

# Why so many translations? Making sense of all the choices

By Nathaniel J. Erickson, PhD

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## Week 1: The Making of a (Good) Translation

### Introduction

According to the American Bible Society, there is somewhere in the vicinity of 900 different English translations (and the number is always growing).<sup>1</sup> We have come a long way from John Wycliffe's groundbreaking translation of the Bible, appearing in the 1380's.<sup>2</sup> On the one hand, this is cause for rejoicing. According to Wycliffe (Bible translation ministry), 1.45 billion people using 5,509 languages do not have a Bible in their mother tongue. Only 724 languages around the world currently have an entire Bible translated into the language.<sup>3</sup> By contrast to this sparsity on the global picture, we are literally swimming in translations. Reading every day, it would take you nearly 3 years just to read from each possible English translation. Not only are there immense numbers of translations, but an enormous number of them are freely available online to anyone with internet access.

That is the good news. The bad news is that with options comes the burden of choice. And the burden of choice also brings with it the burden of debates. No doubt, many have heard about debates of which translation to use—most famously the KJV only camp insists that the KJV is the only valid English Bible. While I have my own opinions about a wide range of questions regarding Bible translations, the aim of this two-week study will be modest, and hopefully helpful.

Over the coming two weeks, we will address some questions like:

- What are good translations? And why?
- What are the differences between translations?
- What should I read/use?

But before starting into those types of questions, I want to begin with a brief overview of how we get an English Bible. I say “an English Bible” as opposed to “the English Bible” because we have lots of different ones to choose from and there never has been, nor ever will be, a definitive English Bible in existence. We should learn from the fate of the first English Bible. The entire Bible which we call the Wycliffe Bible

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<sup>1</sup> Accessed: [Number of English Translations of the Bible | Articles | American Bible Society News](#) 5/4/2022.

“Somewhere in the vicinity” because there are lots of complexities regarding what counts as a distinct translation and how to count translations of just a part of the Bible (does a New Testament translation get counted as a Bible translation? How about the translations provided in commentary series?), and so forth.

<sup>2</sup> Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), 282.

<sup>3</sup> Accessed: <https://www.wycliffe.net/resources/statistics/> 10/18/2022.

appeared in 1382 (NT in 1380). Within 6 years, a revised second edition was already complete. From the moment it appeared it was being revised.<sup>4</sup>

Only fools try to make a definitive Bible translation in the English language.

Today's class will focus, then, on getting a baseline understanding of how we get an English Bible. This baseline will be very helpful when we come to talking about different translations, their strengths and weaknesses, and why there are so many.

### What is translation?

Before discussing English translations, it makes sense to clarify what a translation actually is. In our largely monolingual society, most of us don't have cause to worry about translation with any regularity.<sup>5</sup> Where we are in the country means that we hardly ever hear any language other than English. This is a minority experience through most of human history and in most places in the world today. Translation is simply a normal reality for most people most of the time.

**Translation** refers to the process by which a text, either oral or written, is transformed from one language into an equivalent text of another language. In this definition, the word "text" refers to any use of language, whether written or oral.

Translations usually seek to answer the question, *"If the original writer or speaker were creating the equivalent text in my language, with the same information and intentions, for the same type of readers or listeners, what would that text look like?"*<sup>6</sup>

### From whence cometh an English Bible?

Any English Bible is a *translation* or is ultimately *based on a translation* from a different language. Said differently, the Bible was not composed in English. God did not send down an English Bible from heaven, with a nice leather cover and gold gilt-pages. While the exact parameters of what we mean by "translation" and "based on a translation" are difficult to parse at times,<sup>7</sup> the bottom line is this: the ability to read the Bible in English requires a great deal of work behind the scenes by someone (or someones) else.

To move from the biblical languages to an English translation requires at least 4 big-picture background steps: (1) the text, (2) a reason, (3) resources, and (4) results.

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<sup>4</sup> To appreciate the speed of this process, consider that in the 1380's all book production was done by hand.

<sup>5</sup> Since our first language, English, also happens to be the dominant global language at the time, we are rarely confronted with translated material in any form. This differs greatly from many other countries where translating foreign (that is, American-made) media is common. Our situation in history can often make us blind to translation. There are certainly places in the country where this is not the case.

<sup>6</sup> E. Ray Clendenen and David K. Stabnow, *HCSB: Navigating the Horizons in Bible Translation* (Nashville: B&H, 2012), 42.

