

# THE BIRTH OF THE BIBLE IN ENGLISH

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Reverence for the *King James Bible*, 1611 Bible, is not entirely a sentiment or prejudice. The Englishman's Bible, no matter how frequently or infrequently he opens it, is as essential a part of the national culture as the works of Chaucer and Shakespeare. There is a consensus of opinion among English people that a valuable institution like the Bible should not be subject to fluctuations of linguistic taste. And this view is apparently shared by other European peoples (Partridge, 1973). But we are not dealing with this religious literary treasure on this paper. Reaching the summit of a mountain demands careful previous preparation; much in the same way as a leading book, The Book in this case, cannot be analysed linguistically (Semantics included) without a full account of its socio-cultural background. We are planning to reach the summit step by step, hoping to end up in the future, as we think that new conferences on Renaissance Studies will be held in the following years. So, the birth of the Bible in English.

The Bible known and used in the earliest English Church, as in the British and Irish Churches, was the Latin Bible, which came to mean the version made by St. Jerome at the end of the fourth century, and which is commonly known as the Latin Vulgate. From the earliest days of English Christianity the gospel story, which, of course, is based on the Bible, was told to the people of England in their own language; but the preaching of the gospel in English hardly amounts to the beginnings of the Bible in English. Apart from telling the gospel story occasionally, one of the most permanent means of teaching people the Bible was the decoration of church buildings with wall paintings and relief carvings, with which, for example, in the seventh century Wilfrid adorned the church of York, and Benedict Biscop the church of Wearmouth. From the same period we have the carved panels, representing scenes from the gospels, on the Ruthwell Cross, which also contains extracts from one of the greatest of Old English poems, *The Dream of the Rood*, in which a mystic vision of the true cross is described with

fervid and tender devotion. There also some writers and translators, such as Bede and Alfred the Great, who gave lay people some parts of the New Testament in their own tongue, as they had a concern for the spiritual welfare of their less learned fellow countrymen. In the same way, one form which early translations of the biblical texts into English took was that of interlinear glosses in Latin manuscripts, frequently written by monks or priests, to help people who could not understand the Latin text itself. And we have a Middle English work called *Ormulum*, by an Augustinian monk named Orm, a kind of poetical version of the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles, accompanied by a commentary.

But the first translation of the whole Bible into English is associated with the name of John Wyclif (1330-1384). Although technically a parish priest, he was in fact an Oxford don; he was far more interested in ideas and debates than in people. He was a scholar and a critic; a man of strong feelings, his indignation was quickly aroused by what he regarded as abuses, and he was always ready to strike out. When we examine his teaching, we find that it was closely bound up with the idea of "dominion". Feudalism taught that each man held whatever position and authority he had from his immediate superior to whom he was responsible. The Church adopted a similar doctrine, even more, it had for long been engaged in a struggle to make the secular and temporal power dependent upon the spiritual dominion. Wyclif struck at the whole theory of dominion, whether temporal or spiritual, by declaring that all dominion is derived directly from God. Such doctrine cut right across the whole idea of authority in Church and State; and this was indeed what Wyclif proceeded to do. In his book *De Dominio Divino* he argued that, since each man is responsible to God alone, there can be no need for a hierarchy and no distinction between priest and layman. All are equal in the sight of God.

Consequently, he began to lash out on all sides with great vigour. The Church was rich, powerful and corrupt. Beginning with the papacy, he had an easy target, for the popes had long been exiles in France, and then the Great Schism set up two rival popes. He turned to criticize and condemn the secular clergy, for he was convinced that the power of the clergy rested upon false teaching about the sacraments. By the way, the real presence of Christ in Eucharist Wyclif never denied, but the formal doctrine of Transubstantiation he substituted for the theory of Consubstantiation. The monks he called "possessioners", and all monasteries should be dissolved.

The friars were wicked and he denounced their apostasy and degeneration. Wyclif was thus essentially a critic and a satirist, lashing out at the abuses which were so obvious. But to counteract the evils of the day, he made a very positive contribution: the translation of the Bible into English (Moorman, 1980).

