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The Birth of the English Bible

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Chapter 3: The Birth of the English Bible¹

Bryan Ball

No book has had such a widespread and lasting impact on history or has touched the lives of so many people as the Bible, particularly the Authorised or King James version. First published in 1611, it profoundly influenced the entire English-speaking world for more than 300 years. Yet the story of the English Bible really began much earlier. In one sense 1611 marked the end of the story, rather than its beginning. That story began centuries previously, and for reasons it is important for those who live so much later to understand.

The Times and the Tensions

When the Authorised Version first appeared, Europe in general and England in particular had not long emerged from centuries of mediaeval ignorance and superstition. It was widely believed at the time – and has since been repeatedly confirmed – that the domination of the mediaeval Catholic Church throughout Europe in virtually all matters of public and private life was the underlying problem.

There had been various protests at papal excesses and inconsistencies through the centuries, but by the early 16th century a major revolt was inevitable. It came in the form of the Protestant Reformation. Led initially by Martin Luther in Germany, it rapidly spread across much of Europe. The significance of this unprecedented upheaval has since been widely recognised. The distinguished historian Hans Hillerbrand described the Reformation as ‘one of the great epochs in the history of Western civilisation’.²

During the long mediaeval period the Bible was literally a closed book, unknown to the vast majority of European people, most of whom were illiterate anyway. Before the invention of the printing press in 1439, the Bible was available only in manuscript form, only in Latin and only to the few

1 An earlier version of this chapter was published in *Can We Still Believe the Bible? And Does it Really Matter?*, Signs Publishing Company, Warburton, Victoria, Australia, (2nd revised edition, 2011), to coincide with the 400th anniversary of the Authorised Version.

2 Hans J. Hillerbrand, ed., *The Protestant Reformation* (London and Melbourne: Macmillan, 1968), xi.

better-educated priests. Church services were also conducted in Latin and were unintelligible to almost all parishioners. The widespread ignorance and frequent corruption of the parish clergy made matters worse. Not without reason have the Middle Ages also been known as the Dark Ages. By the time the Reformation arrived, it was long overdue.

Perhaps Luther's greatest contribution to the Reformation in his homeland and to the development of German culture was his translation of the Bible into the German language – finally in 1533 but first with the New Testament in 1522. Although there had been some translations of parts of the Bible into German before Luther, his translation was a masterpiece which for “the next two or three hundred years was to mould the German language”.³

Rather than translating from the Latin Vulgate, the only available printed Bible at the time, Luther used the best available Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. He expressed the hope that as a result of his work, “the German lark would sing as well as the Greek nightingale”.⁴ History confirms that indeed it did. Much the same could be said of many other European countries where the Bible was translated into the language of the people. Roland Bainton, another authority on Reformation history, commented, “The Reformers dethroned the pope and enthroned the Bible”.⁵

A similar situation had already been developing in England. Widespread unhappiness with the ignorance and immorality of the clergy and the perceived excesses of the church, had surfaced much earlier. John Wycliffe, ‘the morning star of the Reformation’ and an Oxford doctor of theology, had voiced his revolutionary concerns in the 1370s. Tried as a heretic in 1377 and again in 1382, Wycliffe was forced to leave Oxford. His chief offence was that he had challenged the basis of papal teachings. He claimed that the Bible was the only true source of Christian belief and the standard of life in the church and for each individual. He argued that every person should be able to read the Scriptures in their native tongue. Claire Cross, a noted Wycliffe scholar, says that after he retired to his parish of Lutterworth in 1381, Wycliffe continued to write against papal teachings, advocating a return to apostolic simplicity, “contrasting the Church of Christ with the Church of Antichrist . . . and supporting the opening of the sacred scriptures to the laity”.⁶

Wycliffe died in 1384, having ‘created a hunger for the Bible in the

3 Richard Friedenthal, *Luther* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1970), 310.

4 James Atkinson, *The Great Light: Luther and the Reformation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 71.

5 See S. L. Greenslade, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1963), vol.3, 1.

6 Claire Cross, *Church and People, 1450 -1660* (London: Fontana, 1976), 15.

tongue of the common man⁷ and also having attracted a considerable number of followers in many parts of the country. They were known as Lollards, from the old Dutch word *lollen* meaning to ‘mumble, or ‘murmur’, because as they travelled from place to place they would sing quietly or mumble the words of Scripture they had committed to memory, sharing what they had learnt of the Bible with many willing hearers. The Lollards recognised a hunger for the Scriptures among the common people and the desire to have it in their own language that later moved the German people to support Luther.

Since Wycliffe’s teachings had taken hold across much of the country, legislation was enacted by Parliament in 1401 with the ominously-worded anti-heresy Act, ‘*De Haeritico Comburendo*, ‘Concerning the Burning of Heretics’. Thereafter a steady stream of Lollards from many parts of the country appeared before the courts, many ending up in prison or at the stake. They persisted in large numbers well into the next century and were always known principally for their emphasis on the Bible. A few examples must suffice. Foxe’s famous *Book of Martyrs*, as well as several other sources, contains many more.

- William Smith of Leicester had taught himself to read and write in order to produce manuscripts based on the Bible to share with others. He was brought before the courts in 1398.
- William Scrivener, from Amersham, was put to death for ‘heresy’ in 1511. He owned a copy of the Ten Commandments and the Gospels of Matthew and Mark.
- A Richard Collins owned a copy of the Gospel of Luke, the book of Revelation and one of Paul’s epistles. Alice, his wife, could recite the Ten Commandments and the Epistles of James and Peter, which she did frequently at Lollard gatherings.
- Another convicted ‘heretic’, John Pykas, had taught others the Ten Commandments and the Lord’s Prayer in English and knew of other Lollards who could recite the Epistles of James and John.⁸
- Thomas Bilney was burned at Norwich in 1531 as a ‘relapsed heretic’ for preaching and for distributing copies of Tyndale’s New Testament.

