Top 10 “must see” historical Bibles

Rheims New Testament 1582

This translation into English from the Latin Vulgate of Jerome (4th Century) was made in Rheims at a time of severe persecution of Catholics in England. Up to this time the Catholic church had fought against the Bible being translated into the common tongue. Tyndale had been hounded and executed for doing just that in 1536. Now the tables had been turned and Catholics were suffering persecution. In Germany, Luther had already embarrassed the Church of Rome with his translation of the New Testament into German in 1522 followed with the Old Testament in 1534 and was excommunicated. So began the Protestant movement. In England, this movement was aided by Henry VIII breaking with the Roman Church for his own ends. The dissolution of the monasteries and strife broke out in England as a consequence.

The following picture called “Geistlicher Rauffhandel” (religious brawl) taken from a wood carving of 1590 shows the Pope, Luther and Calvin in dispute.

Facsimile of King James Bible of 1611

Printed in 1611 by Barker of London and known as the Authorised Version (although it was never authorised!). The King James Version (KJV), also known as the King James Bible (KJB) or simply the Authorized Version (AV), is an English translation of the Bible for the Church of England begun in 1604 and completed in 1611.

It was first printed by the King’s printer Robert Barker and was the third translation into English approved by the English Church authorities. The first had been the Great Bible, commissioned in the reign of King Henry VIII (1535), and the second had been the Bishops’ Bible of 1568. In January 1604, James 1st convened the Hampton Court Conference, where a new English version was conceived in response to the problems of the earlier translations perceived by the Puritans (a faction of the Church of England). The translation is noted for its “majesty of style”, and has been described as one of the most important books in English culture and a driving force in the shaping of the English-speaking world.

In common with most other translations of the period, the New Testament was translated from Greek, the Old Testament from Hebrew and Aramaic, and the Apocrypha from Greek and Latin. Since then, many more manuscripts have come to light, especially important being the Dead Sea Scrolls which date back to before the birth of Christ.

Isaiah scroll c150–100BC

The scrolls were found in clay jars stored in a cave high up in the limestone cliffs above Qumran in the Judean desert.

The Isaiah scroll is one of many discovered near the Dead Sea in 1947. It is written in Hebrew and is by far the oldest copy of this important book of the Bible. It contains many explicit prophecies about the life and death of Jesus Christ written long before the birth of Jesus. All the Old Testament books were found at the same site with the exception of Esther. The Isaiah scroll is at least 1100 years older than the Leningrad Codex and is written on 17 sheets of parchment.

Before the discovery of the thousands of manuscripts and fragments at Qumran, Sir Frederic Kenyon asked what he called a “great and all important question” with regard to the traditional text of the Hebrew Bible. It was this: “Does the Hebrew text, which we call Masoretic, and which we have shown to descend from a text drawn up about AD100, faithfully represent the Hebrew text as originally written by the authors of the Old Testament books?” The Dead Sea discoveries at Qumran have enabled us to answer this question in the affirmative with much greater assurance than was possible before 1948.

Leningrad Codex

The Leningrad Codex is the oldest extant Hebrew Masoretic manuscript of the entire Old Testament. The manuscript claims to have been written by Samuel ben Jacob in Cairo in 1008 and based on manuscripts by Aaron ben Moses ben Asher. It has been used as the basis for many printed editions of the Hebrew Bible.

The Leningrad Codex (a codex is a hand-written book as opposed to a scroll) is so named because it has been housed at the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg since 1863. In 1924, after the Russian Revolution, Petrograd (formerly Saint Petersburg) was renamed Leningrad and, because the codex was used as the basic text for the Biblia Hebraica since 1937, it became internationally known as the “Leningrad Codex”. Although in 1991, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the city’s original name was restored to St Petersburg, the National Library of Russia requested that “Leningrad” be retained in the name of the codex. On display is a facsimile.

John Wycliffe Bible, 1382

This is a copy of the John Wycliffe translation from the Latin text of the Bible. The copy is thought to have been made just before or about 1408 and is held by the British Library.

Wycliffe(c.1330–1384) was Master of Balliol College, Oxford but was expelled for his translation by the extremely hostile English Church. Under Archbishop Thomas Arundel, Catholic England had the harshest control of any country in Europe. By statute of 1401, the heresy of not just owning, but reading, a scrap of Scripture not in Latin - however small - was punished, sometimes by burning alive.

