Usage of Greek and Latin at the time of Christ

I would like to talk about the Bible translations from the ancient languages into our English language. There is a long history here and it is worth knowing something about it. To know about the Bible in English however, we really need to start with the Bible’s original languages—as well as the languages spoken and written in England and in the Church since the time of Christ. So first bear with me as I fill you in with a little background about the use of Greek and Latin in the Roman Empire, which of course, included Palestine—and then later, the Church. Rest assured, there is a point to this and it will apply both to the Bible and to the Liturgy so I will make reference to both throughout this. Therefore, you may want to keep it for later reference.

When Jesus spoke with his mother or with his disciples, he spoke Aramaic. We know this indirectly from the Gospels. By his lifetime [Biblical] Hebrew was no longer a spoken language although it was [and is] used in reading by adult Jewish males from the Scriptures in worship. [Even today a young Jewish male learns to read it for his Bar Mitzvah: a ceremony that began in the Middle Ages]. Although Greek was certainly used in the Middle East in the time of Jesus, we can surmise he might have used it only to communicate with people outside his community...like Pontius Pilate. How well he might have spoken it we do not know. We do know that Greek was used in writing the entire New Testament.

[If you saw the movie “The Passion of the Christ” you saw both Latin and Greek being used authentically for the time period. In a similar way modern English now coexists worldwide with many other local languages in their own countries. This is what is called a lingua franca or common language.]

The History of Greek

Greek (before Christ): After the conquests of Alexander the Great (roughly 336-323 BC), who reached as far as India into the Near East, the Greek language was learned by the inhabitants of the regions that Alexander conquered, turning Greek into a world language. [Unlike the Romans who did not impose Latin on their empire, Alexander did impose his own language.] It became the standard language [lingua franca] of commerce and government, throughout the region, existing along side many local languages, like Aramaic. The Attic-Ionic form of the language was ultimately transformed [by the time of Jesus] into what has come to be called the Hellenistic Koiné or common Greek. Koiné continued to thrive long after Alexander, throughout the Hellenistic period (323 BC to 31 BC) and beyond.

During the Late Roman Republic and Early Roman Empire periods, [the two centuries spanning the birth of Christ] educated Roman citizens were generally fluent in
Koiné Greek, although state business was conducted in Latin. Thus educated Roman citizens used Classical Latin for legal, political, and ceremonial purposes, but they also used Koine Greek to discuss philosophy or other intellectual topics. Latin was the common language of the people: the language heard in the streets. No sophisticated Roman wanted to hear it said that his mastery of the Greek language was weak. Hence, even throughout the Roman world, the one language spoken everywhere was Alexander's Greek.

The Greek Old Testament (Septuagint): During the period just BC [before Christ] the Septuagint, (which is de facto still our Old Testament), a Koiné Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, appeared and gained circulation among Greek speaking Jews outside Palestine. In addition to books in Hebrew, the Septuagint also included an additional 7 books, together with parts of other books originally written in Koiné. [Note that this has significant implications for the decisions taken by all Christians regarding whatever contents they will accept in their Bible.] Incidentally, Koiné Greek is also called "New Testament Greek" after its most famous work of literature.

Greek and Latin in the Early Church (1st to 4th c.): The books that eventually became the New Testament collection were originally written in Koiné Greek and only later translated into Latin. Meanwhile, the Church issued all the dogmatic definitions of the first seven (of 21) Ecumenical Councils [all of those held between 325 and 787 AD: Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon among them] in Koiné Greek, and even in Rome, Greek remained at first the language of the Catholic liturgy as well as the language in which the first Popes wrote.

