How We Got the Bible Lesson 4

Early English Bibles[[1]](#footnote-1)

We already covered Greek and Hebrew copies. What happened in translation beyond the copies of manuscripts? What were the next translations after Greek?

We talked some about the Latin Vulgate. Many times, we hear of the Latin Vulgate and immediately plug our ears, because it’s the Bible of the Catholics.

First, it has undergone several revisions, and second, the same kinds of people and within the same lifetimes who produced the Latin Vulgate were those such as Athanasius, who defended against the early heresies of Arianism, and solidified doctrinal statements and creeds that is reflected even in our own doctrinal statements today in regard to matters of the Trinity.

So, the Latin Vulgate does not = bad. Martin Luther obviously took issue, and rightly so, with translations such as “do penance” instead of repentance/confession. Matthew 4:17 – But this rendering did not enter until Jerome’s Latin Vulgate.

Jerome strongly disliked the LXX (which remember, we have quotations of in the Greek NT by Jesus and the apostles!), feeling that the Masoretic text was better (something that the KJV translators believed as well). Frankly, it is my view that the Masoretic text is better than the text of the LXX, but for Greek speakers reading and studying the LXX, it was wholly the Word of God.

Archbishop [Stephen Langton](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stephen_Langton) who in 1205 (AD 1227)[[2]](#footnote-2)created the chapter divisions which are used today using the Latin Vulgate.

There are plenty of old versions of the Bible in other languages such as German, French, Spanish, and even older dialects of these and many other languages. It would be worth another lesson to describe the wealth of information of the translation process into other languages. It is not that English has arisen and all other nations have acquired from that. Rather, English has developed in the translation process just as all other languages.

**What were the earliest English Bibles?**

**Caedmon**

In 678 AD, there was a cowherder named Caedmon. There is a rather fanciful story of his acquiring the gift of singing one night in a dream, after which he was asked to come become a monk and live at the monastery. His songs contain major portions of Genesis, Exodus, and Daniel. They were used as memorable ways to teach the bible to people.[[3]](#footnote-3)

When people were learning these English settings by Caedmon, as there was little else, and the Bible was not complete in all 66 books in English at this time, we could still assert that these people were hearing the Word of God.

**Aldhelm**

In 709, Adhelm produced the first translation of the Psalter from the Latin Vulgate into Anglo-Saxon.[[4]](#footnote-4) Since the Psalms were so important to the educational system at the time, there were many circulating copies of the Psalter with English “glosses”[[5]](#footnote-5) written above or below the Latin text, while no “official” English translation was yet in circulation.

**Bede 675-735**

Bede is considered the “greatest name in the *history* of the early English church.”[[6]](#footnote-6) He was known for his Latin Church and English history writings. He helped translate the Bible into English for people who did not have the ability to do so. He thought it was very important that clergy were familiar at least with the Lord’s Prayer and the Apostles creed in English.

**Alcuin 735-804**

Alcuin was a pupil of Egbert, bishop of York. He worked to render a standardized text of Jerome’s Latin Vulgate. In this move, he moved accessibility to the Bible further away from English speakers. He did, however, develop “Caroline miniscule,” a kind of handwriting that used upper and lower case syllables which made manuscripts easier to read.

**Alfred the Great 849-901**

Alfred the great became burdened that many clergy did not know or couldn’t translate Latin. Alfred the Great established schools where English was taught, and those that were destined for priesthood would stay on and learn Latin. In the process, parts of Psalms, the ten commandments, and a few other small portions of scripture became accessible to some English speakers.

**Aelfric (955-1020)**

He was involved in the education of rural clergy. He had a mantra, “Happy is he, who reads the Scriptures, if he convert the words into actions.” This is why he himself produced some old English translations of portions of the Old Testament.

**Darkness**

Unfortunately, this was not a good time period for Scandinavian countries. Old Roman roads were in disrepair, Christianity was not making good headway in these countries, and robbers and pirates infested land and sea travel. To top it all off, the French-speaking Normans conquered England in 1066. At that time, any English Bible translation came to a halt. Within all of these stories are anecdotes of people who made certain copies of portions of scripture, but when war happens, people burn things, and history is lost. But the Word of God endures!

