



Tyndale was the first to translate the New Testament from Greek and parts of the Old Testament from Hebrew into English.

Revisiting William Tyndale, Father of the English Bible

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The year 2011 marks the four hundredth anniversary of the translation and publication of the King James Bible (the KJV). While we applaud the work of the King James translators, their task was made easier through the labors and sacrifices of earlier Bible translators. Indeed, besides using the Greek and Hebrew texts of the Old and New Testaments, the King James translators used earlier Bible translations to assist them in their work. One of their primary sources was the New Testament and partial Old Testament translations of William Tyndale. Indeed, Tyndale was the first to translate the New Testament from the Greek text and parts of the Old Testament from the Hebrew text into English. The King James translators found his 1534 New Testament to be an excellent translation and incorporated most of it into their own work. Thus the KJV translators were deeply indebted to Tyndale for his groundbreaking work, and it is with that indebtedness to Tyndale that we revisit his history, celebrate his life and works, and pause to express gratitude for his contributions and sacrifices in making God's word available in English to millions of readers.

William Tyndale

In the early part of the sixteenth century, many people throughout England hungered for increased freedom and prosperity. While the privileged few enjoyed the comforts of wealth and ease, many longed for greater freedom of religious thought and action. These seekers of truth yearned to read and study the Bible in English rather than the official Latin text used by the Roman Catholic Church. But the church, always distrustful of new ideas or practices that challenged tradition, had subjected the translation and even the reading of the Bible in English to ecclesiastical approval. The church's rigid policy was not idle chatter. Those daring to challenge the official stance were fined, imprisoned, or even executed.

Despite the Catholic Church's rigid stance on Bible translations, some were not intimidated from reading biblical texts in English. Nonconformists secretly gathered to read Wycliffe and his associates' fourteenth-century English translation of the Bible. Some readers had enjoyed access to Wycliffe's elaborately handwritten Bible for over a century, but those living in the sixteenth century found the Middle English translation archaic and difficult to read. Understandably, these people desired a Bible translation in the English of their day, or even better, a translation of the original Hebrew and Greek texts into common English.

Reformers such as Martin Luther argued that the Bible, not papal authority, represented God's authoritative voice on earth. The false practices and doctrines of the Catholic Church, they argued, resulted from the church's refusal to acknowledge the Bible as the highest authority for Christians. While proclaiming the authority of the biblical word, Luther translated the Bible into German from the Greek and Hebrew texts available to him. Perhaps unwittingly, Luther encouraged other Reformers to begin translating the Bible into their native tongues.

One of the most important voices amongst these Reformers during the early sixteenth century was William Tyndale. Like Wycliffe and Luther, Tyndale vigorously challenged papal authority and proclaimed that people should have the freedom to read the Bible in their own language. He believed an English Bible would challenge Catholic doctrines and practices in England. His reasoning for an English Bible was simple:

Christ commandeth to search the scriptures (John 5). Though that miracles bear record unto his doctrine, yet desired he no faith to be given either unto his doctrine or unto his miracles, without record of the scripture. When Paul preached (Acts 17),

the other searched the scriptures daily, whether they were as he alleged them. Why shall not I likewise, whether it be the scripture that thou [the Catholic Church] allegest? Yea why shall I not see the scripture and the circumstances and what goeth before and after, that I may know whether thine interpretation be the right sense, or whether thou jugglest and drawest the scripture violently unto thy carnal and fleshly purpose? Or whether thou be about to teach me or to deceive me?¹

It is not surprising, then, that Tyndale's greatest accomplishments were his English translations of the New Testament and parts of the Old Testament. His groundbreaking 1526 New Testament was the first printed English edition translated from Greek. His translations became a standard for later Bible translations, including the 1611 King James Bible. Linguistic scholars who compared the King James Version with Tyndale's translations found that "nearly 84 percent of the New Testament and close to 76 percent of the portions of the Old Testament that Tyndale translated have been transmitted to the KJV just as he left them."²

In some cases, Tyndale coined new English words and phrases to capture the meanings of some of the Hebrew and Greek words. We are indebted to Tyndale for phrases like "eat, drink, and be merry" (Luke 12:19), "fight the good fight" (1 Timothy 6:12), "seek, and ye shall find" (Matthew 7:7), "the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13), and "no man can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24). Tyndale also gave us words such as *Jehovah*, *Passover*, and *scapegoat*. These linguistic gems have endured the test of time and continue in use today. Because his translations rest at the heart of later Bible translations, he has been titled "the Father of the English Bible."

We cannot fully appreciate the heritage of the King James Bible without reviewing the life of Tyndale, including his early life and education, his Bible translations, a sampling of his Reformation theology, and his betrayal and martyrdom.

Sixteenth-Century England and the Roman Catholic Church

At the beginning of the sixteenth century in England, both king and country were Catholic. Even though regal figures like King Henry VIII chaffed at the pope's invasive authority, Rome's power still dominated England. The church possessed a wide range of traditional privileges and immunities granted by the English government. These privileges produced great wealth for the papacy, which owned as much as one-fifth of English lands.³

Those who faithfully attended their parish church each week, participated in Mass, confessed their sins to the priest, accepted penance, obtained

indulgences for their shortcomings, and sought blessings through prayers to long-dead Saints. Each week, Latin (the official language of the church) echoed throughout the naves and aisles of churches and cathedrals. Some church authorities believed the use of Latin endowed church rituals and practices with a sense of mystery, of awe, and of the divine presence. That may have been the case for some, but for many parishioners the use of Latin, including the Latin text of the Bible, made church rituals incomprehensible.