The freedom of the Church under Constantine and, roughly, the first general council in 325 (Nicaea), mark a great turning point for liturgical language study. From the fourth century onwards to this day we have very detailed information about liturgical matters all written in Greek. The Greek Fathers such as St. Cyril of Jerusalem (d. 386), St. Athanasius (d. 373), St Basil (d. 379), St. John Chrysostom (d. 407) give us elaborate descriptions (in Greek) of the rites they celebrated (in Greek). It is unfortunate that we know less about the earliest history of the Roman (Latin) rite than about any other—even though it actually came into use later than the Greek. From about the fourth century, complete liturgical texts were compiled in Greek, such as the first Euchologion which was drawn up for use in church. The Euchologion is the liturgical book in Greek of the Eastern Churches containing the Eucharistic rites, the invariable parts of the Divine Office, and the rites for the administration of the Sacraments and Sacramentals. The Greek Euchologion contains, in one compilation, the same essential parts as are found in the separate compilations in the Latin Missal, Pontifical, and Rituale as they are known to us in the Roman Rite. By the 5th century, the old fluid but uniform Greek rite has crystallized into different liturgies in different places and in different languages. These different liturgies all bear the marks of their common descent and follow the same general outline. But there are more differences than simply language.
In summary, Koiné Greek had been the common language of the Middle East from the time of Alexander, three centuries before Christ. It remained a common language of the Roman Empire for centuries after Christ. When St Paul preached or wrote his letters, which now form part of the NT, he did so in Koiné. When the early Church prayed, they did so in Koiné. The earliest Fathers of the Church wrote in Koiné. Indeed Koiné or Common Greek remained the language of Catholic liturgy and the Catholic Bible even in the western empire until it gradually began to be replaced there by Latin sometime around the beginning of the 4th century. In some ways even though Greek was used side by side with Latin during the transition, it was still the “official” language of the Church until well after Constantine made Christianity the official religion of Rome in the 4th century since it was still used for conciliar statements even into the 8th century.
The History of Latin

Classical Latin (1\textsuperscript{st} c. BC to 2\textsuperscript{nd} c. AD): At the time of Christ, we already saw that Greek was the common language around the world into which Jesus was born. At the same time, Classical Latin is the form of the Latin language used by the Romans in what is usually regarded as "classical" Latin literature. Its use spanned the Golden and Silver Ages of Latin literature—broadly appearing between the 1\textsuperscript{st} century BC and 2\textsuperscript{nd} centuries AD. In other words, Classical Latin is the spoken and written Latin used in the Roman Empire during its golden age. This is the Latin of Cicero, (d. 43BC) and Virgil’s (d. 19BC) Aeneid, which I learned to read when I studied Latin in school. The written Latin of today, as used for Church purposes, does not differ radically from this classical Latin. Part of the reason for that is that Latin, in any form, has not been a spoken language in over 1,000 years—except perhaps among churchmen [until the late 20\textsuperscript{th} century].

(Spoken) or Vulgar Latin (2\textsuperscript{nd} c. to 9\textsuperscript{th} c.): Vulgar Latin (in Latin, sermo vulgaris\textsuperscript{1}; the term means common, not filthy) is a blanket term covering the spoken (but not written) vernacular dialects of the Latin language spoken mostly in the western provinces of the Roman Empire (England being the westernmost) by the common people of the Roman Empire from the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century onward, until those dialects, diverging still further, evolved into the early Romance languages—a distinction usually assigned to about the ninth century. This spoken Latin differed more and more from the literary (written) language of classical Latin in its pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. In the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century it was still basically the same language; by the 9\textsuperscript{th} century it definitely was not. Ecclesiastical Latin is similar to the Latin from the earlier part of this transition into modern languages. The Vulgar Latin that evolved into the Romance languages was already around during the time of the empire, and was spoken alongside the written Classical Latin, which was reserved for official and formal occasions. Between the fifth and tenth centuries, the dialects of spoken Vulgar Latin diverged in various parts of their domain, eventually becoming innumerable, distinct “Romance” languages some of which [like Spanish or Italian] survive today in a more modern form. This evolution is poorly documented because the literary (written) language of the time, Medieval Latin, [like the Latin still in use by the Church] remained close to the older Classical Latin.

The Bible in Latin: The 5\textsuperscript{th} century enduring Latin “Vulgate” translation was produced by St. Jerome, (d. 420) around the turn of the 5\textsuperscript{th} century from the original languages [Hebrew/Greek] but in fact using and standardizing older Latin translations. At the behest of Pope St Damasus I (Pope 366-84), the great Latin Father of the Church, St Jerome (d. 420) spent the last 35 years of his life producing the Vulgate, the definitive

\textsuperscript{1}This is the original Latin of our word “Vulgate” which now means the Latin version of the Bible.
translation of the entire Bible into “Vulgar” (that is, common, spoken) Latin. It was actually a compilation of already existing Latin translations, correcting them using the original languages as found in ancient manuscripts many of which no longer exist. So enduring is his work that, in the latest “modern” edition, called the Latin “Neo-Vulgate” this translation is still the only “official” Bible of the Roman Catholic Church. His translation became something that was needed because the 4th century marks the transition from common (Koiné) Greek to common (Vulgar) Latin in everyday speech, and hence, in the Church. The Neo-Vulgate text is at:
http://www.vatican.va/latin/latin_bible.html

The Liturgy in Latin: Towards the end of the fourth century, another Latin Father, St. Ambrose of Milan, (d. 397, but born in the same year as St Jerome) in a collection of instructions for the newly baptized entitled De Sacramentis, quotes the central part of the Canon of the Mass in a Latin which is substantially identical with, but somewhat shorter than, the respective prayers of the Roman Canon which is still in use (now known to us as Eucharistic Prayer I). Indeed he is credited with producing the Latin version of the Canon which we used exclusively until 1970 [check it out at a Traditional Latin Mass] and apparently he had some heated discussions with his brother bishops about the use of the Latin vernacular. It seems the traditionalists of his time wanted to keep the Greek!