According to Wyclif's theory of "dominion by grace", each man is immediately responsible to God, and immediately responsible to obey his Law. And by God's Law he does not mean canon law, which he repudiated, but the Bible. The Bible is the rule of faith and practice. Therefore, if every man is responsible to obey the Bible, it follows that every man must know what to obey, and so the whole Bible should be accessible to him in a form that he can understand. The Bible as a whole is applicable to the whole of human life, and should be available in the vernacular. It is doubtful whether Wyclif himself took any direct part in all the work of Bible translation, but, no doubt, it was under his inspiration and by his friends and colleagues that the work was done. This work distinguishes two versions, an earlier and a later. Both of them were based on the Latin Vulgate, and both were copied and recopied by hand. The invention of the printing was still to come.

The earliest version is an extremely literal rendering of the Latin original. Latin constructions and Latin word order are preserved even where they conflict with English. This reflects one theory about Bible translation, according to which the sacred quality of the text could be preserved in translation only by the most painstaking word-for-word procedure. The first paragraph of the Epistle to the Hebrews may serve as a sample:

**Multifariam multisque modis olim Deus loquens**  
 Manyfold and many maners some tyme God spekinge  
**patribus in prophetis, novissime diebus istis**  
 to fadris in prophetis, at the laste in thes daies  
**locutus est nobis in filio: quem constituit heredem**  
 spak to us in the sone: whom he ordeynede eyr  
**universorum, per quem fecit et saecula.**  
 of alle thingis, by whom he made and the worldis.

But a translation of this kind would have been of little value for ordinary people. It is clear that the translation must be intelligible without

reference to the original, and if so, it must convey the sense, the true and plain sense, without difficulty to the reader whose only language is English.

The later version shows a feeling for native English throughout, and was bound to make a much greater appeal to his fellow countrymen than a word-for-word rendering. Thus, the same paragraph quoted above shows the difference:

God, that spak sum tyme bi prophetis in many maneres to oure fadris, at laste in these daies he hath spoke to us bi the sone; whom he hath ordeyned eir of alle thingis, and bi whom he made the worldis.

Because of his bitter attacks against the Church, Wyclif was branded and condemned as a heretic, even as "archheretic", as Thomas More said (Bruce, 1979). And so were all his writings, the two versions of the Bible included. But, even if we granted that he was a heretic, we could not say that the two versions are heretical "ipso facto", although they are not "Authorized", which is another question. We dare say they are not heretical because the holy text is not purposely corrupted: which is obvious about the very literal rendering of the Latin Vulgate, and also about the late translation, where there is a change of linguistic procedure so as to make the sentence, rather than the individual word, the sense unit, which amounts to "meaning for meaning" translation. How legitimate this procedure is can be proved just by remembering that the translators of the New English Bible, 1970, an Authorized Version, followed the same method.

Thus, Wyclif, with all his faults, succeeded in lighting a candle which burnt steadily through many years of trial and which is by no means extinguished at the present day.

A new situation began to develop in the history of the English Bible with the production of the first printed English Bible, which was translated, not from the Latin, but from the original tongues, Hebrew and Greek.

It was a happy coincidence that the discovery of printing should have been followed so quickly by the Revival of Learning. So far as the history of the English Bible is concerned, there are some representatives of this Revival specially worth of mention.

John Colet (1467-1535), who became Dean of St. Paul's in London, delivered a course of lectures on the Epistles of St. Paul at the University of Oxford, which made a deep impression on many who heard them. In his principles of biblical interpretation he made a clean break with the methods of the mediaeval scholastics, and expounded the text in accordance with the plain meaning of the words viewed in relation to their historical context.

Erasmus (1466-1536) paid several visits to England, mainly to Cambridge, where he served as Professor of Greek, and he gave himself to the study of St. Jerome and the New Testament, and laid the foundations of his edition of the Greek Testament.

Martin Luther, the famous Augustinian monk and Professor of Theology in the University of Wittenberg, in November 1515 began to expound Paul's Epistle to the Romans to his students. He came more and more to grasp the crucial character of St. Paul's teaching about justification by faith. When at last he understood what Paul was getting at, and applied it to himself, he said: "I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the righteousness of God had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven" (Bruce, 1979:27). Luther himself did not foresee what his teaching would lead to, but in the light of the sequel we look back to that action as the one which more than any other sparked off the Reformation in England. And the progress of the Reformation is closely bound up with the history of the first printed Bible in the vernaculars, specially the first printed Bibles in English.