**Middle English**

Middle English, the language of Chaucer, was half-Norman/half-English. A few stories from Genesis and Exodus were written in middle English and two copies of the Psalms appeared in some writings. Some epistles were circulated to a few monks and nuns, but these writings were not made available to “common” people. After all the Bible is “Holy.” Why cast it to commoners? John Wycliffe would answer that question like this, “Because Jesus said to!

Latin for clergy and nothing for layman grew. In addition, the chasm between rich and poor grew. Rome was establishing dominance and the pope spoke of his direct links to God. This idea was shaken when England and French broke away from the Roman Empire (1378-1417)

The Black death (bubonic plague and pneumonic infections) lacerated this portion of the world. The average life expectancy in England in 1348 was 25. It *dropped* to 17 in 1376. People became interested in religion. Friars opposed English translation because scripture needed to be done only by those with skills in the original languages, philosophical training, exegesis, and biblical theology.

For details about Bibles in other languages, Wikipedia has some good information. (Be sure to double-check the sources! [Bible translations in the Middle Ages - Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible_translations_in_the_Middle_Ages#:~:text=Other%20early%20versions.%20The%20Bible%20was%20translated%20into,language%20of%20Ethiopia%2C%20and%2C%20in%20Western%20Europe%2C%20Latin.)

**John Wycliffe**

Prior to John Wycliffe there was no English Bible that was translated from beginning to end, though there was some translation. People relied on teaching and preaching, and small portions of translated text.

Wycliffe became a scholar and popular lecturer at Oxford. He had concerns about corruption in the papacy. The church had so much money it was telling the major European governments, including England, what to do.[[7]](#footnote-7)

He opposed intermediaries (priest/pope) and transubstantiation (communion turning into the actual body and blood of Christ). The pope tried to kick him out of Oxford, but at first he was too popular. Eventually the church forced the University’s hand, and they fired Wycliffe. His followers, many his students at Oxford, were given the title “Lollards” (lowlanders, used in the sense of being called heretics).

Wycliffe felt that the Bible should be in the common tongue. “It helpeth Christian men to study the Gospel in that tongue in which they know best Christ’s sentence.”

Archbishop Arundel wrote to Pope John XXIII in 1411: “This pestilent and wretched John Wyclif, of cursed memory, that son of the old serpent . . . endevoured by every means to attack the very faith and sacred doctrine of the Holy Church, devising – to fill up the measure of his malice – the expedient of a new translation of the Scriptures into the mother tongue.”

The Lord’s Prayer as translated in Wycliffe’s bible (modern characters)

“Oure fadir that art in hevenes, halowid be thi name. Thi kingdom come to. Be thi wille don in erthe as in hevene. Geve to us this day oure breed ovir othir substaunce. And forgeve to us oure dettis, as we forgeven to our dettouris. And lede us not in temptacioun, but delyver us fro yvel. Amen.”

**John Purvey (ca. 1354–1428)[[8]](#footnote-8)**

a. He was Wycliffe’s secretary and assistant.

b. Around 1388 he issued a complete revision of Wycliffe’s Bible *in a more*

*idiomatic English style.*

c. About *170 manuscripts of Wycliffe’s Bible are known and most of them are of*

*the Purvey edition.*

**The Church Condemned the Wycliffe Bible.**

Archbishop Arundel supported a synod at Oxford in 1408 which denounced the Wycliffe Bible,

“It is a dangerous thing, . . . as witnesseth blessed St. Jerome, to translate the text of the holy Scripture out of one tongue into another; for in the translation the same sense is not always easily kept, as the same St. Jerome confesseth, that although *he were inspired* . . . yet often-times in this he erred; we therefore decree and ordain that no man hereafter by his own authority . . . translate any text of the Scripture into English or any other tongue, by way of a book, pamphlet, or treatise; and that no man read any such book, pamphlet or treatise, now lately composed in the time of John Wycliffe or since, or hereafter to be set forth in part or in whole, publicly or privately, upon pain of greater excommunication, until the said translation be approved by the ordinary of the place or, if the case so require, by the council provincial. He that shall do contrary to this shall likewise be punished as a favourer of heresy and error.”