As we see from Ambrose, Liturgical books in Latin were certainly being used by the middle of the 4th century, and possibly before the end of the third, but the earliest surviving Latin liturgical texts date only from the seventh century. Musical notation was not used in the west (to put music in writing) until the ninth century when the melodies of Gregorian chant were codified. The earliest Roman Sacramentaries (the main missal for the priest) are the first complete sources for the Roman or “Latin” Rite. Three stand out as the earliest, the most complete, the most important in every way. These are the so-called Leonine, Gelasian, and Gregorian Sacramentaries, named respectively after the three popes who are credited with collecting them: St. Leo (440-61), Gelasius (492-6), and St. Gregory the Great (590-604). These were written in the Latin language which had gradually replaced Greek as the language of the Roman liturgy. Scholars differ as to the precise time when the transition was complete, giving dates from the second half of the third century up to the end of the fourth (which is also when Ambrose died). Both languages must have been used side by side during a fairly long period of transition, ending by around 397 AD when Ambrose died. But in the end, Ambrose and Damasus won in demanding the use of Latin because, by now, it was the only language of the people in the Church.

Of course I find all of this instructive to the debates even today about what language should be used for translations of the Bible and the Liturgy. Should the original languages be used or should we use translations? If we do use translations how close are they to the wording of the original? How and why does it matter?
“ORIGINAL” LANGUAGES OF THE BIBLE/ EARLY TRANSLATIONS:

Sometimes you will hear the Old Testament referred to as the “Hebrew Bible.” That [mostly Protestant usage] is because the Old Testament was mostly written in Hebrew. Today the term is used most precisely to refer to the complete Bible of the Jews. However, by the time of Christ, the Koiné Greek translation, called the Septuagint [and often referred to as LXX, the roman numeral for 70 because of a Jewish tradition about 72 translators], was the most commonly used version among Jews outside Palestine (called the diaspora). That is why the LXX became the version used by the Early Church. [For example, it was used by St Paul.] Interestingly enough, the Septuagint translation itself was ultimately rejected by the Jewish Rabbis of Palestine at the turn of the 2nd century AD most likely because it was being used by the Early Church. We will have to look at that more extensively later when we discuss the contents of the Bible.

Some seven OT books, plus other fragments, were originally written in Koiné Greek and they had already been included in the Septuagint by the time of Christ. Remember, this Koiné Old Testament is the version commonly used by the Early Church and its contents remain with Catholics today. Many Early Fathers talk about the Septuagint translation as if they considered it to be an inspired translation. The Septuagint translation, with these additional books, remains the basis for the content of our Catholic Old Testament to this very day.

The New Testament however was written entirely in Koiné. The Liturgy of the Early Church was also celebrated in Koiné. Why? Because, thanks to Alexander the Great, Koiné was the lingua franca, or common language, of the entire Mediterranean region. It was the language everybody knew. And when that was no longer the case, the Koiné of Bible and Liturgy was replaced in the western Mediterranean by the newer “common” language, Vulgar Latin. In the meantime, in the early centuries as Christianity spread to people of other languages, a similar process was also taking place, with ancient translations of the Bible into Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, Georgian, Arabic and Slavonic--each of which also had their distinctive ancient liturgical traditions—a simple fact completely lost on most Latin Rite, Roman Catholics.

In summary, the Church of Rome, which had been established by the Apostles Peter and Paul, continued to use Greek, the lingua franca of the Roman Empire, even long after Latin became the common language of the western empire. Greek, as we see in the writings [in Greek] of St. Justin Martyr [d. ca. 165], St. Clement I of Rome [4th pope, d. ca. 98, and St. Hippolytus [d. ca. 236], (who is the source of our Eucharistic Prayer II) was still used for its scriptures in both Old (Septuagint) and New Testaments as well as in its liturgical prayer. [See 1917 Catholic Encyclopedia “Liturgy of the Mass.”] The transition to Latin came about because increasingly in the western empire Latin,
specifically Vulgar or spoken Latin, was becoming the common spoken language of the masses as we move through the 3rd and into the 4th century. But that confronted the Pastors of the Church of the 4th century with a dilemma we still confront today: do we use the original languages or use translations?

