

# MORE BIBLE CURIOSITIES AND MISTRANSLATIONS

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Chaim Abramowitz, the late Assistant Editor of *Dor le Dor* (as *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* was originally entitled), published a short account of "Bible Translations and Mistranslations" (VII:1, 1978, pp. 44-45), to which I later added a brief supplement (VIII:1, 1979, p. 49). More detailed information later appeared in "Translations of the Bible," a survey that I contributed to *Almanac of the Bible*.<sup>1</sup> There is also a roster of "specially named editions" included under "Bible" in *The Wordsworth Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*.<sup>2</sup> Having checked various sources and information circulated on the internet, I can now provide *Jewish Bible Quarterly* readers with a more comprehensive list of Bible curiosities and mistranslations. An archaism, a misspelled word, or a hilarious printer's error can turn one of these Bibles into a collector's item. They are arranged in chronological order.

## THE COMPLUTENSIAN POLYGLOT (ALCALÁ DE HENARES, 1514-17)

Drawing its title from the Latin name of Alcalá [*Complutum*], this was the first complete Bible published in Spain. Financed by Cardinal Francisco Ximenes de Cisneros, the project employed Greek scholars and converted Jews. Its six large volumes displayed the Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic (Chaldee) texts in parallel columns and included an "apparatus" of Greek and Hebrew grammars and a Hebrew dictionary.

## THE "BUG" BIBLE (ZURICH, 1535)

Miles Coverdale, who published the first complete edition of the Bible in English, utilized the more distinctly Protestant translations of William Tyndale (1530-34). Coverdale's Bible owes its nickname to the fact that Psalm 91:5 is rendered *Thou shalt not nede to be afrayed for eny bugges* [Hebrew *pahad*] *by night*. The archaic term *bugges* (whence our "bogyman" and "bugbear"), also used in *Matthew's Bible* (Antwerp, 1537), was justly replaced by "terror" in the *Authorized (King James) Version* of 1611.

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## THE "PORTRAIT" BIBLE (LONDON, 1539)

Sponsored by Chancellor Thomas Cromwell and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, the principal advocates of religious reform, this *Byble in Englyshe* (produced once again by Miles Coverdale) was originally printed on extra-large sheets and "appoynted to be read in churches," which gave rise to its more familiar title, *The Great Bible*. On the first (1539) edition's title page there was a portrait of Cromwell; in the second (1540) edition this was replaced by Hans Holbein's woodcut of King Henry VIII handing copies of *The Great Bible* to Cromwell and Cranmer.

## THE FERRARA BIBLE (1553)

After their expulsion from Spain in 1492, Jews printed Ladino (Judeo-Spanish) translations of the Bible in Hebrew characters. One exception was the Bible issued by two ex-Marranos in Ferrara, Italy, which used Latin typography and appeared in two editions.

The first, intended for exiled Sephardim, was dedicated to their great heroine Doña Gracia Nasi and bore a Hebrew date (14 Adar 5313). The second, meant for Spanish Christians, was dedicated to the tolerant Duke Ercole d'Este of Ferrara and was dated March 1, 1553. The names of the printer and the publisher likewise appeared in two forms: Avraham Usque (Duarte Pinel) and Yom Tov ben Levi Athias (Jerónimo de Vargas). This type of subterfuge also characterized the eight-volume *Antwerp Polyglot Bible* published some years later by Christophe Plantin (see below).

## THE "BREECHES" BIBLE (GENEVA, 1560)

A revised and more distinctly Protestant version of *The Great Bible*, it was first published in the Calvinist stronghold of Geneva, but a bestselling cheap edition appeared in England after the death of Bloody Mary and the coronation of Elizabeth I. This *Geneva Bible* is known for its odd translation of *hagorot* [girdles] in Genesis 3:7, which reads: *And they sowed figge-tree leaves together, and made themselves breeches*. The editors probably utilized a manuscript copy of the 14th-century Lollard Bible, translated from the Vulgate by John Wycliffe's associates who could not read Hebrew. For *breeches* the King James Version substituted *aprons*.

## THE "TREACLE" BIBLE (LONDON, 1568)

Produced under the auspices of Archbishop Matthew Parker -- hence its nickname, *The Bishops'* (or *Matthew Parker's*) *Bible*, this early Anglican edition was the basis for the King James Version. Here, a curious mistranslation of *tzori* [balm, balsam] rendered Jeremiah 8:22 as follows: *Is there no tryacle in Gilead, is there no phisition there?* Incidentally, this odd term reappears in Jeremiah 46:11 and Ezekiel 27:17. *Tryacle* (spelled *triacle* in Coverdale's "*Bug*" *Bible*) was the Middle English term for an antidote or cure-all, but it also gave rise to "treacle," the British term for molasses.