<sup>7</sup> For example, *The Message* Bible is translated from the original languages, while *The Living Bible* is a paraphrase of an English translation. However, on reading the two you would guess that *The Message* is more like a paraphrase and *The Living Bible* more like a translation.

Most English Bibles are translations from the Biblical languages, unless otherwise specified. In many bible translation projects around the world today, the translation is done directly from English rather than the biblical languages. This saves time in that far more people are competent at translating from English than from the biblical languages.

## The text

Behind every English Bible is a text in some other language. Almost any Bible you will read today is translated from the original languages of the Bible.

The OT is predominantly Hebrew, with a few chapters in Aramaic.

The NT is exclusively in Greek, with a few words in Aramaic written in Greek phonetic equivalence.

Modern English translations are based on these languages.<sup>8</sup> There is an added level of difficulty, though, in that not all English translations use the same “edition” of the Hebrew and Greek original texts in their work. But we have gotten ahead of ourselves. Let’s first talk briefly of the process of bringing a translation into existence.

Having a text to translate from is a necessary but not sufficient impetus for a Bible translation. A translation is “born” through (at least) these next three “steps”: reason, resources, and results.

## Reason

Every translation begins with a reason why it was translated. The most obvious reason is that the original text is not in a language that is accessible. When a critical mass of people in the community no longer can understand the source text, we have the core rationale for a translation.

NB: we tend to assume that the “people in the community” are the normal Christians in the pews. Many times and places throughout history, though, have not made that assumption. In some times and places, translations were tools to help scholars/church leaders engage with the text and/or learn the language of the tradition (like Latin or Ethiopic). In such a situation, the Bible is not actually translated into a language which most people in the community at large know; only which a community of specialists know. Alternately, people can and have made private translations of the Bible, or portions of the Bible, throughout history.

The first time in history where a portion of the Bible was systematically translated between languages was the Septuagint (see below for more details).

In multi-lingual communities, it is common that people use a Bible that is not in their native or preferred language, but which they can readily understand. There is no exact percentage of people in the community longing for a Bible in their language that constitutes a critical mass. But for a translation to happen, this reason needs to be met.<sup>9</sup>

## Resources

A reasonable desire for a translation is not enough. A translation project also requires resources. First, a translation requires at least one person who knows all the languages involved well enough to make a translation. Such people are generally in short supply throughout history.

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<sup>8</sup> It is possible to find English translations which translate the Septuagint or Vulgate, for instance, but these are usually marked out as such and often have a scholarly audience in mind. Unless specifically stated otherwise, you can assume an English Bible you read is translated from the original languages.

<sup>9</sup> It may be the case that a scholar makes a private translation for personal use. In that case, the “critical mass of people in the community” is just one, the scholar.

In addition to a translator or group of translators, there are many other needed resources. The Bible is a large book and translating it requires a good amount of time, effort, and materials, whether that be papyri, parchment, or computers. Some necessary resources:

- a text or texts to translate from
- support for the translator/translators while the project is underway
- writing materials
- specialist resources
- educational system which produces necessary competence for translating

This list could go on. The point here is that no matter how much you want a translation of the Bible in a given language, it doesn't just happen. Translating the Bible—whether well or poorly—requires a lot of resources, ranging from people to materials.

## Results

Lastly, the translation project involves “results.” Once pen is put to paper and we have a translation, the results need to be available for people to access. When Wycliffe first produced his English Bible translation, it had minimal affect for most people because: (1) most people were illiterate and (2) it was illegal to have, look at, or read with the penalty of forfeiting “land, cattle, life, and goods.”<sup>10</sup>

In many modern translation projects, the Bible translators are producing a translation in a language without a prior written tradition. In such a situation, it is not sufficient to make a translation; it must be accessible, meaning either people need to be taught how to read or the translators need to produce audio versions of the translation. A translation that nobody can read or have makes minimal impact.

The translations we have access to have all walked through these various steps, and there are bound to be more coming in the future. But, before looking forward, we will take some time to look backward at key milestones along the journey to so many translations.

## Some significant milestones along the way

The path towards our modern plethora of translations (in English, that is), is paved with many important translation projects along the way. Certain translation projects have wielded immense influence in how subsequent generations came to view the task of translating God's word and, in some cases, what the very words of God were.