Thomas More (1478-1535), a wonderful scholar and politician, understood the Revival mainly as related to the Classics and Classical Languages, and so he wrote *Utopia* in Latin. From the deepest of his conviction he objected to the translation of the Bible into English, as he believed it was a deviation from the faith. He made suffer the new translators, although not as much as he suffered himself in the Tower of London where he was beheaded because of his opposition to the divorce of Henry VIII and his refusal to sign the Act of Supremacy.

William Tyndale's translation was the first English *New Testament* to be printed; it appeared in 1526. Tyndale had the conviction that the root

cause of much confusion in people's mind on the matters of faith was ignorance of the Scripture. If this ignorance could be corrected, the eyes of all would be opened and the truth made clearly known. Perhaps the knowledge that Luther had given his countrymen the German New Testament in 1522 was a further stimulus to Tyndale to do the like service for his countrymen. But it would not be politic to mention Luther's name in this connection, as Luther was disapproved of in the highest quarters in England. In fact, king Henry VIII had published his *Assertion of the Seven Sacraments* against Luther, and received thereby from Pope Leo X the title of "Defender of the Faith", which his successors have borne to this day. By the way, this is most probably the root reason why Anglicans have never liked being named Protestants.

The incidental resemblances between Tyndale's New Testament and Luther's have led some people to suppose that Tyndale did little more than translate Luther's version into English. But this is far from being the truth. Although he had Luther's German New Testament at his hands for reference, and also the Latin Vulgate, his work is a translation of Erasmus's edition of the Greek Testament. Tyndale was a better Greek scholar than Luther, and he turns the Greek text into good English, not into a literal rendering of the original text.

Thomas More wrote a book entitled *The Confutation of Tyndale*. Tyndale's New Testament, said More, was so perverted in the interests of heresy that it was not worthy to be called Christ's Testament, but either Tyndale's own testament or the testament of his master Antichrist (Bruce, 1979). It affords no pleasure to us today to contemplate two great Englishmen, men of principle who were both to suffer death for conscience's sake, engaging in bitter controversy. Yet More was not obscurantist; he was a leading humanist and patron of the new learning, and a warm friend of Erasmus, whose Greek New Testament Tyndale had now turned into good English. We can only be surprised that a scholar like More should go to such lengths in denouncing so good an achievement. When his charges are examined, they amount to nothing more than a complaint that Tyndale translated certain ecclesiastical terms by English words which lacked ecclesiastical associations. Thus, he used "congregation" and not "church"; "senior" and not "priest"; "repetance" and not "penance"; "love" and not "charity", and so forth. But no faults can be found with Tyndale from the standpoint of Semantics. And indeed Tyndale could point to Erasmus, More's

great friend, for a precedent. For Erasmus had not only edited the New Testament in Greek, he had also translated it into Latin, and in Erasmus's Latin translation the Greek word "ekklesia" appears as "congregatio"; Greek "presbyteros" appears as "senior", and so forth. Why should such translations be branded as heretical in Tyndale's English version when they were tolerated in Erasmus's Latin version? Because, said More, he found no such malicious intent in Erasmus as he found in Tyndale. We may well rub our eyes at these charges.

If Tyndale had given himself exclusively to his Bible translation, he might have come to translate the whole Bible. By 1530 he had completed and published the translation of the first five books of the Old Testament from Hebrew, and then translated several other books, but the whole of it never did. He was anxious to continue his work, but he was accused of Lutheranism, sent to prison, found guilty of heresy, and handed over to the secular power for execution.

We may say that Tyndale's version of the New Testament and most part of the Old Testament is basic to the successive versions, more particularly the Authorized Version, or King James Bible. Tyndale's simple directness and magical simplicity of phrase, his modest music, gave an authority to his wording that has imposed itself on all later versions. A new version of the Bible in English, drawn largely upon his own work, was circulating with King Henry's permission some months before his death. The new translator was Coverdale, and Coverdale's Bible was the first complete printed Bible in English. But more about this and later Biblical Translations, up to King James Bible, in future conferences on Renaissance Studies.

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