

How Many English Bible Versions Came Before the King James Version?

The King James Version (KJV) was first published in 1611, but it was not the first English Bible. For more than 200 years before the KJV, several English translations had already been produced. Some were translated from the Latin Vulgate, while others were translated directly from the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. Each translation helped make God’s Word more accessible to English-speaking people and influenced the development of later versions, including the King James Bible.

The following are the major English Bible translations that appeared before the King James Version:

Year	Translation	Notes
1382	Wycliffe Bible	First complete English Bible, translated from Latin
1526	Tyndale New Testament	First English NT translated from Greek
1535	Coverdale Bible	First complete printed English Bible
1537	Matthew Bible	Combined Tyndale and Coverdale work
1539	Great Bible	First authorized English Bible for churches
1560	Geneva Bible	Very popular among Protestants and Puritans
1568	Bishops’ Bible	Church of England response to Geneva Bible
1582–1610	Douay-Rheims Bible	Catholic English translation from Latin

1. Wycliffe Bible (1382)

John Wycliffe, an English scholar and theologian, believed that every person should be able to read God’s Word in their own language. He and his followers translated the Bible into English from the Latin Vulgate, making it the first complete English Bible. Since this was before the invention of the printing press, every copy had to be written by hand, which made the work slow and expensive.

Church authorities strongly opposed the translation because they wanted to keep control over biblical teaching and did not want ordinary people reading and interpreting Scripture for themselves.

After Wycliffe’s death, some church leaders even ordered his bones to be dug up and burned as a sign of condemnation. Despite the opposition, his translation helped lay the foundation for future English Bibles and encouraged a greater desire for people to have direct access to God’s Word.

2. Tyndale Bible (1526)

William Tyndale changed the course of English Bible history. Unlike John Wycliffe, who translated from the Latin Vulgate, Tyndale translated the New Testament directly from the original Greek text. He later translated portions of

the Old Testament directly from Hebrew. His goal was to give English-speaking people access to the Scriptures as close to the original languages as possible.

Tyndale believed that every person should be able to read and understand God's Word. He once told a religious leader that if God spared his life, he would make it possible for "a boy that driveth the plow" to know more of the Scriptures than many of the educated clergy. This conviction drove his life's work.

Because English Bible translation was forbidden in England, Tyndale left the country and worked in Europe. In 1526, his English New Testament was printed and secretly smuggled into England. The books were hidden in bales of cloth, barrels, and shipments of merchandise. As copies spread across the country, many people were able to read the New Testament in English for the first time.

Church authorities strongly opposed Tyndale's work. Copies of his New Testament were seized and publicly burned. Religious leaders viewed his translation as a threat because it allowed ordinary people to read and interpret Scripture for themselves.

Tyndale's translation was written in clear, memorable English. So much of his wording was preserved that scholars estimate that a large portion of the King James New Testament is based directly on Tyndale's work. Many well-known phrases found in the King James Version first appeared in Tyndale's translation, including:

- "Let there be light"
- "the powers that be"
- "fight the good fight"
- "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak"
- "the salt of the earth"
- "a law unto themselves"
- "the signs of the times"
- "my brother's keeper"

In 1535, Tyndale was betrayed by a man who gained his trust. He was arrested near Brussels, imprisoned for more than a year, and charged with heresy. On October 6, 1536, he was strangled and then burned at the stake for translating the Bible into English.

His final recorded prayer was, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."

God answered that prayer. Within a few years, English Bibles were being printed with royal approval and placed in churches throughout England. Tyndale did not live to see the fruit of his labor, but his influence lived on. His translation became one of the most important foundations of the King James Bible of 1611, ensuring that his work would continue to impact millions of readers for centuries to come.

3. Geneva Bible (1560)

The Geneva Bible was first published in 1560 by English Protestant scholars who had fled to Geneva, Switzerland, during the reign of Queen Mary I. Many of these scholars were influenced by the teachings of John Calvin and other leaders of the Protestant Reformation. While living in exile, they worked together to produce a new English Bible that was accurate, readable, and useful for everyday people.

The Geneva Bible quickly became one of the most popular Bibles ever printed in English. It was especially loved by common people because it was designed for personal study as well as public reading. Several features made it stand out from earlier translations:

- It was written in clear, readable English.
- It was the first English Bible to use numbered verses throughout the text.

- It included study notes, cross-references, maps, and introductions to the books of the Bible.
- It was available in smaller and more affordable editions that families could own and read at home.

Because of these features, the Geneva Bible became the Bible of choice for many Protestants throughout England and Scotland. It encouraged people to study the Scriptures for themselves and helped spread Reformation teachings.

The Geneva Bible is often called the “Pilgrims’ Bible” because it was the Bible carried by the Pilgrims when they sailed to North America on the Mayflower in 1620. It played an important role in shaping the religious life of early English settlers in the New World.

Many influential writers and Christian leaders used the Geneva Bible, including William Shakespeare, John Bunyan, Oliver Cromwell, and countless Puritans. John Bunyan, author of *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, was especially influenced by its language and notes.

One reason some English rulers disliked the Geneva Bible was its extensive study notes. Certain notes questioned the authority of kings when they acted contrary to God’s law. Because of this, King James I was not pleased with the Geneva Bible and later supported the creation of a new translation that would not contain such notes.

