

HOW WE GOT OUR ENGLISH

BIBLE



Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom

ISBN 978 1 86228 287 2

© 2007 Trinitarian Bible Society
Tyndale House, Dorset Road, London, SW19 3NN, UK

5M/2/07

HOW WE GOT OUR ENGLISH

BIBLE

by Mr. B. A. Ramsbottom

Pastor at Bethel Strict Baptist Chapel, Luton,
Bedfordshire, England, and
Editor of the *Gospel Standard Magazine*

Based upon a children's address given on 13th June 2004 in remembrance of the 400th anniversary of the decision to translate the Authorised Version. The style and personal references of the address are left unchanged wherever possible, but some are adapted for a wider audience.

This afternoon I want to speak especially to our girls and boys but also to our young people and our older

friends. Right at the beginning let me say what a wonderful, wonderful thing it is that God has given us a holy Book. We have it in our own language; it can be understood; it sets forth the way of salvation, the way to heaven; and with the Holy Spirit's help we can understand it.

Now then, I want you to listen very carefully whilst I read to you the first three verses in Genesis.

*in principio creavit Deus caelum et terram
terra autem erat inanis et vacua et tenebrae
erant super
faciem abyssi et spiritus Dei
ferebatur super aquas
dixitque Deus fiat lux et facta est lux*

There is something wrong, isn't there? There is something the matter. It is in a strange

The Scriptorium, where Bibles like the Vulgate would have been copied by hand.



language. It is in a language we do not understand. If we had been living in England a thousand years ago, that would have been the only Bible there was, and it was not a very good one. It was called the Vulgate. It was in Latin. What I have read to you just now is Latin. It was in Latin, and as many of you know, the Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek. So the

only Bible in England was this Latin translation. Hardly anybody could understand Latin. There were not many of these Bibles even if they could. Even the priests—the most outwardly religious people—most of them could not understand Latin. So people in England just did not know about God. They just did not know the way of salvation. It is said that many of the priests could not repeat the Ten Commandments, or say where they were found, and most of the priests did not know who it was that first taught the Lord's Prayer. Sadly, the fact that there were so many priests reflected great ignorance of the true Gospel.

So there were two terrible things. One was that there was a dreadful lot of superstition. People just could not understand this Latin. They had never read the simple Bible narratives that we know. So they were fascinated by all kinds of superstition. Down in Gloucestershire in southwest England you could visit an abbey and they would show you what they said was a vial filled with the blood of Christ. One of the most famous things people went to see was a crucifix. If you put a lot of money down, the face on it smiled. If you did not put much money down, the face on it frowned. There was a church in Reading, west of London, that had lots of things people used to visit. They had the wing of an angel; they had the spearhead that was used at the crucifixion; they had two pieces of the cross; they had one of Mary Magdalene's bones; and they had James's hand—or so these things were supposed to be. We could go on and on. Down in Somerset, in the southwest of England, was a church which among other things claimed to have a piece of bread from the first Lord's Supper and also a piece of the manger in which Jesus was laid when He was born.

People could not read the Bible. They did not know what was in the Bible. They hardly knew what the name of Jesus meant, so they were fascinated by all these strange, weird,

mysterious superstitions. The other terrible thing: there was a dreadful lot of wickedness and immorality.

John Wycliffe

Over the years there had been odd bits and pieces where people had put some of the Bible into English. Now in the 1300s a man



Wycliffe sends out his Lollard preachers armed with Bibles

appeared in England, a very wonderful man, a very godly man. His name was John Wycliffe (c. 1330–1384). He was a very learned man, one of the most learned men in England. Also, he was blessed with much of the Spirit of God, and he saw through the evils of the day. And revealed to him was the way of salvation through the Lord Jesus Christ. If any of you are ever up at Attleborough in the English Midlands, where I know quite a lot of you go, if you take a little journey of about fifteen minutes through the Leicestershire country lanes, you come to the small town of Lutterworth where Wycliffe was the minister and you can see the church where he preached. Wycliffe is known as the *morning star of the Reformation*.¹ Now his great desire was that the Bible should appear in English, so he with his helpers translated it.

