

# **The Bible: Its Original Languages and English Translations**

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*The Bible - Greatest Monument of Mankind*

There are distinguished persons and distinguished monuments which stand out in the annals of history. Their lives were full of adventure as they faced the tremendous opposition of their contemporaries as well as accepting enormous sacrifice in their own lives. One of the monuments, the greatest in the history of the world, is the Bible. It has met great challenges of its literal expression as well as its trials over its validity and accuracy. The critical scrutiny of the Bible is the most thorough effort and examination that has ever been made of a literary work from the beginning of time, an examination challenging its integrity and meaning. Its words, thoughts and personalities have been the subject of controversial discussion and debate through the centuries, both in its original language and its translation. From approximately 12 centuries before the Christian era through 20 centuries since (the former for the Old Testament and the latter for both the Old and New Testament), its construction, correction and restoration was achieved. The Bible is stronger today than ever before, despite the "scientific" effort to replace it with human elements of the laboratory and technology. The Bible is so different from other literary works of famous writers whose names are mentioned in the history of scientific findings that only a Superhuman Providence has kept it alive through its orbit of destiny. The Bible has been inscribed on stone, papyrus, lamb skin, in the memories of men and in the hearts of the people.

This extraordinary adventure of the Bible, a written document of historical validity, is so because its content and mission are different from all other examples of human literature, regardless of their valuable content of knowledge and human wisdom. The Bible was written by different writers over an extensive period of time, especially the Old Testament. The writers of the Old Testament began with Moses, covering 12 centuries before Christ and continuing through the writers of the historical, poetical, instructive and prophetic books, together with the writers of the New Testament, writing over a period of 50 years. They find themselves in agreement on thoughts, purpose, destination and mission. The readers of the Bible are overwhelmed and astonished to find these harmonious elements of destiny and purpose. No other literature of this kind exists. A close coherence of the Old and New Testaments, keeping their content intact, their continuity in "promises" and "fulfillments," links them together so closely. The various writings of the Old and New Testaments witness one Editor with Authority that permeates their thoughts.

The literature of the Bible is an epic monument which influences the thinking of man and the molding of his character. "The Bible carries its full message, not to those who regard it simply as a heritage of the past or who praise its literary style, but to those who read it that they may discern and understand God's Word to man. That Word must not be disguised in phrases that are no longer clear, nor be hidden under words that have changed or lost their meaning. It must stand forth in language that is direct and plain and meaningful to people today."

## **THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGES - THE INSPIRED WORD OF GOD**

The Gospel of Christ and, in general, the Holy Bible are written with the inspiration of God. The Prophets and the Apostles have recorded in written form a portion of the oral teaching of the Old Testament in Hebrew and Aramaic as well as the New Testament in Greek. These are the original languages of the Holy Bible from which all the translations have been derived. God's inspiration is

confined to the original languages and utterances, not the many translations. There are 1,300 languages and dialects into which the Holy Bible, in its entirety or in portions, has been translated. This does not mean that the translations do not convey the meaning of the Bible for spiritual uprightness of the readers in their own language. On the contrary, the Bible should be spread and preached to "all nations." The missionaries in foreign lands learn the language or the dialect of the new area into which they bring the Bible and other religious teachings. For example, the missionaries from Constantinople, Saints Cyril and Methodios, sent to Christianize the Slavic peoples in the 9th century, first translated the Bible and the ritual books into the language of the people.

Translations of the Bible are very necessary, but are not sufficient for formulating dogmas and doctrines of the Church, which requires reference to the original languages. The translations depend upon the genius and knowledge of the translator in the selection of the proper words and phrases to render meaning as close as possible to the text of the original language. It is well-known that a new translation is more or less a new interpretation. This is obvious when the Bible is translated in the same language, but in different expressions and words. For instance, in the English language there are many translations and renderings with different words and phrases, which imply that one translation differs from the other. The many translations in the same language are justified in that new renderings are different from the previous ones. The fact that there are many translations in the same language indicates that the first translation is not understood after many centuries. For instance, the first translation into the English language from the original New Testament Greek and Old Testament Hebrew by John Wycliffe in the fifteenth century is incomprehensible to the reader today in English.

