

HISTORY OF BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

During the **1st** century Greek remains the language of the small **Christian** community, but with the spread of the faith through the Roman empire a Latin version of the Bible texts is needed in western regions.

Around this time a community of Jews, in the Diaspora, forget their Hebrew. For the Jews of Alexandria, in the **3rd century BC**, Greek is the first language. They undertake the translation of the Old Testament now known as the Septuagint.

Five centuries later the early **Christians**, who use Greek for their own New Testament, need to read both Old and New Testaments - for they see themselves as the inheritors of the Old Testament tradition. It is essential for their arguments, when debating with Jewish rabbis, that they have an accurate understanding of the original Hebrew. Their need prompts the great work of biblical scholarship undertaken by Origen in the **3rd century AD**.

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When it comes to the Psalms, Origen adds a further two versions. One of them is the text of a scroll which he has himself discovered in a jar in the valley of the Jordan - exactly as with the Dead Sea Scrolls in our own time.

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The Old Testament in Greek: 3rd c. BC - 3rd c. AD

There is no need for any part of the Bible to be translated until a community of Jews, in the **Diaspora**, forget their Hebrew. For the Jews of **Alexandria**, in the **3rd century BC**, Greek is the first language. They undertake the translation of the Old Testament now known as the **Septuagint**.

Five centuries later the early **Christians**, who use Greek for their own New Testament, need to read both **Old and New Testaments** - for they see themselves as the inheritors of the Old Testament tradition. It is essential for

their arguments, when debating with Jewish rabbis, that they have an accurate understanding of the original Hebrew. Their need prompts the great work of biblical scholarship undertaken by Origen in the **3rd century AD**.

In his *Hexapla* (from the Greek word for 'sixfold') Origen arranges six versions of the Old Testament in parallel columns for comparative study. The first column is the original Hebrew; next comes a transliteration of this in Greek letters, so that **Christians** can pronounce the Hebrew text; this is followed by the **Septuagint**, and then by Greek translations by **Christian** scholars.

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The Bible in Latin: 2nd - 4th century AD

During the **1st century** Greek remains the language of the small **Christian** community, but with the spread of the faith through the Roman empire a Latin version of the Bible texts is needed in western regions. By the second century there is one such version in use in north Africa and another in Italy.

These versions become corrupted and others are added, until by the **4th** century in the words of St Jerome, the leading biblical scholar of the time - there are 'almost as many texts as manuscripts'.

In **382** the **pope, Damasus**, commissions **Jerome** to provide a definitive Latin version. In his monastery at Bethlehem, tended by aristocratic virgins, the saint produces the **Vulgate**. This eventually becomes established as the Bible of the whole western church until the Reformation.

By the time the Vulgate is complete (in about 405), the barbarian Goths also have their own version of parts of the Bible - thanks to the astonishing missionary effort of Ulfilas.

Ulfilas and his alphabet: AD c.360

Ulfilas is the first man known to have undertaken an extraordinarily difficult intellectual task - writing down, from scratch, a language which is as yet purely oral. He even devises a new alphabet to capture accurately the sounds of spoken Gothic, using a total of twenty-seven letters adapted from examples in the Greek and Roman alphabets.

God's work is Ulphilas' purpose. He needs the alphabet for his translation of the Bible from Greek into the language of the Goths. It is not known how much he completes, but large sections of the Gospels and the Epistles survive in his version - dating from several years before **Jerome** begins work on his Latin text.

A restricted Bible: 8th - 14th century AD

The intention of St **Jerome**, translating into Latin the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament, was that ordinary **Christians** of the Roman empire should be able to read the word of **God**. 'Ignorance of the scriptures', he wrote, 'is ignorance of **Christ**'.

Gradually this perception is altered. After the collapse of the **western empire**, the people of **Christian** Europe speak varieties of German, French, Anglo-Saxon, Italian or Spanish. The text of Jerome's Vulgate is understood only by the learned, most of whom are priests. They prefer to corner the source of **Christian** truth, keeping for themselves the privilege of interpreting it for the people. Translation into vulgar tongues is discouraged.

There are exceptions. In the late **8th century Charlemagne** commissions translation of parts of the Bible for the use of his missionaries in the drive to convert pagan Germans. In the **9th century** the Greek brothers **Cyril and Methodius**, sent from Constantinople to **Moravia** at royal request, translate the Gospels and parts of the Old Testament into Slavonic.

These are missionary endeavors, promoted by rulers as an act of government when pagan Europe is being brought into the **Christian** fold. In the later fully **Christian** centuries there is no equivalent need to provide the **holy** texts in vernacular form. Any such impulse is now a radical demand on behalf of ordinary **Christians** against the church hierarchy.

The strongest medieval demand for vernacular texts comes in France from a heretical sect, the Cathars. The suppression of the Cathars is complete by the mid-**13th century**. But in the following century the same demand surfaces within mainstream western **Christianity**.

John Wycliffe and his followers produce full English versions of the Old and New Testament in the late **14th century**. At the same period the Czechs have their own vernacular Bible, subsequently much improved by John **Huss**.

These translations are part of the radical impulse for reform within the church. Indeed the issue of vernacular Bibles becomes one of the contentious themes of the Reformation.