It is recorded that many Lollards sat up all night reading or listening to the words of Scripture. Cross states that many of the more illiterate among them learned to read ‘with the express purpose of reaching the kernel of

7 Donald Brake, *A Visual History of the English Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 49.

8 For these and other Lollards with similar views, see Cross, *Church and People*, 32- 42.

the Scriptures for themselves'.⁹ At a time when manuscripts were costly to purchase, many were willing to pay large sums for just small portions of the Bible. Some gave a load of hay for a few chapters of the New Testament. As we have seen, some were willing to pay with their lives.

Lollard enthusiasm for the Bible persisted throughout the fifteenth century, until the beginnings of the English Reformation in the reign of Henry VIII. This same passion for the Bible undergirded the Reformation in England, the dismantling of the corrupt mediaeval church and the establishment of Protestant England, greatly helping them on their way. Lollard faithfulness to Scripture was, in reality, a significant factor in the early development of Western civilisation.

Three things in particular, then, characterised the people of England in the times leading up to the first printed translations of the Bible:

- A great respect for Scripture
- A great desire to be able to read it in their own language
- A great thirst to understand its meaning and message for themselves

In his beautifully illustrated book *A Visual History of the English Bible*, Donald Brake stresses the vital place of the Bible in the success of the Reformation in England. He says that without the Bible “the English Reformation would have languished in the dungeons of Henry VIII”, and pointing out that “for the first time, every literate person could read and understand God’s Word”.¹⁰

Early English Translations

The story of the English Bible actually begins centuries before Wycliffe and the 14th and 15th- century Lollards. In his history of the English Bible, Donald Coggan reminds us that “the beginnings of the Bible in Britain must forever be wrapped in the mists of obscurity”.¹¹ While this is undeniably true, notable peaks can be discerned through those ancient swirling mists. No account of the origins of the English Bible is complete without at least a glimpse of them.

First, chronologically if not for literary merit, is **Caedmon of Whitby**, an illiterate cowherd attached to the great monastery at Whitby in the county of Northumberland. A fascinating story concerning Caedmon has persisted through the centuries, even finding its way into the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. In about the year AD 670 Caedmon, it is said, received a vision in which he heard a voice calling him by name. That night, it was widely believed, Caedmon suddenly became proficient in music and poetry.

⁹ Cross, *Church and People*, 34.

¹⁰ Brake, *English Bible*, 50.

¹¹ Donald Coggan, *The English Bible* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1963), 13.

F. F. Bruce tells us that Caedmon, previously “ungifted in poetry and song” began to turn the biblical record, told to him by the Whitby monks, into melodious verse.¹²

The monk and early English historian Bede, in his renowned *Ecclesiastical History of England*, written shortly after Caedmon’s experience, tells it like this:

He sang of the creation of the world, the origin of man and all the history of Genesis, the departure of the children of Israel out of Egypt, their entrance into the promised land, and many other histories from Holy Scripture; the incarnation, passion and resurrection of our Lord, and his ascension into heaven; the coming of the Holy Ghost, and the teaching of the Apostles.

Professor Bruce contends that through his verse, Caedmon created a “people’s Bible”, unwritten but sung and shared in a Northumbrian dialect of the Anglo-Saxon tongue. A later manuscript of more than 200 pages of Caedmon’s verse is now housed in the Bodleian Library in Oxford.¹³ Without committing a word to parchment or vellum, Caedmon became the first ‘translator’ of large portions of the Bible into the Old English language.¹⁴

Aldhelm of Sherborne is next discernible through the mists of antiquity. He was the first bishop of this historic Dorset town in south-western England and was regarded as one of the most prominent scholars of his day. In about AD 700 Aldhelm translated some of the Psalms into Anglo-Saxon, thus providing the first known written translation of any part of the Bible into Old English.

Shortly thereafter **Bede**, “the father of English history”, whose learning was renowned throughout Western Europe, translated parts of the Bible into the Anglo-Saxon of his day, including the Lord’s Prayer and the Gospel of John. He completed the latter on the day he died in AD 735. According to another respected scholar, Sir Frederic Kenyon, Bede was driven by the same vision that compelled the Lollards 700 years later: “That the Scriptures might be faithfully delivered to the common people in their own tongue”.¹⁵

Mention must also be made of **Aelfred** or **King Alfred the Great** who, in an age of widespread illiteracy, was one of the few literate English monarchs up to that time. Alfred is remembered for his desire to reform the church of his day and to promote learning throughout his kingdom. This

12 F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English* (Oxford: OUP, 1978), 2-3.

13 Bruce, 3; David Marshall, *The Battle for the Book* (Grantham: Autumn House, 1991), 101.

14 Old English prevailed between the mid-5th century (c. AD 450) to the mid-12th century (c. AD 1150); Middle English from about 1150 to about 1500, and modern English from about 1500 onward.

15 F. G. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 4th edit., 1939), 195.

latter goal was, it is widely recognised, “the most distinctive feature of his rule”.¹⁶ He introduced a noted code of law which contained a translation of the Ten Commandments, passages from Exodus and the book of Acts, and a notation that Christ “had come not shatter or annul the commandments but to fulfil them”. He had begun translating the Psalms when he died in AD 901.

