

# The History of English Bibles Up to the Protestant Reformation



I get confused sometimes about who translated the first English Bible, and then who came after him, etc. I therefore researched it from several web sites to write this article. Most of the information I got came from [English Bible History](#)



John Wycliffe

**The first hand-written English language Bible manuscripts** were produced in the **1380's** AD by [John Wycliffe](#), an Oxford professor, scholar, and theologian. Wycliffe, (also spelled "Wycliff" & "Wyclif"), was well-known throughout Europe for his opposition to the teaching of the organized Church, which he believed to be contrary to the Bible. With the help of his followers, called the Lollards, and his assistant Purvey, and many other faithful scribes, Wycliffe produced dozens of English language manuscript copies of the scriptures. They were translated out of the Latin Vulgate, which was the only source text available to Wycliffe. The Pope was so infuriated by his teachings and his translation of the Bible into English, that 44 years after Wycliffe had died, he ordered the bones to be dug-up, crushed, and scattered in the river!



John Colet

In 1496, **John Colet**, another Oxford professor and the son of the Mayor of London, started reading the New Testament in Greek and translating it into English for his students at Oxford, and later for the public at Saint Paul's Cathedral in London. The people were so hungry to hear the Word of God in a language they could understand, that within six months there were 20,000 people packed in the church and at least that many outside trying to get in! (Sadly, while the enormous and beautiful Saint Paul's Cathedral remains the main church in London today, as of 2003, typical Sunday morning worship attendance is only around 200 people... and most of them are tourists). Fortunately for Colet, he was a powerful man with friends in high places, so he amazingly managed to avoid execution.



William Tyndale

**William Tyndale** was the Captain of the Army of Reformers, and was their spiritual leader. Tyndale holds the distinction of being the first man to ever print the New Testament in the English language. Tyndale was a true scholar and a genius, so fluent in eight languages that it was said one would think any one of them to be his native tongue. He is frequently referred to as the "Architect of the English Language", (even more so than William Shakespeare) as so many of the phrases Tyndale coined are still in our language today. According to [https://www.tbsbibles.org/page/William\\_Tyndale](https://www.tbsbibles.org/page/William_Tyndale), Tyndale was influenced by John Colet. William Tyndale died for translating the Bible into English, creating the forerunner of the KJV.

William Tyndale wanted to use the same 1516 Erasmus text as a source to translate and print the New Testament in English for the first time in history. Tyndale showed up on Luther's doorstep in Germany in 1525, and by year's end had translated the New Testament into English. Tyndale had been forced to flee England, because of the wide-spread rumor that his English New

Testament project was underway, causing inquisitors and bounty hunters to be constantly on Tyndale's trail to arrest him and prevent his project. God foiled their plans, and in **1525-1526** the Tyndale New Testament became the first printed edition of the scripture in the English language. Subsequent printings of the Tyndale New Testament in the 1530's were often elaborately illustrated.

They were burned as soon as the Bishop could confiscate them, but copies trickled through and actually ended up in the bedroom of King Henry VIII. The more the King and Bishop resisted its distribution, the more fascinated the public at large became. The church declared it contained thousands of errors as they torched hundreds of New Testaments confiscated by the clergy, while in fact, they burned them because they could find no errors at all. One risked death by burning if caught in mere possession of Tyndale's forbidden books.

Tyndale was incarcerated for 500 days before he was strangled and burned at the stake in **1536**. Tyndale's last words were, "Oh Lord, open the King of England's eyes". This prayer would be answered just three years later in **1539**, when King Henry VIII finally allowed, and even funded, the printing of an English Bible known as the "Great Bible". But before that could happen...



Myles Coverdale

**Myles Coverdale** and John "Thomas Matthew" Rogers had remained loyal disciples the last six years of Tyndale's life, and they carried the English Bible project forward and even accelerated it. Coverdale finished translating the Old Testament, and in **1535** he printed the first complete Bible in the English language, making use of Luther's German text and the Latin as sources. Thus, the first complete English Bible was printed on **October 4, 1535**, and is known as the **Coverdale Bible**.



## John Rogers

**John Rogers** went on to print the second complete English Bible in **1537**. It was, however, the first English Bible translated from the original Biblical languages of Hebrew & Greek. He printed it under the pseudonym "**Thomas Matthew**", (an assumed name that had actually been used by Tyndale at one time) as a considerable part of this Bible was the translation of Tyndale, whose writings had been condemned by the English authorities. It is a composite made up of Tyndale's Pentateuch and New Testament (1534-1535 edition) and Coverdale's Bible and some of Roger's own translation of the text. It remains known most commonly as the **Matthew-Tyndale Bible**. It went through a nearly identical second-edition printing in 1549.



Thomas Cranmer

In **1539**, **Thomas Cranmer**, the Archbishop of Canterbury, hired Myles Coverdale at the bequest of King Henry VIII to publish the "**Great Bible**". It became the first English Bible authorized for public use, as it was distributed to every church, chained to the pulpit, and a reader was even provided so that the illiterate could hear the Word of God in plain English. It would seem that William Tyndale's last wish had been granted...just three years after his martyrdom. **Cranmer's Bible, published by Coverdale, was known as the Great Bible due to its great size:** a large pulpit folio measuring over 14 inches tall. Seven editions of this version were printed between April of **1539** and December of **1541**.