So we had a Bible in the 1300s in English, really for the first time. But there were just



A page from a Wycliffe Bible

one or two difficulties! One was that printing had not been invented, so the Bible had to be copied out by hand and it took about ten months to copy out the Bible. Actually, one or two of them are still in existence. If you bought one, it would be about £40 in those days, which would be

the same as thousands in our days. It is said that one farmer offered a whole cartload of hay if in return he could have one page of Wycliffe's Bible.

But there was another difficulty. Wycliffe's Bible was just a translation of this Latin Vulgate, so it was a translation of a translation. Wycliffe had not got the original Greek and Hebrew. It was a translation of a translation and there were one or two bad mistakes in the Vulgate translation; and Wycliffe, as this was the only thing he had, reproduced them. Where John the Baptist and the Lord Jesus preached 'Repent', the need of repentance for a sinner to be saved, the Vulgate had translated it 'Do penance', the Roman Catholic 'something you had to do'—tell your rosary so many times, or go on a pilgrimage to Rome. Wycliffe, having nothing else, also translated into the English 'Do penance'. Another example, where the angel appeared to Mary and said 'Hail, thou that art highly favoured', the

Vulgate had it 'Mary, full of grace'. Of course, it is the Lord Jesus full of grace, not Mary. Wycliffe, having no other, translated it as it stood. So you have the first English Bible, but it has mistakes in, it is very expensive, and there are not many of them.

William Tyndale

So we wait about two hundred years when God raised up a young man down in Gloucestershire named William Tyndale (1494–1536), and really I think William Tyndale was perhaps one of the greatest men who ever lived. Tyndale had a wonderful understanding of Hebrew and Greek, and he had an ambition. Lots of young people have an ambition, something they would like to do. This was his ambition: he said, 'If God spares my life, ere many years I will take care that a ploughboy shall know more of the Scriptures than you do.'² So he started putting the Bible into English from the original language texts.



Tyndale undertakes the hazardous task of translation

ynge: Herthe was combred about m
 wyng: and fode and fode: If lafer: be
 not care: that me fiter hath left me to
 alone: God herthefore: that he helpe
 Tejus anfwere: and fande unto her: If
 If lath: thow art buile: adronble
 fe: about many thing: verely one ye
 Mary had the: in her agid parts: why
 not be lath: away from her.

The vi. Chapter.

And it shewed as he was praying
 to me plain: when he ceased: words

Sample from Tyndale's New Testament

Bible in English or sold such a Bible was put to death. It was the same with Tyndale. He went to the Bishop of London and thought he would help him. The Bishop of London tried to put him in prison. So in the end Tyndale had to flee to the Continent where he lived and died. This is why I think Tyndale was one of the greatest godly Englishmen. It is one thing like Whitefield to stand up before thirty thousand people, but think of Tyndale in a damp, cold cellar from morning to night, working away translating the Bible into English, or in a dusty attic, and hardly being able to leave the house in case he was captured, which at last he was. They caught him and strangled him and burnt him. He had travelled from country to country until in the end he was martyred. I think perhaps England owes more to Tyndale than anybody else. There is a statue of him on the embankment of the River Thames in London.

Tyndale was godly, he was accurate, he was learned, and he was helped by the Spirit of God in translating the Greek New Testament into English. But these New Testaments were not allowed in England. They had to be smuggled into the country. Bales of cloth would come from Holland. In the middle would be some of these Tyndale New Testaments. In the end, the

To his amazement he did not get any help. When Wycliffe translated his Bible, Bible translating was made illegal. Anyone who read the

Bishop of London bought as many New Testaments as he could and burnt them, but with the money that was paid for them some more, better-produced New Testaments were sent to England. I say *New Testaments*, because Tyndale never lived to translate the *whole* of the Bible into English—he only actually completed the New Testament. But the Bibles that followed, especially the Authorised Version, followed Tyndale probably ninety per cent or more than ninety per cent in what he *had* translated.³ So the Bible we have today is very similar to what Tyndale produced.