More distinct peaks can now be seen through those ancient mists. The world-famous and intricately beautiful **Lindisfarne Gospels**, originally written or copied in about AD 698 in Latin, are attributed to the monk **Eadfrith**. In about 970 a literal translation into Anglo-Saxon of many passages was added beneath the Latin, making the meaning of the text clear in the vernacular tongue. These later translations or explanations, known as glosses, became increasingly popular with scholars working with older manuscripts.

At about the same time, the first known translation of the four gospels, now known as the **Wessex Gospels**, appeared in Old English. Attributed by some to **Aelfric of Bath**, this historic manuscript can be seen in the British Library, with many other priceless manuscripts and documents relating to the history of the English Bible. Aelfric also translated parts of several Old Testament books, including passages from the Pentateuch, Kings, Job and Daniel.

It is possible, then, to discern several significant attempts to translate the Bible, or parts of it, into the Old English or Anglo-Saxon language before AD 1000. All were important contributions to the story of the English Bible. However, the Norman invasion of 1066 brought an abrupt halt to the use of Anglo-Saxon by imposing French and Latin as the spoken and written languages of Church and State. Thus Old English became merely the language of the common people. Only after another 300 years or more did English reappear as the language of scholarship as well as the language of ordinary communication. By then it had been transformed by the addition of thousands of new words and phrases from Latin and French, and the stage was set for a new chapter in the story of the English Bible.

The ‘Wycliffe’ Bible

The ‘Wycliffe’ Bible is one of two early translations that had a profound influence on the Authorised Version of 1611. As the first complete Bible in the English language, albeit in the Middle English of the late 14th and early 15th centuries, it was a milestone in the development of both social and religious history. It was produced against a background of heated theological controversy and we can only fully understand Wycliffe and his followers if we first understand why they reacted so strongly to the mediaeval Church

16 S. Lee, ed., *Concise Dictionary of National Biography*, under ‘Aelfred’.

of the day.

As previously noted, Wycliffe was much concerned by the ignorance and immorality of many priests, as well as the general condition of the Church in the 1370s and 1380s. His Lollard followers shared the same convictions – but there was more. In 1378 the papacy had been split by two rival popes, Clement VII, who resided at Avignon in France, and Urban VI, located in Rome. Known now as the ‘Great Schism’ in the mediaeval papacy, this situation lasted until 1417. It was made even more ludicrous by the election of a third pope at Pisa in 1409, all three claiming to be the true successor of St Peter. As this undignified scenario unfolded, Wycliffe himself was already writing and speaking against the wealth of the papacy, the ostentatious lifestyle of many church dignitaries, and the sale of indulgences to raise further income from already over-burdened working people.

Wycliffe thus called for the Bible to be translated into English and for its teachings to be recognised as the standard for the corporate life of the Church. This included the daily life of individual members and all church dignitaries. A. G. Dickens says, “He accepted the Bible as the sure basis of belief, and demanded that it should be freely placed in lay hands”.¹⁷ Wycliffe himself said,

Holy Scripture is the faith of the Church, and the more widely its true meaning becomes known the better it will be. Therefore since the laity should know the faith, it should be taught in whatever language is most easily comprehended. Christ and his Apostles taught the people in the language best known to them.¹⁸

And so it happened. The ‘Wycliffe’ translation of the New Testament first appeared in 1380, followed in 1384, the year in which Wycliffe died, by the rest of the Bible. It is known as the ‘Early Wycliffe Bible’.

An important clarification needs to be made here. Although known since as ‘Wycliffe’s’ Bible, it is almost certain that Wycliffe did not translate most of it. He may have been responsible for certain parts of the New Testament but the majority of it was the work of his followers at Oxford, careful scholars who shared Wycliffe’s convictions and aspirations. Chief among them was John Purvey, who became leader of the Lollards after Wycliffe’s death. This first Wycliffite Bible was a strict and literal translation from Jerome’s Latin Vulgate and did not read easily in English. In some places it followed the Latin so closely that it could hardly be understood. Nevertheless, it was a huge leap forward in making the Bible available to the people, even though still in manuscript form.

Shortly after Wycliffe’s death another translation of the complete Bible was produced by Wycliffe’s Oxford disciples. Known as the ‘Later Wycliffe

17 A. G. Dickens, *The English Reformation* (London: Batsford, 1964), 22.

18 Cited in Brake, *English Bible*, 47-48.

Bible’, it was also produced under the guidance of John Purvey. It appeared in 1388, or soon afterward, and although it was still a translation of the Latin Vulgate – Greek manuscripts were rarely available in the late 14th century – it read much more easily in English. Still in manuscript form, it became the predominant English Bible until the time of Tyndale nearly 150 years later. Its influence was incalculable. In the introduction to the 2002 British Library reprint of the 1388 Wycliffe New Testament, Dr. W. R. Cooper describes it as a “magnificent translation, a superior, powerful rendition of the Scriptures”,¹⁹ which “truly heralded the dawning of the great English Reformation”. It is still, he adds, “a monument to be read and cherished”.²⁰

Despite prohibition, confiscation and destruction the copying, reading and proliferation of Wycliffe’s Bible continued for more than a century. Some even preferred it after printed Bibles became available in the 16th century, such were its power and attraction. More than 200 copies of Wycliffe’s Bible have survived, in part or in whole, most of them copies of the ‘Later’ Wycliffe version and many of them showing evidence of great usage. It is clear testimony to the widespread production, distribution and use of the Wycliffe Bible during the 15th and early 16th centuries.