[Similarly English is the present or modern lingua franca (or language widely used beyond the population of its native speakers) of international business, science, technology and aviation. A synonym for lingua franca today is “vehicular language.” Whereas a vernacular language is used as a native language in a single speaker community, a vehicular language goes beyond the boundaries of its original community, and is used as a second language for communication between communities.]

Because of its status as a lingua franca, if not its relatively newer status as a liturgical language of the Early Church, Greek did not yield to Latin either easily or quickly. I have read that the 4th century Latin Father of the Church, Saint Ambrose of Milan, is regarded as a champion of using the (Latin) vernacular in the Mass, despite opposition from other bishops. Perhaps it had something to do with the fact that he was elected bishop by acclamation while still a catechumen! Needless to say there is clear evidence that by the 5th century, Latin was the language used in the Roman Liturgy. [See 1917 Catholic Encyclopedia “Liturgy of the Mass.”] Needless to say Ambrose was a man of his times because his contemporary Pope Damasus had also championed the translation of the Bible into Latin by St Jerome. Indeed these guys are “Latin Fathers of the Church” because their cause was successful: they wanted to use the language people understood. Indeed how sad that there were no comparable “Fathers” for the 9th century, when Latin died out as a spoken language only to be replaced by the Romance languages into which its spoken form had evolved. (Maybe the need wasn’t felt because Classical Latin was still the language of learning and writing and would remain so through the Middle Ages and into modern times.)

Indeed, I would argue that the original Tradition of the Church is not found in the preservation of Latin as the language of Bible and Liturgy. Indeed, neither of them was in Latin in the first place! The authentic and most ancient Tradition, as authenticated by the post Vatican II decision of Pope Paul VI, is to translate and proclaim the Scriptures in the common language of the people (called the vernacular) and to celebrate the Liturgy in the vernacular as well. So I join the Latin Fathers of the Church as a champion of using the language people understand. Without it, the words and full meaning of the Bible and the Liturgy are mostly inaccessible to most of us.

Indeed if we wanted to make an argument in favor of using a common liturgical language for the entire Catholic Church of today, one cannot escape the fact that the modern equivalent of both Koiné Greek and Classical Latin is now American English! This is the language that is now spoken just about everywhere. I have personally even seen it written on the blackboard in a school in isolationist Red China! So if you subscribe to that kind of thinking, pray for an American Pope who will get to impose the current lingua franca on the entire Church. ;) [Just kidding!]
SPOKEN VULGAR LATIN IS REPLACED IN ENGLAND BY OLD ENGLISH:

Between 200 BC and AD 150, the expansion of the Roman Empire, together with its administrative and educational policies, had made Latin the dominant native (spoken) language over an area spanning from the Iberian Peninsula to the Black Sea, and from the Maghreb to southern Great Britain. Vulgar Latin, became the common language spoken by soldiers, settlers and merchants of the Roman Empire. Later, during the political decline of the Roman Empire in the fifth century, when there were large-scale migrations, including notably Germanic (aka “Barbarian”) incursions, the Latin-speaking world was fragmented into several independent states. Central Europe and the Balkans were occupied by the Germanic and Slavic tribes, and the Huns and Turks, which isolated Romania from the rest of Latin Europe. Latin disappeared from southern Britain, which had been for a time part of the Roman Empire. As we shall see, spoken Latin was to be replaced in England by early forms of spoken English and only later by the written forms of English.

THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH

Spoken Latin Dies: The decline of the Roman Empire and the Germanic incursions into former Roman territory such as southern England led to the replacement of spoken “Vulgar” Latin, which had been around in England (but not Scotland) since it took over between the 1st century BC and the 2nd century AD, with Anglo-Saxon or Old English. Keep in mind that written Latin in England has a different history.

Old English (450-1100): Scholars regard the English language as having developed in several stages before reaching the form we know today. “Old English,” also known as Anglo-Saxon, is a “West Germanic language” which is regarded as having been in use from about the middle of the 5th until the middle of the 12th century—by which time it had evolved into what is known as “Middle English.” At the time a large percentage of the educated and literate population (monks, clerics, etc.) were also competent in Latin, which was now the scholarly and diplomatic lingua franca of Europe.

Middle English (1100-1500): After the middle of the 12th century, Middle English became the “vernacular” or common language of the people of England and it remained so until the mid-to-late 15th century. [This was the language of Chaucer who died about 1400. His Canterbury Tales (in modern translation) were required reading when I was in school.]