Naturally, there are many other significant translations of old that are not covered here, such as the Syriac, the Ethiopic, the Gothic, etc., along with a good many important English translations. These other old translations and various English translations are significant in their own times and places, but have played a smaller part in our current state of multitudinous translations.

### *Septuagint (LXX) (c. 350 BC – AD 100)*

No account of Bible translation would be complete without brief comment on the Septuagint (LXX). The Septuagint—the name just means “70”—is so named because of a legend about the 70 (or 72)

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<sup>10</sup> Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*, 283.

translators who produced it.<sup>11</sup> The LXX is the first known translation project of its kind and scope in antiquity.<sup>12</sup> The LXX is a translation of the Hebrew OT into Greek.<sup>13</sup> Jobes and Silva write:

“In its most general sense, the term [Septuagint, NJE] refers to any or all ancient Greek translations of the Hebrew Bible, just as one might now refer in general to the “English Bible,” with no particular translation in mind.”<sup>14</sup>

Aside from being magisterial in its own, idiosyncratic way, the LXX is important in the way it mediates the OT into the NT. The LXX is widely quoted by NT writers as they weave OT citations and allusions into their works.<sup>15</sup>

The LXX is also important in our doctrine of the word of God. The fact that NT writers often cite directly from the LXX (or make their own apparently *de novo* translations from Hebrew into Greek), all the while calling it the word of God is significant. God’s word is not restricted to a single language; in some sense it is the message which is inspired, not the words.<sup>16</sup>

As some may know, this differs from the Islamic view which claims that only the original Arabic of the Koran (and just what that ‘original’ Arabic is is a slippery prospect) is inspired. Translations are not “the word of Allah.” The reality of the LXX gives us confidence to hold up our English Bible’s today and say, “This is the word of God.” It is derivative, a translation, but it still shares in the core identity of God’s word.

In addition to its status as a trailblazer and its role in theological mediation between the OT and the NT, the Septuagint is also important in Bible translation history in that many ancient translations were based

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<sup>11</sup> Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 23. The story appears in many allusions, but is told most fully in *The Letter of Aristeas*, a letter written most likely in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC (ibid, 19).

<sup>12</sup> Based on what scholars have learned about the history of the Hebrew language, there would have been a good deal of “updating” of the Hebrew text of certain books of the OT across its history. However, updating/modernizing a text to keep in pace with inner-language developments is a different project than translating.

As a general rule in the ancient Mediterranean world, works of cultural and religious importance were not translated; one learned the original language to read an important work.

<sup>13</sup> As everyone is quick to note, there is no such thing as “the Septuagint.” See Jobes and Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, 14–17. That just means that there never was one complete translation project where a single group translated all of the Hebrew Old Testament texts into Greek. Various portions were translated into Greek in various places at various times—sometimes multiple different ones.

<sup>14</sup> Jobes and Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> For some estimates, see Karen H. Jobes, “When God Spoke Greek: The Place of the Greek Bible in Evangelical Scholarship,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 16, no. 2 (2006): 221. The exact number of quotations is impossible to tell given the variabilities in all the textual traditions, as well as the uncertainty whether a given variance in a citation of the OT is a new translation by the author, a variation of an extant translation, or some admixture of all the possibilities. There are likely hundreds of OT quotations in the NT which are either directly from the LXX or are influenced by it.

<sup>16</sup> By this I mean nothing more than that the Jewish and Christian traditions share the foundational belief that God’s words are *translatable* from one language to another. It is possible to hear the voice of God through a translation. The exact original words are not necessary to engage with God’s word.

on the LXX, not on the Hebrew.<sup>17</sup> While scholars use the Hebrew OT today for English translation projects, the LXX plays a towering role in the history of Judaism, Christianity, and Bible translation.<sup>18</sup>

### *Vulgate (c. AD 383-405)*

There are few Bible translations which have done so much to shape the conception of what the Word of God is as the Vulgate. The Vulgate is the name given to St. Jerome's Latin translation of the Hebrew and Greek Bible. The name Vulgate comes from the Latin name, "Vulgata," which means "vulgar" as in "common." The name indicates the initial point of the translation: to be a Bible in the language of the people who used it (as opposed to the Hebrew and/or Greek Jerome was working from).<sup>19</sup> When Jerome did the Vulgate translation, it actually brought the Bible nearer to the people by putting it into a version of Latin they understood. It is tragically ironic, then, that in the subsequent development of things in the Roman Catholic Church, adherence to the Vulgate ended up removing the Bible from the people.