Despite the pleas for an English translation of the Bible, the Roman Catholic Church refused to amend their policies regarding Bible translations. Those who read from an English Bible, some church officials argued, would become less dependent upon the clergy for spiritual guidance, be easily misled by their personal (and false) interpretations of the scriptures, and be more willing to disagree with church practices not explicitly supported by the text of the Bible. Any Bible translated outside the jurisdiction of the church was considered the work of heretics. Thus church authorities obsessed over ways to repress unsanctioned Bible translations.

Although authorities tried to steady the course and squelch the translation of a vernacular Bible, they found this impossible due to a number of extraordinary events. Two of these events were of paramount importance. The first was the Renaissance and its emphasis on “new learning.” Universities across Europe added courses on classical literature, history, science, and languages to accompany the traditional diet of theology and philosophy. This inevitably produced scholars who could read classical manuscripts in the original Greek. Many of these scholars, known as humanists, enthusiastically shared a passion for the revival of Greek and biblical Hebrew and an increased knowledge of Latin.⁴ A number of these humanists—such as Desiderius Erasmus, a Dutch theologian and scholar who could read and write Greek—taught at one of the two major universities in England: Oxford and Cambridge. Tyndale was a beneficiary of Erasmus’s earlier work to establish courses in Greek; it was at one or both of these universities that Tyndale mastered Greek, enabling him to produce a Greek-to-English translation of the New Testament.

A second influence that led to the publication of an English Bible was the work of Martin Luther. A former Augustinian friar, Luther adamantly rejected many of the traditional teachings of the Catholic Church. He staunchly affirmed that salvation was a gift made possible through the grace of Christ alone, rather than the mediation of church ritual and liturgy. Luther’s message alarmed church leaders, and for good reason. For centuries,

the Catholic Church had taught that Christ dispensed his divine grace only to those who participated in the seven sacraments.

If, as Luther maintained, Christ bestowed his grace freely upon those who simply believed, what would happen to the church's monopoly on salvation? Luther's translations further complicated matters for the church, since Germans could now read the Bible in their native tongue and rely upon its promises of salvation through faith in Christ without the mediation of a priest or the church. Indeed, Luther's message emboldened many across Europe to protest the traditions and practices of the Roman Catholic Church. And if that were not enough, ardent proponents of the new *sola scriptura* (by scripture alone) and *sola fide* (by faith alone) factions began smuggling Luther's writings into England, where people of similar mindsets read and studied them. Luther's writings undoubtedly inspired men and women to push for religious reform in England. His writings may have also fueled Tyndale's passion for increased religious autonomy, which included a vernacular translation of the Bible.

Tyndale's Early Life and Education

History is nearly silent about Tyndale's birth, early childhood, and adolescent years. Some sources indicate he was born "about the borders of Wales," in the English county of Gloucester, in 1495.⁵ William had two brothers, John and Edward, who supported the Reformation and Martin Luther's teachings.⁶ Their sympathies for the Reformation conceivably influenced young William even before he attended school in Oxford at the age of twelve. By 1515, he had completed his bachelor and master of arts degrees. The grueling years at Oxford provided Tyndale with a solid background in grammar, logic, and rhetoric—skills that would facilitate his efforts to translate the Bible.⁷ John Foxe, the sixteenth-century historian, also noted that Tyndale "increased as well in the knowledge of tongues,"⁸ learning Greek, Latin, French,⁹ and perhaps other languages as well. As his language skills increased, Tyndale probably devoted as much time as he could to reading the Greek New Testament, and in all likelihood, sharing what he learned with schoolmates:

[Tyndale was] brought up from a child in the University of Oxford, where he, by long continuance, increased as well in the knowledge of tongues, and other liberal arts, as especially in the knowledge of the Scriptures, whereunto his mind was singularly addicted; insomuch that he, lying then in Magdalen hall, read privily to certain students and fellows of Magdalen college some parcel of divinity; instructing them in the knowledge and truth of the Scriptures. His manners and conversation being

correspondent to the same, were such, that all they that knew him, reputed him to be a man of most virtuous disposition, and of life unspotted.¹⁰

After completing the master of arts, Tyndale was obligated to teach for one year at Oxford, after which he moved to Cambridge, where he “likewise made his abode a certain space, . . . being now further ripened in the knowledge of God’s Word.”¹¹ The move to Cambridge was a logical choice: it was smaller than Oxford, less conservative, and more importantly, home to a number of pro-Reformation scholars such as Robert Barnes, Miles Coverdale, John Frith, and Thomas Bilney. These men met at the Cambridge White Horse Inn to discuss new theological ideas, including Luther’s controversial writings. Indeed, many of these Cambridge men, who were later called evangelicals, were the engines driving the English Reformation in the early part of the sixteenth century. Their rejection of church practices, their message of salvation through Christ alone, and their insistence that an English translation of the Bible be made available would ire Catholics and eventually cost many of these people their lives. William Tyndale would be one of them.

From Cambridge to Gloucestershire

Following his days at Cambridge, Tyndale returned to the rolling hills of Gloucester to tutor the children of Sir John Walsh, a prominent and distinguished resident. Fired with Reformation zeal and his unique perspectives of the scriptures, Tyndale expounded his religious views to the local clergy. These lively discussions often took place around the Walshes’ dinner table:

There resorted to him [Walsh] many times sundry abbots, deans, archdeacons, with divers other doctors, and great beneficed men; who there, together with Master Tyndale sitting at the same table, did use many times to enter communication, and talk of learned men, as of Luther and of Erasmus; also of divers other controversies and questions upon the Scripture.

