

The English Bible before Tyndale

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The English language is a hodge-podge, largely for historical reasons. The name comes from the Angles, a “Germanic” people that immigrated to the island in the fifth and sixth centuries A.D. Their removal from their homeland to their new home was facilitated by the evacuation of “Eng-

land” by the Romans, who had conquered it in A.D. 43 under emperor Claudius and named it Brittaina Province. By the middle of the fifth century the Romans were everywhere in retreat, the last blow coming in A.D. 476 when the last emperor, Romulus Augustus (an ironic name) was deposed by an army led by the mercenary Odoacre. Into the void left by the departing Romans, Angles, Saxons, and Jutes streamed across the North Sea and became the new masters of the world that had for centuries belonged to various indigenous Celtic peoples.

The new masters brought with them their languages, various forms of Old German, and unlike the Romans they remained, eventually bringing nearly all of “England” under their control during the ninth-century reign of King Alfred.¹ These languages became enmeshed with the indigenous tongues of the earlier inhabitants of the land.² In the meantime, England had linked (not altogether willingly) its version of Celtic Christianity with that of the rising papacy in Europe, and so the Latin of that church increasingly impinged on the language that was slowly evolving in the land of the Anglo-Saxons. Close proximity to (and regular war with) France brought influence from the several languages that were spoken there, most of them derivatives themselves from Latin. Hence, the hodge-podge.³

It was King Alfred who first sought to have parts of the Bible translated into the evolving English tongue.⁴ But it would be a very long time before the entire Bible would be rendered into English, and even longer before it would be done well. That work would be initiated, but not completed, by

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William Tyndale in the third and fourth decades of the sixteenth century. Other essays in this journal give effective treatment of the contributions of Tyndale. This essay will treat the pre-history of Tyndale and the KJV, and will contend that Tyndale was driven in part to produce a truly excellent translation because of the failures of those who had gone before him.

“I CANNOT SPEAK YOUR ENGLAND”

Until the sixteenth century there was much disaffection toward the English language, even on the part of Englishmen, especially those in Court and the educated elite. The Normans (Norse-men who had relocated to France, beginning in the tenth century) had conquered England in 1066 at the Battle of Hastings. Their language was a version of French, and for centuries English was suppressed in public life. The language of official matters was French, or a kind of “Anglo-French.”⁵ That fact makes Shakespeare’s Henry V anachronistic when in Act 5, Scene 2, Katharine, princess of France, says to Henry, “Your majesty shall mock at me; I cannot speak your England.” What Shakespeare apparently did not know (or simply ignored) was that a century before his time all English kings spoke fluent French and conducted business in that tongue on a daily basis. That fact itself is a testimony to the improved fortunes of the English language in the previous decades before Shakespeare.

What was the source of the disaffection for English, other than political reasons? For one thing, French culture was seen throughout Europe as being superior to other cultures, an opinion no doubt encouraged by the French themselves. In addition, English was viewed as uncouth, the language of plough-boys and ditch-diggers. Not until Chaucer gave the English their first great literary monument (in their own language), *Canterbury Tales*, did the fortunes of English begin to change.⁶ Following on that, the self-same Henry V who was the focus of The Bard’s play, the Henry who defeated the French at Agincourt, was the first to

write his letters in English rather than in French. “That military victory proved to be short-lived; the linguistic victory proved to be permanent.”⁷ Another hundred years would go by before there would be an adequate English translation in place, but that hundred years would witness reformations linguistic, theological, and technological that would pave the way.

THE BIBLE IN OLDER ENGLISH

We have already mentioned the translation of select texts of Scripture made under the aegis of King Alfred. That was not the end of the story before Tyndale, or even before Wycliffe. There were interlinear “glosses” made in English in Latin manuscripts of the “Vulgate.”⁸ It needs to be pointed out that there were many different versions of the Vulgate to be found in the Middle Ages, so many that they can be broken down into *families* of editions.⁹ One of these manuscripts now held in the British Museum, the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, is a seventh-century production written by Bishop Eadfrith of Lindisfarne. Around the middle of the tenth century a priest named Aldred wrote an interlinear translation in English.¹⁰ This would have been an Old English translation, but it was a translation only of the Gospels. Others were also attempted. In the tenth century Abbot Aelfric of Eynsham translated the first seven books of the Old Testament, as well as snippets for other Old Testament books.¹¹

There was, however, no effort to translate all of Scripture into English before the Norman conquest, and afterward, as we have already noted, there was a definite antipathy to the English language in any event on the part of anyone with the scholarly skills to make such a translation. Another problematic factor was that even those early translations into Old English would have been undecipherable to later readers, especially those in Norman England, with the continued influence on the English language of the rapidly changing Anglo-French. But there were further barriers to the realization of a full English Bible.

