responsible for giving the English-speaking world the Bible in English in a completed form for the first time. He stylized the English and provided a complete Bible. His work of translation was focused on the New Testament for which he is given credit. A man named Nicholas Hereford who was a follower of Wycliffe probably translated the Old Testament. John Wycliffe is called the “Morning Star of the Reformation. He spoke against the corruption of the Papacy and wrote

¹ A flight that goes from Moscow, Russia to St. Petersburg, Russia is not determined by that law. The controllers can speak Russian. There was an incident several years ago where a Russian plane was carrying over 100 passengers, most of them young people on their way to France for a vacation. There was a collision between that plane and a German aircraft in mid air where both planes were lost and all the passengers were killed. The blame began to be cast back and forth and one conclusion was that the Russian pilot was not able to speak English and understand the directions given him to avoid the crash in mid-air. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Air_traffic_control for further information.

19 articles of heresies to the Pope in 1377. There were five *Papal Bulls*² issued against him. He died a natural death but 44 years later the Catholic church dug up his bones, burned them and scattered the ashes in the Swift River.

2. **The Tyndale Bible.** William Tyndale lived from 1494 to 1536. Tyndale studied Greek and Latin under Erasmus, was a scholar at both Cambridge and Oxford (Universities), and was fluent in several languages. It is reported that he gave the following answer to a critic: “I defy the pope and all his laws; if God spare my life, ere many years I will cause the boy that driveth the plough in England to know more of the Scriptures than thou doest.”³ The New Testament was completed in 1525; the Pentateuch (first five books of the Old Testament called the Law of Moses) was completed in 1530; Jonah in 1531; Joshua to I Chronicles was translated while he was in prison in Belgium; and the entire work was revised in 1534. While Tyndale did not translate the entire Bible, the New Testament was his work. Since the time of Wycliffe, the Bible was forbidden in English. Tyndale used his own money to print 3,000 copies secretly in Germany and shipped them to England. The Bishops bought as many as they could and burned them. Tyndale, though a Catholic, opposed the Papacy. He was arrested and tried as a heretic. Being found guilty, he was condemned to be burned at the stake. This was during a time in England when only Anabaptists were burned at the stake. He was strangled and burned but not before he uttered the prayer, “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes.”
3. **The Coverdale Bible.** Myles Coverdale (1488-1569) was the first to publish a complete English Bible. He evidently assisted Tyndale and actually completed that work. King Henry VIII established the Church of England over a dispute with the Roman Catholic Church. He issued a decree that the Bible should be translated into the language of the people. The prayer of William Tyndale was about to be answered. Archbishop Cramner, head of the Anglican Church (Church of England) was given authority by the king to make a new translation. Coverdale’s Bible was printed in October 1535. Coverdale was more of an editor than a translator. He claims to have completed his work by comparing the works of Zwingli, the *Vulgate*, the Latin text, Martin Luther’s German translation and the work of William Tyndale.
4. **Matthew’s Bible.** This Bible gets its name from “Thomas Matthew” which was a pseudonym for John Rogers, a friend of William Tyndale who evidently turned over unpublished manuscripts of the Old Testament to Rogers. He used Tyndale’s Old Testament work as well as his New Testament translation. The *Matthew’s Bible* is the first revision of the *Tyndale Bible*. The reason given for Rogers not using Tyndale’s name on the Bible was the opposition to Tyndale’s work and believing it might hinder the sale of the new Bible. Even though King Henry VIII authorized the translation of a new Bible, he considered Tyndale a heretic. The *Matthew’s Bible* was actually published in 1536, a year prior to the Coverdale Bible. Rogers was put to death as a martyr in 1555 when Mary Tudor, a Roman Catholic, took the throne of England in 1553.
5. **The Great Bible.** The *Great Bible* has the distinction of being the first “authorized” Bible. Published in 1539, the Great Bible had the following on its title page:

² A Papal Bull is a statement that issues from the Pope himself. It carries more weight than an *encyclical* letter. It carried a seal called a “*bull*” (Latin) thus the corruption of the word *Papal Bull*. This is an official statement by the Pope on a particular subject or issue.

³ Cited by Laurence M. Vance, *A Brief History of English Bible Translations*, 1993, page 13.

“The Byble in Englyshe, that is to saye the content of all the holy scripture bothe of ye old and new testament, truly translated after the veryte of the Hebrue and Greke textes, by ye dylygent studye of diverse excellent learned men, expert in the forsayde tonges. Prynted by Rychard Grafton and Edward Whitchurch. Cum privilegio ad imprimendum solum, 1539.”⁴

The *Great Bible* was a revision of the *Matthew's Bible* (ordered by Cromwell) and printed in Paris in 1538. Yet, the *Inquisition*⁵ was being enforced. An order was issued by the Roman Catholic Church to confiscate the material. Thomas Cromwell secured the printing equipment and had it moved to England. He obtained the plates, type, presses and even the printer who had been arrested. Cromwell had assigned Myles Coverdale the task of revising the *Matthew's Bible* and the *Great Bible* is the results. It is called the *Great Bible* because of its size. It went through seven editions but the second edition had the added statement, “This is the Bible appointed to the use of the churches.” To comply with this injunction, the Bible was placed in every church and chained in a convenient place. This often gave it the designation of the “chained Bible.” The *Great Bible* was the work of Tyndale since *Matthew's Bible* was a revision of Tyndale's work.

