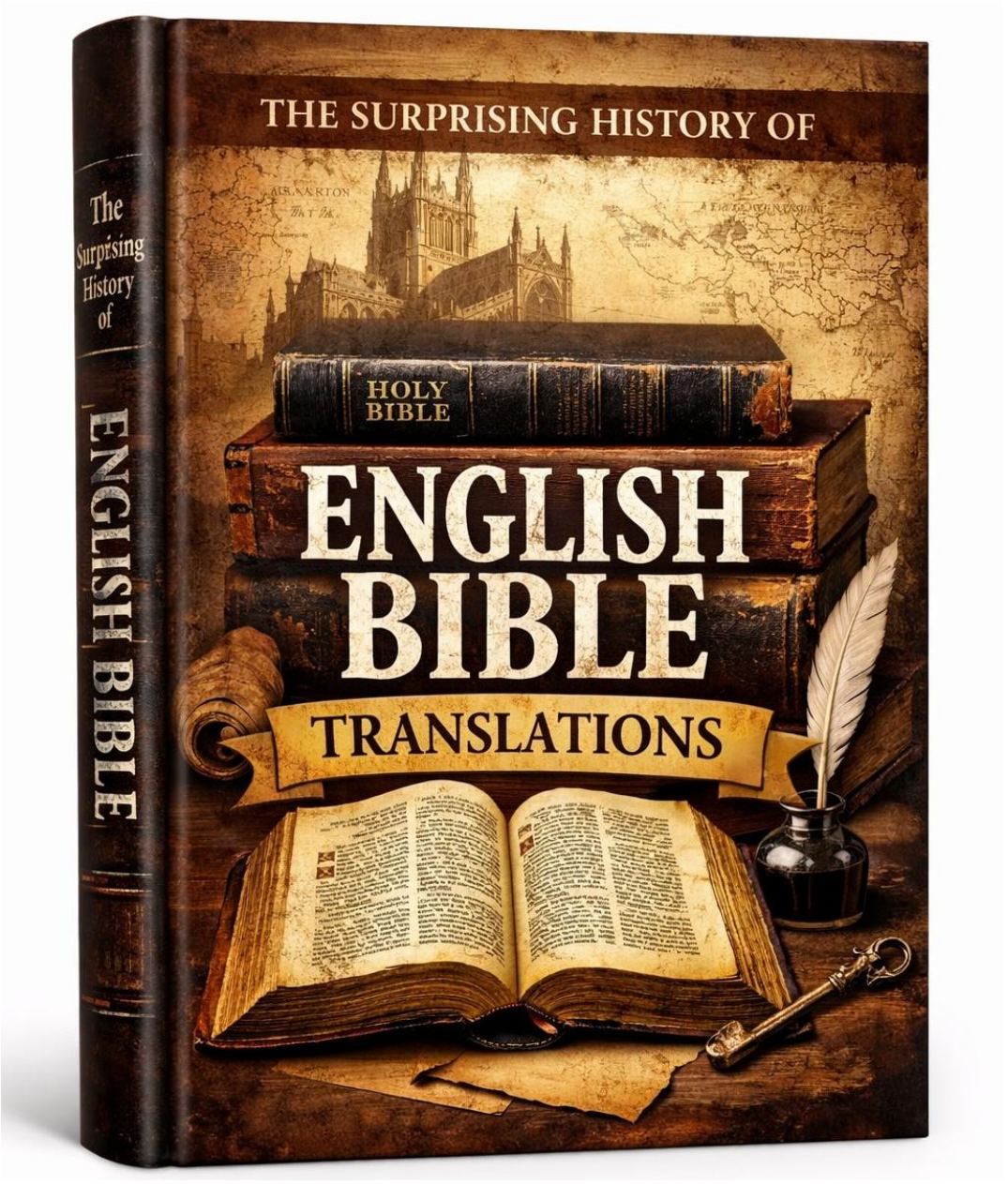
THE SURPRISING HISTORY OF
The Surprising History of
ENGLISH BIBLE
HOLY BIBLE
ENGLISH BIBLE
TRANSLATIONS

The Surprising History of English Bible Translations

D. L. WEBSTER

There is an interesting history of English Bible translations. Did you know that most major translations are all a part of a family tree? More often than not, new translations are actually based on previous translations, only changing words or sentences in certain places and for certain reasons. I explain more about translation paradigms in my book, *Curing Christianity*. This look at major English translations was originally a part of the chapter "Bibliolatry". Here I'll share a quick overview of the history of some of the best known English translations. This history is insightful for understanding why we have different English translations and how they compare.