Written Latin Changes to Written English: The Chancery Standard, a form of London-based English, was developed during the reign of English Lancastrian King Henry V (1413 to 1422, you may know him from Shakespeare’s play) in response to his order for his chancery (government officials) to use, like himself, English rather than
Anglo-Norman (early French) or Latin.  [An important moment: this marks the “official” shift in England from written Latin to written English! This occurred centuries after the transition in the spoken languages.] It had become broadly standardized by about the 1430s and by the mid-15th century, Chancery Standard was used for most official purposes except by the Church (which still used Latin) and some legal matters (which used French and some Latin).  In the 1470s the printing press was introduced to England and it played a role in the spread of this “Chancery Standard” which began to become widespread and would become Early Modern English.

**Early Modern English (1500-1650):** The language of England as spoken after [about 1470], up to 1650, is known as “Early Modern English.” Early Modern was the vernacular or common language used by Shakespeare, who died in 1616, and who did most of his writing in Early Modern English between 1590 and 1613, that is, around the turn of the 17th century.

In summary, we saw how Latin replaced Greek as the language of the Bible and the Liturgy when Latin became the common vernacular of the people of western Europe. What we don’t see is that between the 5th and the 10th centuries as Vulgar Latin evolved into what are now known as the Romance languages (Spanish, French, Italian, Portuguese, etc) and as it is replaced by Germanic English in England, no similar transition took place in the biblical and liturgical language in use. In part this is due to the fact that while these spoken languages, (Romance as well as English), were developing, the common written language of western Europe was still Classical Latin, the *lingua franca* of the educated written world of all western Europe.

That the Catholic Church played a part in this preservation there can be no doubt. Its Bible and Liturgy were “fixed” in Latin and remained so as the other languages developed. Yet another factor is that all books were still hand written and the common man couldn’t read one or afford one. So writing and the manuscripts—all in Latin—were preserved in the Church’s Benedictine monasteries more so than anywhere else. [This, by the way, is why Benedict XVI took his name: to say something to us about the preservation of western Catholic culture in our time just as in the Benedictine monasteries of Medieval Europe.] Later in this series I will return to the question of Latin, English and the Liturgy. For now we will focus in coming sections on the English Bible.
EARLY CATHOLIC HAND-COPIED ENGLISH BIBLES:
BEFORE PRINTING AND BEFORE THE REFORMATION

England is believed to have been converted to Christianity by Saint Augustine of Canterbury d. 604/5 (not to be confused with the more famous A. of Hippo, d. 430) and 40 companions who were sent by Pope St. Gregory I, the Great (Pope 590-604). They arrived during the period when Old English was being spoken. The English Benedictine monk Saint Bede the Venerable (673-735) tried to make the Scriptures available to people in their own language and was apparently still engaged in translating John into Old English when he died. [NJBC 68:189] Remember printing did not yet exist so any and all manuscripts would have been hand copied. The Oxford Companion to the Bible (p. 758) says this “may be the earliest written translation in English of any portion of the Bible.” They mean hand written translations! No printing yet. Not even a single complete book in English.

This is the time in England (before the Norman invasion of 1066) when Beowulf was written (c. 900, another school favorite). It was a time when most people couldn’t read and write and if they did, they still used Latin [and were likely to be Benedictine monks]. To understand this, it might be important to remember that in this period before printing in what we know as the “Dark Ages” (lasting from 476-1000 AD) only the monks and the wealthy could read and all education was received in Latin and Greek, not the vernacular spoken in the street. Books were hand copied manuscripts and generally preserved only in the monasteries.

Hence, before the time of Chaucer (1350-1400), there is no evidence of any translation of large portions (say, more than the Gospels) of the Bible into either “Old” or “Middle” English. [NJBC 68:190.] Simply put, there just was no particular need for a translation since those who could read would use the Latin Vulgate and when they did read, they did so from rare hand written manuscripts.