THE ANTWERP POLYGLOT (*BIBLIA REGIA*, 1568-73)<sup>3</sup>

An updated and expanded version of the *Complutensian Polyglot*, it was prepared by a team of experts (including French and Flemish orientalists) working for Christophe Plantin, one of the greatest non-Jewish printers of Hebrew books. The inspiration for this monumental Bible was Plantin's fear that heresy-hunters in the Spanish Netherlands would uncover his secret Protestant involvements. After gaining Vatican approval and King Philip II's patronage for a Second Complutensian Bible, Plantin directed an enterprise that ultimately outshone its model. The Old Testament (vols. 1-4) consisted of amended Aramaic and Latin translations as well as the Hebrew, Greek Septuagint, and Latin Vulgate texts. The New Testament (vol. 5) followed the same pattern, while newly compiled dictionaries and essays were included in the "apparatus" (vols. 6-8). The 1,200 sets of this *Antwerp Polyglot* were published in two separate editions, one for export to Protestant lands and the other (excluding kabbalistic material and the names of suspect individuals) for sale to wealthy Catholics. The "apparatus" was consulted by later scholars, notably those of the King James Version.

## THE "INCUNABULA" BIBLE (1594)

Though published in 1594, this edition's title page mistakenly bore the date 1495, which would have made it a rarity. Books printed before 1501 are known as incunabula (from the era when typography was "in its swaddling-clothes"), hence this Bible's nickname.

## THE "ROSIN" BIBLE (1609)

In a belated attempt to stem the tide of Protestantism, Roman Catholic exiles labored to produce a Bible of their own for English-speaking readers. Based solely on the Latin Vulgate, it came out in two parts, the second (OT) being published at Douai in France (1609). For *tryacle* the *Douai Bible* supplied *rosin* [resin], so that Jeremiah 8:22 reads: *Is there noe rosin in Galaad?*

## THE "HE AND SHE" BIBLE (LONDON, 1611)

Working on the orders of King James I, who had a practical interest in Bible translation, a team of 47 Anglican and Puritan scholars (including Hebraists) devoted seven years (1604-11) to producing the *Authorized* [or *King James*] *Version*, which was destined to become **the** English Bible. All previous editions were consulted, especially the *Bishops' Bible*, and the translators also had the *Antwerp Polyglot's* scholarly "apparatus" at their disposal.

The "He and She" nickname was given to the King James Version's first two editions, in which the sexes were twice confused due to a printer's error. In the first (1611) edition, the last part of Ruth 3:15 was correctly translated *and he went into the city*. In the second (1615) edition, however, *she* was wrongly substituted for *he*. This was obviously a typesetter's mistake, as *vayavo ha-ir* (referring to Boaz) would never have been mistranslated by the King James Version's Hebraists. Strangely enough, the same typo has recurred in many subsequent editions, including a standard Anglican (1958) copy. The other, even more glaring, mistake occurred in both early editions, where Leviticus 20:11 reads: *And the man that lieth with his grandmother's* [instead of *his father's*] *wife . . . shall surely be put to death*. This nonsense wormed its way into the *Affinity Bible* over 300 years later (see below).

## THE "WICKED" BIBLE (LONDON, 1631)

Printed by the firm of Barker & Lucas at Blackfriars, this edition of the King James Version – also known as the *Adulterer's* or *Sinner's Bible* – omitted the vital "not" in the Seventh Commandment (Ex. 20:14), which thus read: *Thou shalt commit adultery*. As a result of their negligence, the printers were fined the sum of £300, a lifetime's wages in those days and enough to put them out of business. Most of the copies were immediately recalled, and no more than 11 are said to exist today.

## THE "FOOL'S" BIBLE (LONDON, 1634)

This edition, published during the reign of Charles I, omitted the word "no" in Psalm 14:1, which then read: *The fool hath said in his heart, there is a God.* The printers were fined the vast sum of £3,000 and all copies of the edition were suppressed.

## THE INDIAN BIBLE (CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS, 1663)

*Upbiblum God*, the first complete Bible printed in North America, predating any English-language edition, translated the Scriptures into an Algonquian dialect spoken by tribes living in Massachusetts. The Rev. John Eliot, known as the Apostle of the Indians, was responsible for this translation. He firmly believed that Native Americans were descended from the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel and that they still retained ancient Hebrew practices.

