

How the Bible Came to Us - #13

Christianity and the Bible come to Great Britain

1. There is evidence that Christianity reached Great Britain as early as the 2nd century A.D. That was in the times of very primitive Christianity, before it had become corrupted through the influences we have discussed. In the first four centuries of its growth in Great Britain, it took deep hold in Ireland, but it grew only minimally in England and Scotland. In A.D. 597, Augustine arrived in England and gave new impetus to Christianity in that land.
2. Very few people could read any dialect spoken on the islands. So the gospel was brought to them in verbal form. The Bible they used was the Old Latin.
3. In the middle of the 7th century, the great Anglo-Saxon scholar, Bede, preserved the story of Caedmon. Caedmon had a great gift for poetry and paraphrase. He created a number of short stories based on biblical subjects intended to instruct the local people. His stories were not an attempt to translate into the Anglo-Saxon language, but they represent the first written form of biblical materials in any of the local dialects of Great Britain.
4. About the same time, a musician by the name of Aldhelm, who was Abbott of Malmesbury, realized that few Englishmen were attracted by the sermons that were usually offered in places of worship. So he developed songs about biblical subjects that people could sing. Before his death in 709, he translated the Psalms into Anglo-Saxon. We may have available to us a single copy of his work. Aldhelm furthermore encouraged Egbert, Bishop of Holy Island, to produce a translation of the Gospels into Anglo-Saxon. There is a copy of those Anglo-Saxon Gospels in the British Museum.
5. Probably the most famous translator in those centuries was Bede himself (673-735). Cuthbert tells how that monk of Jarrow barely managed to finish translating the last verse of John before he died. Unfortunately, there is no trace left of that translation. It was destroyed by the Danes when they conquered Northumbria sometime soon thereafter.
6. About a hundred years later, King Alfred (848-901) became so excited about the teachings of the Bible that he either translated himself or arranged for someone else to translate the 10 Commandments and additional other laws from the Pentateuch. There is some evidence that he later arranged for the translation of the Psalms. His translation included the Old Latin with the local Anglo-Saxon written between the lines. Other translators attempted similar translations in later years. Around A.D. 950, Aldred, a priest, took a copy of an Old Latin Bible and translated the Gospels interlinearly. It was written in the dialect of Northumbria. It included some magnificent illustrations in the margins.
7. Starting in the 10th century, the first "Anglo-Saxon only" translations were made. Six copies of portions of those Gospels can still be found in the libraries of Oxford, Cambridge, and the British Museum. Those six manuscripts are so similar that it is assumed that they were produced by a single translator.
8. A short while later, Abbot Aelfric produced many homilies and some translations. He paraphrased in the common language of the people large portions of the books of Judges, Kings, Job, Esther, Judith, and the Maccabees. He also translated the five books of Moses and the book of Joshua, leaving out portions that he figured would not be of particular interest to the general population. One manuscript of his work remains in the British Museum and one in Oxford.
9. In 1066, when the Normans conquered England, Anglo-Norman was substituted for Anglo-Saxon. Every effort was made to eliminate the use of Anglo-Saxon in schools, in courts, etc. Over the next 200 years, nothing that could be considered serious literature of any kind seems

to have been produced. The language was too confused.

10. Around 1215 an Augustinian monk by the name of Orm made a metrical version of parts of the Gospels and Acts for use during church services. It was not a translation as such but rather a paraphrase. Not long thereafter, someone else did the same thing with the books of Genesis and Exodus.
11. Except for the book of Psalms, no translation or version of the Bible in any English dialect was produced from the time of the Norman conquest until the middle of the 14th century. Two of those versions of the Psalms were produced. One by William of Shoreham around 1320 and another by Richard Rolle, the so-called "Hermit of Hampole," in Yorkshire. Thus, we see that around the time of the birth of John Wycliffe, these two translations of the book of Psalms were the only English-language material available from the Bible.
12. Without a doubt John Wycliffe, called the "Morning Star of the Reformation," was the great impetus in the early years of translation into the English language. He was born around 1320 and was a brilliant scholar at Oxford in his early years. He became master of one of the colleges there. Wycliffe's ministry can be divided into roughly 3 separate periods. 1) His education and training at Oxford including his early work with the church (1336-66); 2) His semi-political and anti-papal church work from 1366-78; and 3) His open war against Rome and his translation into English of a Bible from the Latin Vulgate for the common people from 1378 through 1384.
13. The 14th century was a time of religious and educational awakening in Europe. The Hundred Years' War with France was going on and there were papal quarrels at Rome. The monks, the friars, and the priests of the Roman Catholic Church made increasing demands for money from everyone that they thought they could extract it from.
14. At one point, the pope from Roman demanded the payment of a large sum of money from the English Parliament. At the time, Wycliffe was an adviser to the king and Parliament. He stoutly refused to allow any such payment to be made. Instead, he poured out very strong written materials against such abuses. In his attacks against papal and church abuses, Wycliffe had the backing of scholars at Oxford as well as the English King and Parliament. Those who attempted to support and justify the actions of the church were soundly defeated by Wycliffe in both lecture hall and pulpit. It became apparent to Wycliffe that the most sure way to defeat the Roman Church was to translate the Bible and make it available to ordinary people in their own language.
15. One of the most important things that Wycliffe did in addition to his translation of the Bible was the organization and training of a group of poor, volunteer preachers who traveled through England teaching his doctrines. They came to be known as Lollards or Wycliffites. The availability of a Bible in the English language was their most important weapon. Their work was enormously successful in England. It was the first major, serious defeat for the church which previously had maintained complete control of the people of England.
16. England was suffering under the "blight" of a large number of "mendicant friars" who swarmed over the land.

