

## A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

### Newer Translations

#### Revising a Landmark

Although the KJV stood as the most widely read Bible for the better part of three centuries, two fundamental reasons calling for its revision would emerge over the years. One was the ever-changing English language itself. English words gradually shift in meaning over time, and expressions that were understandable in the 1600s would cease to be understood in the same way at later periods.<sup>1</sup>

The second reason was the discovery of older manuscripts closer to the originals, both for the New Testament as well as the Old Testament. The basic Greek text underlying the KJV was what a printer in Leyden in 1633 dubbed “the text which now is received by all.” This expressed “received text” (*Textus Receptus*), which was nothing more than a publishers’ blurb, was sometimes taken to mean authoritative, as though no more research into the text was warranted. In fact, better and older manuscripts than were available to the KJV translators have been discovered regularly over the past four centuries, not the least of which were Codex Sinaiticus (mid-1800s) and the Dead Sea Scrolls (mid 1900s).<sup>2</sup> Hence, efforts to provide improved translations have appeared at various times, such as, John Wesley’s revision of the KJV New Testament (including some 12,000 alterations based on his study of the Greek text), John Darby’s *New Translation* (1871, 1890), Young’s *Literal Translation* (1862), and Rotherham’s *Emphasized Version* (1897-1902), among others. These were essentially private efforts to improve the English Bible.

#### CHANGES IN ENGLISH

*Examples of changing English since the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the KJV was translated illustrate one reason a revision seemed appropriate: the word “prevent,” for instance, in the KJV meant “to go ahead of” or “precede” in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Ps. 119:147; 1 Th. 4:15). Now, it means “to stop” or “prohibit.” The word “suffer,” which was used some 69 times in the KJV to mean “endure” and an additional 60 times to mean “allow,” no longer means either in contemporary English. When the KJV uses the word “conversation,” it always refers to behavior. Today, it means a dialogue. In the KJV, words like “anon,” “by and by,” “presently,” and “out of hand” mean “immediately,” but the modern person is hardly likely to understand them in this way.*

<sup>1</sup> A selected list of obsolete English terms and their meanings, both 17<sup>th</sup> century and modern, can be found in L. Weigle, *IDB* (1962) 3.582-589.

<sup>2</sup> To be sure, there have been ardent defenders of the KJV as though it were the only legitimate translation in existence, cf. J. Ray, *God Wrote Only One Bible* (Junction City, OR: The Eye Opener Publishers, 1955); E. Hill, *The King James Version Defended* (Des Moines, IA: Christian Research Press, 1956); W. Pickering, *The Identity of the New Testament* (Nashville: Nelson, 1977), etc. Nonetheless, such works have won no more than a modicum of support from even the most conservative scholars, let alone scholars in the wider field of Bible translation.

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, however, larger cooperative efforts were afoot. In 1870, a major revision was undertaken by some of the best of British scholars to be published by the presses of Oxford and Cambridge Universities. This *English Revised Version* was issued in England in 1881 (New Testament) and 1885 (Old Testament). While certainly based on better and older manuscripts than the KJV, the *English Revised Version* became a lightning rod, especially for conservative Christians, because of its omission of various texts that had been in the KJV but were not in the earliest manuscripts (e.g., 1 Jn. 5:7, etc.).<sup>3</sup> Also, some conservatives felt that some of its renderings were tilted toward theological liberalism.<sup>4</sup>

By 1871, an American committee of scholars had been selected to review the translation work being done by the British scholars, but the Americans agreed not to produce a version of their own for another 14 years. When the 14-year moratorium had expired, the Americans began working on their own contribution to a revised English Bible, and they published the *American Standard Version* in 1901. By all accounts it was a better end-product than the 1881 *English Revised Version*, and unlike its predecessors, it set out poetical passages in poetic form (poetry accounts for about 40% of the Old Testament). Still, both the ERV and the ASV retained considerable archaic English carried over from the KJV. Half a century later, yet another revision was begun and published in 1946 as the *Revised Standard Version*. This version saw a wide circulation for the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and beginning in 1957, it became available both with and without the Apocrypha, eventually even distinguishing subtleties between Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox understandings of what constituted the Apocrypha.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the RSV has become a “common Bible,” that is, a Bible that could be used by any of the three branches of the Christian faith, Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestant.

### Modern English Versions

Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, a whole new company of Bible translations has arisen. To a large degree, these various versions are distinguished from each other by two major features. First, some are translated by individuals and others by committees. Second, there is a range of translations between two poles of translation theory, one along the lines of **formal equivalency** (word-for-word) and the other along the lines of **dynamic equivalency** (concept-for-concept).

Both of these factors bear upon the finished product. Translations by individuals naturally result in a consistency of diction and style, but at the same time, any personal idiosyncrasies cannot be balanced by other minds. The debate between formal

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<sup>3</sup> The fact notwithstanding that 1 Jn. 5:7 appears in no Greek manuscript earlier than the 16<sup>th</sup> century, there was considerable suspicion that “things were being left out.”

<sup>4</sup> For instance, where the KJV renders 2 Ti. 3:16 as, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God...”, the RV renders it, “Every scripture inspired of God...”, leaving open the possibility that Paul considered some Scriptures inspired and others not.

<sup>5</sup> 1 and 2 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh, for instance, are included in the Orthodox canon but not in the Roman Catholic canon.