The Invention of Printing and the English Bible

About this time was a very wonderful invention, nothing whatsoever to do with religion (although we certainly see the providence of God in it!) and that was the invention of printing by Gutenberg in Germany. Gutenberg produced the first Bible that was printed, in 1456. Actually, it was the Latin Vulgate.

Gutenberg and his movable type printing press

The desire began to spring up that England might have its own Bible. By 1534 Germany had its own Bible in German; Luther had produced it. England was beginning to feel very English and felt that it should have the Bible in English.



The king at the time was the famous Henry VIII. He was having trouble with the pope, and there was quite a complicated period with several different Bibles appearing. In 1535, Coverdale's Bible appeared. He was not really a translator himself. He used Tyndale, he used the Vulgate, he used Luther, he used one or two others. This was Anne Boleyn's Bible. You remember poor Anne Boleyn, the wife of Henry VIII, who was beheaded. She had her own Bible to read. Two years later there was Matthew's Bible. After Anne Boleyn's death, Henry did not like to use her Bible. And then in 1539 was the Great Bible. That was really the first 'Authorised Version'.

King Henry VIII was always a bigoted Roman Catholic, but he quarrelled with the pope and decided he was going to have a Bible in every church in England. So was published this Great Bible, which was really a combination of all the others with a lot of Tyndale in it.



This Great Bible was called that because of its size. It was a very big Bible and these Bibles were chained in the churches because people wanted to read the Word of God so much they would have borrowed them if not stolen them. Not far from where I lived, in the ancient church at Mitton in the Ribble Valley in Lancashire, northwest England, there is one of these chained Bibles still there with its chains.

The Great Bible was the Bible which was also known as the Treacle Bible. A lot of these old Bibles were known by strange names. This was called the Treacle Bible because the translation of Jeremiah 8.22, 'Is there no balm in Gilead; is there no physician there?' was rendered 'Is there no **triacle** in Gilead; is there no physician there?'

Really, much of the Reformation in England came about through the people gathering together in the churches whenever they had a spare moment, someone climbing up to the chained Bible, reading it aloud, hundreds of people listening, God the Spirit sealing it home on their hearts. On the Continent it was individual people—Luther, Zwingli, Calvin. But in England it was not so much any person, but the Bible.

There were all these Bibles appearing. One of the more famous is the Breeches Bible. In one of the catalogues of second-hand Christian books for sale I received a few weeks ago, there was a Breeches Bible for sale, for £3,000. The Breeches Bible was the famous 1560 Geneva Bible. Those who had fled from England to Geneva produced it, and the Geneva Bible—the Breeches Bible—was the favourite of the Reformers, the favourite of the Puritans, the favourite of Shakespeare. If you study Shakespeare, when he quotes from the Bible, he quotes from the Geneva.

Why was it called the Breeches Bible? Where we have in our Bibles in Genesis 3.7 that Adam and Eve 'sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons', the Geneva Bible has, they 'sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves **breeches**'. The Geneva was popular. It was very small, very cheap. It also had very, very striking notes, strongly Calvinistic, strongly anti-popish.

A Brief Pause

Let me pause here. Some of you have asked me a question over the years. First of all the Bible, any Bible, had no chapters or verses. A Roman Catholic cardinal called Hugo in 1250 divided the Bible into chapters, and we still have those same chapters today. But

it had no verses until 1551 when an Englishman, Sir Robert Stevens, divided the chapters into verses. We still have the same verses today. The italics we have first appeared in the Geneva Bible—the Breeches Bible—and the margin references did not appear until we had the Authorised Version.