### *Noteworthy Facts*

**Purpose:** Jerome's work began at the request of Damasus, bishop of Rome, with the aim of producing a standard version of the Latin in place of the variety of Latin texts then in existence.<sup>20</sup>

**Notable First:** the Vulgate was the first Latin translation (and pretty much first Christian translation) based on the Hebrew OT rather than the Greek LXX.

**Late-comer:** the Vulgate took several centuries before it was widely accepted, and it wasn't until the 16<sup>th</sup> century that the Vulgate was enshrined as "the Bible" in Catholicism (though, in practice it fulfilled that role earlier than that).<sup>21</sup>

**First-comer:** the first English Bible was translated from the Vulgate.<sup>22</sup>

### *Erasmus' Greek New Testament (5 editions from 1516-1535)*

With Erasmus' Greek New Testament, we enter into the age of the printing press.<sup>23</sup> This text is significant because of the role it plays in the subsequent history of English Bible translations. In 1516, the versatile and learned Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus published a new Latin translation of the New Testament. He was one of many in that era trying their hand at improving upon the Vulgate. Far more impactful than his translation was the Greek New Testament text which he printed in parallel columns next to the Latin. His original purpose for the Greek was to confirm the accuracy his Latin translation

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<sup>17</sup> Very few early church scholars knew Hebrew at all. It is not until the Reformation era that knowledge of Hebrew among Christians became normal and an expected part of biblical scholarship.

<sup>18</sup> Any avid footnote reader will note that the LXX is regularly called upon today by English translations to help clear up parts of the Hebrew text which are unclear.

<sup>19</sup> Gregor Geiger, "Die Sprache(n) Jesu (1): Aramäisch, Hebräisch, Griechisch, Lateinisch?," *Im Land des Herrn: Franziskanische Zeitschrift für das Heilige Land*, 2014, 102. He writes: „Sie heißt „Vulgata“ (die Volkstümliche), wollte also eine Übersetzung der Bibel in die Volkssprache sein. Lateinisch war also genau das Gegenteil dessen, als was es manchmal heute von Katholiken angesehen wird: eine volksnahe Neuerung.“

<sup>20</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments: Some Chapters on the Transmission of the Bible*, rev. (Westwood (NJ): Fleming H. Revell, 1963), 201. Latin translations of the Bible go back at least to the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, Geiger, "Die Sprache(n) Jesu (1): Aramäisch, Hebräisch, Griechisch, Lateinisch?," 102.

<sup>21</sup> Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, 206–8.

<sup>22</sup> Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, 201.

<sup>23</sup> The printing press is significant because, for the first time in history, it is possible to produce *identical books*. No two handwritten manuscripts are identical. By contrast, all the copies from the same run of a printing press are identical, even when that means having identical errors introduced by the typesetters.

(and thus show that it was actually better than the Vulgate).<sup>24</sup> While by modern standards his Greek NT rested on incredibly slim evidence (initially 8 manuscripts, none older than the 11<sup>th</sup> century<sup>25</sup>), getting this Greek New Testament together and accessible was a significant achievement.<sup>26</sup> And not because it was necessarily a great end product. In fact, its best merit was that it was available to buy before any other printed Greek New Testament, not that it was materially better than the soon to follow competitors. It is a significant part of our story, though, because the early English translations were based, in one form or another, on one of the editions of Erasmus' work. For example, William Tyndale translated his English New Testament from the third edition of Erasmus' Greek New Testament (1526). The biggest splash in English Bibles, the *King James Version*, also used Erasmus' Greek New Testament. Some of the differences between a modern New Testament and the King James Version New Testament are due to the idiosyncrasies of Erasmus' Greek New Testament.

#### Noteworthy Facts

**Notable First:** first printed Greek New Testament available to scholars.

**Notable shortcoming:** while Erasmus' text was based on multiple manuscripts, it was not "critical" in any sense of the word. In fact, there were a few portions where Erasmus backtranslated the Greek from his Latin because he did not have a manuscript which covered that portion of the NT!

#### *The Bible becomes English: Wycliffe and Tyndale*

While we know of some portions of the Bible translated into varieties of English prior to John Wycliffe, the first entire English Bible owes its existence to him.