The King James Bible or **King James Version (KJV)** (a.k.a. the Authorized Version) is the most well-known English Bible translation and is the most printed book of all time. It was first published in 1611 and is loved for its beautiful language. This translation was commissioned by King James of England in order to address perceived problems with the two most used English translations of the time, the Geneva Bible and the Bishops Bible. The latter translation itself had actually been made in response to

the Geneva Bible—the first English Bible accessible to the average lay person. Church leaders were primarily concerned with the notes in the Geneva Bible rather than the translation itself. The notes in the Geneva Bible supported the idea lay elders governing the church instead of professional bishops, and church leaders were none too keen on this. Controversy over Bible translations has a long history!

There were a number of stipulations and directions given to the translators of the King James. No marginal notes (the source of controversy in the Geneva Bible) were to be included. The translation was to conform to Anglican ideas regarding church, to limit puritan influence, and to retain certain traditional words. The Bishops Bible was to be used as a guide though the translation was to be made from the *Textus Receptus*, a Greek New Testament created from Eastern Church manuscripts.

I find it unfortunate that the King James Version remains so used today. First, we have better manuscripts now than they had available at the time. Second, the English language has changed over the past four centuries. People may feel nostalgic for the KJV and its high sounding language. And it is lauded for its poetic nature. But this hides the fact that the New Testament was written in common Greek. No one today talks like the KJV. The antiquated language results in the Bible sounding like it's completely divorced from our everyday life. Instead, reading the King James sounds mostly like just religious ritual. It may sound very nice, but the language is a barrier to the modern reader actually understanding the Bible.

In the late nineteenth century, a revision to the King James Bible was authorized. This is known as the English Revised Version or simply the **Revised Version (RV)**. The translators used the *Novum Testamentum Graece*, the Greek New Testament containing the oldest and best manuscripts we have. At the turn of the twentieth century, a slight variant of the Revised Version, the **American Standard Version (ASV)**, was published. These translations serve as the ancestors to several of today's most popular translations.

In the mid-twentieth century, a new revision of the ASV was sought which would make use of the best manuscripts and scholarship available at that time. Most notably, the translators used the Dead Sea Scroll of Isaiah, the first translation to have done so. Also, the **Revised Standard Version (RSV)**, which was first published in 1952, significantly modernized the translation's language.

There was notable controversy regarding this translation, primarily centered around *just one word* in Isaiah 7:14. The Hebrew word *ʿalmāh* had traditionally been translated as "virgin" in this verse. However, the most literal meaning of *ʿalmāh* is "young woman" which is how the word was translated in the RSV. Part of the reason we know there is a distinction is that there is another word for virgin in Hebrew, *bəṯūlāh*. The controversy partially comes from the fact that when Matthew quotes this verse from Isaiah, he uses the Septuagint (a Greek translation of the Old Testament) which translates the word as "virgin". In other words, the most accurate translation of the New Testament quoting of Isaiah *is* "virgin", however the most accurate translation of Isaiah itself is "young woman". This

can make it appear that Matthew is misquoting Isaiah. The real controversy though was due to people not wanting any change to their traditional understanding of the verse or any possible perceived doubt to the belief that Mary was a virgin when she became pregnant with Jesus.

In 1989, a new version of the RSV, unimaginatively titled the **New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)**, was released. This translation also came with controversies. This time, one of the big controversies was the translation of yet another single word, *arsenokoitais*, in two of Paul's letters. This has often been translated as "homosexuals" or anachronistically, sodomites. But the NRSV translated this word as "men who engage in illicit sex".