Unique characteristics such as idioms and colloquialisms make it impossible for an accurate translation of the meaning of the original language. Therefore, the translations should be used for the spiritual guidance of the believers, but not for the formulation of dogmatic teaching of the Church. This is why it cannot be said that the translations are "the inspired word of God." Only the original language is "the inspired word of God." It should be repeated, however, that the translations of the Bible are necessary for the spreading of the Revealed Truths of God among the people in all languages. This is the great commandment of God and the mission of His Church, for Jesus Christ Himself commissioned the Apostles to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you", Matthew 28:19, 20. This is to be in many languages of the nations, especially to nations which have never heard the Christian Message.

### The Translations of the Bible

The many translations are necessary for spreading the word of God without any obstacles in communication. However, this should not diminish the significance of the original languages of the Bible, the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament, and the language of the era when the books of the Scriptures were written. The study of the original languages is imperative for the correct understanding of the meaning of the Bible. The knowledge of the original languages is also imperative in order to translate the Scriptures into the vernacular. The knowledge of the original language is especially necessary for the doctrinal teaching of the Bible.

The individual Christian is urged to read the Bible in his own language for his spiritual enrichment, but not to use the translation in arriving at personal conclusions. One should read the Bible against the background of the interpretation given it by the Church as a whole, not on one's own interpretation. It is profitable, however, for one who studies the Bible to use short commentaries of the Church and to leave the dogmatic and systematic teaching to the Church, which is the authoritative and infallible body. Taking a Biblical verse out of context often is misleading and is

the basic cause of the Christian Church being separated into many parts, each interpreting according to their own opinions and thoughts.

It is not the Bible itself that divides Christianity, but its interpretation based on personal premises. That is the weakness of the human element. This weakness of the human element is reflected in claims that the Holy Spirit has inspired the individual to interpret the Bible according to his own premise. This is where the fallacy lies—the claim that the Holy Spirit is the author of his own personal interpretation, a claim that all make. The fact that so many persons have claimed that the Holy Spirit has spoken to and chosen them personally should be clear and unmistakable proof that the interpretation of Scriptures lies only in the authority of the Church as a whole, and not with individuals. It should be stressed that the Bible is written on the background of the life of the Church, which has kept the Christian Message, Sacred Tradition, both the words and deed of Jesus Christ, undefiled. The Church, not individuals, was and remains the infallible interpreter of the written word, the Holy Bible. The mistake is even greater when the interpretation of the Bible depends upon the translations instead of the original Hebrew and, especially, the New Testament Greek text. The fact that there are variations in the translations of the Bible indicates most clearly the need for a common edition of the Greek New Testament on which other translations will depend.

A comparison of the text of this edition with that of the edition of the official New Testament text of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople shows approximately 2,000 variations. But most of them do not change the meaning of the New Testament. All the variations between these two texts are found in the apparatus of the critical edition of 1966, issued by the five Bible Societies. The text of the Patriarchate was prepared by a commission in 1904, and it also has approximately 2,000 variations compared to the Common Edition, Textus Receptus, prepared much earlier. Despite these efforts, there is still no one common edition of the New Testament Greek accepted by all. It must be recognized, though, that the edition issued by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople depended mainly upon the passages and verses designated by the Church to be read during the celebrations on Sundays and feast days, and for this reason, these passages were kept intact with fewer changes. It is evident that greater efforts involving all the Christian churches must be made to arrive at one common edition in the original language recognized by all Christians. This effort will be a step in unifying the Christian Church as Christ meant it to be, One Body, Undivided.

## THE NEED TO KNOW THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGES

A critical examination of the text of the original Hebrew and Greek languages of the Bible is indispensable, for through the centuries, many words were added or omitted. This was especially so before the printing press when there was only manual copying on rough lamb skin and papyrus. The scholarly study of the original languages is a valuable aid in correcting the mistakes and reestablishing intact the original texts from which the translations should be made. The prime purpose of such a valuable work is not only to make the Bible free from any and all changes and mistakes, but even more to make the original context and meaning available for translations in many languages for reading by all Christians. The simple purpose of the Bible is to be read and known by all the peoples of the world, in their own languages and in its pure and true form in its original languages and in its many translations.

