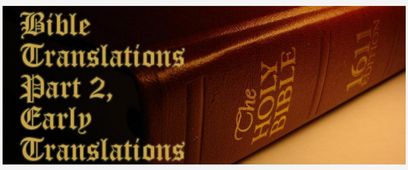
BIBLE TRANSLATIONS, PART 2: EARLY TRANSLATIONS



By Paul Miles

This is Part II of a three-part introduction to Bible translation. Part I focused on Bible manuscripts and in this section we will be looking at some early translations. English Bible translations have a rich history. To fully appreciate the English Bible translations that we have today, it is helpful to consider the history of their translations. As mentioned earlier, Bible translators often refer to other translations of antiquity in addition to manuscripts in the original languages to help in their translations. There are several ancient translations, but the two most significant are the Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate. So, before discussing some early English translations, we'll take a look at the Septuagint and Vulgate to understand a bit more about where the translations came from.

SEPTUAGINT (3RD CENTURY B.C.)

At the end of the captivity in Babylon, King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return home to Jerusalem (538 B.C.). Not all of them made it back, though, and by the time of Alexander the Great (356-323 B.C.), Jews had been scattered all around the ancient world for hundreds of years. Alexander sought to "Hellenize" the world, and so Greek became the *lingua franca* of the day. After Alexander's death, the kingdom was divided and many Jews were cut off from their Hebrew culture. Jews were becoming more proficient in Greek than in Hebrew, so seventy-two Jewish scholars in Egypt worked to produce a Greek translation of the Old Testament under the rule of Ptolemy Philadelphus (285-246 B.C.). This translation came to be known as the Septuagint, but is also often designated by the Roman numeral LXX. This was the standard Bible of Jesus' time. When New Testament authors quoted the Old Testament, they often used the Septuagint. The Septuagint provides valuable insight on Koine[1] Greek grammar, and shows how Jewish scholars interpreted the Hebrew texts.

VULGATE (4TH CENTURY A.D.)

By the time Christ was born, Israel had switched rulers a few times and managed to fall into the political hands of the Latin-speaking Roman Empire while still retaining the Greek-speaking Jewish cultural aspect. Latin became such a popular language in the community that when Pilate crucified Christ, he translated the sign on the cross reading "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews" into Hebrew, Greek, and Latin (John 19:19-20). The Latin language itself has an interesting history. The Latin that the Romans in Christ's days spoke is called Classical Latin. It eventually developed around the 3rd century into what is now known as Late Latin. Late Latin turned into Vulgar Latin, and eventually branched out into the Romance languages, which are spoken all over the world today. After the Scriptures were complete, Latin scholars started converting Biblical texts into various Late Latin translations called *Vetus Latina*. In 382 A.D., Pope Damasus I commissioned St. Jerome to form a standardized Latin translation that came to be known as the Vulgate. The Vulgate was the Bible of the West for over a thousand years after its birth, and was the only tolerated version of the Bible in England as the English language developed.

Vulgate translation of John 3:16: Sic enim Deus dilexit mundum, ut Filium suum unigenitum daret: ut omnis qui credit in eum, non pereat, sed habeat vitam ?ternam.

WYCLIFFE (1395)

By the time of John Wycliffe, the Vulgate had been the Bible translation of Europe for about 1,000 years. Latin was no longer the tongue of the land, and the time had well come to retranslate the Bible into a language that the average man could understand. A popular philosophy of the day was that laymen did not need to read the Bible, but could trust the Roman Catholic Church to teach whatever theology he needed, so Wycliffe's endeavor to make the Bible available in the vernacular met plenty of resistance. Wycliffe was not alone in his sentiment to encourage Christians to study the Word of God. He started a movement called Lollardy, which promoted the study of Scripture. While Wycliffe was the main leader of the movement, Lollards were a decentralized group that didn't have a single leader or a strict set of doctrines. Their beliefs are generally summed up in The Lollard Conclusions, but not all Lollards adhered to all twelve conclusions. Wycliffe died from a stroke in 1384, and 44 years later, Pope Martin V had his bones dug up and burned. Soon, the Lollardy movement diminished, but its inspiration to theologians still lives on today.

Wycliffe's Bible in and of itself is not an especially great translation. John Wycliffe was neither a Greek nor a Hebrew scholar, so he translated the Bible from the Vulgate. While his translation skills may have had its shortcomings, and the Lollarly movement was short-lived after his death, historians still called John Wycliffe, "The Morning Star of the Reformation," for his stance for Scriptures and opposition to the Roman Catholic Church 200 years before the Reformation in Germany.

Wycliffe translation of John 3:16: For God louede so the world, that he yaf his `oon bigetun sone, that ech man that bileueth in him perische not, but haue euerlastynge lijf.