Some may think that this change was made simply to be "progressive" or "liberal" and to cater to the left, but this is inaccurate. The problem with translating *arsenokoitais* is that the writings of Paul are the first uses of this word which have ever been found. This has led some to speculate that Paul made up the word. In any case, it is a compound word made up of the word for man and the word for bed, the latter of which indicates sexual activity. The most literal translation would be "man bed", but of course being this literal comes out nonsense. Due to the uncertain meaning, the NRSV is arguably the most accurate translation.

An updated version of the NRSV was just released in 2022 and is known as the **New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition** (**NRSVue**). The NRSV has been the preferred English translation of scholars and it presumably will be superseded by the NRSVue.

In part because of the controversies surrounding the RSV, some Christians desired an updated version of the ASV which was more conservative. This led to the publication of the **New American Standard Bible (NASB)** in 1971. This is generally considered the most formally equivalent English translation. (See Curing Christianity for explanation of translation paradigms.) The NASB was updated in 1977, 1995, and 2020.

All of the above major translations I have mentioned are descendants of the King James Bible and lean toward a formally equivalent approach to translation. Many people, especially those who are not Bible scholars or pastors, have long wanted a Bible translation which is easy to read. In the 1960s and 1970s, work began on a completely new translation which took a new approach. Instead of attempting to stick to formal equivalence, they decided to balance it with functional equivalence in order to make a more accessible translation. The result was the **New International Version (NIV)** which became the most sold version of the Bible, at least in the U.S. It is considered one of the most balanced versions in terms of being in the middle of translation philosophies. The NIV was originally published in 1978 with a minor revision in 1984.

There have been a number of updates and variations of the NIV published subsequently. In 1996, the New International Version Inclusive Language Edition (NIVi) was published, but only in the UK and related countries. It was never released in the U.S. due to considerable opposition from conservative Christians. The organization behind the NIV commissioned a new updated translation which was released in 2005 as Today's New International

Version (TNIV). This Bible continued to encounter significant opposition due to its use of gender-neutral language. Finally, in 2011 a revision of the NIV was released. Subsequently both the 1984 version and the TNIV were discontinued. This revision brought in some of the gender-neutral language from the TNIV but also kept some of the gender specific language from the earlier NIV. Yet even this was controversial and which resulted in many churches abandoning the NIV for the soon to be mentioned ESV or other translations.

In 1971 a man named Kenneth N. Taylor published a paraphrase of the ASV called **The Living Bible**. This paraphrase proved to be quite popular. However the concern with this Bible was that it wasn't always accurate since it was a reworded version of an English translation. In other words, it was only a paraphrase and not an actual translation. So a group was formed to create a new translation with a goal of achieving similar ease of reading yet being faithful to the original texts. The **New Living Translation (NLT)** was released in 1996 and has become nearly as popular as the NIV. The NLT is one of the best functionally equivalent translations.

In the 1990s, work began on a new translation, based on the RSV, which aimed for the formally equivalent end of the translation spectrum. (It's unclear to me why people felt this need when the NASB already seemed to serve this purpose.) The **English Standard Version (ESV)** was published in 2001 and quickly gained popularity. (The *ESV Study Bible* has been a specifically popular edition.) My understanding as a Christian is that we want to understand the Bible as accurately as possible because it is

so important to us. So I found it shocking, though perhaps not surprising, when I discovered this statement from one of the members of the translation committee, Wanye Grudem: "The ESV translation committee removed every trace of liberal influence that had caused such criticism from evangelicals when the RSV was first published in 1952."[1] I find it concerning that such a popular translation was made with an agenda apparently other than to be as faithful to the original language as possible.

The Message (MSG) was first published as a complete Bible in 2002 (portions had been published previously). All of the other translations mentioned here were the works of a whole team of scholars and at the behest of organizations which are themselves led by groups of people. In contrast, The Message is the work of one man, Eugene Peterson. However, according to the publisher, it was reviewed by a group of scholars. The Message can be considered a paraphrase even though Peterson translated from the original language. His goal was to try and communicate the tone of passages rather than merely translating each individual word as accurately as possible. His translation tries to capture the sense of entire sentences or paragraphs at once and put them into modern vernacular. Unfortunately, I find that the idiom of his translation is often rather peculiar itself and doesn't feel like common speech. The Message occupies the far opposite end of the translation spectrum from the NASB.