Wycliffe died at Lutterworth in 1384, convinced to the end. But in the eyes of the Church he was a convicted heretic, excommunicated and lucky to have died in his bed, judging by what happened to many of his followers. In 1415, more than 30 years later, the Council of Constance condemned his writings yet again and ordered that his remains be disinterred and burned. This eventually happened in 1428. His ashes were cast into the river Swift, which carried them into the Avon, thence to the Severn and the sea, a fitting if unintended symbol of the ever-widening influence of Wycliffe’s teachings and writings, and of the first English translation of the Bible.

Tyndale’s New Testament

William Tyndale has been called “the father of the English Bible” and his 1526 New Testament the “jewel in the crown” of that Bible.²¹ It had an immense impact on the English religious scene and its effects are still with us today. The broadcaster and scholar Melvyn Bragg argues that Tyndale’s New Testament is “probably the most influential book in the history of the language”.²² It was, after Wycliffe, the second of those early English transla-

19 W. R. Cooper, ed., *The Wycliffe New Testament* (London: British Library, 2002), vii.

20 *Ibid.*, viii.

21 H. W. Robinson, *The Bible in Ancient and English Versions* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954), 149; David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven, CN and London: Yale University, 1994), 6.

22 Melvyn Bragg, *The Adventure of English*, TimeLife DVD, SBS 2008, Disc

tions which profoundly influenced the Authorised Version of 1611. Professor David Daniell even claims that through his New Testament, Tyndale has influenced more people than Shakespeare.

Two world-changing events had occurred in the years between the Wycliffe Bibles and Tyndale's New Testament. Firstly, Johannes Gutenberg had invented the printing press in Germany in 1439 and soon afterward, in 1455, had produced the first printed book – the famous Gutenberg Bible. Then, in 1453, the 1000-year-old Byzantine city of Constantinople had fallen to the Islamic Ottomans, an event with considerable political, social and religious implications. Though it was seen as a massive blow to Christianity, it was not entirely bad. Many Christian scholars fled to Europe, taking with them old Greek and Latin manuscripts previously unknown in the West. Had these two momentous events not occurred, Tyndale's great work would not have been possible.

Like Wycliffe before him, Tyndale was an accomplished scholar, educated at Oxford and possibly also at Cambridge. He was proficient in eight languages, with particular skill in Hebrew, Greek and Latin, all of which were essential for accurate Bible translation. He was regarded by many as England's best Greek scholar of the time. But Tyndale was unhappy with the Oxford scene – especially its emphasis on Greek and Roman authors and the philosophical rationalisation that undergirded the study of theology. Alister McGrath points out that for Tyndale “theology was worthy of the name only when it took its lead directly from the Bible”.²³ Moreover, in the early 1500s Oxford was still intent on eliminating the Wycliffite ‘heresy’.

Reacting against all this, and the sorry state of the English clergy that had changed little since Wycliffe's day, Tyndale's life work began to take shape in his mind. After university, Tyndale found employment for a short time in the home of Sir John Walsh of Little Sodbury in Gloucestershire as tutor to the Walsh's two young sons. While there, Tyndale's conviction of the pressing need for a Bible in the English language found expression. In a discussion with a Gloucestershire priest whose knowledge of the Bible was minimal, Tyndale uttered the famous words that have come down to us across 400 years: “If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth a plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost”. History testifies to the unquestionable fulfilment of this compelling vision.

Tyndale had wanted to undertake his work in England, with the blessing of the Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall. It was, perhaps, a naive hope given that his initial approach to Tunstall took place in 1523, thirteen years before the formal beginning of the English Reformation. Whilst a moderate One, Episode 3.

23 Alister McGrath, *In The Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001), 69.

and a scholar himself, Tunstall was also one of the leaders of the prevailing Catholic Church. Tyndale had few remaining options. He left England and went first to Germany, arriving in Cologne in 1525. While there, he finished the work of translation and the printing of the New Testament began. But being discovered by his enemies, Tyndale and his friends were forced to leave, taking everything with them to Worms. There the printing of the entire New Testament in English was completed by February 1526.

Perhaps the most important fact about Tyndale's New Testament is that it was translated directly from the best available Greek manuscripts of the day, and not from the Latin Vulgate. It was not a translation of a translation but a translation from the original – the first in the history of the English Bible. It was as true to the original as possible, presented in gripping but straightforward English. McGrath states that there is evidence to suggest that many people used it to learn to read “as well as to learn about the Christian faith”.²⁴ F. F. Bruce noted Tyndale's “honesty, sincerity and scrupulous integrity”, commenting on the “magical simplicity of phrase” that gave his work an “authority” that has lasted until today.²⁵

Some 3000 copies were printed in a small, pocket-sized edition that was soon available in London and other places in southern and eastern England. It had to be smuggled into the country in bales of cloth or bags of flour, or concealed in the false bottoms of wine casks. The translation was immediately popular – and immediately banned. Efforts to suppress and destroy it were intense. Boats were requisitioned to guard the south-eastern shores of England to prevent it being landed in the country. W. R. Cooper tells us that even listening to it being read was punishable by death. Many copies, perhaps most, were burnt on the orders of Bishop Tunstall. Only three copies are known to have survived. One of them, complete but for the title page, is now in the British Library, bought from Bristol Baptist College for a reported one million pounds.

