

1 The Bible - How it came to us

So who wrote the Bible and how did it get to us?



Why is it called The Bible?

The name 'Bible' comes from the Greek city Byblos. If you have maps in your Bible you can look for it by its other name, Gebal. It is on the coast about 50 miles north of Sidon. Byblos was a famous centre for trading in papyrus. Biblion = papyrus scroll; biblia = set of scrolls.

Papyrus

Papyrus is a sort of reed, perhaps the same as the rushes in which Moses' ark was laid. It grew about eight to ten feet tall, and had very



fibrous stems. In Old Testament times, papyrus was cut into long strips, which were laid side by side, with others across them. These were then soaked and beaten with a mallet to make them join together to make a sort of paper (we get our word 'paper' from papyrus).

The Old Testament

The original book of the law was put inside of the ark (Deuteronomy 31:26) and later books were laid up before the Lord (1 Samuel 10:25). Altogether the Old Testament was written in Hebrew, beginning around 1450 BC, and completed around 400 BC. Altogether it amounted to about 40 papyrus scrolls.

Copies of these scrolls were made in order to:

- preserve the word of God
- help the copier to learn the word of God
- Copies were made by:
 - leaders - Joshua 8:32
 - kings - Deuteronomy 17:18
 - scribes - Ezra 7:6



A Jewish scholar looking at a scroll of part of the Old Testament

Copying the Hebrew text was laborious. Rules governing copying were extremely strict, and many checks were built in to avoid error. The scrolls were difficult to read, because there were

- no gaps between the words
- no punctuation

- no lower-case letters
- no vowels, only system of dots

They were also very cumbersome to refer to, because Papyrus scrolls are so large and heavy.

And they were expensive - it took a scribe 10 months to complete a set. So only rich and affluent people such as the eunuch (Acts 8:28) could afford them.

The Old Testament in Greek

After they were exiled into Assyria and Babylon the Jews became scattered, and many Jews outside Israel spoke no Hebrew. So in 258 BC the Old Testament was translated into Greek. It was called the Septuagint version. The story goes that 72 Jewish translators were enlisted to complete the translation while kept in separate chambers, and they all produced identical versions of the text in seventy-two days. That's almost certainly not true, but it was a valuable step forward:

- it allowed the Old Testament to reach a wider public
- it was more intelligible than Hebrew (Greeks introduced vowels circa 850 BC)
- it was more durable (written on parchment)

By the time of Jesus each synagogue had its own set of scrolls.

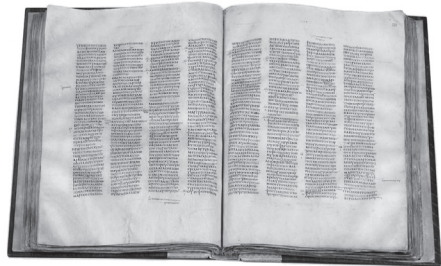
The Complete Bible - from scrolls to a book

The early name for a book was 'codex'. A codex was a number of folded pages, sewn together, with text written on both sides. It was developed by the early Christians, who found the Old Testament scrolls too cumbersome for daily reference. We are told that they searched the scriptures daily (Acts 17:11), so we can say that Christianity brought literacy and the introduction of books.

The New Testament, written in everyday Greek, was largely completed by AD 65. The Septuagint Old Testament was added to it to make a complete Bible in Greek.

The complete Bible was reduced from several volumes written on parchment (thin leather), to one volume written on vellum (even thinner leather) by about AD 350. The most famous of these is the Codex Sinaiticus.

Methods of copying had become less laborious; Greek scribes employed dictation, which was fast, and they wrote from left to right, which lessened the risk of smudging the text (most people being right-handed). So, the new Bibles were more portable and more easily referred to, also less costly - although still beyond the ownership of all but a few.



Codex Sinaiticus

Codex Sinaiticus is one of the most important books in the world. It was handwritten well over 1600 years ago, and it contains most of the Bible written in Greek, including the oldest copy of the New Testament. It is the oldest real book in the world, and most of it is in the British Museum in London. It came to the attention of scholars in the 19th century at a Greek Monastery on what is believed to be Mount Sinai.

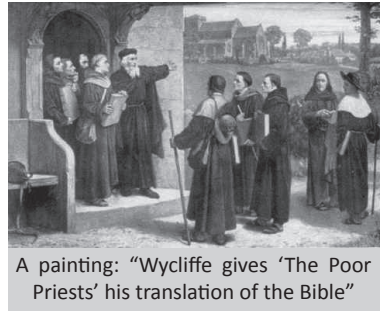
From Greek to Latin

By 170 AD Latin was replacing Greek as the language of the Roman empire. In 404 AD Jerome had completed the first official Latin version of the whole Bible, called the Vulgate because it was in common - vulgar - use. Over the next 1050 years the Latin Vulgate spread throughout western Europe, but at the same time it became less accessible to the common man because ordinary people did not speak Latin, and anyway the church denied access to the scriptures to all but clerics, stopped translations into common tongues, blocked reform and then condemned the use of the Bible altogether.

King Alfred and a monk called Bede translated part of the Latin Bible. But the earliest surviving Anglo Saxon translation is the Lindisfarne Gospels; this was a translation by monks who wrote the Anglo Saxon between the Latin lines.

... to English

In 1382 John Wycliffe produced the first complete Bible in English. It was translated from the Latin, and cost 13 times a labourer's annual salary. Wycliffe was a Master of Balliol College, Oxford, and he had encouraged his theology students to preach in English to villagers and poor labourers. He was expelled from Oxford the same year and died two years later. His translation of the Bible into English marked the beginning of the Reformation in England and his many religious tracts inspired followers both at home and abroad. He and his followers, the Lollards, moved around the country with their Bibles preaching to the common people.