#### John Wycliffe (c. 1329-1384, Bible 1382)

Wycliffe was behind the first complete English Bible. I say behind it rather than calling him the translator because it is probable that he only did some of the translation, with various of his students doing most of the work and him overseeing it.<sup>27</sup> Wycliffe was a Catholic scholar and teacher (pre-Reformation, so everybody in the West was still Catholic) and churchman. As a strident critic of corruption and certain stances of the late medieval catholic church, Wycliffe was eventually ousted from Oxford, where he taught. Through his influence, though, a complete English Bible was born for the first time.<sup>28</sup>

From our point of view, the Wycliffe Bible is deficient for two main reasons. First, it is a translation from the Latin Vulgate, itself a translation. Second, and more problematic for us, it is translated into Middle English. While much of Middle English is comprehensible—once the different spellings and characters

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<sup>24</sup> Craig A. Evans, *Jesus and the Manuscripts: What We Can Learn from the Oldest Texts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2020), 451.

<sup>25</sup> Evans, *Jesus and the Manuscripts: What We Can Learn from the Oldest Texts*, 451.

<sup>26</sup> For a summary of the undertaking—and its many shortcomings—see Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 142–50.

<sup>27</sup> Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*, 282.

<sup>28</sup> Technically, there are two distinct Wycliffe translations. The first edition, completed around 1382, was revised by John Purvey and appeared as a "second edition" in 1388, four years after Wycliffe's death. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*, 283. The revisions were fairly extensive. For instance, the first version of the Wycliffe Bible had multiple dialects of English (from the different translators) and often followed the Latin word order and choice so painfully close to make it obscure English.

are learned—it is a different period of English and requires scholarly expertise to do much with. Deficiencies note, however, it is the fountain from which all subsequent English Bible translations flow.

#### [William Tyndale \(c. 1494-1536\)](#)

Tyndale translated the NT (1526) and portions of the OT (1534). He was executed for heresy, having run afoul of the Catholic authorities during the hot days of the Reformation for his work on translating the Bible into English and his Reformed theological views. The inconvenient execution explains why he never finished the OT.

Tyndale's translation is significant in that it is the first English translation of note in the "Modern English" period. While it still sounds (and looks!) foreign to us, there are few major differences in how English works today as compared to how it worked when Tyndale did his translation (once we adjust for spelling changes, that is). Second, Tyndale's translation was printed via the printing press, as opposed to hand-copied in the case of Wycliffe. Third, Tyndale was a gifted scholar who translated from the original languages. His is the first English translation which came from the Greek and Hebrew originals, rather than Latin.

In all these ways, Tyndale's translation was the forerunner of all that was to come in the world of English Bible translations. Not only that, but his phrasing and translation pattern proved to be influential in the production of our next translation of note, the KJV.

#### [The KJV \(1611\)](#)

No discussion of the English Bible would be complete without mentioning this one. The KJV looms large over the world of English Bibles. Many believe it to be the greatest Bible translation, and not a few believe that the KJV is the actual word of God in English and no other English version is acceptable. Setting aside these historically odd and groundless views, we can recognize the KJV for what it was: a well-done translation very fitting for its time.

Technically speaking, the KJV is not a *translation*, rather it was a *revision*. While the details get messy, the basic difference is that the KJV started with an already complete English translation—called the Bishop's Bible—and reworked it rather than producing an entirely new translation. The Bishop's Bible, like most other English Bibles produced between Tyndale and the KJV, was itself primarily a revision of Tyndale's Bible, for those parts his translation existed. It has been estimated that for those areas where the Tyndale Bible was completed, roughly 83% of the KJV is just the Tyndale Bible. Two other key translations heavily influenced the KJV: the Coverdale Bible and the Geneva Bible.

"The Authorized Version [aka, the King James Version, NJE] was formally a revision of the 1602 edition of the Bishops' Bible. But all the existing English versions lay before the translators, and every available foreign version, Latin translations ancient and recent, the Targums and the Peshitta—all as aids to the elucidation of the Hebrew and Greek originals. But the abiding influence of one man in particular may be traced throughout great portions of their work, and that man was William Tyndale. Of their sixteenth-century predecessors the translators justly say: 'they deserve to be had of us and of posterity in everlasting remembrance. . . . blessed be they, and most honoured be their name, that break the ice, and give the onset upon that which helpeth



forward to the saving of souls'. But of all these, the one who actually broke the ice was Tyndale."<sup>29</sup>

"So the KJV, strictly speaking, is not a translation but a revision. In fact, it is a revision of a revision (Bishop's Bible) of a revision (Great Bible) of a revision (Matthew's Bible) of a revision (Coverdale's Bible) of Tyndale's translation. "A great deal of praise, therefore, that is given to it belongs to its predecessors. For the idiom and vocabulary, Tyndale deserves the greatest credit; for the melody and harmony, Coverdale; for scholarship and accuracy, the Geneva version."<sup>30</sup>

With the KJV, we see the beginning of a noteworthy trend: revisions. The KJV is basically a revision of an already complete English translation. This is largely the way things work these days as well. Why start from scratch when you can just tweak an already complete translation?