Wycliffe (first complete [Middle] English Bible): The first complete Bible translation into English (from the Vulgate) was that of John Wycliffe (ca. 1330-84). This was years before the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. It was a (hand written/copied) Middle English translation usually dated ca. 1382-84. [JBC 69:153] “The Wycliffe Bible is almost a word-for-word equivalent of the [Latin] Vulgate. For 150 years [roughly until the 1430s] this was the only [complete] Bible in English.” [The Oxford Companion to the Bible, p. 758.] Because Wycliffe and his Lollard followers [the name, used pejoratively, derived from the Middle Dutch lollaert or “mumbler”] ultimately fell into formal heresy, Wycliffe’s translation [authentic in itself] fell into disfavor with the Church. However, we are still in the time before printing was introduced so everything is still hand copied manuscripts in limited circulation.
Once printing began in the mid 15th century, Wycliffe’s Middle English translation quickly became the popular vernacular English Bible of 15th and early 16th century England. However, even as it appeared, *Middle English itself was on its way out.* So what you have is a text that already sounds archaic (like reading Chaucer in the original). Notice that this is still the period prior to the Reformation so everything said so far is in regard to *Catholic* translations, and Catholic attempts to make the Word of God more accessible in English.

Therefore we should remember that the early 17th century (Protestant) King James Version, or *KJV, which was published in Early Modern English in 1611,* is not the *first* translation into *English* (or even into modern English) but it has come to hold a place of honor in English literature partly because of its timing with respect to the emergence of the Church of England and the simultaneous emergence of Modern English. Its most recently released or latest “updated version” is known as the *New Revised Standard Version (1990).* Next we will look at the immediate predecessors of the KJV.
FIRST PRINTED ENGLISH BIBLES OF THE REFORMATION [PROTESTANT]

It was the reformation movement in England that produced a string of English translations—all of them very interdependent—which were the background to the well known King James Version (KJV). [NJBC 68:192] Certainly the spread of printing also played a major role. We should also not forget that the English Reformation coincides with the evolution of Early Modern English in the 16th century.

Overall [the originally Catholic priests] William Tyndale [translation] and M[y]iles Coverdale [notes] were the ones behind the first Bibles in Early Modern English printed between 1525 and 1541, the years that overlapped the withdrawal by King Henry VIII of the Church of England from full Communion with Rome. **These editions are most important for the crucial role their anti-Catholic notes and commentary and their occasionally slanted translation played in the withdrawal of the common man of the English Church from the ancient practices of Rome.**

Tyndale (1525-31, first Early Modern English NT translation; used by the new Church of England): William Tyndale (1490-1536), a priest who soon became a follower of Martin Luther [who was Spaniards Jan 3, 1521], produced a new NT translation from the original languages (although not exactly from the best of manuscripts) into Early Modern English between 1525-31 with a revised NT being completed in 1534 just after Henry VIII (1491-1547) took the Church of England out of the Catholic Church. *Its heavily anti-Catholic notes are regarded as having played a big role in the popular acceptance of the Henrician schism.*

After 24 years of marriage which failed to produce a male heir, Henry VIII (d. 1547) divorced his Catholic Queen, Catherine of Aragon (d. 1/1536, youngest daughter of famous Spaniards [los Reyes Católicos] Ferdinand and Isabella) in 1533 to marry Anne Boleyn (d. 5/1536, mother of Queen Elizabeth I [1533-1603]). He did so after about 6 years of unsuccessful attempts to get an annulment of the marriage from the Pope. Henry was finally excommunicated for his remarriage and rejection of papal authority on 11 July 1533. In 1534 he went on to decree the Act of Supremacy making the English sovereign the head of the Church of England. [Catholic Almanac, p. 118.]

“Tyndale’s translation was the first complete, printed New Testament in Early Modern English and it was also the first English New Testament translated from the original Greek as opposed to directly from the Latin Vulgate. [The Oxford Companion to the Bible, p. 759.] “Tyndale’s vigorous English left a permanent mark on the history of the English Bible.” [NJBC 68:193.] Tyndale was executed for heresy by Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V in 1536. [Charles happened to be Queen Catherine’s nephew.]

Coverdale (1535, first complete printed English Bible; not a new translation): “The

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first complete, printed English Bible, known as **Coverdale’s Bible**, [Text online at: http://www.studylight.org/desk/?l=en&query=Genesis+1&translation=mc] was commissioned by Thomas Cromwell, King Henry VIII’s secretary of state” [NJBC 68:194] or Chancellor. It was dedicated to Henry VIII.

[Cromwell had replaced St Thomas More as Henry VIII’s Chancellor or chief minister after 1532 when More resigned in protest of Henry’s growing separation from Rome. More was martyred in 1535. Cromwell is credited with first suggesting to Henry years earlier that he reject papal supremacy, an act formally accomplished by Parliament only in 1534. Cromwell was to be later executed in 1540 for his failed efforts in Henry’s disastrous 4th marriage to Anne of Cleves. Coverdale died naturally in 1568.]