The teaching of the Church (the Roman Catholic Church) held that anyone seeking to teach Scripture needed to have a full understanding of the meaning of the Scriptures, as well as knowing how to communicate this understanding. This had been set forth centuries earlier by Augustine in his *De Doctrina Christiana*. “The very complexity of the first process, however, was thought to demonstrate the unsuitability of any attempt to achieve the second by mere translation. To translate the Latin Bible would have been to transform the whole frame of knowledge, human and divine.”¹² Technically speaking, it was not illegal to make vernacular translations into European languages at the time. It would only be illegal in England after the Wycliffe translation had been made available, by the passing of the Constitutions of Oxford in 1408.¹³ Though no official pronouncement to that effect would be made by the Church until the Council of Trent (1545-63), the Roman Catholic Church’s position was that Jerome’s translation into Latin was the only acceptable Bible for use in the Church (or out of it), and that teaching from it was restricted only to those qualified with monastic or later university training so to do.¹⁴

Some “translations” into English were made, however. There were attempts at rendering the Psalter into English at various points in history, from the seventh century until the fourteenth. Parts of the Gospel story were cast into English verse, such as the *Dream of the Rood*, a Passion narrative that incorporates some biblical phrases, but is more dependent on “liturgical practices associated with the veneration of the Cross.”¹⁵ A translation of the chief Epistles was made in the late fourteenth century, independent of Wycliffe, but this was for the use of monks and nuns, and not intended for the general population of English readers, a population itself still quite small in these very early days of the Renaissance.¹⁶

THE MORNING STAR

It is axiomatic and of little surprise to most educated people today that John Wycliffe (and those

about him) made the first translation of the entire Scripture into English. What I wish to do, though, is to show somewhat how that was done, but even more to show its defects, in order to pave the way for understanding the great need for the work of Tyndale, and beyond him to the KJV.

John Wycliffe (c. 1328-84) spent most of his adult life at Oxford University where he was lecturer. Early on he began to object to teachings of the Church that he considered contrary to Scripture, on the one hand, or simply not supported by Scripture, on the other. Wycliffe’s theology was heavily dependent on Thomas Bradwardine, a member of the so-called *schola Augustiniana moderna*, and he set himself against what he perceived to be an ascendant semi-Pelagianism in his day.¹⁷ This orientation would naturally bring him (as it did, to a lesser degree, Bradwardine) into conflict with the teaching of the Church, especially on issues such as transubstantiation, a lynchpin in Catholic theology since it was reserved to the clergy alone, thus establishing their hierarchical position above all “laymen,” including princes and kings. More vitriolic were Wycliffe’s invectives against the abuse of power by the Church at all levels.¹⁸ He did not reject the papacy outright, since he believed the Church needed an earthly head, but he did call on the Pope to be a spiritual man. He repeatedly condemned clerical officials for the luxurious lives they lived and for the way in which the Church imposed itself into politics and secular affairs of all kinds, in contrast to the poverty and the spirituality of Jesus and the apostles. In 1378 he wrote, “It is not deducible from Scripture that the Pope’s secular power extends over the temporal property of our realm.”¹⁹ Heresy, indeed!

Wycliffe was the subject of numerous summonses to Rome, all of which he ignored, and was the subject of several papal bulls intended to strip him of his position, none of which were effective. Wycliffe’s ace-in-the-hole was the powerful John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, who supported Wycliffe, and even when royal support sided with

the papacy, was able to protect the teacher from the long arm of Rome. Gaunt's concerns were more political than religious—he resented any kind of European interference in England's business, but especially *papal* European interference. A rising tide of nationalism was spreading throughout the realm, and this professor from Oxford was good for England, in Gaunt's view. Wycliffe was, thus, able to live a long life and die in his bed, rather than lashed to a stake.²⁰

In 1382, two years before his death, Wycliffe began in earnest a translation of the Bible into English. Only the year before he had claimed that if the Bible is the only authority in matters of faith, that “all Christians, and lay lords in particular, ought to know holy writ and to defend it.”²¹ Wycliffe believed that the English people needed the Bible in their language, “rather than be forced to listen to what their clergy wished them to hear.”²² If they had a Bible in their own language they might discover that their own bishops and abbots were living a lifestyle contrary to the founder of the church and his earliest followers. That was something very much in Wycliffe's interest! Of course, such a project had the potential to destroy the whole edifice of the Church as it existed in the fourteenth century. Therefore, it could not be allowed! Archbishop Arundel wrote to Pope John XXIII in A.D. 1411, “This pestilent and wretched John Wyclif, of cursed memory, that son of the old serpent ... endeavored by every means to attack the very faith and sacred doctrine of the Holy Church, devising—to fill up the measure of his malice—the expedient of a new translation of the Scriptures into the mother tongue.”²³ That was one of the milder declamations, and in 1428 Wycliffe's body would be exhumed and burned.

The translation was not the task of Wycliffe alone. Five of his students were at first assigned the task, but Wycliffe and his assistant, John Purvey, were unhappy with the woodenness of the initial translation, so they undertook a revision, a revision that was still not complete when Wycliffe died of a stroke on December 31, 1384. The task was carried on by his “Lollard” followers. This is

often not clearly understood. Wycliffe was more like a chairman of a translation committee rather than the sole translator, and a chairman who died before the task was completed.