Then Master Tyndale, as he was learned and well practiced in God’s matters, spared not to show unto them simply and plainly his judgment, and when they at any time did vary from Tyndale in opinions, he would show them in the book, and lay plainly before them the open and manifest places of the Scriptures, to confute their errors and confirm his sayings. And thus continued they for a certain season, reasoning and contending together divers times, till at length they waxed weary, and bare a secret grudge in their hearts against him.¹²

Timidity was not one of Tyndale’s weaknesses. Abruptness evidently was. He shared his religious views with the local clergy and, to their consternation, supported his doctrine with scriptural text and sound reasoning. But

he also made enemies—those who bore “a secret grudge” against him, and who evidently accused him before church authorities.¹³ In time, the bishop’s chancellor summoned Tyndale to his home, accused him of heresy, threatened and reviled him, and treated him “as though he had been a dog.”¹⁴ In the end, however, nothing came of the charges.

Despite his encounter with the bishop’s chancellor, Tyndale refused to alter his convictions or mediate his strong feelings about the necessity of a vernacular Bible. Tyndale voiced these feelings during a conversation with a local priest, who replied that it would be better to have the pope’s laws than to have God’s laws as found in the scriptures.¹⁵ Defiantly, and with great conviction, Tyndale made his now-famous declaration, “I defie the Pope, and all his laws. . . . If God spare my lyfe ere many yeares, I will cause a boye that [driveth] the plough, shall knowe more of the Scripture then thou doest.”¹⁶ And how would the common, uneducated English plowboy come to know the Bible as well as, if not better than, the clergy? Tyndale’s answer was through a readable English translation.

London

Translating the Bible from Greek and Hebrew into English would be a daunting task. It would require language skills, focus, and drive. Tyndale possessed the latter two and was constantly improving his linguistic abilities in Greek and later in Hebrew. But a serious problem shadowed the project: how could he devote huge blocks of time translating the Bible while also supporting himself? Tyndale needed a patron—someone to endow him with money, resources, and a roof over his head. More importantly, he needed permission from an ecclesiastical authority to proceed with the project, since a law drafted in 1408 required explicit permission from church authorities to translate or even read the Bible in English.

After consulting with John Walsh, Tyndale determined to seek the patronage and ecclesiastical support of Cuthbert Tunstall, bishop of London. Tunstall seemed a likely choice. By all accounts, he was a forward-thinking man: a fellow Oxford graduate who studied Greek, mathematics, law, and, more importantly, a humanist scholar.¹⁷

After arriving in London in July 1523, Tyndale arranged a meeting at Tunstall’s home. Tunstall was cordial enough but unwilling to support Tyndale’s proposal or grant him permission to begin the translation. Tyndale described the interview in this short narrative: “Whereupon my lord

answered me, his house was full, he had more than he could well find, and advised me to seek in London, where he said I could not lack a service. . . . [I] understood at the last . . . that there was no room in my lord of London's palace to translate the new testament."¹⁸

Clearly disheartened by Tunstall's rejection, Tyndale preached in London and scoured the city for financial backing during the next year, until he "understood, not only that there was no room in the bishop's house for him to translate the New Testament, but also that there was no place to do it in all England."¹⁹

Germany and the 1525 Cologne Manuscript

Tyndale left England and arrived in Germany sometime around April or May 1524. It is likely he never saw his family or his homeland again, a price he willingly paid to fulfill his oath to provide the Bible to the plowboy.

Following his arrival in Germany, it appears Tyndale traveled to the university town of Wittenberg—home to Martin Luther—where he resided for the better part of a year.²⁰ Did he attend the university and study Hebrew? How much time did he spend with Luther or his associates? These questions and others regarding Tyndale's Wittenberg experience remain unanswered. One thing seems certain, however, while in Wittenberg, Tyndale became acquainted with William Roye, a friar from England and a recent graduate of Wittenberg University.²¹ A competent linguist, Roye offered to assist Tyndale in translating the New Testament, which they probably commenced while still in Wittenberg.

Tyndale and Roye toiled long hours using Erasmus's Greek edition of the New Testament, the *Textus Receptus*, as their primary source. Erasmus' translation had its shortcomings, but it was one of the few Greek collations available. How long the translation took and how much of it they were able to complete in Wittenberg is uncertain. Sometime in August 1525, Tyndale and Roye moved to Cologne and arranged with Peter Quentel, the renowned German printer, to publish their New Testament manuscript.²²

The first pages to roll from Quentel's press contained Tyndale's prologue, which begins with this straightforward statement: "I haue here translated (brethern and sisters moost dere and tenderly beloved in Christ) the newe Testament for youre spirituall edyfyinge, consolacion, and solas."²³

Because Cologne was loyal to the papacy, it was not long before John Dobneck (surnamed Cochlaeus), an antagonist of Luther and an opponent

of vernacular Bible translations, overheard Quentel's printers boasting of the English New Testament. He also heard them claim "the whole of England would shortly be Lutheran whether the King and Cardinal wished it, or not."²⁴ Dobneck wasted no time in alerting city officials, who quickly arrested Quentel and shut down his printing operations.²⁵ As for Tyndale and Roye, they rescued their New Testament manuscript, together with a large number of the pages Quentel had managed to print, and fled up the Rhine River to the city of Worms.