Wycliffe, renowned across Europe for his great learning and theological penetration, challenged Papal claims and dared to question orthodox doctrines. His followers were called "Lollards", a rude word from the Low Countries meaning "mutterers", used of Bible students who were heretics. In the second column, the text from Psalm 53:1 beginning with the big 'T' is "The fool says in his heart, there is no God".

Facsimile of The Latin Bible printed by Gutenberg 1455.

Gutenberg's main inventions were the printers ink, the making of type, the use of a press and perhaps most importantly the production process itself which combined these techniques to produce printed books. Each invention would have been useless without the vision which combined new and old methods.

Part of the process was composition and once the sheets had been printed they had to be made into gatherings. The surviving copies tell us how Gutenberg and his team learnt about the work processes and their financial implications as the work went on. They made at least three changes during the printing. Printing could not have been an economic success without paper, which was originally invented in China and then spread west reaching Europe via the Muslim world. Before this European books were written on vellum, (animal skin). One of the British Library's copies of the Gutenberg Bible is printed on vellum.

William Tyndale Pocket Bible of 1526

William Tyndale translated the New Testament, not from the Latin Vulgate, but from the original Greek. He also mastered Hebrew, being one of very few who understood Hebrew in England at that time. He did not complete his translation of the Old Testament before being betrayed by an Englishman in 1535. He was arrested in Antwerp and imprisoned in a dungeon without light or books for 16 months. On the morning of 6th October 1536 he was taken out and in a ceremony attended by a self-congratulatory church and civic officials, was strangled and burned. All this was for giving the Bible in English to the common people. His dying words, it is said, were "LORD, open the King of England's eyes". Thousands of copies of this Bible were smuggled into England and soon after the eyes of Henry VIII were opened and he commanded a copy of the Bible in English to be chained to a lectern in every parish church in the land! But of course, by then he had broken away from Rome and established the Church of England.

Martin Luther

This edition of Luther's German translation dates from the late 19th Century. Luther's translation into the common tongue was completed in 1534. Once a zealous monk, he became indignant at the practices of the Church of Rome during his pilgrimage to Rome. St. Peter's was in an early stage of construction but it was being paid for by ordinary citizens from all over Europe who were sold Papal indulgences. These enabled the purchaser to escape purgatory or hell and go to heaven. Luther's reading of the New Testament showed plainly that absolution from sins was the free gift of God to those who had faith in Him. Payment for absolution was a deceitful practice.

His translation, like Tyndale's, was widely disseminated by the invention of printing about 70 years earlier.

The Geneva Bible

Protestant scholars took refuge in Geneva from the murderous attempts by Queen Mary to reinstate Catholicism. The translation was published in 1560 shortly after the death of Mary on 17th November 1558. The copy on display is of 1599 and marks the fortieth year of Queen Elizabeth 1's reign. It was owned by a Cornish family.

The Geneva Bible is one of the most historically significant translations of the Bible into English, preceding the King James Version by 51 years. It was translated from the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament but its English owed much to the earlier translations of Tyndale and Coverdale. It was the primary Bible of 16th-century English Protestants and was the Bible used by William Shakespeare, Oliver Cromwell, John Knox, John Donne and John Bunyan, author of Pilgrims Progress (1678). It was one of the Bibles taken to America on the Mayflower. (Several copies belonging to Mayflower passengers exist in USA).

This version of the Bible is significant because, for the very first time, a mechanically printed, mass-produced Bible was made available directly to the general public which came with a variety of scriptural study guides and aids (collectively called an apparatus), which included verse citations that allow the reader to cross-reference one verse with numerous relevant verses in the rest of the Bible, introductions to each book of the Bible that acted to summarize all of the material that each book would cover, maps, tables, woodcut illustrations and indices.

Because the language of the Geneva Bible was more forceful and vigorous, most readers strongly preferred this version to the Great Bible.

The Geneva Bible translated in 1560

This edition was printed by Robert Barker in London in 1607. It was the first English Bible to introduce numbering of verses and to print in Roman type. It includes the Apocrypha and many study notes. It was known as the **Breeches Bible** due to the description of the clothing made by Adam and Eve when they realised they were naked. "They sewed fig leaves together to make breeches." Genesis 3:7.