

SOMETHING TO CHEW ON

Because we have become so accustomed to having the Bible around, we sometimes forget that it did not just appear one day from God, complete with India paper and black leather covers. The Scriptures came bit by bit as God inspired men with His words. Centuries after the Flood, as men became numerous and spiritual darkness began settling again over the world, holy men of God wrote as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. God used these men to speak to His people, and through them to the world, so that the earth could have a knowledge of God and His will.

This work went on for hundreds of years until Christ, the promised Saviour, came. The message of light and salvation which he and the apostles proclaimed closed the Scripture record, and the Word of God was complete. For most part, the Old Testament Scriptures were first written in Hebrew, on scrolls, or rolls of parchment, linen, or papyrus. Scholars later translated these Hebrew Scriptures into Greek. The oldest such translation, known as the Septuagint Version or "Version of the Seventy," was made at Alexandria for the famous library there. The Bible in common use during the time of Christ was this Septuagint Version of the Old Testament.

Since most of the civilized world in New Testament times spoke Greek, the authors of the New Testament books wrote in that language. For some time the common Bible consisted of the Septuagint Old Testament and the growing list of New Testament Scriptures.

As Latin began to replace Greek as the common tongue, Jerome around AD 400 prepared a carefully translated Latin version of the entire Bible. This version became known as the Vulgate, or common version, because it was the Bible in ordinary use among Latin speaking people. The art of printing still lay in the future, so copies of the Bible could be produced only by the slow, laborious, and expensive process of handwriting. Of course this limited its circulation. Not very many copies could be produced. Not only were copies of the Bible scarce, but for centuries the illuminating, saving truths of the Scriptures were largely obscured by the errors and superstitions of the Dark Ages. During this time the average person knew practically nothing of what the Bible contained.

But with the invention of printing about the middle of the fifteenth century, and with the dawn of the great Reformation in the sixteenth century, the Bible entered upon a new era. The first complete book printed in Europe from movable type was the Latin Bible, printed by Johann Gutenberg, and issued at Mainz, Germany. Others soon brought out different editions of the Scriptures, all in Latin. But except for the priests, the scholars, and the educated, Latin was no longer understood. The ordinary people spoke a variety of languages. So the Bible remained in an ancient language that, by now, very few of the common people could understand. Without the Bible in their own languages, the people found it difficult to retain the gospel seed sown among them by the Reformers. "Oh," said the advocates of the pure gospel, "if only the people could have the Bible in their own languages! Without this it will be impossible to establish them in the truth of God."

"And why should they not have it?" they reasoned. "After all, Moses wrote in the language of the people of his time; the prophets wrote in the tongue of the people they addressed; the New Testament was written in the language current then."

Among the men who thought this way was John Wycliffe. Even before the full sweep of the Reformation had begun, Wycliffe and his associates had translated major portions of the Bible into English. Wycliffe believed that each man had a direct access and responsibility to God. He believed that all had an obligation to obey God's will as found in the Bible. "But if everyone is responsible to obey the teachings of the Bible," Wycliffe reasoned, "the Bible must be accessible to him in his native tongue so he can read it for himself."

He finished his work on the Bible about 1380, and found that it became one of the causes leading to the Reformation, as it prepared the way for a revival of Christianity in England and the future multiplication of the Scriptures. To make such a translation at that time was a bold undertaking, and Wycliffe knew that by so doing he placed his life in danger. The churchmen condemned him for "introducing among the multitude a book reserved exclusively for the use of the priests." But in spite of the danger and opposition, Wycliffe continued his work, encouraging the people to read the Scriptures in English. Forty-three years after his death, the Council of Constance ordered his bones dug up and burned to show its rage against the man who had initiated the process of providing people with a Bible they could read.

Wycliffe's work impressed another Englishman, William Tyndale, who likewise felt that the people should be able to read the Word of God in their mother tongue. At this time not only the laity but the clergy itself was woefully ignorant concerning the Bible. Once while in discussion with a learned man, Tyndale reproved his ignorance of the Bible by saying, "If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost." Tyndale wanted to make the Scriptures available to every person who could, and would, read its life-giving message.

In 1525 Tyndale gave to the English people his translation of the New Testament, and later he followed it with portions of the Old Testament. Tyndale, too, encountered much opposition to his work. In 1536 he sealed his Christian witness with his life. By order of Charles V of Germany, authorities strangled Tyndale and burned him at the stake.