Coverdale’s Bible was printed in Zurich in 1535, [a year after the NT] not long after the establishment of the Church of England, and edited by Miles Coverdale, a priest and later an Anglican bishop, from the above English work of Tyndale (whose translation of the NT and parts of the OT was used) along with the German translation and especially the notes of Martin Luther. It was not a translation from the original languages, but more of a complied edition of anti-Catholic notes, and was reprinted in England in 1537 by permission of the excommunicated King.

*(continued)*
FIRST PRINTED ENGLISH BIBLES (continued):

Matthew Bible (1537): The Thomas Matthew Bible, was edited pseudonymously under that name by John Rogers, a friend of Tyndale, in 1537, after Tyndale’s execution, and based on again recompiling the work of both Tyndale and Coverdale. [The Oxford Companion to the Bible, p. 759.]

Great Bible (1539-41) The first official or "authorized" English Bible of the new Church of England [called Anglican in Europe; Episcopal in the US] was known as the The Great Bible (1539-41). It was an update of the Matthew Bible and was basically the work of Coverdale who based his editorial revisions on the Latin Vulgate. It was this edition which “was set up in every church in England and thus became the first official [Anglican] church bible in the vernacular. Its Psalter was the one used in the Anglican Book of Common Prayer [NJBC 68:195] which was used for centuries. [First published in 1549, this book for worship was the de-catholicising liturgy promulgated by Thomas Cranmer, 1st Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury.]” All of the above were produced under the reign of Henry VIII (r. 1509-47). The next English translation would come under his daughter, Queen Elizabeth I (r. 1558-1603).

Geneva Bible (1560): While England temporarily returned to Catholicism under Henry and Catherine’s daughter, Queen Mary I (r. 1553-58) a new translation (still using much of Tyndale) was produced in Geneva by a group which included Coverdale and John Calvin. [His Reformed Theology is today found in Presbyterianism.] The Geneva Bible (1560), considered the “best of the (English) Bibles before the King James” [NJBC 68:196] was the Bible “commonly used for private reading” [Ibid] and it was the Bible of Shakespeare and the Puritans [another group of Calvinists,] who came to America on the Mayflower; it was dedicated to Elizabeth I and remained popular for nearly a hundred years [The Oxford Companion to the Bible, p. 759] despite several official attempts to replace it (with the Bishop’s Bible and the KJV). This was the first English Bible to have verse numbers inserted in the text [verse numbers were only just coming into use with printed bibles]. Its extremely Calvinist Protestant notes were offensive to many bishops of the Church of England who therefore commissioned a revision. Years later it was a favorite of Oliver Cromwell, the Puritan who temporarily abolished both the Stuart monarchy (1649-60) and the Anglican episcopacy.

Bishop’s Bible (1568): “In 1568 a revision of the Great Bible was published, which became known as the Bishop’s Bible . . . [and] in 1570 the Convocation of Canterbury ordered it to be placed in all cathedrals, and so it became the second Authorized Version . . . but it did not replace the Geneva Bible in popular esteem.” [The Oxford Companion to the Bible, p. 759.]

COMMENTS:
For centuries, going back even to Old Testament times, the practice had been that the religion of the monarch was also to be the religion of the people. In many ways this was true of early Lutheranism on the European continent, especially among the Germanic princes. I don’t know that I can say it was so simplistically true in England. Here the common folk apparently played a greater role.

I have studied **Henry VIII** extensively and see several forces at work. First, Henry was beside himself to produce a male heir (no woman had ever succeeded in ruling before him) and in my opinion it was his preoccupation with this issue—and not directly with issues of faith—that led to his break with Rome. Would he have changed his religion if Catherine had given him a living son? Would he have divorced her or just played the field? Ironically it was his daughter **Elizabeth I**, queen for 45 years at a peak moment in British history (1558-1603), who is considered one of the greatest British monarchs in history. However, even before dumping his Queen, Henry was definitely surrounded by the forces of the Reformation movement and certainly the increasing availability of unquestionably slanted English translations of the Bible with extensive notes filled with ranting against the Catholic Church (some of it a matter of calling sin what it is) played a role in solidifying popular support for the Reformation among the English people.

It fascinates me that only a handful of men played a role in the preparation of these instruments of intense propaganda—and how readily they were accepted among the masses who for the first time had access to books (and especially, for the first time in many centuries, to The Good Book in their own language and even to the liturgy of their church) because of printing and the rapidly spreading capacity to read. [This raises a word of caution regarding the power of the media in our times to spread false information.]