The Four Hundredth Anniversary

I suppose you are saying, Whatever has this to do with a four hundredth anniversary? Well, you have all heard of the famous Queen Elizabeth, the great Queen Elizabeth I and the days of Sir Francis Drake, Sir Walter Raleigh, the Spanish Armada and so on. When she died she had no children—she was never married—and King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England. His being from Scotland, people thought they would get a lot of favours from him and a petition was put before him. In the end, four hundred years ago in 1604, the new king agreed to meet a number of ministers at Hampton Court Palace. I think many of you, if not most of you, have been there. I remember at one time we had two or three of our Sabbath School outings to Hampton Court Palace. I remember some of our children getting lost in the well-known Hampton Court Maze, and I remember a lot of you who are now older going to see the Vine.

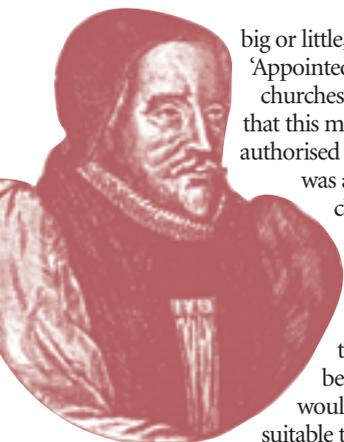
In former days Hampton Court was one of the royal palaces. Buckingham Palace had not appeared then. The king met these ministers and the most important thing they decided was that they would have just one version of the Bible which would be the authentic one instead of these different Bibles which were still appearing—Coverdale's, Matthew's, the Great Bible, the Geneva, and various other ones. So the king agreed and there was this royal appointment that there was going to be just one Bible in English.

The Learned Men

Now what happened? Fifty-four of the most learned Hebrew and Greek scholars in England were chosen to do the translation, to prepare it. But they did not just start with a blank page. They had Tyndale and they relied heavily on Tyndale. You will find if you compare Tyndale and our Bible that from 1604 they followed Tyndale very, very closely indeed. It was not until 1611 that this Bible appeared. In America they always called it the King James Bible. Most Bibles still have a little piece right at the front, a dedication of the Bible by the translators to King James. In Great Britain we call it the Authorised Version.

One thing most people have never understood, is that on the front page you will find in all your Bibles, whether they are





big or little, the words 'Appointed to be read in churches'. Most people think that this means that the king authorised it, it was permitted, it was allowed to be read in churches. But the meaning is completely different. It had to be prepared in such a way, it had to be set out, it had to be arranged, so that it would be very easy, very suitable to be read in churches.

Lancelot Andrewes, Fellow of Pembroke College, Cambridge. One of the members of the Old Testament translation Committee responsible for the books of Genesis to 1 Chronicles

Well, you have these fifty-four very learned men. I

understand that Hebrew is a dreadfully difficult language. These fifty-four men were some of the greatest Hebrew and Greek scholars our country has ever known. They were all different and had all kinds of different views, but every one of them was completely committed to the infallibility and inspiration of Scripture. They wanted to produce an excellent version of the Bible.

They were divided into six different groups. Two met in London at Westminster; two of them met in Cambridge; two of them met in Oxford. So, in the end, after seven years laboriously comparing, re-comparing and discussing, our wonderful version of the Bible appeared in 1611. For years up till recent times this was *the* Bible. Everyone thought of it just as *the* Bible.

The Authorised Version

Interestingly, apart from anything to do with religion, the Authorised Version has fashioned our English language more than

any other book. So many of the expressions we use continually, day by day, come from the Authorised Version of the Bible. All kinds of people use them, ungodly people, atheists, but they are all from the Bible. Things like: a thorn in the flesh, the powers that be, a fly in the ointment. Our English language is very, very much moulded by our Bible.

One of the sad things today is that instead of people referring to *the* Bible as they did years ago, as they still did when I was a boy, now there are all kinds of versions and more and more coming out year by year. What is the fault with these new versions? Two things: It seems that first of all most of them are based on doubtful manuscripts; but secondly, many of the modern translators use what they call 'dynamic equivalence', which means they try to capture the thoughts behind the words rather than translating the words themselves. Our version of the Bible is a strict translation, word for word from the best manuscripts in keeping with what was inspired by the Spirit of God.

