

How did we get the Bible?

In our last lesson we discussed textual criticism as the process by which manuscript evidence is examined so that the exact words of the original text may be discovered.

Our English translations are made from *reconstructed* Hebrew and Greek texts. Instead of taking just one Greek manuscript a *restored* text is made by consulting and comparing a great number of manuscripts, versions, and early Christian writers. Through his method we can be confident that we have a reliable (very nearly exact) reconstruction from which to base our English translations.

Lightfoot says (pg. 50-51), "...the greatest of textual critics tell us that many people *exaggerate* textual differences, and that only a *thousandth part* of the New Testament represents substantial variation! We might add that even where "substantial variation" may exist, not a single principle of faith or divine command is involved."

The first complete Bible in English was the Wycliffe Bible completed in 1382. One hundred seventy of these Bibles survive, but only twenty-five are the the 1382 originals.

Johannes Gutenberg changed the way the Bible was copied when he invented the first mechanical printing press in 1454 with the Gutenberg Bible printed in entirety in 1455.

William Tyndale published the first printed complete English language Bible in 1526. Tyndale translated from the Erasmus Greek New Testament which in 1516 became the first printed Greek New Testament. The Erasmus text was based on six manuscripts from A.D 1000 and later.



The Geneva Bible by John Calvin was printed in 1560. This was the Bible used by William Shakespeare, John Bunyan, and the Puritans and was the first English Bible printed with verse numbers.

Over the hundred years from Tyndale to the King James Version, the Erasmus text was edited by Stephanus, Beza, and Elzevir and these texts became known as the **"Textus Receptus"** (Latin for *received text*). The *Textus Receptus* used for translation of the King James Version includes ten additional manuscripts beyond what was in the Erasmus text.

Besides the English translations listed above between Tyndale and the King James Version came Coverdale (1535), Matthew's Bible (1537), "The Great Bible" (1539), Bishop's Bible (1568), and Douay-Rheims (1610).

Arnold (pg. 64) writes, "The King James Bible we use today, called 'the Oxford standard edition,' actually differs significantly from the original 1611. It is based on a 1769 revision that followed several earlier revisions carried out in the 150 years between 1611 and 1769. Not only has the King James Version been the most popular Bible in history, it has also been the most influential book in the history of the English language.

The **Westcott-Hort Text** Greek text was published in 1881 by Cambridge scholars B. F. Westcott and J. F. A. Hort after nearly thirty years of research.

Since the publication of the Westcott-Hort Text numerous manuscript discoveries have been made. Even though some of these manuscripts are old and valuable they simply confirm the excellence of the Greek text that we possess.

Today the **Nestle** or **Nestle-Aland Text** (1st addition, 1898; 27th edition, 1993) or the **United Bible Societies** (1st edition, 1966; 4th edition 1993) are the most popular Greek texts.

I. Look in the front of your Bible. If there is a preface or foreword what information is given about the textual basis for the translation?

Choosing a translation of the Bible is an important decision. It quickly becomes apparent that English translations have noticeable variations. Some translations are very literal like the *King James Version*, the *American Standard Version*, and the *New American Standard Bible*. Due to the age of the *KJV* it uses language that is archaic making it very difficult to understand for most English readers today.

Translations are developed with two different philosophies. Some translators attempt a “word for word” or “formal equivalence” translation from the original language. This can also be called a “literal” translation. The second translation method is that of “thought for thought” or “dynamic equivalence.” Literal translations attempt to translate what the original authors of Bible said as exactly as possible while dynamic equivalency translators attempt convey the meaning of a word or phrase.

The most popular English translation today by number of sales is the *New International Version* which was translated by the dynamic equivalency method. The danger in a thought for thought or dynamic equivalency translation is that biases emerge as the translator makes interpretive decisions based on his theological perspectives.

Literal translations are not perfect either because they are sometimes difficult to read and not all words or metaphors are easily translated into an exact English word or phrase. Literal translations require a higher reading level than those translated through dynamic equivalency. The *KJV* requires a grade 12 reading level while the *NIV* requires a grade 7.8 reading level.

A new translation, the *English Standard Version* is a literal translation that retains a relatively easy reading style. The *ESV* is essentially an update of the *Revised Standard Version*, but is more conservative in approach dropping the gender-inclusive language of the *RSV*.

One final group of English Bibles are paraphrases which are not translations, but attempts to put the meaning of the verse in common language. While there is value in making the Bible accessible to those with limited reading abilities, paraphrases can obscure the real meaning of the original text.

Some Popular English Translations

King James Version — Excellent literal translation dated from 1611; though there have been many revisions. The KJV is difficult to read and uses outdated language.

Revised Standard Version — Dates to 1929 and is a reasonably literal translation not widely used today. This translation has been influenced by theological liberalism.

New Revised Standard Version — A mostly literal translation updating the RSV.

New American Standard Version — This is an excellent literal translation that was updated in 1995. It is quite accurate, but sometimes is a bit difficult to read. It lacks the poetic quality of the KJV, but is extremely literal.

New International Version — By sales this is the most popular English translation today. It is a dynamic equivalency translation and is easy to read, but sometimes is not as accurate as other translations. New updated versions use “*gender inclusive language*.”

New King James Version — Update of the KJV which is a good and literal translation.

English Standard Version — A literal and readable new translation in the tradition of the KJV and RSV. It is quite conservative in approach and perhaps one of the best translations available today.

Paraphrases — The Message and Good News Bible are popular paraphrases. They may be useful for those who are not proficient in English, but they also have serious weaknesses. There is real danger in putting the Bible in our own words instead of using its own words.

Serious Bible students will want more than one translation for comparison in their Bible studies. Nearly every translation is good enough to lead someone to Christ and to help them grow in Him, however some translations are certainly “better” than others. Personal preference can help decide what translation is best for one’s own use. The very best translation is one that you will use.

2. What is your favourite translation and why?

Arnold, Clinton E. *How We Got the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008.

Kutilek, Douglas. *Westcott & Hort vs. Textus Receptus: Which is Superior?* <http://www.bible-researcher.com/kutilek1.html>

Lightfoot, Neil R. *How We Got the Bible*. Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 1986.