TYNDALE (1526)

In reaction to the work of John Wycliffe and the Lollards, Archbishop Thomas Arundel led a council in Oxford in 1408 that passed "The Constitutions of Oxford" which outlawed English translations of the Bible. By this time in the Late Middle Ages, vernacular translations were already available in other languages around Europe, but clergymen in England only tolerated the Vulgate. Not only was English Bible translation forbidden, but since the anti-Semitic Edict of Expulsion of 1290, studying Hebrew in England was illegal. William Tyndale realized the need for an English version of the Bible. After struggling to translate in England, he moved to Germany to study and then on to Antwerp to complete the project. While in Antwerp, he stayed with Thomas Pointz, an English ex-pat who took care of other Englishmen. Within about a year, Pointz betrayed Tyndale and handed him over to the authorities who imprisoned him and sentenced him to death. Even in the face of death, Tyndale continued witnessing to those around him. John Foxe records his execution:

> **At last, after much reasoning, when no reason would serve, although he deserved no death, he was condemned by virtue of the emperor's decree, made in the assembly at Augsburg. Brought forth to the place of execution, he was tied to the stake, strangled by the hangman, and afterwards consumed with fire, at the town of Vilvorde, A.D. 1536; crying at the stake with a fervent zeal, and a loud voice, "Lord! open the king of England's eyes."**[2]

Tyndale's translation was the first English translation to actually use Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. Although Tyndale was martyred before he was able to finish his Bible translation, some additional scholars continued his work to complete the first English Bible from the original languages in 1560. This version came to be known as the Geneva Bible and was later used by John Milton, William Shakespeare, John Bunyan, the Pilgrims, and many others. Meanwhile, the English Church authorities finally woke up and authorized an English version of the Bible in 1538 called the Great Bible. The translators basically took Tyndale's work and edited it to make it jive with the Church of England's theology, adding translations from the Vulgate when needed, rewording Tyndale when convenient, or completely leaving sections out.

Tyndale translation of John 3:16: For God so loveth the worlde yt he hath geven his only sonne that none that beleve in him shuld perisshe: but shuld have everlastinge lyfe. Geneva translation of John 3:16: For God so loued the worlde, that hee hath giuen his onely begotten Sonne, that whosoeuer beleeueth in him, should not perish, but haue euerlasting life. Great Bible translation of John 3:16: For God so loed y worlde, that he gaue is only begott? sonne, that whosoeuer beleueth in him, shulde not perishe, but haue euerlastyng lyfe.

KING JAMES (1611)

Within 30 years of the Great Bible's publication, the English clergy realized that the Great Bible was severely lacking, but the Geneva Bible was the Calvinists' version and had some flaws as well, so in 1568 they began work on what came to be known as the Bishop's Bible. The Bishop's Bible did not gain much popularity, and within another 40 years, a new translation was underway. The King of England at the time, King James I, wanted a translation that responded to the Puritans' protests of the current authorized translation, but didn't want to allow them to have any influence on the translation. In fact, the 47-member committee of translators consisted solely of members of the Church of England. King James wanted the version to comply with the Anglican view of church ordination, and downplay some of the instances of civil disobedience in the Bible. The translators were patriotic to say the least. The first line of the introduction to the King James Version reads, "To the most high and mightie Prince, James by the grace of God King of Great Britaine, France and Ireland, Defender of the Faith, &c."[3] But despite the leanings toward Anglican theology and English politics, in 1611, an English version was finally available that could be used by Anglican and Protestants alike. There are many Protestants today that swear by the King James only, which is ironic, since originally the King James' purpose was to stop Protestantism. Nevertheless, the King James Version has been used now for over 400 years and is hands-down the most popular English Bible ever translated.

Bishop's Bible translation of John 3:16: For God so loued the worlde, that he gaue his only begotten sonne, that whosoeuer beleueth in hym, shoulde not perishe, but haue euerlastyng lyfe. King James translation of John 3:16: For God so loued ye world, that he gaue his only begotten Sonne: that whosoeuer beleeueth in him, should not perish, but haue euerlasting life.

WRAP-UP

The history of Bible translations is truly an interesting topic. If you happen to have a couple million dollars lying around, then you can buy your own Wycliffe manuscript, or if you're broke, there are plenty of resources available for free online. One of my favorites out there is Bible Gateway for Bible translations in 71 languages including Greek and Hebrew texts, and 45 English translations including Wycliffe, Geneva and King James in modern spelling. If you search around archive.org you might find another interesting translation or two that I didn't mention here. That pretty much wraps up this discussion. The next article will be on translation philosophy and will compare and contrast a few translations that are common today.

1 The term, Koine Greek, refers to the Greek language from around 300 B.C. to 300 A.D. Koine is from the Greek word, *koin?*, which means "common."
2 John Foxe, Foxe's Book of Martys, Ch. XII.
3 King James Bible Online.

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