Because of the near mythic status of the KJV, it is worth commenting briefly on a few other points:

- First, the KJV you read today is not the KJV that was first published in 1611 (unless you specifically buy a 1611 one; though, they are still generally modernized).
  - o The text has been considerably modernized with regard to spelling, obsolete vocabulary changed out, expressions changed, etc. Errors and infelicities in the original run have been ferreted out (actually, there were two original runs by different printers, and the texts differed from each other<sup>31</sup>). Also, it simply includes many suggested improvements.
  - o According to one estimate, the KJV text which we use today differs from the original in at least 75,000 places.<sup>32</sup>
- The KJV was a monument to biblical scholarship and translation practices of its day—400 years ago. Since that point in time, we have thousands more biblical manuscripts and knowledge about the world of the Bible has grown exponentially. In many ways, this knowledge doesn't change anything, but there are more than a few instances where the KJV translators had to make an educated guess on something they could not possibly have known, and have sense been proven wrong. Hey, it happens.

## The Modern Period of Bible Translation

A lot happened in the world of English Bible translations between the early 1600's and the mid-to-late 1900s, where we will pick up our account again. In jumping over the many translations produced in this era, I am not implying they did nothing valuable or worth paying attention to, but we must be selective. According to F.F. Bruce, there are three main epochs of Bible translation:<sup>33</sup>

- (1) the initial flurry of translations circa 150-450 AD (Syria, Coptic, Armenian, Cyrillic, Gothic, Latin, etc.)
- (2) Reformation era and revival of translation from original texts and into vernaculars (1500-1600's)

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<sup>29</sup> Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, 229.

<sup>30</sup> Clendenen and Stabnow, *HCSB: Navigating the Horizons in Bible Translation*, 23. Internal quote is from B. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 76-77.

<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of various problems from the start, as well as subsequent errors in the text, see Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*, 312.

<sup>32</sup> Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*, 314.

<sup>33</sup> Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, 218.

- (3) translation activities associated with the modern missions movement (beginning of 19<sup>th</sup> century through the present)

We are in a continuation of Epoch 3 at a worldwide scale and the methods of translation developed by pioneering translators continually get applied to English translations. This is where we pick up with the modern flurry of English Bible translations—and debates about translations which you probably have heard whispers of, at least. The big modern innovation in English Bible translation is using linguistic theories designed for translating the Bible into languages with no written language and no history of literacy.<sup>34</sup>

Behind this move is a more important change in stance toward what many assume a reader should get out of a Bible translation. We might call this the “Reader’s Revolution.”

#### Reader’s Revolution

The idea which we take for granted now—that an “anyman” from the street should be able to pick up a Bible and read it—is quiet young, as far as the history of the Bible goes. Reading was a highly specialized skill for most of human history; a skill learned only by “scholarly” types and people in the bureaucracy. Few people had any use for reading, beyond the ability to make out some signs and know how to sign a contract. The ability to pick up a Bible and read it was far beyond the skills of all but a few people.

This began to change in the Reformation time and later. The rise of mass literacy and the age of “classic” English Bible translations coincide. Our classic texts—like the KJV and Shakespeare—hail from a time when their sort of English was more like the English people spoke. While elevated English in its day, the KJV was not intentionally archaic. To us, it is irredeemably archaic. After all, it is 400 years old. Up until recent times, the KJV has strongly influenced most English Bible translations: the RSV (a revision of the KJV, ultimately), the NASB (a translation done in the KJV style), or the ASV all being clear examples. Most widely-used English translations stood strongly in the KJV stream of tradition.<sup>35</sup>

Picking up in the 1950’s, and more obviously from the 1970’s on, the world of English Bible translations has diversified in approaches and results.<sup>36</sup> More and more, the question in being asked when thinking about Bible translation was, “How close to contemporary spoken English should a Bible translation be?”