John Knox

In the 1550's, the Church at Geneva, Switzerland, was very sympathetic to the reformer refugees and was one of only a few safe havens for a desperate

people. Many of them met in Geneva, led by Myles Coverdale and John Foxe (publisher of the famous Foxe's Book of Martyrs, which is to this day the only exhaustive reference work on the persecution and martyrdom of Early Christians and Protestants from the first century up to the mid-16th century), as well as Thomas Sampson and William Whittingham. There, with the protection of the great theologian John Calvin (author of the most famous theological book ever published, Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion) and John Knox, the great Reformer of the Scottish Church, **the Church of Geneva** determined to produce a Bible that would educate their families while they continued in exile. The Bible they produced was therefore called the **Geneva Bible**.

The New Testament in **1557** and the Old Testament in **1560** was translated into English in Geneva by a colony of Protestant scholars in exile from England who worked under the general direction of **Miles Coverdale** and **John Knox** and under the influence of **John Calvin**. The English churchmen had fled London during the repressive reign of the Roman Catholic Mary I, which had halted the publication of Bibles there.

The Geneva Bible was **the first Bible to add numbered verses to the chapters**, so that referencing specific passages would be easier. Every chapter was also accompanied by extensive marginal notes and references so thorough and complete that the Geneva Bible is also considered the first English "Study Bible". William Shakespeare quotes hundreds of times in his plays from the Geneva translation of the Bible.

The Geneva Bible became the Bible of choice for over 100 years of English speaking Christians. Between 1560 and 1644 at least 144 editions of this Bible were published. Examination of the 1611 King James Bible shows clearly that its translators were influenced much more by the Geneva Bible, than by any other source. The Geneva Bible itself retains over 90% of William Tyndale's original English translation. The Geneva in fact, remained more popular than the King James Version until decades after its original release in 1611! The Geneva holds the honor of being the first Bible taken to America, and the Bible of the Puritans and Pilgrims. It is truly **the "Bible of the Protestant Reformation."**



King James I

With the death of Queen Elizabeth I, Prince James VI of Scotland became **King James I** of England. The Protestant clergy approached the new King in 1604 and announced their desire for a new translation to replace the Bishop's Bible

first printed in 1568. They knew that the Geneva Version had won the hearts of the people because of its excellent scholarship, accuracy, and exhaustive commentary. However, they did not want the controversial marginal notes (proclaiming the Pope an Anti-Christ, etc.) Essentially, the leaders of the church desired a Bible for the people, with scriptural references only for word clarification or cross-references. This "translation to end all translations" was the result of **the combined effort of about fifty scholars**. They took into consideration: **The Tyndale New Testament, The Coverdale Bible, The Matthews Bible, The Great Bible, The Geneva Bible**, and even the Rheims New Testament. The great revision of the Bishop's Bible had begun. From 1605 to 1606 the scholars engaged in private research. From 1607 to 1609 the work was assembled. In 1610 the work went to press, and in 1611 the first of the huge (16 inch tall) pulpit folios known today as "The 1611 King James Bible" came off the printing press.

A typographical discrepancy in Ruth 3:15 rendered a pronoun "He" instead of "She" in that verse in some printings. This caused some of the 1611 First Editions to be known by collectors as "He" Bibles, and others as "She" Bibles. Starting just one year after the huge 1611 pulpit-size King James Bibles were printed and chained to every church pulpit in England; printing then began on the earliest normal-size printings of the King James Bible. These were produced so individuals could have their own personal copy of the Bible.

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So that's the history of English Bibles up to the KJV. As frequent visitors of this website know, I use only the KJV to teach God's Word. But I also like the [Geneva Bible and sometimes compare translations with it and the KJV](#). Some verses I think are clearer in the Geneva Bible such as Romans 1:27 which says:

And likewise also the men left the natural use of the woman, and burned in their lust one toward another, and **man with man wrought filthiness**, and received in themselves such recompense of their error, as was meet.

But I also think the KJV is more polished overall.

Sometimes I wonder if Darby's dispensationalism would have become popular if the English-speaking world had stuck with the Geneva Bible. The Geneva Bible commentary of Daniel 9:27 correctly calls it a Messianic prophecy fulfilled by Jesus Christ. Dispensationalism and all the false doctrines that arose from it such as "the two peoples of God, the Church and Israel," the secret pre-tribulation rapture, Christian Zionism, and the Futurist interpretations of the Books of Daniel, Revelation, Matthew 24 and II Thessalonians 2:3-4 would not be so widespread and popular today had evangelical Christians stuck with the Geneva Bible notes! But on the other hand, because of the influence of John Calvin and his doctrines, I can't agree with all the notes in the Geneva Bible. Moreover, I think because of the popularity of modern English Bibles which are based on bad manuscripts and influenced by Jesuit false doctrines, I think if not John Nelson Darby somebody else sooner or later would have begun the spread of Jesuit dispensational Futurism.

Right or wrong, those are my thoughts on the matter.