Two leading authorities, Alister McGrath and David Daniell, both describe the printing of Tyndale's New Testament as a “landmark”. McGrath says it was a landmark “in the history of the English Bible” and Daniell calls it a landmark in “the history of all English-speaking peoples”.²⁶ It was, of course, both – and more. It eventually played a major role in shaping the Authorised Version and through it the social and religious history of the English-speaking world. It helped chart the course of Western civilisation for at least three centuries. Its first arrival in England has been described as

24 *Ibid.*, 78.

25 Bruce, *History of the Bible*, 44

26 McGrath, 1; David Daniell in W. R. Cooper, ed., *New Testament, 1526* (London: British Library, 2000), v.

“arguably the most important single event . . . of the English Reformation”.²⁷ It is equally arguable that it was the catalyst for the spread of Protestantism throughout the entire English-speaking world, thus impacting the lives of untold millions for nearly five centuries. Yet it had almost been wiped out within a few months of its appearance.

This remarkable book was so popular and demand so great that supplies of the first edition quickly ran out. Soon unauthorised pirated editions were being printed in Europe and shipped to England. Two such editions of about 5000 copies each were hastily printed in Antwerp, but proved to be full of errors. And there were others, including at least one unauthorised edition printed in England. In 1534 Tyndale decided to publish a revised edition himself, which he did, in even better English than the original. His name was added to the title page and many improvements were made in the text. Another printing was issued in 1535. This edition was, in Daniell’s words, “the glory of his lifework” and the New Testament “as English speakers have known it until the last few decades of the twentieth century”.²⁸ It was the text of this edition that eventually found its way almost verbatim into the Authorised Version.

Many have written about Tyndale’s New Testament through the years, reminding successive generations of its immense significance. The following comment by Dr. Cooper, from his introduction to the British Library’s reprint of the 1526 Tyndale New Testament, is as good a summary as any:

Its impact on arrival in England was immediate, and almost impossible to calculate in terms of spiritual revival and political upheaval. Every effort was made to suppress and destroy the ‘perfidious’ work, but to no avail. The more it was suppressed, the more it was read. And the more it was read, the more people’s eyes were opened, and the sooner was brought about the downfall in this land of the mediaeval Papacy, and the pretensions of a hopelessly corrupt church.²⁹

If influence is to be judged by popularity and readership, we should remember that between 1526 and 1566 at least 40 editions of Tyndale’s New Testament were printed, with an estimated circulation of more than 50,000 copies.

Mention must also be made of Tyndale’s important work on the Old Testament, since his original aim had been to translate the entire Bible into English. By 1530, working from the Hebrew text, he had completed translating the Pentateuch, again succeeding in putting it into language that could easily be understood. Compared to some other translations, to read Tyndale’s Old Testament has been described as like “seeing the road ahead through a wind-

27 Cooper, *New Testament*, ix.

28 Daniell, *Tyndale*, 331.

29 Cooper, *New Testament*, ix.

screen that has been suddenly wiped".³⁰

Tyndale's Pentateuch was published in 1530 and again in 1534. By the time of his death in 1536 he had translated at least ten more books of the Old Testament. Most of this also went straight into the Authorised Version. Bishop Westcott wrote in 1868 that Tyndale directly contributed to the Authorised Version "half of the Old Testament, as well as almost the whole of the New".³¹ There can be little doubt that Tyndale was indeed "the father of the English Bible".

But it was all accomplished at a terrible price. While still working on the Old Testament in Antwerp in 1535, Tyndale was betrayed to the authorities by English spies. He was arrested and imprisoned in Vilvorde castle near Brussels. After more than a year in prison, he was eventually tried and condemned to death as a heretic. Dr. Daniell tersely notes that "in netting Tyndale the heresy-hunters had their largest catch".³² In October, 1536, after a perfunctory trial, Tyndale was brought to the stake, bound and then strangled. His body was then burned, but his last words have persisted through more than four centuries: "Lord, open the king of England's eyes".

Tyndale would have been amazed at how soon that fervent prayer was answered. Within a year of Tyndale's death, Henry VIII's eyes had indeed been opened, his mind changed and two versions of the English Bible officially approved. The course of English history, and ultimately that of other English-speaking peoples, had been radically and irreversibly changed.

Other Early English Translations

Tyndale's New Testament precipitated something of an avalanche. Between 1535 and 1611, less than eighty years, at least seven new complete translations of the Bible were produced in English, most of them also printed in England. They all played an important part in the developing story of the English Bible and together they are undeniable evidence of great interest, great activity, and a new and more enlightened England.

Prior to Tyndale's death, one of his disciples and helpers, Miles Coverdale, later Bishop of Exeter, another competent and reformer, produced a translation of the Bible in 1535 while exiled in Europe. **Coverdale's Bible** was the first complete printed English Bible. It was, however, a secondary translation, based on Luther's German Bible and the Latin Vulgate as well as all Tyndale's Old Testament translations and his New Testament. It was printed in Europe and dedicated to Henry VIII. After taking advice, Henry approved Coverdale's work. Although this Bible was never 'author-

30 Daniell, *Tyndale*, 312.

31 B. F. Westcott, *The History of the English Bible* (London: Macmillan, 1927), 158.

32 Daniell, *Tyndale*, 375.

ised' by royal decree, it was officially licensed. Coverdale's English was often smoother than that of Tyndale and, for the first time, the books of the Apocrypha were separated from the rest of the Old Testament. A note was included, explaining that they did not appear in the Hebrew Scriptures and therefore did not have the same authority.

