



# THE MURDEROUS HISTORY OF BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

**Power, Conflict, and the Quest for Meaning**

by Harry Freedman

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A retelling of the well-studied history of biblical translation.

Freedman (*The Talmud: A Biography*, 2014), who has a doctorate in Aramaic, provides a basic, serviceable, Western-centered history of the translation of the Bible. Despite the title, only a small portion of his book centers on the gruesome and deadly history of pre-Reformation attempts at Bible translation. The author begins with pre-Christian translations of the Hebrew Bible, such as the Septuagint (Hebrew to Greek) and the Targum (Hebrew to Aramaic). Freedman moves on to cover the storied creation of the Vulgate by Saint Jerome. Eventually, he comes to the age of the Cathars, the French movement ruthlessly suppressed by Rome in the 13th century. “It was the first act,” writes Freedman, “in what was to become an endemic, medieval persecution of the translated Bible.” At this point, the author delves into names familiar to students of Reformation history and its run-up—e.g., John Wycliffe, the Lollards, Jan Hus, Erasmus, and others. The murder of William Tyndale is at the center of the book. From there on, with the advent of the Reformation, the translation of the Bible became a less and less fearsome act. “With the creation of the King James Bible [in 1611],” writes Freedman, “the age of the Bible translator living in fear for his life had drawn to an end.” Indeed, it would be the beginning of an explosion of translation activity, much of which is now largely forgotten. The author ends with the history of 20th-century English translations such as the New Jerusalem Bible, the Revised Standard Version, etc. Strangely, he does not mention such important developments as the New International Version. Freedman does pull in references to non-English translations, but his work is far from a complete translation history. Though it is worthwhile for those with an amateur interest in church history, it offers few new insights and only scratches the surface of global translation history.