The Worms 1526 New Testament

An impressive structure with towering spires, the Worms Cathedral overlooks a city steeped in religious history. For centuries, the cathedral represented the might and grandeur of the Roman Catholic Church. But the shepherd of German souls had given way to the rising tide of Luther's movement. At the time of Tyndale's hasty arrival in Worms, city officials had recently given its allegiance to Luther and the Reformation.

Bolstered by the city's new loyalty, the two Englishmen employed the printing services of Peter Schöffer and possibly other printers in the area.²⁶ It was not long before the efficient German presses were generating page after page of Tyndale's English New Testament. The Worms edition, printed in octavo size,²⁷ was much smaller than the partially completed Cologne text, and in this case smaller was better—much better. English merchants who supported Tyndale's work found it easier to smuggle the smaller, compact edition among cloth bales or other goods shipped to England.²⁸

The 1526 Worms edition was monumental. It was the first printed New Testament translated directly from Greek into the English of its time. Tyndale's vernacular New Testament infused life and power into the English Reformation. But it did more than that. His prose, his choice of words, and the smooth, easy flow of his sentences inspired and dignified the English language. Phrases like "Blessed are they which hunger and thirst for righteousness: for they shall be filled"²⁹ were unmistakably clear to the reader in Tyndale's day, and remain so in modern English. The common folk, eager to read or hear God's word in their own language, purchased thousands of the immensely popular translation between 1526 and 1528.³⁰ Little did Tyndale realize the impact he would have on later New Testament translations. Most of these later translations (such as the work of Coverdale, Matthews, and the

Geneva and King James translators) would incorporate much of Tyndale's work into their own New Testament editions.

But what of the 1525 fragment rescued from Quentel's printing house in Cologne? It appears Tyndale made use of the partially printed New Testament by smuggling to his homeland unbound copies of the incomplete 1525 Cologne translation, which consisted of a prologue, the book of Matthew, and possibly a portion of the book of Mark. Only a single copy, which contains the prologue and Matthew 1 to Matthew 22, is known to exist.³¹

Opposition to the 1526 Worms Edition

While John Dobneck had warned city officials about the heretical English Bible, he also wrote to church and government officials in England like Sir Thomas More, the king's chancellor, about the renegade text and the "two apostates from England."³² Dobneck never specified Tyndale's name in his letters, but the mere mention of an English Bible alarmed church and state authorities—and well it should have. Government and church overseers such as Thomas More, Bishop Tunstall, and Cardinal Wolsey sent their people to scour the docks of London and other English ports for the renegade translation. Both sides knew the stakes were high: if the established church wanted to safeguard their traditions, they could never allow circulation of Tyndale's text. Conversely, if the reformers wanted people to evaluate the normative religious practices of Catholicism against the teachings of the Bible, they would need an English text. Indeed, for both sides, the continued absence or presence of a vernacular translation would empower their cause.

Officials seized and burned (or even purchased, oddly enough) as many copies of the Bible as they could find but failed to halt the flow of Tyndale's translations, since book smuggling had become an art. One historian described the smugglers' cadre of tools:

Bales of cloth or fabric not infrequently contained well-hidden flat printed sheets. Barrels or casks, apparently full of wine or oil, might secrete watertight boxes holding dangerous propaganda. Cargoes of wheat or grain, hides or skins were not always made up exclusively of these items. Flour sacks often held carefully packed contraband books strategically placed in the meal. Chests with false sides or bases, hidden receptacles or secret compartments brought over documents which, discovered by Government officials, might cost the owners their heads.³³

Cardinal Wolsey, the powerful overseer of Catholicism in England, ordered a gathering of bishops in the summer of 1526. During the meeting,

Wolsey declared that the “untrue translations” should be burned and that those who had translated the work, distributed it, or read its contents should be punished.³⁴ Tyndale’s nemesis, Bishop Tunstall, confiscated and burned as many of the New Testaments as he could find at London’s St. Paul’s Cross in October 1526. As the flames engulfed Tyndale’s work, Bishop Tunstall preached a spirited sermon, denouncing the English New Testament as the work of “many children of iniquity, maintainers of Luther’s sect, blinded through extreme wickedness, wandering from the way of truth and the Catholic faith.”³⁵

Church and government officials condemned the translation, continued burning the books, and even sent some of its readers to the stake. Nevertheless, Tyndale’s Bible continued to sell, and in doing so, unlocked the New Testament for those fortunate enough to obtain a copy. They could now read about the life and teachings of Jesus: his sermons upon grassy hilltops; his stilling of storms, cleansing of lepers, and raising of the dead. No longer dependent upon the clergy for Bible scholarship or interpretation, the people could now access Christ’s world for themselves through Tyndale’s English New Testament.

Church authorities understood the gravity of the situation and began devising wild schemes to halt the spread of Tyndale’s work. One plan, described by Edward Hall in 1548, involved Bishop Tunstall, who traveled to the low countries in order to purchase and burn the troublesome books for the last time. In Antwerp, he met a London merchant named Augustine Packington, a man “of a great honesty” who “highly favoured William Tyndale.”³⁶ Packington was only too happy to help Tunstall and assured him that he knew “the Dutch men and strangers that have bought them of Tyndale, and have them here to sell, so that if it be your lordship’s pleasure, to pay for them. . . . I will then assure you, to have every book of them, that is imprinted and is here unsold.”³⁷