Just two years later, in 1537, **Matthew's Bible** was published in London, although probably printed in Antwerp. 'Matthew' was a pseudonym for the translator John Rogers, another Tyndale supporter. His Bible consisted of Tyndale's Pentateuch and other Old Testament translations, the remainder of the Old Testament from Coverdale's Bible, and Tyndale's New Testament. The bulk of Matthew's Bible was thus the work of Tyndale, a point not to be missed, for it later turned out to be the foundation of all later English versions. It has been calculated that 65 per cent of Matthew's entire Bible was straight from Tyndale, and all later Protestant translations were essentially revisions of this text. It was licensed by Henry VIII and was circulating in England within a year of Tyndale's death. Rogers, however, was to meet a similar fate as Tyndale, and became the first victim of persecution under the Catholic Queen Mary. He was burnt at the stake at Smithfield in London in 1555.

In 1539, Richard Taverner, another noted Greek scholar, published what was basically a minor revision of Matthew's Bible with only a few changes. **Taverner's Bible** introduced some new Saxon words into the English text, though his New Testament remained essentially Tyndale and his Old Testament a combination of Tyndale and Coverdale. Its influence on later versions was minimal and some accounts of the English Bible do not even include Taverner's translation. Taverner spent some time in the Tower of London for his work on the Bible but he survived the persecutions under Mary and was later favoured by Elizabeth I.

In that same year, a more substantial and influential Bible appeared in England. It was known as **The Great Bible**, since it was larger than any previously printed English Bible. It carried on its title page the announcement "This Bible is appointed to the use of the churches", meaning that it was authorised by Henry VIII to be read in church as well as privately. It was intended that a copy be placed in every church in the land. Wherever this happened, people flocked to see the Bible publicly displayed and to hear it read. It was the first Bible many of them had ever seen, and it was also eagerly bought and read at home.

Described as both "evangelical" and "scholarly", the Great Bible went through six printings before the end of 1541, with an extensive revision in 1540 and many later editions and reprints. Its translation and production was overseen by Coverdale and was a revision of Matthew's Bible, which in

turn had been a revision of Tyndale's work, although it excluded most of the controversial strongly Protestant notes that had been included in Matthew's Bible. Toward the end of Henry's reign, an anti-Protestant reaction set in, and more Bibles were burnt. The Great Bible was the last of the English Bibles printed before the return of Catholicism under Queen Mary.

During the years of suppression and persecution, particularly those of Mary's reign (1553-58), hundreds of English believers sought refuge in Continental Europe. Many of them found a temporary home in Geneva, a strong Protestant centre. It was there that the next English Bible was prepared, translated by William Whittingham. The complete **Geneva Bible** was first published in 1560 and rapidly became popular throughout England, where it was the most widely read Bible for the next fifty years. It ran to one hundred and forty printings between 1560 and 1644. It was also read widely in Scotland, where the parliament made it compulsory for all householders with adequate income to buy a copy. It too was based largely on Tyndale and also the Great Bible, revised with particular attention to those parts of the Old Testament that Tyndale had not translated.

The Geneva Bible was the first English Bible to divide the text into verses. It soon became known as the 'Breeches Bible' on account of its rendering of Genesis 3:7, where it was recorded that Adam and Eve sewed together fig leaves "and made themselves breeches". Its most distinctive features were the copious marginal notes of a strongly Calvinistic nature, which greatly influenced the rise and development of English Puritanism. Of this Gerald Hammond wrote, "Of all English versions the Geneva Bible had probably the greatest political significance, in its preparing a generation of radical Puritans to challenge, with the Word of God, their tyrant rulers".³³ He had in mind the long struggle against the Church/State alliance, the English Civil Wars, the eventual overthrow of royal and ecclesiastical domination and, perhaps even the founding of the American colonies.

Although popular with the people, the Geneva Bible was not regarded as suitable for the churches on account of its marginal notes. As Elizabeth's reign began to develop, a new version was deemed necessary to replace the Great Bible that had been authorised for this purpose. Under the guidance of Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury, and with the assistance of the English bishops, **The Bishops' Bible** was first published in 1568, and in 1571 all parish churches were ordered to obtain a copy. It remained the official English version until the introduction of the Authorised Version in 1611. The result was one Bible for church – the Bishops' Bible, and another Bible for home and the people – the Geneva Bible. The latter remained in

33 Gerald Hammond, *The Making of the English Bible* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1982), 136.

print until 1644, long after the last edition of the Bishops' Bible had been printed in 1602.

Apart from following the Geneva Bible in dividing the text into verses, the Bishops' Bible was based entirely on the Great Bible. Parker gave instructions to the translators to follow that version closely, except "where it varieth manifestly from the Hebrew of Greek original".³⁴ There were relatively few changes of any significance in the text but the new Bishops' Bible contained only a few marginal notes, the offending Calvinism of the Geneva Bible having been removed. One interesting feature of the Bishops' Bible was that the New Testament was printed on thicker paper, since it was believed that it would be read more than the Old Testament – "because it should be more occupied", to use the quaint words of Archbishop Parker's instructions. It has been suggested this directive completely misunderstood the spirit and tradition of English Bible reading, and this is probably correct.

