

The Bible in English (and the Celtic languages)

English

Although the Bible was originally written in Hebrew and Greek, by the 5th century AD the Bible had been translated into Latin. This was the language many people spoke as well as their 'home' language, a little like English is spoken in many countries today. Over the years many people stopped speaking Latin but the Bible stayed in Latin, which meant ordinary people could not understand it. Only small parts of the Bible were translated into English (Old English).

After 1066 and the Norman conquest of England, most English nobles spoke a form of French, as did the King and the Court. The clergy spoke French and Latin; the ordinary working people spoke English. Most people could not read and they did not understand Latin. Sometimes people would translate parts of the Bible into English, but generally it was in Latin. English was considered a rough language. It was all right for asking how the pigs were doing but not suitable for the Bible.

In the 14th and 15th centuries attitudes began to change. People began to be proud of being English. The King and Parliament changed to speaking English. English began to be seen as a language that could express ideas. Poetry and plays, such as Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and the *Mystery Plays*, were written in the English of the time.



In the 14th century the reformer John Wycliffe called for the Bible to be in English and he criticised the wealth and power of the Church. The Wycliffe Bible (produced by Wycliffe and Nicholas Hereford and revised by Purvey) was an English translation from Latin. It did not go back to the original Bible languages. The Government promptly banned the Bible in English, any copies found were burned and translators could suffer the death penalty. Many Catholic European countries had the Bible in their own language. It was the link with radical ideas that led the Church and Government to ban the Bible in English. They were afraid of people becoming critical of their leaders. The Bible was seen as a dangerous book.

William Tyndale (1494-1536) was not deterred; he knew Greek and he learned Hebrew and started to translate the Bible. He had to do this in Europe as he had been refused permission to



translate by the English authorities. Tyndale translated the New Testament by 1525 and parts of the Old Testament followed. He never finished the Old Testament because a spy found out where he was living and Tyndale was arrested and executed. Tyndale died in 1536 with the words, 'Lord, open the King of England's eyes'. Tyndale's Bible was outlawed and copies burned, but people were very inventive in working out ways to smuggle Bibles into the country.

Separate pages were wound inside bales of cloth and barrels had false bottoms put in them to hide Bibles. However hard the authorities tried, they could not stop the flow of Bibles into the country.

The authorities decided that, 'If you can't beat them join, them.' Henry VIII commissioned a Bible and instructed Miles Coverdale to produce it in English. By 1539, what became known as

the 'Great Bible' was published and placed in English churches. People would gather to hear the Bible read. Coverdale used Tyndale's work and other translations to produce the Great Bible.

Different Bibles were produced in English over the years. The Geneva Bible appeared in 1560 and in 1582 a Catholic English Bible was produced called the Douay-Rheims Bible. The most popular of all the Bibles in English was the Geneva Bible. This Bible was completed by a group of English/Scottish exiles in Geneva, Switzerland. The translation team was overseen by William Whittington, and John Knox (the Scottish reformer) was involved with the production of this Bible. Like the other translations, the Geneva Bible used Tyndale's text. Unlike other Bibles, it had notes. The English Government (and Elizabeth 1 in particular) hated those notes, they were far too radical! For example, in the story of baby Moses, the notes on Exodus 1:19 say that the Hebrew midwives were right to disobey Pharaoh. Disobeying a ruler was a dangerous idea, it might just catch on.

The English bishops produced the Bishops' Bible (1568/9) to try to counteract the Geneva Bible but, despite all the efforts of the Crown and the Church, the Geneva Bible continued to be popular. In Scotland the Geneva Bible became the official version and by 1579, every Scottish household that could afford one was required to have a Geneva Bible. It was the Geneva Bible that Shakespeare used. It was the Geneva Bible

that the Pilgrims took to America in 1620. Elizabeth's successor James I of England (James VI of Scotland) also disliked the Geneva Bible. Something had to be done . . . (see the section on the King James Bible).



The Celtic languages

English was spoken only in parts of the British Isles. Welsh, Scots, Gaelic (Manx, Scottish and Irish forms) and Cornish were living languages and some people spoke them to the exclusion of English or used English as a second language. For the Bible to reach all parts of the British Isles the Bible had to be translated into the languages of all four nations.

The Bible in Welsh

In 1588 the Bible was translated into Welsh by William Morgan, drawing on both the Bishops' Bible and the Geneva Bible. This can be viewed online along with the story of the Bible in Welsh at www.llgc.org.uk/index.php?id=1588welshbible

The Bible in Gaelic and Scots

The Bible in Gaelic came slowly, with the New Testament being translated into Irish Gaelic in 1602 by William O Daniell and others. The Old Testament was translated by William Bedell and others, but the two were not published as a complete Bible until 1685/90. It was 1767 before a Scottish Gaelic version of the New Testament was produced by Dr James Stuart. It was not until 1801/2 that the whole Bible in Scottish Gaelic was completed. The Isle of Man did not get a Bible in Manx Gaelic until the mid 18th century, translated by Bishop Hildesley and others. No complete Bible has been published in Scots although parts of the Bible were translated and are available today. Parts of Scottish Gaelic and a Manx Bible can be viewed online at www.biblekeeper.com

Cornish

Cornish was one of the few Celtic languages not to have a Bible translation. That may have been a factor in the language's demise. Only a few Bible texts were translated into Cornish. Go to www.bibelkernewek.com/tekstow.htm to view them. A revival in the language has led to a Bible translation project begun in 1996. A Bible in Cornish, translated from the original languages, is now in process. The New Testament and some of the Old Testament are already available.



Useful websites

www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/tyndale.html View Tyndale's Bible online and turn the pages

www.bible-researcher.com/links02.html Scroll down for a wide range of historic Bibles online

http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/OE_vs_ME.pdf The Lord's Prayer (Matthew 6.9-13) in early and later forms of English

www.genevabible.org/files/Geneva_Bible/Old_Testament/Exodus_F.pdf See an example of the original with notes

Welsh:
www.beibl.net/adre/index.php Information about the Bible in Welsh

Scots and Gaelic:
www.nls.uk/collections/rarebooks/collections/bibles.html Information about the Bible in Scotland

www.biblekeeper.com See Mark's gospel in Gaelic Scots

www.ambaile.org.uk/en/sub_section.jsp?SectionID=5¤tId=30 Information about the Gaelic Bible

www.scottishbiblesociety.org/about/bibleworld/ Website for the Scottish Bible society

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/7389393.stm> Recording of the gospels in Scots

Manx:
www.iomtoday.co.im/skeelnygaelgey/The-Bible-in-Manx-Gaelic.4248981.jp Video about the Bible in Manx Gaelic

<http://mannin.info/MHF/> Electronic form of the Manx Bible

Cornish:
www.bibelkernewek.com/index.htm The Cornish Bible project website