



“Understanding the Bible”

Section 2: How Did We Get the Bible?

Unit 2.5: The Process From Preservation to Publication



I) The Task of Preserving Truth

- When we hold a Holy Bible in our hands we should not only be amazed by this divine miracle of revelation, but also by the divine process of **preservation**. This is the process where God guided His words from the mouth of prophets and apostles to be forever captured on the printed pages of the bestselling book in human history. In this unit, we will take a closer look at key moments in the history of biblical formation, where God’s providential hand protected and eventually published His Word so that the gospel would one day reach all four corners of the earth.

II) Sticking to the ‘Script

- As mentioned in previous units of these section, for God’s Word to spread there was a great need for this revelation to be written down, copied, and distributed. The original documents that were first written down by the prophets and apostles are known as the **autographs**. Although none of these autographs have been preserved today, the truth of these autographs has been preserved through thousands of hand-written copies known simply as manuscripts.
- Christian author and historian Timothy Paul Jones believes that the Christian church does not fully appreciate the time and sacrifice that many men made by copying the Scriptures so that God’s truth would be so readily available today in every bookstore and library. According to Jones, *“We are deeply indebted to those early copyists of Scripture. Many risked their lives making or saving copies of the New Testament. We may never know how many ancient Christians gave their lives trying to save those copies of Scripture. The Bibles we have today are as reliable as they are because the early copyists preserved the text of the New Testament so well. We have their manuscripts. They should have our gratitude.”*

III) Learning Hand-Written Limitations

- While we celebrate the riches of having so many manuscripts of Scripture in our possession, there are two specific areas where early Christians had to recognize the limitations of hand-writing copies of God’s Word: Overcoming hand-writing errors and finding a way to increase production speed. First, the errors found in the manuscripts are referred to as **variants**, and critics often point to the thousands of variants as proof that you cannot trust what is in our Bibles. We will discuss in greater detail in Section Four why these variants should not keep us from trusting in the truth of God’s Word, but for now we need to keep in mind that the great majority of these variants are simple spelling and punctuation marks that were easily reconcilable once discovered. The second limitation was the slow and laborious speed of hand-writing Scripture. This process caused complete copies of God’s Word to be very rare and expensive. Copies of Holy Scripture were reserved for the clergy and the wealthy, so there needed to be a more efficient way for God’s Word to be produced in order to reach more hands and hearts.

IV) A Publication Hot off the Press

- The single most important invention that redefined the process of Bible production surfaced in the fifteenth century with the **Gutenberg Printing Press**. In 1455, Johann Gutenberg invented a pioneer mechanical press that could print entire books with his innovative movable metal type. The very first book printed on this press was the Gutenberg Bible, and this new process revolutionized the distribution of God’s truth to God’s people all over Europe and eventually the entire world. Through Gutenberg’s invention, the Bible was not only the first book ever printed, but it has remained the most popular printed book in the history of human literature ever since it first came off the press.

V) Following a Morning Star

- Now that we know the single most important invention that helped contribute to the widespread distribution of the Bible, let us turn our attention to three important men who made it possible for us to have easy access to a Bible in our English language today. The first figure for our careful consideration, known as the “Morning Star of the Reformation,” is **John Wycliffe** (1320-1384). A doctoral graduate of Oxford University in 1372, Wycliffe was a professor who held a strong conviction that the central authority of the Christian life was the Holy Scriptures and not church tradition. He strongly opposed the church’s requirement of a mediating pope or priest as necessary to understand the Scriptures and to communicate with God. All copies of Scripture were written in Latin and were not available for his British students to read in their native language. So, Wycliffe, along with several of his colleagues at Queens College in Oxford, created the first English translation of the Bible known simply as the Wycliffe Bible. Since this was still several decades before Gutenberg’s printing press was unveiled, each copy of the Bible still had to be hand-written and it cost six months’ wages to produce a single copy (Today there are just 176 copies of the Wycliffe Bible’s New Testament available, and only 25 complete copies of the Wycliffe Bible that include both Testaments). The Wycliffe Bible was so controversial at the time, that several years after Wycliffe’s death in 1384 the established church banned his translation of the Bible altogether. Church leaders also dug up Wycliffe’s bones and burned them at the stake, sending England a message that the authority belonged to the church and not the Book.

VI) Plowing Through Persecution

- Although John Wycliffe was able to escape torture for his efforts to give us an English Bible until after his death, our next champion of biblical formation was not so fortunate. **William Tyndale** (1492-1536) was another Oxford University graduate like Wycliffe, but he later pursued a doctorate at Cambridge from 1517-1521 where he became proficient in eight languages. He developed a strong conviction that Scripture needed to be written in the common language of the day and given to everyone to learn and grow in their walk with Christ. Tyndale once debated a visiting priest and boldly proclaimed his strong convictions and controversial plan. The priest said that it would be better to lose God’s law (Scripture) than it would be to lose the pope’s law (church tradition). Tyndale responded by saying, *“If God spares my life, I will cause a boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scripture than you do.”* God did spare Tyndale’s life long enough for him to complete his stated task. In 1526, Tyndale translated the New Testament into English and met with a printer in Germany who printed 6,000 copies of his translation. He packaged the copies individually in water tight boxes that contained cases of wine and sacks of flour, and smuggled the boxes into England. He then patched the pages together and distributed them all over the country, starting a brushfire of interest in common Christians buying and reading God’s Word. Eventually, Tyndale got in hot water with King Henry VIII who wanted to ban the Tyndale versions of Scripture because they clearly revealed in English God’s condemnation of the King’s desired divorce. King Henry VIII threw Tyndale in prison, and while in chains Tyndale finished translating the Old Testament. However, while still in prison in 1536, Tyndale was burned at the stake because of his translation efforts. His last words were, *“Lord, open the King of England’s eyes.”*

VII) Judging a Book by its Cover

- The final historical figure that played a significant role in paving the way for our English Bibles was **Myles Coverdale** (1488-1569). Coverdale was Tyndale’s assistant and proofreader, and he was responsible for taking Tyndale’s final work and producing the first complete printed English Bible, known as the Coverdale Bible, in 1535. Coverdale was the first to introduce chapter summaries and study notes around the text of his translation. He also was the first to separate the Old Testament from the books of the Apocrypha that the Catholic Church was still affirming as part of Holy Scripture.

VIII) Living & Dying for God’s Word

- Even though this unit just gives us a glimpse of the tireless work and life-threatening **risks** that many individuals played in ensuring that we have an English Bible in our hands today, the real question that we need to ask ourselves is this: *If they were willing to die for God’s Word back then, are we willing for live for God’s Word today?*