A complaint by an English contemporary of Wycliffe, the chronicler Henry Knighton, is a measure of how far the church of Rome has swung on this issue since **Jerome's** campaign against 'ignorance of scripture'. Knighton rejects translation of the Bible on the grounds that by this means 'the jewel of the church is turned into the common sport of the people'.

Erasmus, Luther and Tyndale: AD 1516-1536

By the **16th century** the view is gaining ground that a personal knowledge of scripture is precisely what ordinary people most need for their own spiritual good. **Erasmus**, though he himself translates the New Testament only from Greek into Latin, expresses in his preface of **1516** the wish that the holy text should be in every language - so that even **Scots and Irishmen** might read it.

In the next decade this wish becomes a central demand of the Reformation. Fortunately writers with a vigorous style undertake the task. Notable among them are Luther and Tyndale. At a time of increasing literacy, their phrases have a profound influence on German and English literature.

Luther's interest in translating the New Testament from the original Greek into German has been stimulated, in **1518**, by the arrival in Wittenberg of a new young professor, Philip Melanchthon. His lectures on Homer inspire Luther to study Greek. Melanchthon - soon to become Luther's lieutenant in the Reformation - gives advice on Luther's first efforts at translation.

Luther revives the task in the Wartburg. His New Testament is ready for publication in **September 1522** (it becomes known as the *September Bible*). Luther's complete Bible, with the Old Testament translated from the Hebrew, is published in **1534**.

Soon after the publication of Luther's New Testament an English scholar, William Tyndale, is studying in **Wittenberg** - where he probably matriculates in **May 1524**. Tyndale begins a translation of the New Testament from Greek into English. His version is printed at Worms in **1526** in **3000** copies. When they reach England, the bishop of London seizes every copy that his agents can lay their hands on.

The offending texts are burnt at St Paul's Cross, a gathering place in the precincts of the cathedral. So effective are the bishop's methods that today only **(2)** two copies of the original **3000** survive.

Tyndale continues with his dangerous work (his life demonstrates the benefit to Luther of a strong protector, **Frederick the Wise**). By **1535** he has translated the first half of the Old Testament. In that year, living inconspicuously among English merchants in Antwerp, his identity is betrayed to the authorities. This city is in the **Spanish empire**, so Tyndale is unmistakably a heretic. He is executed at the stake in **1536**.

In spite of the destruction of printed copies, Tyndale's words survive in a living form. His texts become the source to which subsequent translators regularly return once it has been decided - by Henry VIII in **1534** - that there shall be an official English Bible.

The first authorized translation in England is that of Miles Coverdale, whose Bible of **1535** is dedicated to Henry VIII. Soon Henry commissions another version, edited under the supervision of Coverdale, with the intention that every church in the land shall possess a copy. This is the **Great Bible**, the saga of which from **1539** provides an intriguing insight into the politics of reform.

The translation which becomes central to English culture, as Luther's is to German, is the King James Bible (also called the Authorized Version). Edited by forty-seven scholars between **1604** and **1611**, it aims to take the best from all earlier translations. By far its major source is Tyndale.

The Bible in vernacular languages, a central demand of the Protestant **Reformation**, subsequently becomes the main weapon in the armory of Protestant missionaries. Spreading around the world, along with the traders and administrators of the expanding European empires of the **19th century**, these missionaries encounter more and more languages into which the holy text can be usefully translated.

During the **19th century** translations of the Bible, in whole or in part, are published in some **400** new languages. The **20th century** has added at least double that number.

One small local example can give an idea of the pace and energy of the missionary program. In Papua New Guinea more than **800** languages are

spoken. The first translation of the New Testament into one of these languages is not published until **1956**. Yet by the **1990s** the New Testament is available in more than **100** languages of the region, with almost **200** other versions in preparation.

Tyndale (c **1491 - 1536**) made the first Protestant translation of the Bible into English. The **Roman Catholic Church** continued to insist that the Bible should only be read in Latin, so Tyndale's was the very first English translation..

Tyndale's New Testament was fully printed in **1526**, and the portions of the Old Testament were published in sections during his life but as a group in **1537**, the year after his death. However, the Wycliffe translation first appeared in **1382**, and there had been earlier partial translations into **7th century** Old English before this.

The Authorized Version, commonly known as the King James Version, King James Bible or KJV, is an English translation of the Christian Bible by the Church of England begun in **1604** and completed in **1611**. First printed by the King's Printer Robert Barker, this was the third official translation into English; the first having been the Great Bible commissioned by the Church of England in the reign of King Henry VIII, and the second was the Bishop's Bible of **1568**. In **January 1604**, King James I of England convened the Hampton Court Conference where a new English version was conceived in response to the perceived problems of the earlier translations as detected by the Puritans, a faction within the Church of England

The Bible has been translated into many languages from the biblical languages of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Indeed, the full Bible has been translated into over **450** languages, although sections of the Bible have been translated into over **2,000** languages.

The Latin Vulgate was dominant in Western Christianity through the Middle Ages. Since then, the Bible has been translated into many more languages. English Bible translations in particular have a rich and varied history of more than a millennium.