This also raises a central and important question: **what would things have been like if the Church had preserved her early and ancient Tradition of translating her Scriptures and her Worship into the ever-changing languages of her people?** Living less than 50 years into a return to that practice makes it way too soon for us to tell!
THE THIRD “AUTHORIZED” VERSION: THE KING JAMES VERSION

In 1603, with the childless death of Elizabeth I, James VI of Scotland [House of Stuart] ascended to the throne of England as King James I and on February 10, 1604 he ordered a new translation of the whole Bible to be made—this time from the original languages of Hebrew and Greek—and printed without marginal notes. It was intended to replace the two competing Bibles: “the Bishop’s Bible, preferred by [Anglican] church authorities, and the Geneva Bible, the favorite of the people.” [The Oxford Companion to the Bible, p. 759] Work began in 1606-7 and it was first published in 1611. However, by 1614 over 400 changes had been introduced over the course of several editions. [The Oxford Companion to the Bible, p. 759-60] According to the rules used to guide the original work of translation, scholars intended to change the (Calvinistic and more recent) Bishop’s Bible as little as possible and, if needed, they were allowed to consult the older and interrelated Tyndale, Matthew, Coverdale, Great Bible and Geneva Bibles as translations that could be followed in offering a different rendering from the Bishop’s Bible. [The Oxford Companion to the Bible, p. 760]

LATER “AUTHORIZED” VERSIONS

In subsequent editions of the KJV a comprehensive revision by Dr. Benjamin Blayney in 1769 also became known as the “Authorized Version.” In 1870 the Church of England authorized yet another revision: the NT was published in 1881 and the complete work, known as the “Revised Version” appeared in 1885 (the Apocrypha in 1895). In 1901 the Americans published their own edition of this Revised Version, known as the “American Standard Version.” [The Oxford Companion to the Bible, p. 760]

In 1946 first the NT and then in 1952 the OT the revision of the ASV known as the “Revised Standard Version” was published. The 1966 edition of the RSV as published in the Oxford Annotated Bible was given an imprimatur by Richard Cardinal Cushing, Archbishop of Boston (d. 1970). Some editions of this work were published under the cover name “Common Bible.” Subsequently a major revision (abandoning the “thou” pronouns and using more “inclusive language”) was published in 1990 as the “New Revised Standard Version” or NRSV.

COMMENTS

Today you are not likely to walk into a bookstore and find a copy of any of the translations we have talked about so far except the King James and the more recent (that is, from the last 100 years) editions of its updating revisions (those with “standard” in their descriptions above). The KJV is of course written in Early Modern English making it understandable albeit a little awkward for us to read. Nonetheless its place in
English literary history gives it continued prominence. As to quality, we might mention that the original language manuscripts used for more recent editions are of far higher quality and antiquity than those available in 1611 to the KJV translators so at issue is not just the ongoing changes in English usage, but the accuracy of the original text itself.

Because of major improvements to our understanding of the textual history of ancient manuscripts—due in part to the capacities of modern science, like carbon dating and computer analysis—and the discovery and identification of far more ancient manuscripts (such as those from the 1940s discoveries in the Dead Sea area) than previously known, modern translations [also including the Neo-Vulgate] now benefit from the effort to identify the original text, without the mistakes introduced by centuries of hand copied manuscripts. This refined edition in the original language is then translated into modern English.

The Church’s major concern with Reformation era and later translations, including the KJV, is not just with the translation (such as when that is slanted with anti-Catholic bias) as having an issue with the anti-Catholic notes and commentaries (however subtle) which abounded in the period and are still to be found even today. Thus we can approve of a Protestant translation such as the RSV (Revised Standard Version) which, if it includes the deuterocanonical books accepted as inspired by Catholics but rejected by Protestants, would be regarded by us as an accurate and complete, authentic effort to render the entire original in our own language. Therefore, you will find this 1966 version in use at the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy’s website:

http://www.clerus.org/pls/clerus/cn_clerus.h_home_lingua_base?dicastero=2&lingua=2

Unfortunately more recent editions, such as the New Revised Standard Version are not entirely free of concern for all Catholics. In this case however, the problem is with the English which has made choices in how to render the original text while supporting the modern agenda of using only inclusive language and avoiding the use of masculine pronouns to the point, and at the expense, of rendering a less precise translation of the original. [See NRSV Reader’s Introduction, xx: "inclusiveness has been attained by simple rephrasing or by introducing plural forms."] Nonetheless, this is still an excellent “literal” translation. [Ibid, p. xix] I do not know of any bishop granting an imprimatur to this “inclusive language” edition.

There are other ways to evaluate a translation for our use and we will return to that later.