

# What About ... the English Bible?

BY DR. DAVID A. DEWITT

**Originally**, the Bible was written primarily in two languages, the Old Testament in Hebrew, with a few passages in Aramaic, mostly in Daniel and Ezra, and the New Testament in Greek. The largest Aramaic section is Daniel 2:4–7:28. There are a few words and phrases in the gospels in Aramaic [such as *Eloi, Eloi lama Sabachthani* (Mark 15:34) and *Hosanna* (Matthew 21:9)]. But for the most part, we can think of the Bible as being written in Hebrew and Greek. The Dead Sea Scrolls provided the most significant discovery of Hebrew manuscripts. In existence today, there are about 40,000 handwritten manuscripts in the original languages of the Bible, with more discovered regularly.

**The Apocrypha** is a collection of 14 books written in Greek during the inter-testament times. These books were included in the Eastern Orthodox Churches, but not in the western Roman Catholic Church. The western Catholic Church followed only the Hebrew text for the Old Testament and the 27 Christian books written in the first century, known as the New Testament. [It should be noted that there are no Christian writings of the first century which the church left out. There are only 27, and they are all in the New Testament.] The Roman Catholic Church did not include the Apocrypha until 1546. It was part of their Counter Reformation, apparently, to support the idea of people paying indulgences to the church to pray for the dead (2 Maccabees 12:39-41).

**400s.** The first major translation of the Bible was into Latin, done by a Balkan monk named Jerome (347-420). It started in Rome but was completed in Bethlehem. It was known as **The Latin Vulgate** (“common” Latin), and it became the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church.

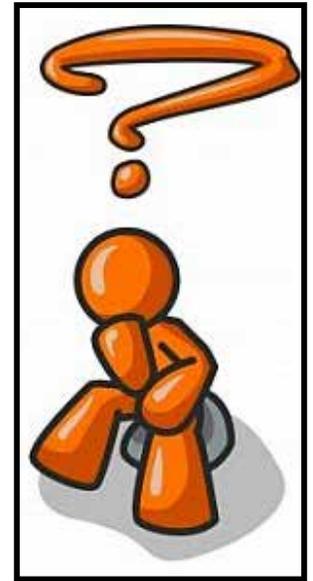
**500s-1200s.** Then came the “Dark Ages,” where the Bible was kept from the people in the western church by maintaining the Latin Vulgate, which only the priests could read. The original texts were studied and copied by monks in monasteries, preserving the Bible throughout the Dark Ages.

**1300s. The Wycliffe Bible** was the first English Bible. It was translated from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe (1338-1384) and his friends in the 1380s. Over 30 years after his death, Wycliffe was labeled as a heretic and his bones were dug up and burned by the Catholic leadership. **It was feared that translations of the Bible into English would lead to wrong interpretations and limit the power and influence of the clergy and the church.**

**1400s.** Known as the Renaissance, the 1400s saw the invention of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg (1398-1468). The first book printed was **The Guten-**

**berg Bible** in the 1450s. Printed in Latin, in Mainz, Germany, it was an edition of the Catholic Vulgate, which was carried to America by Columbus. So the first Bible to reach America was the Latin Vulgate in 1492.

**1500s.** In 1516, Erasmus (1466-1536) produced a Parallel New Testament in Greek and Latin. Erasmus corrected errors that had crept into the Latin, producing a better Latin text. The Erasmus text was used by Luther in translating the Bible into German, and for **The Tyndale Bible** in English. William Tyndale’s (1492-1536) translation was more accurate than Wycliffe’s because it came from Greek rather than Latin. He was finally arrested and burned at the stake in 1536, praying God would “open the eyes of the king.” His prayers were answered three years later when Henry VIII of England renounced Roman Catholicism, had himself declared the head of the Church of England, and in 1539 funded the printing of an English Bible known as “**The Great Bible.**” Henry VIII was succeeded by a sickly son Edward who died young and was succeeded by Henry’s first daughter, known as “Bloody Mary” (for obvious reasons). Mary tried to return England to Catholicism and killed anyone who produced an English Bible. At this time, a group of English Protestants fled to John



Calvin's domain in Geneva, and translated the first complete English study Bible, known as **The Geneva Bible**. The Geneva Bible was the first English Bible to use our Roman style letters and verse numbers, based on the work of Robert Estienne (Robert Stephanus) a Protestant convert from Paris (1503-1559). This was the primary Bible of William Shakespeare, Oliver Cromwell, John Knox, and John Bunyan of 'Pilgrim's Progress.' It was taken to America on the *Mayflower* in 1620.

**1600s.** "Bloody Mary" was succeeded by her sister Elizabeth, who had a long reign and returned England to Protestantism. But she had no children. To find a king, parliament went to the line of Margaret Tudor, the sister of Henry VIII, who had married James IV of Scotland. They had James V, who had Mary Tudor, who had James VI, who became James I of England (ruled 1603-1625). James I commissioned a team of 54 scholars to translate **The King James Bible** (KJV), completed in 1611. The KJV was carried to the American colonies by John Winthrop in 1630, and gradually replaced the Geneva Bible in America. The KJV has become the most printed book in the world, with over a billion copies.

**1700s.** Under British rule, it was legal to print the Bible in other languages but illegal to print an English Bible in the Americas. But with American independence, that changed. In 1782, the United States Congress authorized the printing of **The Robert Aitken English Bible** for use in schools.

**1800s.** The next century saw the development of Bible distribution societies. The first was the Philadelphia Bible Society in 1808, then the New York Bible society in 1809, followed by Bible societies in Baltimore, Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Maine. In 1833, Noah Webster (of the Webster's Dictionary), realizing the English language had changed a lot since 1611, produced a modern variation of the King James Bible. Possibly **The Webster Bible** was ahead of his time because his translation did not sell very well.

**1900s.** The 20th century saw a controversy between the "King James only" people and those who saw a need for a modern translation. The problem was more than the Elizabethan English of the 1600. The bigger issue was the discovery of thousands of more Greek manuscripts. The King James came from a Greek text called "the Majority Text" because it selected the word used the majority of times in the available manuscripts. The modern translations used what was called "the Minority Text." Due to thousands of newly discovered manuscripts, it was possible to use other criteria, such as geographic isolation of variants, as a way to determine an accurate text. Although there are many others available, we shall comment on four modern translations:

1. 1971– **The Living Bible** pioneered the idea of an **idea-for-idea** paraphrase of the text. They applied simple, often slang expressions, and took liberties with the meaning of the original.
2. 1971 – **The New American Standard Bible** (NASB) was an attempt to use the textual analysis available through the increased number of manuscripts to produce a **word-for-word** translation into modern English, from a better Greek text.
3. 1973 – **The New International Version** (NIV) used the later Greek texts but produced a **phrase-for-phrase** translation. The NIV employed a principle called "dynamic equivalent." The idea was to render what they believed to be the "dynamic equivalent" of the original author's intent into 20th century vernacular.
4. 1982 – **The New King James Bible** followed the manuscript evidence of the original King James but updated the grammar and vocabulary to modern English.