But the flame of truth had become a blaze which could not be extinguished. The English Scriptures began appearing in different translations and editions. Wycliffe's Bible had been handwritten, Tyndale's New Testament was printed, and Miles Coverdale produced the first complete printed Bible in English in 1535. Matthew's Bible, Taverner's Bible, and the Great Bible came out shortly thereafter. Today in 2006, the word of God is available in numerous "common" tongues so that the fulfillment that the gospel would go throughout all the world looms near; and is a further portent to the nearness of Christ's coming.

The light of Bible truth began to shine again upon the common people, but not without opposition.

As Jehoiakim, king of Judah, and the princes under King Zedekiah showed their contempt for God by burning the writings of Jeremiah and confining the prophet in a dungeon (Jeremiah 36:20-23; 38:1-6), so now men sought to stem the rising tide of reform by burning the Word of God as well as the men who translated it.

Bible burning began in England with the destruction of copies of Tyndale's New Testament at St. Paul's Cross, London, in 1527. Other burnings followed, until a little later religious and civil leaders banned the writings and Bible translations of Wycliffe, Tyndale, Basil, Coverdale, Bernes, and others, and in some cases burned them.

But the Word of God could not be forever bound. Men soon discovered that in attempting to prevent the circulation of the Scriptures they had undertaken a task far beyond their strength. The Bible had taken deep root in the hearts of the people. So what kings and churchmen had tried to suppress, they gradually decided to foster and supply.

King Henry the eighth in 1538 issued an edict requiring the clergy to provide "one book of the whole Bible of the largest volume in England" in each church and to encourage the laity to read it. Henry, himself, was not so anxious that the Bible be available, but some of the powerful men around him, who were concerned to see the Bible in the hands of the ordinary people, influenced him to make the proclamation.

Since the Great Bible, so called because of its size, was obviously the largest English Bible available, the churches placed this translation in a location where the people could have access to it. For thirty years this Bible enjoyed wide popularity and acceptance among English-speaking people. In fact, regulations became necessary forbidding the reading of the Scriptures during the sermon, because many of the common people, instead of listening to the sermon, gathered around one who could read and listened to him read from the Bible.

The Great Bible, popular though it was, consisted mainly of Tyndale's translation revised by Coverdale and Matthews. By 1560 there was a growing feeling among several English Reformers that a better and more clear translation was needed. Since Mary now sat on the throne of England, a number of the Reformers lived in Geneva, Switzerland, where they had safety. The translation these men produced became known as the Geneva Bible. The Geneva Bible immediately caught the public fancy and became the household Bible of English Protestants. It was by far the best English translation at that time.

Some forty years later the crown passed to James, and soon a resolution appeared providing for a new translation of the entire Bible from the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. This translation would be printed without notes or explanations of any kind. A panel of forty-seven men, including most of the leading Biblical scholars in England, divided up the work of translating. When these men had completed their task, a smaller committee of twelve men reviewed the entire production before it was printed in 1611. This Bible became known as the King James Version since he had encouraged the project. Soon it had replaced both the Great Bible and the Geneva Bible as the most popular translation. Its merits were obvious.

More than 370 years have gone by since the King James Version came from the press, and today this version is still being used by most English-speaking Protestants. Its literary beauty has found its way into art, literature, and music in a way that can never be erased.

A revision was carried out in 1884 and again in 1946, the latter being the Revised Standard Version. These revisions improved certain passages which had lost their meaning in the King James Version because of obsolete wording and also provided an opportunity to incorporate the results of better manuscripts than the 1611 translators had available to them. During the last few decades numerous versions and translations in modern English have appeared, each trying to make the Sacred Writings a living reality to those who read. As a result the King James Version is being more and more superseded by the newer much easier to understand versions

No, the English Bible did not fall from heaven adorned with gilt-edged pages. It has come to us as the result of diligent study by men who loved God and who had a burning desire to make His Word available in a language everyone could understand. These men were willing to give their lives for such a noble cause, and a number of them did. Because of their labours nearly every home has at least one copy of the Book. But the Bible is of no value at all until we take it from the shelf and by reading, prayer, and study transfer its truths into our lives.