This strategy didn’t work. People could lose their livestock over reading the Wycliffe Bible, and yet there are records of people trading an hour of reading the Wycliffe Bible for a load of hay! People started asking – wait, why aren’t they letting us read this?

In 1415 The Council of Constance condemned John Huss, a disciple of Wycliffe, to be burned at the stake, and Wycliffe’s dead bones were dug up, burned, and scattered into the River Swift. Having and reading the Wycliffe Bible came at a great cost, but its completion survives even to this day.

**William Tyndale (1494-1536)**

Tyndale went to Oxford about a hundred years after the sobering end of Wycliffe. He was frustrated at how little, both laity and clergy, knew of the Bible. One prominent church figure once said to Tyndale, “We are better to be without God’s law than the Pope’s.”

Tyndale replied, “I defy the Pope and all his laws,” and added that if God spared him life, “ere many years he would cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than he did.”

Much could be said of Tyndale – what he gleaned from Martin Luther, and the vast efforts that he went to ensure that the “Ploughboys” of the future would have the Bible. In August of 1536, Tyndale was found guilty of heresy and burned at the stake. His last words were, “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes.” Less than a year later, Henry the 8th granted permission for what was largely Tyndale’s Bible to be printed in England.

**Distinctions between Tyndale and Wycliffe.**

1. Wycliffe translated from Jerome’s Latin Vulgate. 100 years later, Tyndale translated from Greek and Hebrew.
2. Wycliffe’s Bible was a hand-copied manuscript. Tyndale’s Bible was printed (printing press invented around 1440)
3. Wycliffe translated into Middle English, but Tyndale’s version was part of the modern English period.

Lord’s Prayer

“Oure father, whych arte in heaue, halowed be thy name. . . Thy wyll be fulfilled upo the earth, as it is in heauen.”

KJV resource - [Love’s Labor Lost: Charity Banished By Tyndale | King James Bible History (kjbhistory.com)](https://kjbhistory.com/loves-labor-lost-charity-banished-by-tyndale/)

“Love patently demands affection. It must be felt, and only the gospel can cause it to be so felt, as joyous thanksgiving for the work Christ has already done, not as work that we must do.” – Tyndale

Tyndale brought out the nonsense of agape being of works merely by citing 1 Cor. 13:3 – and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profits nothing.

How senseless is this verse if by charity is meant, “But if you’re not doing acts of kindness/alms…” This would be a self-defeating verse! And yet that is precisely the message the catholic church was teaching by the usage of the Latin word for charity being used in this instance.

Tyndale’s Bible had several revisions, but a few consistencies that set his translation apart from any others at the time.

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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Tyndale’s Translation | congregation | senior | repentance | love |
| Common Translation | church | priest | penance | charity |

Tyndale’s Bible remains influential even to this day.

**The Coverdale Bible (1535)**

Miles Coverdale (1488-1569)

Miles Coverdale was not a scholar to be compared to other Bible translators and he admitted that. He did, however, follow the work of others such as Tyndale very closely.

Henry VIII had a major falling out with the church of Rome when the Pope refused to allow him to divorce and marry Anne Boleyn (because his first wife wasn’t giving him offspring – neither did Anne Boleyn). In short, this made him angry and he appointed himself the King of England, under the advice of Thomas Cranmer, a protestant who had been appointed Archbishop of Canterbury.

When Miles Coverdale completed his translation, to protect his work, he dedicated it to Henry VIII for being a “better defender of the faith” than the pope himself. Henry decreed that the work be accepted.

**The Matthew Bible (1537)**

John Rogers was a scholar that met William Tyndale and at one point helped smuggle English bibles into England. When William Tyndale died, John Rogers took the pen name “Thomas Matthew” and finished editing the bible.

Archbishop Cranmer appealed to Thomas Cromwell to appeal to the King Henry to sanction this translation, which he did. Now Coverdale and Matthew’s Bibles were both popular. But when England reverted to Catholicism under Mary Tudor in 1555, John Rogers (Thomas Matthew of the Matthew Bible) was one of the first to be burned at the stake.[[9]](#footnote-9)

**The Great Bible (1539)**

Coverdale was asked to make a revision of the Matthew Bible. The Great Bible was authorized and made to be purchased more cheaply, encouraging greater access. This greatly annoyed many parishioners were reading this Bible in church – even during church services!