With the bishop’s money in hand, Packington met with Tyndale and revealed Tunstall’s devious plan. Tyndale remarked that he was “gladder, . . . for these two benefits shall come thereof, I shall get money of him for these books, to bring myself out of debt, (and the whole world shall cry out upon the burning of God’s word). And the overplus of the money, that shall remain to me, shall make me more studious, to correct the said New Testament, and so newly to imprint the same once again.”³⁸ Tunstall purchased the books, leaving Tyndale with the money to pay his debts and finance the revision of

the 1526 New Testament. And when the 1534 revised translations “came thick and threefold into England,” Tunstall was mystified, never realizing he was the financier of Tyndale’s revised New Testament.³⁹

Tyndale was used to opposition. In fact, it probably steeled his resolve to continue translating the scriptures, as evidenced by something he once wrote in *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*: “Some man will ask peradventure why I take the labor to make this work, inasmuch as they will burn it, seeing they burnt the gospel? I answer, in burning the New Testament they did none other thing than that I looked for, no more shall they do if they burn me also; if it be God’s will it shall so be. Nevertheless, in translating the New Testament I did my duty, and so do I now, and will do as much more as God hath ordained me to do.”⁴⁰

The 1530 Pentateuch

From 1526 to 1536, the ever-focused Tyndale devoted the last ten years of his life to publishing his theological beliefs, producing a partial translation of the Old Testament, and revising his 1526 New Testament. He accomplished all of this by vigilantly keeping his attention on his writings and on his enemies. Tyndale was a fugitive, a hunted man wanted by the church and state for his heretical views, his papal criticisms, and his meddling with the scriptures. Thus, for most of these ten years he lived a solitary life in Antwerp and possibly other European cities, carefully choosing his friends and drawing as little attention to himself as possible. Fortunately for Tyndale, a cadre of English merchants living abroad generously supported Tyndale with money and ships to smuggle his translations into England.

While his contraband New Testaments invaded England, Tyndale labored in dimly lit rooms on his translation of the Old Testament. He, like many other scholars, worked in solitude—a solitude that allowed him to read pensively from the Hebrew text of the Bible and methodically translate it into English. He was a good Hebraist and presumably mastered the language while studying with Jewish scholars in cities like Wittenberg and Worms.⁴¹ Tyndale published the Pentateuch (Genesis through Deuteronomy) in the early part of 1530. Shortly thereafter, copies of the precious volume, bearing the initials “W. T. to the Reader,” began appearing in England.

Tyndale unlocked the Old Testament treasury with his newest English translation. Churchgoers had been suckled on a diet of Latin for centuries: Latin Mass, Latin prayers, and Latin scriptures. A few understood Latin; most

did not. Imagine the excitement of those who could now read the account of the Creation in simple, common English: “In the begynnyng God created heaven and erth. The erth was voyde and emptie, and darcknesse was vpon the depe. . . . Than God sayd: let there be lyghte and there was lyghte.”⁴²

Old Testament characters like Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, and Abraham and Sarah sprang to life through Tyndale’s translation. Tyndale’s simple English painted various images for the common reader: Cain’s brutal murder of his brother Abel; a lonely mountaintop altar where Abraham laid his bound son, Isaac; Joseph and the redemption of his estranged brothers; Moses, manna, the tabernacle, and the parting of the Red Sea.

Like his New Testament, Tyndale’s Pentateuch demonstrated his remarkable gift for diction, style, and simplicity. In this translation, Tyndale coined English words and phrases such as “mercy seat,” “Passover,” “scapegoat,” “apple of his eye,” and “blind lead the blind,” to name only a few. His creation of the English word “Jehovah” left his literary mark on the Christian world past, present, and future. Indeed, Tyndale’s creative and masterful use of English validates Shakespeare’s statement that “sweet religion makes a rhapsody of words.”⁴³

For the first time, Tyndale employed a number of marginal notes in the Pentateuch in order to explain passages of scripture or to editorialize. Some of his marginal notes were highly critical of the pope. For example, where the text of Exodus 34:34 states that Moses “came out and spake unto the Children of Israel that which he was commanded,” Tyndale added this marginal commentary, “The Pope speaketh that which he is not commaunded.”⁴⁴ Similarly, where Moses requests the people to discontinue their offerings for the building of the Tabernacle (Exodus 36:5–7), Tyndale’s marginal note reads, “When will the Pope hold, and forbid to offer for the building of Saint Peters church: and when will our clergy saye hold, and forbid to give them more land? Never verily until they have all.”⁴⁵ These notes may seem humorous by today’s standards, but it certainly added to the already growing displeasure of Roman Catholic officials toward Tyndale.

Tyndale labored to make the 1530 Pentateuch user-friendly. After all, his work was meant for individual readers or small study groups. Consequently, he began each of the five books of the Pentateuch with a prologue containing admonitions to the reader, explanations of the text, short sermons, and lists of difficult words with their meanings. For example, one of his exhortations to his readers contained the following counsel: “As thou readeste therefore

thinke that every sillable pertayneth to thyne awne silf, and sucke out the pith of the scripture, and arm thy silf ageynst all assaultes.”⁴⁶

Tyndale’s Final Translation: The 1534 New Testament

The Pentateuch translation marked the beginning of Tyndale’s Old Testament endeavors. While completing his translation of the first five books of the Old Testament, Tyndale also translated the book of Jonah and the text from Joshua to 2 Chronicles. Although they were not published during his lifetime, John Rogers, Tyndale’s close associate, included them in his 1537 translation of the Bible, called the Matthew Bible.⁴⁷