Although the King James Version was published in 1611, the Geneva Bible remained more popular for many years. Many English families continued reading it, and some editions were printed for decades after the KJV first appeared. Its influence on English-speaking Christianity was enormous, and it helped prepare the way for future generations of Bible readers.

For many Christians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Geneva Bible was more than a translation. It was a study Bible, a family Bible, and a trusted guide for understanding God’s Word.

4. Bishops’ Bible (1568)

The Bishops’ Bible was published in 1568 under the direction of the Church of England. It was produced largely because church leaders were concerned about the growing popularity of the Geneva Bible. While they appreciated the Geneva Bible’s translation, they strongly disliked many of its study notes, which reflected Calvinist theology and sometimes criticized the actions of kings and rulers.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker, organized a group of bishops and scholars to create a new translation that would replace the Geneva Bible in the churches of England. Because much of the work was done by bishops of the Church of England, it became known as the Bishops’ Bible.

The translators based much of their work on earlier English Bibles, especially the Great Bible of 1539, but they also consulted the original Hebrew and Greek texts. Their goal was to produce a Bible that was suitable for public worship and officially approved by the Church of England.

Unlike the Geneva Bible, the Bishops’ Bible contained very few notes. The church wanted a translation that would avoid controversial comments and promote unity within the English church. Large copies were placed in churches across England and were intended to be read aloud during worship services.

Although the Bishops’ Bible became the official Bible of the Church of England, it never gained the popularity of the Geneva Bible among ordinary people. Many families continued to purchase and read the Geneva Bible because it was easier to understand, smaller in size, and included helpful study notes and references.

Despite its limited popularity, the Bishops' Bible played a very important role in the history of the English Bible. When King James I commissioned a new translation in 1604, he instructed the translators to use the Bishops' Bible as their primary base text. The translators carefully revised it, comparing it with the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts as well as earlier English translations such as Tyndale's, Coverdale's, and the Geneva Bible.

As a result, the King James Version was not created from scratch. It was built upon more than two centuries of English Bible translation work, with the Bishops' Bible serving as the official starting point for the translators. While the Bishops' Bible itself eventually faded from use, its influence lived on through the King James Bible, which would become the most influential English translation in history.

So How Many English Bible Versions Existed Before the King James Version?

The answer depends on how we define the word *version*.

If we count the major English Bible translations that were widely circulated and influential before 1611, there were approximately six to eight major versions.

Each of these made a significant contribution to the history of the English Bible and helped shape the language and translation traditions that eventually influenced the King James Version.

However, if we include partial translations, revisions, Psalters, handwritten copies, and smaller translation projects, the number becomes much larger. Before 1611, there were numerous editions and revisions produced over more than two centuries. Some were complete Bibles, while others contained only portions of Scripture such as the New Testament, Psalms, or selected books of the Bible.

It is also important to remember that the King James Version did not appear in a vacuum. The translators stood on the shoulders of earlier Bible translators, especially William Tyndale. Scholars often note that much of the wording found in the King James New Testament can be traced back to Tyndale's work.

The King James translators themselves acknowledged their debt to earlier English Bibles. Their task was not to create an entirely new translation but to revise, improve, and unify the best work that had already been done. As a result, the KJV became the culmination of more than 200 years of English Bible translation efforts.

In many ways, the history of the English Bible before 1611 is a story of faithful men who risked opposition, imprisonment, and even death so that ordinary people could read the Word of God in their own language. The King James Version became the most famous English Bible, but it was built upon the foundation laid by those earlier translators and translations.

An Important Fact About the King James Version

The King James translators never claimed to be creating a completely new Bible. Instead, they were revising and improving earlier English translations.

In the original 1611 preface, they praised the work of earlier translators such as William Tyndale and recognized their contribution to bringing God's Word into English.

A common saying among Bible scholars is: "The King James Version stands on the shoulders of Tyndale."

Scholars estimate that about 70–90% of the wording in the KJV New Testament comes from Tyndale’s earlier translation. Many of the verses people know from the King James Bible were first translated into English by Tyndale decades before 1611.

The KJV was a remarkable achievement, but it was also the result of more than 200 years of English Bible translation work by faithful men who made God’s Word available to English-speaking people.

Why the King James Version Became So Influential

The King James Version became the most influential English Bible for several reasons.

First, it was written in beautiful, memorable English. The translators carefully chose words and sentence structures that sounded powerful when read aloud. Its rhythm and style made it easy to remember and ideal for public worship.

Second, it was officially authorized by King James I and gradually became the standard Bible used in the Church of England. As the British Empire expanded around the world, the KJV spread with it, reaching millions of English-speaking people.

Third, advances in printing allowed the KJV to be widely distributed. As more copies became available, it became the Bible found in churches, homes, schools, and public life throughout England and later America.

For more than three centuries, the KJV was the primary Bible used by English-speaking Protestants. It was read from pulpits, taught in classrooms, quoted in books, and memorized by generations of Christians. Many believers knew large portions of Scripture by heart from the King James Bible.

The KJV also had a tremendous influence on the English language. Countless phrases and expressions entered everyday speech through its pages. Writers, poets, statesmen, and preachers regularly quoted its words. Its influence can be seen in the works of authors such as John Bunyan, John Milton, Charles Dickens, Abraham Lincoln, and many others.

The King James Version was not the first English Bible, but it became the most widely used and enduring. Its combination of accuracy, literary beauty, official support, widespread distribution, and long use in churches helped make it one of the most influential books in the history of the English-speaking world.