You remember that Queen Victoria was once asked by an African prince, 'What is the secret of England's greatness?' To his

The Bible an open book: pages from an original 1611 edition of the Authorised Version, open at 1 Samuel 24





amazement, she took up a Bible, and it was the Authorised Version, of course. She said, 'This is the secret of England's greatness.'

that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law' (Psalm 119.18). Especially pray to find salvation there, to find Christ there.

A little girl was given a Bible once and she wrote at the front of it,

'Divine Instructor, gracious Lord,
Be Thou for ever near;
Teach me to love Thy sacred Word,
And find the Saviour there.'

'Search the Scriptures'

Now I would like you all to turn with me to John 5.39. These are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ: 'Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me'. We are wonderfully favoured that we have a Bible in English, accurate, a true representation of God's revelation, and there we can read the will, the purpose of God: why He created the world; who God is, Father, Son and Holy Ghost; what our need is as sinners; how we can escape hell, how we can get to heaven; there is a heaven; there is a hell; what is the way of salvation; why did the Lord Jesus Christ come—all these things.

Now the Lord Jesus said, 'Search the scriptures'. What a terrible thing it is if we believe that this is God's holy, inspired Word and we do not read it! There are some people who will fight to the death for the Bible, the Authorised Version being God's holy, infallible Book, but they do not read it. There are some ungodly, militant self-styled Protestants who would fight, literally fight, that the Bible is God's holy, infallible Word. But they do not read it; they do not want to read it.

'Search the scriptures'. I hope you read your Bible every morning or every night, or both. Read it slowly and pray that God will help you to understand it. 'Open thou mine eyes,

Now I pray that it might be like that with our young people and older ones, too, each of us: may we 'love God's Holy Word, and find the Saviour there'.



Slightly edited and printed by kind permission. Originally published as 'The Story of our Bible' in QR571, April to June 2005.

Endnotes:

1. While many people tend to think that the Reformation started with Martin Luther, d'Aubigné and others afford that honour to John Wycliffe. D'Aubigné wrote of him, 'Wycliffe is the greatest of English reformers: he was in truth the first reformer of Christendom' (1.98); it was he who early sought the reform of the established church and pioneered the concept of *Sola Scriptura*. "The morning star of the Reformation," for so has Wycliffe been called, had appeared above the horizon, and its beams were no more to be extinguished' (1.100). (J.H.M. d'Aubigné, *The Reformation in England*, 2 vols. [London, England: Banner of Truth Trust, 1962])
2. Tyndale's words, spoken to a 'celebrated divine' of the Roman church, have been quoted in several different forms since he spoke them, but the meaning is always the same. This quotation is taken from d'Aubigné, 1.175.
3. 'Nine-tenths of the Authorised Version's New Testament is Tyndale's. The same is true of the first half of the Old Testament, which is as far as he was able to get before he was executed outside Brussels in 1536' (David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* [New Haven, CT, USA: Yale University Press, 1994], p. 1).

The aims of the Society

- To publish and distribute the Holy Scriptures throughout the world in many languages.
- To promote Bible translations which are accurate and trustworthy, conforming to the Hebrew Masoretic Text of the Old Testament, and the Greek Textus Receptus of the New Testament, upon which texts the English Authorised Version is based.
- To be instrumental in bringing light and life, through the Gospel of Christ, to those who are lost in sin and in the darkness of false religion and unbelief.
- To uphold the doctrines of reformed Christianity, bearing witness to the equal and eternal deity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, One God in three Persons.
- To uphold the Bible as the inspired, inerrant Word of God.
- **For the Glory of God and the increase of His Kingdom through the circulation of Protestant or uncorrupted versions of the Word of God.**

For introductory literature and catalogue please write to the Society at the address below.



Trinitarian Bible Society

Tyndale House, Dorset Road,
London, SW19 3NN, England
e-mail: TBS@trinitarianbiblesociety.org
www.trinitarianbiblesociety.org

Product Code: A119

ISBN 978 1 86228 287 2



9 781862 282872