Also during the 1990s, Southern Baptists (via their publisher Lifeway) sponsored yet another translation,

[1] The Advantages of the English Standard Version (ESV) Translation, p. 3.

because at this point, why not? 😄 The **Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB)** was released in 2004 and is a specifically conservative evangelical translation linked with the belief in Biblical inerrancy. The HCSB sought a balanced approach in translation in the vein of the NIV. An updated edition was released in 2010, and then a subsequent major revision was released in 2017. Beginning with this last edition, the translation is now simply known as the **Christian Standard Bible (CBS)**.

* * *

Ok, we're through the overview of specific translations. Part of the reason I believe it is worth sharing all of this is to point out that translation have not all been made in an attempt to create the most accurate translation possible. Groups and individuals have often sought a translation which aligns with their existing beliefs and theology rather than just desiring the most accurate translation possible. These translations are often very good nonetheless. The differences between translations are usually limited to a rather small number of instances and are often subtle. I don't want to suggest that they make no difference. However, I do want to counter the idea that some translations are completely bad or significantly wrong. Most Bible translations should lead the average Christian in the right direction. The main difference is in the ease of reading, with one caveat—the difference between a Bible translation and a Bible.

A large share of Bibles contain not only the text of the Bible itself, but also notes and other supplemental material. Bibles are no doubt a significant source of income for Christian publishers. In order to try and sell

their Bibles, they are often branded in a variety of different ways. There are Bibles for teens, men, women, devotionals, popular pastors, authors, or organizations—just about anything popular in Christian circles. As often as not, a Bible is more than just a Bible.

One particular category is that of study Bibles which include extensive notes and commentary. Notes in Bibles are often included in attempt to help a reader better understand a passage. Some Bibles provide reasonably neutral information. However, many promote a specific theology. The *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909) and later the *Ryrie Study Bible* (1978) were instrumental in the spread of dispensationalism for instance. The sixteenth century's Geneva Bible (perhaps the first study Bible) was controversial and led to the Bishops Bible as previously mentioned. Presently, the *ESV Study Bible* is quite popular. Its notes are written from a specifically conservative evangelical point of view and as such influence Bible readers in such direction.

It's important to note that commentaries usually speak as though what they are saying is the *only* way to understand the Bible, even if written from only one particular theological vantage point. This can mislead people into believing that there is only one correct way to believe and not be aware that there are other perspectives. In any case, it's worth stating that the commentaries and notes found in many Bibles are not the Bible themselves. Yet these are clearly influential in how people understand the Bible.

* * *

What do I take from all of the above? It's important to understand why there isn't one "correct" English Bible, nor is there one translation which is best. Furthermore, the theology of people, organizations, and denominations influences the translation to some degree. Furthermore again, many Bibles are printed with notes and commentaries which communicate their own message. Does this all mean that we don't know what the Bible says? Not at all. The overall message of the Bible is clear. All of the above just means that we can't be overly dogmatic about our particular point of view on certain aspects of the Bible and its teachings.

The Bible can and should be approached from a variety of different angles. One can read it devotionally, considering how it can bring them personally closer to God. Passages can be used for meditation. Teachings in the Bible can be used as guidance in one's life. The Bible can be studied intently in attempt to understand its meaning. A translation which excels in one area may not excel in another.

For study, a more formally equivalent translation is often preferable, along with a neutral commentary. It is also easy now days to use online tools such as Bible Gateway in order to compare translations and look up notes and commentary. For devotional and/or general reading, a Bible which takes a balanced approached to translation (such as the NIV, NLT, or CSB) is generally a good choice. I personally own ten Bibles, everything from the NASB and ESV to the NLT and The Message.

Reading from a different translation is a good way to get a fresh perspective on the Bible. Especially for those of us

who grew up in church, we've heard and read certain passages so much that it is easy for it to go in one ear and out the other without us really hearing it, and this is especially true if we're always using the same translation.

* * *

I hope this has given you better insight into major English Bible translations. If you haven't yet done so, be sure to check out my book, *Curing Christianity*, for more on Bible translation and a variety of other subjects. It's designed to clarify areas of confusion and help avoid common pitfalls many have fallen into. I want you to have the healthiest faith possible!