



The history of the translation to the English Bible

One of the first who sought to make Bibles available to the average person was **John Wycliffe**, Oxford theologian and 14th-century English reformer. Wycliffe argued that the Scriptures did little good locked away in Latin that few could understand. God's Word, he declared, is for all people: 'No man is so rude a scholar but that he might learn the words of the Gospel according to his simplicity.' Wycliffe thus determined to give the English people a translation that could be read in their native tongue. He and his associates completed the monumental task about **1382**. Wycliffe's translation was based on the **Latin Vulgate**, as he and his colleagues knew no Hebrew or Greek.

Wycliffe was brought to trial several times in church courts, but his powerful and influential friends protected him. He died a natural death in 1384 at about the age of 55 and was buried at Letterworth. As his teachings were forerunners of those of the Reformation, he is accorded the title '**morning star of the Reformation**', having heralded the dawn of that epic era.

Dutch scholar **Erasmus** of Rotterdam voiced his strong support for translating the Bible into ordinary speech: 'I wish that the Scriptures might be translated into all languages, so that not only the Scots and the Irish, but also the Turk and the Saracen might read and understand them. I long that the farm-labourer might sing them as he follows his plough, the weaver hum them to the tune of his shuttle.'



Erasmus published the New Testament in Greek in 1516.



Martin Luther, the Great German reformer, had completed a translation of the New Testament into German from Erasmus' Greek Testament in 1522.

Inspired by Luther's example, William Tyndale pushed ahead with his English translation, completing it in 1525. Never had official religion been at a lower ebb than in Tyndale's day. Finding both clergy and laity ignorant of the Scriptures, Tyndale conceived, in 1522, the ambitious project of translating the New Testament directly from the Greek into English, bypassing the Latin Vulgate. To a critic of the plan, Tyndale

announced: 'if God spare my life, ere many years pass, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou dost.' The project became his life's work. A master style, Tyndale had rendered the Greek into simple, fresh and vigorous English. The beauty and rhythm of his language fixed the style and tone of the English Bible for centuries to come. He is thus the **'Father of the English Bible'**.

King James appointed **54 scholars**, drawn from Oxford, Cambridge and Westminster, who were renowned for their Greek and Hebrew expertise. They worked in six groups, the work of each group being reviewed by the other groups.

What distinguished the *King James Version* of the Bible was that it was produced by a committee of scholars, rather than by one man. The translators drew heavily on all that was good in previous translations. Their aim was not to make an entirely new translation but, in their own words, 'to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one.'

Significantly, their New Testament was based largely on Tyndale's translation. It is estimated that 80 to 90 percent of Tyndale's wording passed into the *King James Version* of the New Testament. The King James translators' work was published in 1611. The *King James* or *Authorised Version*, soon took the place of all the other English versions.

For 400 years, the *King James Version* has been the household Bible of the English-speaking world, renowned for its **majesty of style and superb prose**. But more important, it has been the primary source of the knowledge of salvation and the message of the gospel for untold numbers of readers.



William Tyndale was killed in 1536 for translating the New Testament.



The 1611 version of the English Bible was authorised by King James I.