The KJV was ‘normal’ for its day, but it has long ceased to be like contemporary English. The spate of modern translations have aimed at modernizing. Along with the “dust up” of making a text sound more modern, a new set of debates has opened up in Bible translation, leaving us with a dizzying array of translations and terminology to try to make sense of.

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<sup>34</sup> Ryken raises some important criticisms about this procedure, even if some of his approach is perhaps a little overblown. Leland Ryken, *The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2002).

<sup>35</sup> This is not to suggest that there were not various translations in existence which departed from the KJV tradition; there were. However, the main Bibles were within the KJV stream.

<sup>36</sup> 1950 is arbitrary in some ways. Two features of this date are noteworthy: (1) since 1950 a flurry of translations aiming for intelligibility and lucidity in contemporary idiom appear and (2) more English Bible translations appear in between 1950 and 2000 than any other time in history. At least 72 partial or total English Bible translations appeared between 1950 and 2000, Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible*, 394–95. These numbers don’t take into account partial translations or new translations found in commentaries.

## Where we are today

We might think of the current world of Bible translations as an attempt to rectify various tensions—tensions which have been evident throughout the history of Bible translation, all the way back into ancient times.

### *Innovation vs. Conservatism*

Not surprisingly, considering the nature of the Word of God we are dealing with, followers of Jesus have often been suspicious of changes in Bible translations. We have records of this dynamic as far back as the early centuries of the church. When you become deeply familiar with a passage of Scripture and then hear it a different way, is it really surprising that many people find that shocking? It is, after all, God's word. It shouldn't change.

However, the reality of any language spoken over time is that the language changes. The Latin Vulgate was not the first Latin translation, but one meant to update and make understandable. Going forward in discussing Bible translations, the tension between conservatism and innovation becomes a major force.

### *Different theories of what a translation should accomplish*

Everyone wants a translation that is "accurate" and "readable." But difficulties arise when we try to pin down what both of those ideas mean in terms of specifics. Without going deeply into the weeds of theories about language and translation, we could say that there is a split over whether a Bible translation should reproduce the *message* of the text or the *effect* of the text.

I want to end today with a light-hearted example that gets to the core of the issue. To briefly unpack the distinction, consider this example from the movie [Shrek](#).

We were all in Jr. High once, so it's okay to laugh. This line works in two ways in English: (1) 'ass' is an archaic word for donkey (and most English speakers in the US know that), so it advances the plot because Shrek needs to go and rescue Donkey, his donkey. But (2) 'ass' is a vulgar term for butt, and by extension, a way to refer to one's whole self. So "I have to save my ass" works as a joke in that Shrek, the valiant knight, is just trying to save himself rather than rescue the princess.

I explain this not to be pedantic—humour which is explained is not funny—but to illustrate in a basic way the sorts of difficulties translators regularly find themselves up against. In German, the line here in the movie goes: "Ich muss meinen Esel retten." Translated back into English, this is, "I have to save my donkey." In German, "Esel" only refers to the animal 'donkey.' It is not a crude reference for "butt." That would be the German word "Arsch."

Considering how this simple line in the movie Shrek gets translated from English into German provides a clear example of how different translation theories envision the task of translation. In German, you can't both make the joke and advance the plot line, because the joke doesn't work in German. If you go with "Esel," that is *ass* in the sense of *donkey*. If you go with "Arsch," that is *ass* in the sense of *ass* as commonly used in modern English. But neither option covers both meanings of English 'ass.'

Working within these constraints:

A message-oriented translation theory is going to go with "Esel" because that is more important to the story and is more central to the meaning of the message.

A response-oriented translation theory is going to go with “Arsch” because the point of the line in the movie is to be a joke, else Shrek could have said, “I have to save my donkey.”

As is often the case in translation, these theories end up with different results because they are in some ways answering the question, “what is the point of translation?” in different ways.

## Conclusion

Over the course of this first week, we have looked at what translation is, and then what makes a good translation. We also looked a little at the basic reason behind and process for making a translation, then took a tour through a few significant translation milestones along the way. Finally, we've ended today reflecting on the modern period of Bible translation and some ways in which the innovations it brings lead us into the situation where there are a lot of translations that we have to choose from and it is not always easy or apparent which one(s) to choose. Next week, we will look more into the actual factors in many translations and how and why to choose a given English translation.