### TRANSLATIONS BY INDIVIDUALS

*Of the modern translations by individuals, The New Testament in Modern English by J. B. Phillips (1958), an Anglican clergyman, is certainly one of the best. Recognizing that many young people did not understand the KJV, he began using his time during WWII during the London Blitz to begin translating the NT into contemporary English. When the early editions of Paul's letters began to appear in 1947, they received a warm endorsement from C. S. Lewis, and Phillips version has been popular ever since. More recently, Eugene Peterson's The Message has been widely received (2002), which features very colloquial language.*

equivalency and dynamic equivalency has been quite vigorous, though both theories bring to the table important features that should be appreciated. Formal equivalency is closer to the original word order and syntax, but it may be harder to read, since both the original word order and syntax often are not normative for the second language. Dynamic equivalency is more idiomatic, and therefore, easier to read. On the other hand, it is more susceptible to interpretive readings.

Committee translations, by definition, seek to avoid personal and denominational bias, and several noteworthy translations have appeared in the past half century. Among the ones that swing the pendulum toward formal equivalency, two of the more widely accepted have been the *New American Standard Bible* (1971) and the *English*

*Standard Version* (2001). The NASB was based on the older ASV, updating archaic language, such as, substituting “you” and “your” for “thou” and “thee” and discontinuing the use of the divine name Jehovah, instead using LORD. Also, the translators attempted very careful renderings of Greek tenses, such as the undefined action of the aorist and the continuous action of the imperfect. While such efforts are noteworthy, they resulted in a somewhat stilted form of English which often is not very idiomatic. No current English writer, for instance, would ever say, “And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, ‘Listen to this!’” (Mk. 4:2-3a). The ESV is the most recent, and it is essentially an updating and revision of the RSV. As opposed to the NRSV, which also is a revision of the RSV but attempts to neutralize gender bias, the ESV translators had no compunctions about using a word like “brothers” where a mixed group was probably intended (though they offer footnotes of explanation). The NKJV also should be mentioned, which is the updating of the traditional KJV, mostly with changes regarding archaic English but still retaining the underlying base of the *Textus Receptus*.

**Those translations that are more open to dynamic equivalency** include *The New English Bible* (1970) from Cambridge University, *Today's English Version* (1966) by the American Bible Society, the *New International Version* (1978), by evangelical scholars from various countries in the English-speaking world, and the *Jerusalem Bible* (1966), a Roman Catholic translation. Each of these versions was a new translation, not a revision of an older one. The NIV, for instance, is dubbed “international,” because the scholars who worked on it were from a variety of English-speaking countries, including Canada, England, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Further, the translators came from a variety of Christian denominations, including Anglican, Baptist, Brethren, Church of Christ, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Nazarene, Presbyterian, and Christian Reformed.

Some paraphrases have been popular also, especially *The Living Bible* by Kenneth Taylor (1971). The problem with paraphrases, of course, is that they may take undue liberties in adding, omitting, or altering the original in such a way that equivalence in meaning is not transferred clearly. Sometimes translations can become mini-commentaries, such as one finds in Francis Siewart's *Amplified Bible* (1958). Here, the text is expanded with additional words and phrases that might have been possible meanings in the original, but often, that are not all possible at the same time. Some of the expansions cannot be supported by the underlying original text. For instance, in Matthew 2:13, it reads, "Get up! [Tenderly] take...the young Child," and in Mark 8:35, it reads, "For whoever wants to save his [higher, spiritual, eternal] life, will lose [the lower, natural, temporal which is lived (only) in earth]..." Such expansions go considerably beyond what the original text actually says.

#### KENNETH TAYLOR'S EXPANSIONS

*The Living Bible sometimes expands upon the original text, such as, when Taylor describes Amos as a "herdsman living in the village of Tekoa. All day long he sat on the hillsides watching the sheep, keeping them from straying" (Am. 1:1a). Anyone conversant with the Hebrew text of Amos 1:1 will immediately see that this expansion, while certainly idiomatic and readable, is simply not in the original text itself. He renders Isaiah 40:26: "As a shepherd leads his sheep, calling each by its pet name, and counts them to see that none are lost or strayed, so God does the stars and planets!" Such interpretive renderings might have been fine for Taylor's children, for whom he originally began this paraphrase, but it hardly represents the Hebrew text, however well-intended.*

Undoubtedly, English Bible translation will continue, if for no other reason than that the English language continues to evolve. In all cases, the history of the English Bible has been an important, indeed crucial, effort to render the Word of God in the language of the people. This effort continues to go forward with attendant challenges, not only in approximating the ancient text into modern English, but in discovering richer nuances of the ancient languages themselves. The translators of the KJV in 1611 were quite frank in this regard, and their sentiments serve as a sound benchmark for the future. They wrote:

*There be many words in the Scriptures, which be never found there but once (having neither brother nor neighbor, as the Hebrews speak) so that we cannot be holpen by conference of places. Again, there be many rare names of certain birds, beasts, and precious stones, etc., concerning which the Hebrews themselves are so divided among themselves for judgment, that they may seem to have defined this or that, rather because they would say something, than because they were sure of that which they said.*

While important advances have been made in all these areas, and our knowledge of ancient Hebrew and Greek has been increasing over the generations, still it must be said that in principle translators continue to work toward clarity in meaning while conceding that there are occasions when they cannot be as clear as they might wish.