Despite his enthusiasm for the Old Testament translation, Tyndale suddenly laid aside the Old Testament project and began revising the 1526 New Testament. Why the sudden change? Rising demands for the popular English New Testament had motivated a few conspiring European printers to publish pirated copies of Tyndale’s New Testament.⁴⁸ These renegade texts irritated Tyndale, but worse, they contained numerous typographical errors and deliberate changes to his translation, like replacing the word “resurrection” with “life after life.” The sloppy printing and the altered text of the bootleg editions pushed Tyndale to revise the 1526 translation. Additionally, Tyndale had also promised his readers the revision. His pledge, tucked neatly into a postscript in the last pages of the 1526 translation, states: “In tyme to come . . . [we] will endever oureselves, as it were to sethe [set] it better, and to make it more apte for the weake stomakes: desyrynge [desiring] them that are learned, and able, to remember their duetie, and to helpe thereunto: and to bestowe unto the edyfyinge of Christis body (which is the congregacion of them that beleve) those gyftes whych they have received of god for the same purpose. The grace that commeth of Christ be with them that love hym. praye for us.”⁴⁹

Tyndale made over four thousand changes from the 1526 New Testament, with about 50 percent of these revisions designed to make his English correspond more closely to the original Greek.⁵⁰ If the 1526 New Testament was a good translation, this one was even better.

The 1534 edition, a small, thick book of four hundred pages, fits comfortably into the reader’s hand. It is six inches tall, four inches wide, and about one and a half inches thick.⁵¹ Beyond the physical appearance of this edition, however, is the beauty of Tyndale’s rhythm and his simple and direct language that set the standard for later New Testament translations, including the 1611 King James Bible. Tyndale’s audience consisted primarily of ordinary men

and women who read the New Testament for themselves or to one another “round the table, in the parlor, [or] under the hedges.”⁵² Commenting on the 1534 edition, one scholar noted that “Tindale’s honesty, sincerity, and scrupulous integrity, his simple directness, his magical simplicity of phrase, his modest music, have given an authority to his wording that has imposed itself on all later versions. With all the tinkering to which the New Testament has been subject, Tindale’s version is still the basis in phrasing, rendering, vocabulary, rhythm, and often in music as well.”⁵³

This edition, printed at Antwerp in November 1534, sold thousands of copies to eager readers throughout England. It was clearly a best seller in its day.

Tyndale’s Religious Beliefs

Early reformers such as Luther and Tyndale were intent on establishing a new kind of faith founded solely on the authority of the Bible, without popes, penance, Mass, or confession. They pictured themselves as being a “congregation” rather than a “church” because, to them, the latter implied dogmas, procedures, hierarchy—in a word, Catholicism. Instead, they desired a congregation of believers, a community who relied upon the mercies and grace of Christ for their salvation, rather than on the mediation of what they saw as a corrupt church.

Tyndale, an outspoken critic of Catholic doctrine, published several books in which he vigorously attacked the practices of the Roman Catholic Church, including confession, penance, holy relics, and prayers to dead saints. Tyndale believed that it was only through the scriptures that one could be shepherded to receive God’s grace. The wells of personal salvation, Tyndale believed, were filled by the grace and mercy of Christ—not the church’s seven sacraments, not the doctrines of the pope, and not the mediation of the clergy. Tyndale was not conciliatory on these issues, as evidenced by his harsh criticisms: “Iudge [judge] whyther yt be possible that any good sholde come oute of theyr domme [dumb] ceremonyes and sacramentes in to thy soule. Iudge theyr penaunce, pylgrymages, pardones, purgatorye, praynge to postes, domme blesynges, domme absolucyons, theyr domme paterynge [pattering] and halowyng [howling], theyr domme straunge holy gestures, wyth all theyr domme disgysynges [disguisings], theyr satisfaccyons and iustefyenge [justifying]. And because thou fyndest them false in so many thynges / truste them in nothyng, but iudge them in all thynges.”⁵⁴

On another occasion, he chastised “the fools” who “bound themselves” to the pope’s doctrine, allowing their “life and soul” to be ruled by the pope rather than by God’s word.⁵⁵

Moreover, he viewed priestly confession as an exercise in unrighteous dominion—a wholly self-serving practice designed to exploit the clergy’s hold over their parishioners: “Wherefore serveth confession, but to sit in thy conscience and to make thee fear and tremble at whatsoever they [the clergy] dream and that thou worship them [the clergy] as Gods: and so forth in all their traditions, ceremonies, and conjurations they serve not the Lord: but their bellies.”⁵⁶

Though extremely harsh and critical at times, Tyndale also possessed the literary skills to nudge his readers towards increased confidence in what he saw as the centerpiece of his reformation doctrine—justification through Christ’s grace alone: “We are justified through faith [and] are at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Tyndale reasoned with his readers that since God “hath promised and sworn to be merciful unto us and to forgive us for Christ’s sake, we believe and are at peace in our consciences.”⁵⁷ Indeed, to Tyndale, grace, as well as other heavenly gifts, was freely bestowed upon the believer, since “if we ask we shall obtain, if we knock he will open, if we seek we shall find, if we thirst, his truth shall fulfil our lust.”⁵⁸

Tyndale’s religion was personal and based upon a “feeling faith.”⁵⁹ That is, he believed that people experienced God’s power through the scriptures. These feelings, he declared, motivated believers to perform good deeds⁶⁰ and to “desire God to give strength to do better daily.”⁶¹

Tyndale’s doctrines left little room for theological fence-sitting. His followers admired and respected him, while the church he criticized sought to silence him. And in the end, his enemies used his teachings, more than his English translations of the scriptures, to condemn him to death as a heretic.