The great Bible included this statement, “This is the Byble apoynted to the use of the churches” in 1538 King Henry made an injunction for every parish to have a Bible.

The Great Bible survived the pro-Roman reign of Mary because of some of the work in it potentially influenced by her chaplain.

Elizabeth I reversed the pro-Roman policies and under her reign came the Geneva Bible.

**The Geneva Bible (1560)**

Geneva was a safe haven for Bible translation work as many in the heart of England had been sentenced to death over this kind of work.

William Whittingham, brother-in-law to John Calvin’s wife, was one of these protestant fugitives. He and others completed the Geneva Bible in 1560. It was dedicated to Queen Elizabeth I. It abolished RC influence in Scotland, and an Act of Scottish Parliament made every household above a certain income amount buy a Geneva Bible. This is the sole Bible used to make disciples of the believers that came out of the reformation in Scotland.

The marginal notes of the Geneva Bible were *very* anti-Catholic, even identifying the pope as the beast in Rev. 11:7. The Geneva bible also contained the apocrypha at the end of the Bible, with a note stating that those books were not canonical.

The Geneva Bible was recognized as an excellent translation in England even by those who disagreed with its theology.

**The Bishop’s Bible (1568)**

This Bible came about because of parishioners who disagreed with the Calvinistic marginal notes of the Geneva Bible. This was essentially the Geneva Bible without an attitude. It was never as well received as the Geneva Bible (120 editions). The Bishop’s Bible had 20 editions.

**Douai-Reihms Bible (1593)**

The RCC eventually became frustrated that English translation was being so well accepted in other parts of the world. So they *finally* decided to make their own. The RCC had a warped view of preservation, however. The preface states:

“It is translated from the Vulgate which possesses ecclesiastical authority and is the least partial text, ‘truer than the vulgar Greek itself’. The translators follow it precisely, risking unfamiliar Latinism and not presuming to mollify hard places ‘for fear of missing or restraining the sense of the Holy Ghost to our phantasy’, whereas Protestants use ‘presumptuous boldness and liberty in translating’.

Ironically, the translators made extensive use of the English translations they condemned.

The Lord’s Prayer

“Ovr Father which art in heauen, sanctified by thy name. Let thy Kingdom come. Thy wil be done, as in heauen, in earth also. Giue vs to day our supersubstantial bread. And forgiue vs our dettes, as we also forgiue our deters . . . “

The Good Samaritan says, “Whatever thou shal supererogate, I, at my return will repay thee.” Supererogation is the RCC doctrine of giving more than is required by duty. Paul and Barnabas ordained “priests,” not “elders,” and many other Latinisms were made quite obvious in the Douai-Reihms Bible in order to leave no question on Catholic doctrinal matters.

Where tampering occurs with God’s Word, it is most obvious (i.e. “supererogation”). The many differences (i.e. words “added” and “missing,” “thought for thought” translation instead of formal-equivalent) in these early English Bibles do not mean that the readers faced widespread corruption.

**Key Takeaway**

Instead, we believe, since God’s truth endures to *every* generation, that these early English Bibles reflected accurately God’s truth as faithful Bible translations, and would be such even to the modern studier of them.

1. These notes on early English Bibles are drawn largely from a recommended book: Paul D. Wegner, “The Journey from Texts to Translation.” This is in Pastor Billy’s personal library if you would like to see it. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Who divided the Bible into chapters and verses? Why and when was it done? | GotQuestions.org](https://www.gotquestions.org/divided-Bible-chapters-verses.html) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Wegner, The Journey from Text to Translations, the Origin and development of the Bible, 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Wegner, 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is an important term where somebody wrote their own translation or notes in the margin. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Wegner, 273 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Wegner, Text to Translations, 279 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John Purvey section used by permission from the notes of professor William Combs (DBTS) presented at Community Bible Church, pg. 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Pictures of Old English Bibles in *The Journey from Texts to Translations*, Wegner 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)