The individual Christian should read the Bible as the Revelation from God Himself for his enlightenment and salvation. He should read the Bible with the fear of God and with true faith. The reader invokes the Holy Spirit to help him understand its deep meaning for his own personal and practical life. The Christian should read the Bible for his spiritual rebirth and divine assistance in order to understand its sacred content carried by the letter, which is a human organ and tool.

Nevertheless, it is the spirit that gives life to the reader, for it is "not of the letter (of the new covenant) but of the spirit; for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life", 2 Corinthians 3:6b; that is, "spiritual and not literal", Romans 2:29b.

Because the Bible took its literal form in the Christian community, which kept it intact, this community-the Church-was and is the treasurer and interpreter of the Revealed Truths of Christ. This Revealed Truth, taught orally by Christ and His Apostles, is the Sacred Tradition, a part of which later became the written New Testament. Therefore, when the Christian reads the Bible, he must read it against the background of this Sacred Tradition at large. The reader should also have in mind that the various parts of the Bible were not written systematically, but occasionally. Therefore, the Christian needs a guide to properly understand the meaning of the Scriptures. The guide is the interpretation given by the Church as a whole, which is infallible. The example that one needs to help him understand the Bible was given when Philip the Apostle asked the minister of Candace who was reading the Prophet Isaiah, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And the minister answered, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" Acts 8:30 (c.f. Acts 8:26-40). In order for the Bible to be read and understood by the people, it should be translated into the various languages of the people, using the interpretation made by the Church as a whole. This is the correct guide.

### The Translation of the Bible into English

The translation of the Bible into the English language coincided with the invention of the printing press and the period of Reformation (15th -16th centuries). Before this time, the use of the Bible in the West was forbidden in any language other than Latin. The Latin translation, from the original Hebrew and Greek, was made by St. Jerome in the fourth century. It became the authoritative Bible for the Western Church and was known as the Vulgate. The reading of the Bible, even in the Latin, was forbidden the lay people without permission. This denial by the authorities of the Western Church was one of the main reasons for the Protestant Reformation. Therefore, the first act of the first reformer, Martin Luther, was the translation of the Bible into German in 1522, which translation was the main factor in the establishment of the German language. Before the Reformation and the printing press, various parts of the Bible had been translated into English from the Latin Vulgate.

The Western Church was very strict in the use of Latin not only for the Bible, but also for the ritual worship of the Church, which was incomprehensible to the people. It should be noted that before the Reformation, there was no complete translation of the Bible in English. The only translation in English, from the Latin and not the original Greek language, covering only the New Testament and some parts of the Old, was that attributed to John Wycliffe of England. Despite the fact it was made with the knowledge of the authorities of the Church, its use was forbidden without special permission, according to the decision of the Synod of Oxford of 1407. The first translation of the Bible into English from the original languages, Hebrew and Greek, and the first which was printed was that of William Tyndale in c. 1523. Before this translation, the only printings of the Bible were the Vulgate (first printing, 1456), the Hebrew text of the Old Testament (1488), the text of the New Testament Greek by Erasmus (1516), with four revisions through 1535, and the literal translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Latin (1528). The translation of the New Testament into English from the original Greek text depended on the initiative of Tyndale (c. 1523), without the sponsorship or permission of the Bishop of London. Tyndale was denounced and forced to flee to Germany, where he probably met Martin Luther. Tyndale started to print the New Testament in English in Cologne, but was again forced to flee to another city, Worms.

In Worms, he finally completed the printing of the English translation of the New Testament in its entirety. This translation was reprinted many times in Holland. Copies of this translation reached England, where it aroused the anger of his enemies. Nevertheless, Tyndale continued his work and undertook to translate and print the books of the Old Testament. He first printed the five Books of

Moses, the Pentateuch, in Antwerp in 1529-30. Over the next few years, he printed the other books of the Old Testament. Tyndale later printed the New Testament and the Pentateuch together with marginal notes reflecting the Protestant views. This further incensed his enemies, who had him condemned as a heretic. He was burned at the stake in Holland in 1536. Tyndale's translation, especially that of the New Testament from the original Greek, marked the beginning of many other English translations from the original Greek, using Tyndale's translation as a guide. Unfortunately, the original Greek New Testament edited by Erasmus in 1516, which was used by Tyndale for his English translation, contained many mistakes. Still, Tyndale's English translation of the Bible was a pioneer work and an independent effort. Much of his translation is used in the King James Version of 1611.