6. **The Geneva Bible.** The last days of Henry VIII were stormy. There was wholesale destruction of images, shrines, plundering of Monasteries and wrecking of Catholic buildings. The Catholics reacted and the king retreated and made some concessions. In 1543, all *Tyndale Bibles* were prohibited. In 1546, all Bibles were condemned except the *Great Bible*. King Henry VIII died in 1547 and Edward VI took the throne. All prohibitions against the Bible were removed. The Bible was easily printed during Edward's reign. When Mary Tudor (better known as “Bloody Mary”) took the throne, the Bible was again restricted and John Rogers and Archbishop Cramner were put to death by Mary. Myles Coverdale and others fled England and settled in Geneva, Switzerland, which had become a haven for “reformers” such as John Calvin. William Whittingham, pastor of the English church in Geneva, translated the New Testament. This became known as the *Geneva Bible*. The complete Bible was produced in 1560. The *Geneva Bible* was very popular and had more influence on the *King James Bible* other than the *Tyndale Bible*. It had notes that were anti-Catholic as well as Calvinistic.
7. **The Bishop's Bible – 1568.** Produced in 1568, the *Bishop's Bible* was the fourth revision of the *Tyndale Bible*. The Archbishop of Canterbury named Parker organized eight or nine bishops to make the new translation. This gave it the designation as the “Bishop's Bible.” This Bible followed the *Great Bible* except where it clearly differed from the Greek and Hebrew. It replaced the *Great Bible* and an order was issued that every bishop was to have a copy in his house. It was not accepted well in some circles due to the formal, stiff and difficult high-sounding words.
8. **The King James Bible – 1611.** James was raised a Protestant⁶ in Scotland. When Queen Elizabeth (1558-1603) died, the throne passed from the Tudor family to the Stuarts. James

⁴ Vance, page 17.

⁵ The Inquisition was a period of church history when the Roman Catholic Church sought to purge the world of those they considered “heretics” which included the Anabaptists, most of the Reformers, and anyone who did not adhere to the doctrines and dictates of the Roman Catholic Church. Many were tortured, burned at the stake, drowned, with many other tactics used in an attempt to force a recantation from the accused.

⁶ Protestant is a designation given to those groups that “protested” the Roman Catholic Church and its doctrine. They opposed the abuses by the priesthood and their careless conduct. These would be of the tradition of Martin Luther, John Calvin, Ulrich Zwingli and others who opposed the Roman Catholic Church. Baptists are not considered Protestant since

was king of Scotland as James VI and when he took the throne of England became James I. He grew up during the period of the *Geneva* and *Bishop's Bible*. James I did not favor the Puritans who were gaining influence in England. The issue of the 17th Century was not whether England was to be Protestant or Catholic, but would it be Puritan or Anglican. The Puritans held a conference in 1604 and 1000 clergy signed a petition opposing superstition and formalism in the church services. One of the first acts of the new King James I was to call a conference at Hampton Court in 1604. The purpose was to address the supposed rumors that were drifting about concerning the church. He gathered an impressive group of bishops, clergymen and professors to consider the complaints of the Puritans. Four Puritan divines were invited to this conference. While the issue of a Bible translation was not on the agenda, John Reynolds, the Puritan president of Corpus Christi College, brought before the group the proposal to make a new translation. The reason given was that the Bibles formerly issued were corrupt and did not conform to the truth of the "original." The king agreed and wished for a "uniform" translation. A resolution came forth that said,

That a translation be made of the whole Bible, as consonant as can be to the original Hebrew and Greek; and this to be set out and printed, without any marginal notes, and only to be used in all churches of England in time of divine service.⁷

King James appointed 54 scholars and placed them into six groups and three companies meeting at Westminster, Cambridge, and Oxford, all checking each other's work. The work began in 1604 and was completed in 1611, a total of seven years. The translation was to be based on the Greek text of the scholar Erasmus (known as the *Textus Receptus*⁸) and the Hebrew text known as the *ben Chayyim* Massoretic text.

The *King James Bible*, often called the Authorized Version⁹ of 1611, became the standard Bible for the English-speaking world. There were small attempts to translate the Bible in English but none were (nor are) recognized by any. The *King James Bible* was the Bible of use by English speaking people for over 270 years without any attempt to change or alter it in any way. In 1881, two men by the name of Brook Foss Westcott and Fenton John Anthony Hort began the work, along with several scholars of the day, to produce a new translation of the Bible based on a different Greek and Hebrew text. The Greek text used became known as the *Westcott-Hort Greek New Testament* and differed from the *Received Text* in over 5,000 places. In addition, the Westcott-Hort translation used the Hebrew text that had been developed by the German higher critics called the *ben Asher* text of the Hebrew. It too differed from the *ben Chayyim* text.

History tells a story that must not be neglected. The *King James Bible of 1611* was unchallenged for nearly 300 years and was the Bible that formed doctrine and practice in the churches for this extended period. With this widespread acceptance, it cannot be disputed that the *King James Bible* is the preserved Bible, the perfect word of God. There is no other need for a new translation.

they have a heritage running throughout history that was part of the "free church" that is characterized by the Anabaptists (those who re-baptized adults who were baptized as infants).

⁷ Vance, page 25

⁸ The *Textus Receptus* comes from the Latin term, which means the "received text." It was the Greek text accepted by the church and authorized to be used as the standard of the "original" text of the New Testament.

⁹ This designation comes from the fact that the king of England James I authorized its translation and appointed it to be used in the churches.