Betrayal and Death

Tyndale once wrote that the difference between the children of God and children of the devil was that “the children of God have power in their hearts to suffer for God’s word which is their life and salvation, their hope and trust and whereby they live in the soul and spirit before God.”⁶² Tyndale knew a great deal about God’s power. He felt it surge through his soul when he promised the plowboy his Bible; he felt it during the hours, days, and months he dedicated to scripture translation; and he felt it as he soberly contemplated

the difficult road God called him to travel. Soon, however, the fires of adversity would test his faith as they had never done before.

During his last years, Tyndale resided at the English House, home of the English merchants living in Antwerp. The sympathetic merchants' guild protected him, and that may explain why the ever-cautious Tyndale temporarily let down his defenses—a lapse that would prove fatal.

It began when Tyndale befriended Henry Phillips, a fellow Englishman and an agent employed by Tyndale's foes to track and capture the illusive translator. Phillips curried Tyndale's friendship, all the while scheming to deliver him to the authorities. In May 1535, Phillips borrowed forty shillings from Tyndale and then graciously offered to take him to dinner. En route to the local inn, Phillips led the unsuspecting Tyndale into the clutches of his enemies. His captors quietly swept Tyndale from town and imprisoned him in the cold, wet dungeon of Vilvorde, a fortress located a few miles from Brussels, where he remained for one year and 135 days.⁶³ Tyndale's friends begged the authorities for his release and even petitioned Henry VIII to intercede on Tyndale's behalf. Sadly, their pleadings could not deliver their friend from prison, trial, or execution.

While awaiting execution, the Apostle Paul wrote Timothy, informing him that he suffered in his bonds and desiring Timothy to visit him and bring "the cloke that I left at Troas with Carpus, when thou comest bring with thee, and the books, but especially the parchments" (2 Timothy 4:13; see also 4:9–13). Tyndale's only remaining letter from his own prison experience is hauntingly similar. In it, he pleads with his captors for warm clothing and his Hebrew Bible. The melancholy letter portrays the dismal prison conditions Tyndale endured:

I beg your Lordship and that by the Lord Jesus, that if I am to remain here through the winter, you will request the commissary to have the kindness to send me from the goods of mine which he has, a warmer cap: for I suffer greatly from cold in the head, and am afflicted by a perpetual catarrh [a cold] which is much increased in this cell. . . . But most of all I beg your clemency to be urgent with the commissary that he will kindly permit me to have the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew grammar, and Hebrew dictionary that I may pass the time in study. . . . I will be patient abiding the will of God, to the glory of the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ, whose spirit (pray) may ever direct your heart. Amen.⁶⁴

In August 1536, the ecclesiastical court found Tyndale guilty of heresy and delivered him to the secular authorities for execution, since the church supported the principle of *Ecclesia non novit sanguinem*, or "the Church

does not shed blood.”⁶⁵ On the morning of October 6, 1536, Tyndale was taken from the castle to the town of Vilvorde, where he was chained to a stake, strangled until he was dead, and then burned. Tyndale’s last words were “Lord! open the King of England’s eyes.”⁶⁶ True to the very last, Tyndale pled that Henry VIII would open both his heart and his kingdom to an authorized English Bible. God answered his prayer within a few short years.

Tradition tells us that the authorities dumped Tyndale’s ashes in a river near Vilvorde, hoping that if there were no remains of Tyndale—no physical evidence that he ever existed, no body to memorialize, no grave to visit—then he might become a distant, faded memory. They were wrong.

Conclusion

The authorities could easily remove William Tyndale’s physical remains, but removing his Bible translations, his writings, and his overwhelming influence on later Bible translations would be impossible. For Tyndale, you see, has never left us. When we read large portions of the King James Bible, we read Tyndale. When we quote certain biblical words or phrases such as “Jehovah” or “ye are the salt of the earth,” we quote Tyndale. When we praise the early Reformers who laid the foundation for the Restoration, we include Tyndale’s name.

The English translator fought with those who opposed the English Bible—and won. His translations paved the way for later Bible editions, like the Geneva Bible and the King James Bible. Each successive translation of the Bible, to the 1611 King James edition and beyond, owes a debt of gratitude to William Tyndale. He used the power of simple, common English to convey God’s word to a nation and initiated a sequence of events that enabled the English Bible to become an accepted standard for studying God’s word.

Those privileged to be involved in the glorious Restoration built upon a foundation of gospel truth because they possessed the English Bible. Joseph Smith studied from the Bible that bore the imprint of William Tyndale. Other good men and women in the early days of the Restoration were prepared to embrace the gospel because they read and studied God’s word from the English Bible. The Bible taught them to ponder, to pray, and to anticipate God’s involvement in their lives.

We shall always be grateful for the man who, like Wycliffe and Luther, helped to give us our English Bible and enabled the plowboy in all of us to study the God’s word. **RE**