All the English Bibles surveyed to this point were Protestant Bibles. They were of the Reformation and for the Reformation. However, by the end of the 16th century, with Protestantism well established in the land and Catholicism on the defensive, the Catholic Church recognised the need for a Bible acceptable to those of the Catholic faith, "free from the heretical renderings in the earlier English Bibles".³⁵ The result was the **Rheims-Douai Bible**, the New Testament translated first by scholars from the English Catholic College in Douai and published in Rheims in 1582. The Old Testament was based on the Latin Vulgate rather than from the original language manuscripts and retained much of the old Latin vocabulary of the mediaeval church.

The Rheims-Douai Version was intended to reflect the old faith and remained in use among English Catholics for three centuries. The article in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* on this Bible refers to the "dogmatic intentions of its authors", while another writer points out that the marginal notes rather than the text "made the book so strongly sectarian".³⁶ In its favour was the fact that the Vulgate was based on Greek manuscripts older than any available to the translators of any of the other English versions, including the Authorised Version. A. W. Pollard concluded nevertheless that it was "a devoted attempt by the Jesuits to win back England to the faith".³⁷ He was most likely correct, even though the Rheims-Douai Bible

34 Greenslade, ed., *Cambridge History of the Bible*, 3, 159.

35 F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds., *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford: OUP, 3rd edit., 1997), under 'Douai-Rheims Bible'.

36 Elizabeth Eisenhart, ed., *A Ready Reference History of the English Bible* (New York: American Bible Society, 1976), 25.

37 A. W. Pollard, 'The Earlier English Translations' in *The Holy Bible, King James Version* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 25.

did not enjoy wide circulation at any time during its long life.

The Authorised Version

When James I came to the throne in 1603, it was evident that no existing version of the English Bible was acceptable to all parties in the English Church. A new version was needed which perhaps would bring unity to the Church and the nation. The decision to proceed was made in 1604 at the famous Hampton Court conference, on a proposal by Dr. John Reynolds, the Puritan president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. It was endorsed by King James, who was a keen and accomplished Bible student and who firmly believed that earlier versions were inadequate since they were not in all respects true to the original languages.

Work eventually began in 1607, in accordance with a process that was to set the pattern for future major translations. It was to be undertaken by a large and representative team of well-qualified scholars, rather than as previously by one or two individuals. In this way bias would be eliminated or countered and the objective of the enterprise assured. This team set out to produce a version of the Bible that was moderate, leaning neither to the left nor the right, neither to Puritanism nor Catholicism.

James himself specified that “the best learned in both universities” should make up the translation team. Accordingly, most of the leading biblical and oriental scholars from Cambridge and Oxford were appointed, together with a few suitably qualified laymen. There were in total 47 (perhaps 48), Anglican and Puritan, carefully chosen for their skills and all “notably competent”, in the words of one record. They were divided into six groups, each responsible for a section of the Bible, with their work to be submitted for final approval to a team of 12, composed of the two leading members of each of the six teams. The final revision was to be approved by the king and his council.

The six groups were to work in accordance with guidelines drawn up by Richard Bancroft, the new Archbishop of Canterbury, and approved by the king. The first and most important rule stipulated that the new version was to be based on the Bishops’ Bible, “as little altered” from it “as the truth of the original will permit”.³⁸ In other words, it was to be a revision rather than a new translation, a fact frequently forgotten. Reference to earlier English versions was permitted, even encouraged. Rule 14 specified which of the previous English versions might be consulted and all were named, except that of Taverner. Reference to available original Hebrew and Greek texts was also encouraged. German and French translations could also be consulted, and the influence of the Rheims New Testament can also be detected.

38 Cited in McGrath, *In The Beginning*, 173.

The guidelines further laid down that existing chapter and verse divisions should be retained, only marginal notes that explained difficult Hebrew and Greek words should be included and the widest possible consultation should take place at every stage in order to ensure the accuracy of the text and its faithfulness to the original languages. The outcome of this well-structured and well-supervised process was exactly what had been intended – a better version of the English Bible than any previously issued. When work on the Revised Version began in 1881, the revisers wrote of the Authorised Version:

We have had to study this great version carefully and minutely, line by line, and the longer we have been engaged upon it the more we have learned to admire its simplicity, its dignity, its power, its happy turns of expression, its general accuracy, and, we must not fail to add, the music of its cadences and the felicities of its rhythm.³⁹

The passing of time has not altered the essential accuracy of this generous assessment.

The Authorised Version was what is now known as a ‘formal’ translation, the most distinguished in a long line of such translations that has continued until the present day. Wherever possible, it attempted to ensure that every word in the original was translated by an equivalent English word. This word-for-word approach requires careful balancing. While the meaning of the original language takes precedence, the receptor language must also be accurate and intelligible. Words in the translation that were not in the original were generally shown in italics in the translated text. One writer observes:

Such understanding is found in the King James Bible, which retains the word order of the original to a remarkable extent, while still making allowances for the resulting text to be, in the first place, recognisably English and in the second, intelligible.⁴⁰

An important result of this way of translating is that a large number of Hebrew and Greek words and idioms have passed into the English language, and thence into all succeeding English literature. It is just one way in which the Authorised Version has influenced the development of the Western world.

We have now returned to the starting point of this chapter – the influence of the Bible in general and of the Authorised Version in particular. All who have seriously considered the story of the Authorised Version in any depth have commented on this amazing influence. Quotations could be multiplied to prove this point. Let it simply be noted here again that this version of the English Bible made a significant impact on the development

39 Preface to the *Revised Version*, 1881.

40 McGrath, *In The Beginning*, 252.

of Western civilisation. When we acknowledge the Authorised Version, we acknowledge who we are and where we have come from, perhaps without even knowing it.