THE BIBLE IN ENGLISH

A translation, any translation, of the Bible in English is a good thing. The Wycliffe Bible, though, had numerous shortcomings, some of which were inevitable given the time in which it was produced. It was a translation from the Vulgate, not the Greek and Hebrew. What we call the “Renaissance,” a flowering of culture and learning that, among other things, restored to the Western curriculum the study of Greek and Hebrew, was in its infancy. Greek was not being taught in English universities in Wycliffe's day, so he had no opportunity to learn either testament in its original language.²⁴ So, his “translation” was a translation from a translation, and a flawed translation at that.²⁵ Making a translation from a translation is like kissing your wife through a curtain. If that is all you can do, well, it is better than nothing. But in such an undertaking there is the great danger that a mistranslation can cause a major misunderstanding.

There was no mechanical printing with moveable type in Wycliffe's day. That technological innovation was still seventy-odd years away. One cannot blame Wycliffe or his Lollards for something outside their control. They had no idea that such an innovation was even on the horizon. But the lack of such technology meant that their manuscripts were, literally, manuscripts!²⁶ The copying of texts by hand, dating back thousands of years, was tedious and culpable of allowing large and continuous errors to creep into the final product. On the other hand, as William Tyndale would discover one hundred forty years later, carelessness on the part of typesetters (who were often careless or, worse, even drunk when setting type) could result in significant errors in a printed run on moveable type.²⁷ The only difference would be that thousands of copies would

have the same errors!

The fact that the translation was made from the Vulgate entailed not only translation errors, but theological ones, as well. For instance, Wycliffe translated Matthew 4:17 as: “Fro that tyme Jhesus bigan to preche, and seie, Do ye penaunce, for the kyngdom of heuenes schal come niy.” “Do penaunce” comes straight from Jerome’s mistranslation, but as Luther would later point out, this elicits a perverse understanding of the nature of repentance. Similar mistranslations can be found throughout the Wycliffe version, making it clear that this translation would have never resulted in a genuine reformation of the English churches in the way that the Tyndale version later did.²⁸

CONCLUSION

When the Tyndale New Testament appeared in 1526 it caused a sensation. For the people of that time, “The experience of reading God’s word was perilous, exciting, intoxicating, and illegal.”²⁹ It was made illegal as a result of the work of John Wycliffe. By 1537, one year after Tyndale’s execution, the ban was lifted and the Bible was being printed and distributed under the auspices of the British crown, and, in 1611, with the publication of the “Authorized Version,” was being put forth in translation by the king himself. For us in America and the West there is no thought of reading the Bible as being somehow made “illegal.” But I fear that along with losing its status of being illegal, for most people in our culture, it has also lost its status of being, “perilous, exciting, [and] intoxicating.” Would that our generation could see a recovery of that!

ENDNOTES

¹Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: The Fall of Rome and the Birth of Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 459.

²David Crystal, *The Stories of English* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 15-33.

³David Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 1995), 6-29.

⁴F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English* (3rd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 6-7.

⁵Alistair McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 26.

⁶*Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁷*Ibid.*, 29.

⁸Jerome’s translation “did not receive the title of ‘Vulgate’ till the sixteenth century, though long before that it had acquired the right to it.” E. F. Sutcliffe, “Jerome,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Fathers to the Reformation* (ed. G. W. H. Lampe; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 2:99.

⁹Raphael Loewe, “The Medieval History of the Latin Vulgate,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 2:102-54.

¹⁰Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*, 7.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 8.

¹²Geoffrey Shepherd, “English Versions of the Scriptures before Wyclif,” in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, 2:367.

¹³David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 94.

¹⁴Eventually vernacular translations were authorized by the Church, but were to be translations from the Vulgate.

¹⁵Shepherd, “The English Versions,” 370.

¹⁶Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*, 10.

¹⁷Gordon Leff, *Bradwardine and the Pelagians* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, New Series, vol. 5; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 134-35, 260-62.

¹⁸Derek Wilson, *The People’s Bible: The Remarkable History of the King James Version* (Oxford: Lion, 2010), 24-25.

¹⁹Quoted in Wilson, *The People’s Bible*, 25.

²⁰G. R. Evans, *John Wyclif: Myth and Reality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 181-95.

²¹Quoted in Wilson, *The People’s Bible*, 26.

²²McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 19.

²³Quoted in Shepherd, “The English Versions,” 388.

²⁴The Platonic Academy, the first Western attempt to bring Greek back into the curriculum, was founded by Cosimo de Medici in Florence in 1422. Dale Kent, *Cosimo de Medici and the Florentine Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 212.

²⁵It needs also to be noted that the existing copies of the Wycliffite manuscripts vary among themselves in some details. Shepherd, "The English Versions," 389.

²⁶From the Latin, "hand writing."

²⁷Brian Moynihan, *God's Bestseller: William Tyndale, Thomas More, and the Writing of the English Bible: A Story of Martyrdom and Betrayal* (New York: St. Martin's, 2002), 107.

²⁸Roland Bainton, "The Bible in the Reformation," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, 3:1-37.

²⁹Moynihan, *God's Bestseller*, 108.