## TYNDALE'S TRANSLATION AND THE KING JAMES VERSION

Tyndale's English translation of the entire Bible was the basis for the many other English translations that followed. The subsequent English versions are Coverdale's Bible, 1535; Thomas Mathew's Bible, 1537; the Great Bible, 1539; the Geneva Bible, 1560; and the Bishop's Bible, 1568. Also the Rheims-Duae's in 1582 was translated from the Latin Vulgate. Within approximately 50 years from the time of Tyndale's first printed translations, the above six translations were made. It must be noted, however, that none of these English translations was accepted as an authorized English version because of general dissatisfaction with them and the many mistakes found in them. Therefore, after 30 years, another attempt to translate the Bible anew into English was made by a conference in England, where a new version of the Bible was suggested to King James. King James was convinced of the need of a new English translation of the Bible. He appointed 54 scholars to undertake the task. These scholars used the Bishop's Bible of 1568 as a basis, but earlier English versions were also taken into consideration, especially Tyndale's.

These 54 scholars, appointed to translate a new, original English version, failed because they used the earlier English translation, which had many mistakes. Thus, theirs was a new revision, not a new translation. Regardless, this new version was received with great enthusiasm and happiness, and within a generation, it displaced all other English translations. This new version became known as the King James Version, or the Authorized Version. This King James Version was printed in 1611 and has become the familiar form of the Bible for many English-speaking generations. The King James Version was the only version that bore the royal authority and was "appointed to be read in churches." It is characterized as "the noblest monument of English prose." The King James Version has played a prominent role in forming the personal character of the church and institutions of the English-speaking people.

Yet, even this King James Version was neither well-received nor free of criticism by some. Nevertheless, it has prevailed through the centuries and is still held in great esteem today, both by preachers and lay people, despite its defects, which were noted more clearly in the mid-nineteenth century and more so today. The Greek and Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible possessed today were unknown to the 54 scholars of the King James Version. The manuscripts of the Bible which were found later pointed out more clearly the serious defects of the King James Version. This fact convinced the Church of England in 1870 to make a revision of the King James translation. This revision was published in 1881 (N.T.) and 1885 (O.T.) and was known as the English Revised Version of the Bible, which included the Apocrypha, printed in 1895. However, to its detriment, this committee of revisers included only Anglican scholars. This version was not accepted by the vast majority of local churches and people, who cherished the King James Version.

## THE REVISED STANDARD VERSION

The dissatisfaction with the new English Revised Version led scholars in America to once again attempt to issue another English translation based on this English Revised Version. The American scholars, who cooperated with the English revisers, made amendments in the English Revised Version and published it in 1901, calling it the American Standard Version. Numerous other new English translations were published over the years. Among those worthy of mention are: The New Testament by R. F. Weymouth, 1902; The New Testament, 1913, and The Old Testament, 1924, by J. Moffatt (complete Bible revised in 1935); The American Translation of the New Testament by E. G. Goodspeed, 1923; the Old Testament by J. M. Powis Smith, 1935; the Apocrypha by Goodspeed, 1938; The Westminster Version of the Holy Scriptures by the Catholic Church, 1935; a Revised Catholic Version by R. A. Knox (New Testament, 1945, Old Testament, 1949); The Basic English by S. H. Hooke (N. T., 1945, O.T., 1949); and The New Translation of the Bible in Modern English, by the Church of Scotland (including only Protestant churches), 1947.

Between 1881 and 1901, when the English Revised Version (1881) and the American Standard Version (1901) were published, there was an unhappy lack of agreement on an English translation acceptable to all. Therefore, the task of a new English translation was again undertaken by the International Council of Religious Education in 1937. This Council appointed a committee of scholars to study The American Standard Version for further revision. The committee studied this question for two years and concluded that there was need for a thorough revision of the American Version of 1901, using the Tyndale Version as well as the King James Version in light of today's knowledge of the Hebrew and Greek texts and their meaning, and also using present understanding of the English language. The Council thereupon authorized an English revision of the Bible.