A few tributes, then, of many which could be cited. The American scholar, Laura Wild, called the Authorised Version ‘our English classic’ and observed,

Out of the fire came this book, so simple and direct, so beautiful and resonant in rhythm, so majestic and inspiring in tone that as literature it is said even to surpass the original, and no one influence has been so great in the life of English-speaking people, religiously, morally, socially, politically, as has this version.⁴¹

The twentieth-century English scholar, Sir Frederic Kenyon, to whom all later biblical scholars owe such an immense debt, wrote of the Authorised Version,

It has been the Bible, not merely of public use, not merely of one sect or party, not even of a single country, but of the whole nation and of every English-speaking country on the face of the globe. It has been the literature of millions who have read little else, it has been the guide of conduct to men and women of every class in life and of every rank in learning and education. . . . It was the work, not of one man, nor of one age, but of many labourers, of diverse and even opposing views, over a period of ninety years. It was watered with the blood of martyrs, and its slow growth gave time for the casting off of all imperfections and for the full accomplishment of its destiny as the Bible of the English nation.⁴²

Alister McGrath has recently put it more succinctly, “Our culture has been enriched by the King James Bible. Sadly, we shall never see its equal, or even its like, again”.⁴³

Postscript: Beyond 1611

It might be thought that what has been said to this point leads to the conclusion that the Authorised Version is the best – perhaps the only – acceptable English translation of the Bible. Indeed, as an earlier writer noted, the Authorised Version has “become so sanctified by time and use that to many people it has come to be regarded as *the Bible*”. He discerningly points out this view reflects an attitude “comparable to that taken toward the Latin Vulgate by the mediaeval church”.⁴⁴ So,

41 Laura Wild, *The Romance of the English Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 1929), 195-196.

42 Kenyon, *Our Bible*, 234.

43 McGrath, *In The Beginning*, 310.

44 H. G. May, *Our English Bible in the Making* (Westminster, CO: Westminster, 1952), 48.

significant and influential though the Authorised Version unquestionably was, we do not intend to suggest either that it brought to an end the history of the English Bible or that it alone constitutes the available Word of God, “the original Bible” which, if “good enough for the apostle Paul”, should also be good enough for us. There are at least three reasons why this is not so.

Firstly, despite the great care taken in its production, there were many mistakes and errors in the 1611 Authorised Version. A revised edition was printed in 1613 that contained more than 300 corrections to the original edition. Further corrected revisions were published in 1629, 1638 and 1657, and new revisions continued to appear. By the mid-18th century extensive variations in the many printed editions “had reached the proportions of a scandal”,⁴⁵ resulting in two further major revisions, one in 1762 at Cambridge and another in 1769 at Oxford. The latter reflected more than 24,000 corrections to the 1611 edition and came to be the standard text, more than 150 years after the original.

Most corrections were of minor a nature but the 1769 edition also corrected the so-called ‘Wicked Bible’ of 1631, which had inadvertently printed the seventh commandment as ‘Thou shalt commit adultery’. A 1717 edition was known as the ‘Vinegar Bible’ because in Luke 20 it mistakenly used the word ‘vinegar’ instead of ‘vineyard’. Many other mistakes are on record, a few more substantial than either of the two just mentioned. New manuscript discoveries and a better understanding of biblical history, geography and social customs still continue to throw light on the format and meaning of the original Hebrew and Greek texts.

Secondly, the Authorised Version of 1611 contained the Apocrypha, and continued to do so until 1782, when it was excluded from an edition published in America and authorised by Congress. The apocryphal books were originally intermingled with the books of the Old Testament in the Latin Vulgate and were not separated from it until Coverdale’s Bible in 1535. This distinction between Old Testament and Apocrypha reflected the views of most of the Protestant Reformers both in Europe and in England that the books of the Apocrypha were not of equal status with the books of the Old Testament, since

⁴⁵ www.wikipedia.org, ‘Authorised King James Version’, see ‘Standard Text of 1769’.

they were not part of the original Hebrew Scriptures. Even now, however, the Apocrypha is retained in some English versions such as the New English Bible, reflecting the continuing influence of the Authorised Version as a theological *via media* between the extremes of mediaeval Catholicism on one hand and the more radical Puritanism of the later English Reformation. Today, most Bibles from the Protestant tradition do not contain the Apocrypha.

A third and more practical reason for avoiding the mistake of regarding the Authorised Version as the one and only true translation of the Bible is the fact that English is still a language in flux. Old words are constantly disappearing from use and new words are constantly being added. As McGrath says, “The English of 1611 is not the English of the twenty-first century”.⁴⁶ In fact, by 1611 the Authorised Version was already linguistically obsolete in some respects. If the Bible is indeed the Word of God, then that Word must be communicated in the language of the people. This principle has been understood by all translators of the Bible since Wycliffe’s time and it still holds true today. It explains in part why there have been so many new translations in recent times and why they continue to roll from presses and publishing houses throughout the English-speaking world.

While the influence of the Authorised Version can never be diminished and should never be forgotten, its meaning can often be clarified with the help of more recent translations. Those who wish to read and understand God’s word from its pages can, of course, still do so. Others find recent translations more easy to read and understand. They, too, have access to the Word of God. That the Bible is available today in so many translations and versions is a great advantage, and that in most parts of the world we are free to read it is one of the great benefits of living in a democratic society. And the fact remains that no other book has had such a widespread impact on world history or has influenced for good the lives of so many people in so many countries as the Bible, especially through its many English-language versions.

46 McGrath, *In The Beginning*, 309.