Notes

1. William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, ed. David Daniell (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 17.
2. John Nielson and Royal Skousen, "How Much of the King James Bible Is William Tyndale's?: An Estimation Based on Sampling," *Reformation* 3 (1998): 73.
3. Kenneth Hylson-Smith, *Christianity in England from Roman Times to the Reformation* (London: SCM Press, 1999–2001), 3:130.
4. Hylson-Smith, *Christianity in England*, 3:148–49; see also Maria Dowling, *Humanism in the Age of Henry VIII* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), 1.
5. John Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, ed. W. Grinton Berry (Grand Rapids, MI: Spire, 1998), 135.
6. J. F. Mozley, *William Tyndale* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971), 4.
7. David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 41.
8. Foxe, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, 135.
9. Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 41.
10. Foxe, *Book of Martyrs*, 135.
11. Foxe, *Book of Martyrs*, 136.
12. Foxe, *Book of Martyrs*, 177.
13. Foxe, *Book of Martyrs*, 136–37.
14. Foxe, *Book of Martyrs*, 138.
15. Foxe, *Book of Martyrs*, 138–39.
16. John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments* (London: John Day, 1563), 514.
17. Mozley, *William Tyndale*, 39.
18. William Tyndale, "W. T. to the Reader," 1530 Pentateuch, 5; spelling modernized.
19. Foxe, *Book of Martyrs*, 140.
20. C. H. Williams, *William Tyndale* (London: Nelson, 1969), 16.
21. Williams, *William Tyndale*, 17.
22. F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English: From the Earliest Versions* (New York: Oxford, 1978), 31.
23. William Tyndale, prologue to the 1525 Cologne New Testament, in *The First Printed English New Testament*, ed. Edward Arber (London: Bloomsbury, 1871), 1.
24. John Dobneck, "An expediat laicis, legere Noui Testamenti libros lingua vernacula?" in prologue to the 1525 Cologne New Testament, 19.
25. Brian Moynahan, *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 Press, 2002), 74.
26. Given the short time it took to publish the Worms edition, Tyndale may have employed several printers, including John Erffordianus, who owned a printing shop in Worms about the time Tyndale arrived. Arber, *First Printed English New Testament*.
27. *Octavo* refers to the "page size, from 5 by 8 inches to 6 by 9 ½ inches, of a book composed of printer's sheets folded into eight leaves [or] a book composed of octavo pages." *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., "octavo."
28. W. R. Cooper, "Introduction to Tyndale's 1526 New Testament Facsimile," in William Tyndale, *The New Testament: Worms Edition of 1526* (London: British Library, 2000), xii–xiii.

29. Cooper, "Introduction to Tyndale's 1526 New Testament Facsimile," 10. This verse is taken from what is now referenced as Matthew 5:6. The text of the New Testament was not divided into verses at that time.
30. John Stevens Kerr, *Ancient Texts Alive Today: The Story of the English Bible* (New York: American Bible Society, 1999), 53.
31. Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 110. The only known copy of the 1525 Cologne translation is housed in the British Library.
32. Dobneck, "Expedit laicis," 18.
33. F. C. Avis, "Book Smuggling into England During the Sixteenth Century," *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch* (1972), 184.
34. Mozley, *William Tyndale*, 114.
35. Robert Demaus, *William Tindale: A Biography; Being a Contribution to the Early History of the English Bible*, popular edition, rev. Richard Lovett (London: Religious Tract Society, 1904), 179.
36. Edward Hall, *Hall's Chronicle: Containing the History of England, During the Reign of Henry the Fourth, and the Succeeding Monarchs, to the End of the Reign of Henry the Eighth, in Which are Particularly Described the Manners and Customs of Those Periods. Carefully Collated with the Editions of 1548 and 1550* (London: printed for J. Johnson, 1809; New York: AMS Press, 1965), 762; spelling modernized here and in succeeding citations.
37. Hall, *Chronicle*, 762.
38. Hall, *Chronicle*, 763.
39. Hall, *Chronicle*, 763.
40. William Tyndale, "To the Reader," in *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon* (1536); spelling modernized.
41. Lewis Lupton, *Tyndale: The Martyr*, vol. 19 of *History of the Geneva Bible* (Foxton, UK: Burlington Press, 1987), 87.
42. Tyndale, 1530 Pentateuch, 15; see Genesis 1:1–2.
43. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 3, scene 4, lines 47–48.
44. Tyndale, 1530 Pentateuch, 269 (marginal note, Exodus 34:34).
45. Tyndale, 1530 Pentateuch, 273 (marginal note, Exodus 36:5–7).
46. Tyndale, 1530 Pentateuch, A prologue, 12.
47. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*, 42.
48. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English*, 42–43.
49. Tyndale, "To the Reader," in *New Testament 1526*, 554–55.
50. Roland H. Worth, *Church, Monarch and Bible in Sixteenth Century England: The Political Context of Biblical Translation* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000), 38–39.
51. David Daniell, introduction to *Tyndale's 1534 New Testament* (London: Yale University Press, 1989), xiv.
52. Daniell, introduction to *Tyndale's 1534 New Testament*, xxvii.
53. J. Isaacs, "The Sixteenth-Century English Versions," in *The Bible in Its Ancient and English Versions*, ed. H. W. Robinson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), 160.
54. Thomas More, *The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer*, vol. 8, part 1 of *The Complete Works of St. Thomas Moore* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), 135.
55. Tyndale, *Obedience of a Christian Man*, 174.
56. Tyndale, *Obedience of a Christian Man*, 170.
57. Tyndale, *Obedience of a Christian Man*, 147; see also Romans 5:1.
58. Tyndale, *Obedience of a Christian Man*, 6.

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59. Daniell, introduction to Tyndale, *Obedience of a Christian Man*, xxvii.
 60. Daniell, introduction to Tyndale, *Obedience of a Christian Man*, xxviii.
 61. Tyndale, *Obedience of a Christian Man*, 180.
 62. Tyndale, *Obedience of a Christian Man*, 11
 63. Demaus, *William Tindale*, 483.
 64. William Tyndale, in Kerr, *Ancient Texts Alive Today*, 60.
 65. Moynahan, *God's Bestseller*, xi.
 66. Foxe, *Book of Martyrs*, 152.