A committee of 32 scholars was appointed to make the new revision in cooperation with an advisory board of 50 representatives of all the denominations which had agreed to its need. The committee was then divided into two groups, one for the Old Testament and the other for the New. Each group submitted its work for the scrutiny of the other, with each change being made by two-thirds vote of the entire committee. The work of the committee covered approximately 10 years. The new revision was unanimously adopted by the advisory board and participating Protestant denominations. The result of this great effort is the Revised Standard Version of the Bible (RSV). The New Testament was first printed in 1946. The complete Bible, Old and New Testaments, was authorized by vote of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America in 1951.

## FINDING OF ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS OF ORIGINAL LANGUAGES

The Greek text of the New Testament used for the King James Version was that of Beza in 1589. Beza had two Greek manuscripts of great value of the fifth and sixth centuries, but he did not use them because they were different from the Greek text made by Erasmus (1516-1535). The manuscripts used by Erasmus were from the tenth century on, and he made little use of them. The discovery of many ancient Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, especially after 1931, provided the committee of scholars with important new sources, including the information which recent discoveries have provided for a better understanding of the vocabulary and idioms of the Greek New Testament language. Since 1870, when the official undertaking of the revision of the King James Version took place, an enormous number of papyri have been unearthed in Egypt, containing private letters, official reports, petitions, business accounts and various other records of the activities of the first centuries. These findings were thoroughly studied by Adolf Deissmann, and his results were published in 1895. His study proved that many of the Greek words of the New Testament were used in the everyday life of the people of the first centuries and were not special words which belonged to what was considered Biblical Greek. These discoveries provided the

committee of scholars of the Revised Standard Version with valuable material not available to previous translators. Another factor promoting the decision to revise the King James Version was that its archaic form of expression of English was not clearly understood by contemporary people. The use of such words as "thou," "thee," "thy" and "thine" and the verb endings, "est," "edst," "eth" and "th," made it difficult for most people to understand it. More than 300 words in the King James Version are misleading in light of today's understanding. This was one of the reasons that led the Council to revise the King James Version. It must be noted that the Revised Standard Version is not a new translation, nor is it a paraphrase of the English language; it is a revision of the King James Version.

## THE NEED OF A COMMON ENGLISH VERSION

There is a tendency today by churches, Bible societies and scholars to adopt one English translation of the Bible as a common, authoritative one. For the first time, even the Roman Catholic Church adopted the Revised Standard Version in 1966 to be used with the addition of the "Apocrypha" (books of the Old Testament designated by the Church "as worthy to be read," which are incorporated in the Hebrew text in the Greek Old Testament, the Septuagint, and the Latin Vulgate). When the Catholic Church adopted the Revised Standard Version, it received permission from the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America, which holds the copyrights of this Version, to include its own explanatory notes in an appendix.

The Eastern Orthodox Church officially uses the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament which was translated from the original Hebrew language into Greek in the third century B.C. The Septuagint of the Orthodox Church contains all the Canonical Books and the Anaginoskoinena Books "worthy to be read" (called Apocrypha in the English Versions). For the New Testament, the original Greek text is used by the Greek Church, while the other Orthodox Churches have translated the Bible into their own native languages from the original Greek, with the Slavonic translation the oldest. The Orthodox Church has not, as yet, translated the Bible into English and so has no official English translation. In the meantime, the Orthodox are temporarily using both the King James Version and the Revised Standard Version.

## THE BIBLE - THE REVEALED WORD OF GOD

The Bible, the inspired word of God, is a living monument in that it goes above and beyond being just a historical document or just a classic piece of literature. It is the Revelation of God Himself and His Will. The Bible is a divine account of God's Design for the salvation of man; it is an account of the Incarnation of the Logos in the Person of Jesus Christ Who became flesh and dwelt among man. It was written to be read with reverence and faith. The Revelation and Message of the Bible should not be hidden or altered by words and phrases that have lost or changed their meaning over the years. The Bible was given to man so he might know the True God and His Revealed Truths, for without the Bible, Christ would be unknown to man. God speaks to man through the Bible. Therefore, the written word in its original context is indispensable for belief in Christ and for living His Commandments. The important words of the Holy Bible are:

"written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name ", John 20:31.

Source: [http://www.christian-orthodox.com/the\\_bible.html](http://www.christian-orthodox.com/the_bible.html)