A painting: "Wycliffe gives 'The Poor Priests' his translation of the Bible"

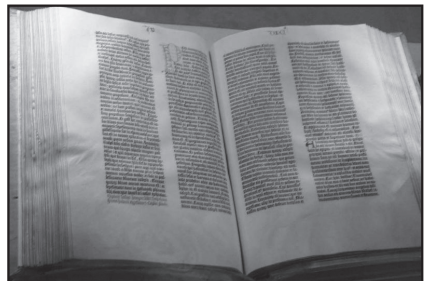
In 1408 the English Church ratified the Constitutions of Oxford. These said that:

... NO ONE HENCEFORTH ON HIS OWN AUTHORITY TRANSLATE ANY TEXT OF HOLY SCRIPTURE INTO THE ENGLISH OR OTHER LANGUAGES ... AND THAT NO BOOK, PAMPHLET, OR TRACT OF THIS KIND BE READ, EITHER RECENTLY COMPOSED IN THE TIME OF THE SAID JOHN WYCLYFF ... OR THAT MAY IN FUTURE BE COMPOSED ... UNDER PAIN OF THE GREATER EXCOMMUNICATION, UNTIL THE TRANSLATION ITSELF SHALL HAVE BEEN APPROVED ...

Printing changes everything

In 1453 the Turks captured Constantinople, and many ancient Greek manuscripts were rediscovered, including the Codex Vaticanus (a Latin Bible, the oldest and most complete Bible yet discovered). As a result, people realised that the Vulgate, upon which many of the church's teachings were based, was an inaccurate translation. and so the desire grew for reform.

In 1454 Johann Gutenberg printed the Vulgate using moveable type face on parchment. He printed as much in one day as was formerly



A Gutenberg Bible owned by the US Library of Congress Washington, DC

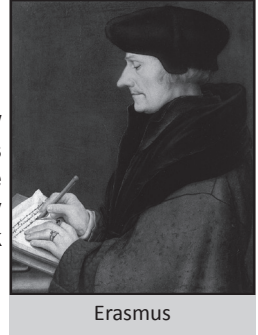
printed in a year. Now the Bible could have been accessible to a farm labourer - if only he could read Latin!

16th century - the age of translations

Some scholars and priests tried to reform from within the Church. Mostly they incurred the wrath of the Pope and the Spanish Inquisition, and were excommunicated or worse. The most important were:

Erasmus

An eminent scholar from Rotterdam. His Greek and Latin New Testament, printed in 1516 was the basis for later translations in the common tongue. His work showed the Vulgate to be incorrect. He wished to see the scriptures translated into every language, but left that controversial task to others.



Erasmus



Martin Luther

Martin Luther

A German Augustinian monk, called "The Father of the German Reformation". In 1517 he openly attacked the excesses of Rome. Excommunicated in 1521, he translated and caused to be printed the first German New Testament in 1522, and the first complete German Bible in 1534. He was protected from the agents of the Pope by the Elector of Saxony. Lutheran Protestantism spread throughout North Germany, Prussia and Scandinavia.

William Tyndale

Tyndale was a theological scholar at Oxford and Cambridge. He was refused permission by the church to translate Erasmus' New Testament into English, so he fled to Hamburg in 1524 to do so. He had said to a clergyman: "If God spare my life, ere many years, I will cause a boy who drives the plough to know more scripture than you." In 1525 he translated the New Testament into English. It was printed and smuggled into England from Germany, but it cost a farm labourer one week's wages. By 1534 he had completed a translation into English of much of the Old Testament but he was captured in 1535 by the agents of the Bishop of London, and strangled



William Tyndale



and burnt near Brussels, on the jurisdiction of the Holy Roman Emperor. Martin Coverdale, his collaborator, carried on his work in exile.

The King James Version

During a conference held at Hampton Court in 1604 James I ordered a new English translation to be made. It was published in 1611 and we know it



as the Authorised Version. It contained much of Tyndale's and Coverdale's translations and was the Bible used in almost every English church and chapel until the 1950's.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

In 1947 a Bedouin boy, looking after his goats at Qumran, a few miles north of En-Gedi on the Dead Sea, found a cave in which had been hidden many jars containing scrolls.



Many more jars were later found in other caves nearby. The scrolls were of various documents, but include extracts from every book of the Old Testament, except Esther. In particular there is a complete copy of the book of Isaiah, which is now in a museum in Jerusalem. These manuscripts were written between 150 BC and 70 AD, and they prove that all the Old Testament was written before the birth of Jesus.

Modern versions and the Dead Sea scrolls.

The Dead Sea scrolls have sometimes helped to clarify the original text. One example is in Psalm 145, which is an acrostic Psalm - in Hebrew each verse begins with a different letter of the alphabet. In most of the ancient copies of the Hebrew Bible there is a verse missing, which would have begun with the Hebrew letter 'nun' - the equivalent of our 'n'. So in the Authorised version there is a verse omitted which should have come between verses 13 and 14. But if you look in a modern version like the English Standard Version or the New International Version you will see that verse 13 has some extra text, and there will be a footnote explaining that the Dead Sea scrolls have helped to clarify what was in the original.

Look at other footnotes in a modern Bible to see if you can find other places where the Dead Sea Scrolls have helped.

The paperless Bible

Ever since the Bible was first written, it has involved making a mark with ink or something similar on something like paper, or a clay tablet. We are the first generation that has been able to read the Bible electronically. You can read the Bible on a computer, an electronic book, a smartphone - pretty well anywhere.

Can you read the Bible on your phone? Do you?