## THE "PRINTERS" BIBLE (1702)

When this edition rolled off the press, readers discovered that Psalm 119:161 made King David exclaim: *Printers [instead of princes] have persecuted me without a cause!* In view of all the mistakes that have crept into printed Bibles over the centuries, there could be more than a grain of truth in this rendering of *sarim redafuni hinnam*.

## THE "LIONS" BIBLE (1804)

Although a large number of typographical errors occurred in this Bible, two are particularly worth recording. Firstly, the word "loins" was jumbled in I Kings 8:19, which referred to *thy son that shall come forth out of thy lions* (whence the nickname of this edition). Secondly, a typesetter changed the sense of Numbers 35:16, which declared that *the murderer shall surely be put together* instead of *put to death!*

## THE "STANDING FISHES" BIBLE (1806)

This edition owes its nickname to another misprint. Here Ezekiel 47:10 is rendered: *And it shall come to pass, that the fishes [properly fishers or "fishermen"] shall stand upon it from En-gedi even unto En-eghaim.*

## THE "IDLE" BIBLE (1809)

The old King James Version translation of Zechariah 11:17 had been: *Woe to the idol [worthless] shepherd that leaveth the flock!* Whoever published this edition mistakenly substituted *idle* for *idol*.

## THE "LARGE FAMILY" BIBLE (OXFORD, 1820)

This edition provoked a great deal of amusement, because Isaiah 66:9 read as follows: *Shall I bring to the birth, and not cease [cause] to bring forth?*

## THE "CAMELS" BIBLE (1823)

Its nickname stems from yet another misprint. Here Genesis 24:61 reads: *And Rebekah arose, and her camels [instead of damsels], and they rode upon the camels, and followed the man.* This may well have been the fault of a careless proofreader.

## THE "BURNT" BIBLE (CAMBRIDGE, ENGLAND, 1885)

In this Oxford and Cambridge edition of the Revised Version, "burn" appeared as "burnt" in Ezekiel 5:4: *Then take of them again, and cast them into the midst of the fire, and burnt them in the fire.* A copy offered for sale in 2003 had Victorian newspaper clippings about Bible misprints pasted onto the front endpapers.

## THE "AFFINITY" BIBLE (1923)

The "*He and She*" Bible's misprint (Lev. 20:11; see above) was somehow overlooked in this edition's table of blood relationships ("affinities"), which states that "a man may not marry his grandmother's wife."

THE "EXTORTIONER'S" BIBLE (1966)<sup>4</sup>

This is my own nickname for the first edition of the modern Catholic *Jerusalem Bible*, a translation of the French *Sainte Bible de Jérusalem* (published in one volume, 1956). Here, Psalm 122:6 disturbingly reads: *Pay [instead of pray] for the peace of Jerusalem.* Was this a political message or only a typographical error?

NOTES

1. New York: Prentice Hall, 1991, pp. 394-405.
2. Revised by Ivor H. Evans (Ware, Herts., 1993) pp. 105-108.
3. See my article, "The Antwerp Polyglot Bible: A Triumph of Hebraism," in *Dor le Dor*, X:2 (Winter 1981/82) pp. 74-89.
4. Chaim Abramowitz also mentioned a left-wing Spanish edition (the so-called *Liberation Bible*), in which one "ideological" illustration showed Dr. Martin Luther King standing among the biblical prophets. Unfortunately, I have been unable to trace this item.



**עשה תורתך קבע**

**THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR  
DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ**

2006

October	Genesis	23 – 50
November	Exodus	1 – 24
December	Exodus	25 – 40
	Leviticus	1 – 12

2007

January	Leviticus	13 – 27
	Numbers	1 – 14
February	Numbers	15 – 36
	Deuteronomy	1 – 7

Start by marking "Serious Mistranslations of the Bible" as Want to Read: Want to Read savingâ| Want to Read.Â Reader Q&A. To ask other readers questions about Serious Mistranslations of the Bible, please sign up. Be the first to ask a question about Serious Mistranslations of the Bible. Lists with This Book. This book is not yet featured on Listopia. Until the last few decades, most biblical scholars believed that the Masoretic biblical texts were, with some exceptions, the best witnesses to the most ancient Hebrew text of the Hebrew Bible (what Christians sometimes call the Old Testament). Recent discoveries from the Dead Sea Scrolls, however, suggest that there were several different versions of many biblical books in the Second Temple period. This literature-related list is incomplete; you can help by expanding it. The Bible has been translated into many languages from the biblical languages of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. The Latin Vulgate translation was dominant in Western Christianity through the Middle Ages. Since then, the Bible has been translated into many more languages. English Bible translations also have a rich and varied history of more than a millennium.