The pope had bestowed on these monks the power to hear confessions and to grant pardon. This became a source of great evil. Bent on enhancing their gains, the friars were so ready to grant absolution that criminals of all descriptions resorted to them, and, as a result, the worst vices rapidly increased...

Notwithstanding their profession of poverty, the wealth of the friars was constantly

increasing, and their magnificent edifices and luxurious tables made more apparent the growing poverty of the nation. Ellen White, *The Great Controversy*, p. 83.

17. The people came to believe that all religion consisted of acknowledging the supremacy of the pope, adoring the saints, and making gifts to monks. They were taught that was all that was required to earn a place in heaven. Instead of trying to reform the system, Wycliffe challenged the entire system, claiming it was false and should be abolished. He showed from Scripture that only God had the power to forgive sins.
18. After being appointed as a royal ambassador for the King of England, he spent two years in the Netherlands in conference with the commissioners of the pope defending the rights of the English crown against the encroachments of the pope. During that time he realized more than ever the incredible extent of the abuses of the papal system, the priests, and the monks. He returned to England with new ammunition for his “pen.”
19. Three edicts were sent from the pope aimed at Wycliffe. One was sent to the university, one to the king, and the other to Catholic leaders in England. All demanded immediate and decisive measures to silence that “teacher of heresy.” Wycliffe was put on trial but a popular uprising—with hundreds of people rushing into court in his defense—intimidated the judges and he was temporarily allowed freedom. A short time later, the old king of England died and the young successor who had been Wycliffe’s former protector became king.
20. But, despite these fortunate events, it looked like Wycliffe was headed for the “fire,” or the stake. However, before that happened, the pope himself, Gregory XI, died and the Roman church leaders who had assembled to deal with Wycliffe dispersed. When Gregory died, two rival popes claimed his position. That gave Wycliffe additional “ink” for his “pen” against the church. He suggested that each of those pretended popes was correct in claiming that the other was antichrist!
21. Some time later, Wycliffe became seriously ill and it was assumed that he would soon die. Representatives from the four Catholic religious orders along with a group of civil officers appeared at his deathbed to hear what they thought would be his confession and recantation. Wycliffe listened to them in silence and then asked his assistants to sit him up in bed. Then he announced, “I shall not die, but live; and again declare the evil deeds of the friars.” His enemies were defeated once again.
22. Wycliffe was repeatedly summoned to trial. A synod of the bishops declared his writings heretical and after winning the support of the young king, they issued an edict consigning to imprisonment anyone who would believe as Wycliffe did. Fearlessly, Wycliffe appealed to parliament. In effect, he took the Catholic system “to court” before Parliament and demanded reforms of the enormous abuses sanctioned by the church. He clearly represented the abuses from the level of the pope all the way down, and his enemies were brought to confusion. Parliament stirred up by the appeals of Wycliffe repealed the edict allowing persecution and imprisonment of Wycliffe, and the reformer again went free.
23. At his third trial, Wycliffe put his judges “on trial.”

“With whom, think you,” he finally said, “are ye contending? with an old man on the brink of the grave? No! with Truth—Truth which is stronger than you, and will overcome you.”—Wylie, b. 2, ch. 13. So saying, he withdrew from the assembly, and not one of his adversaries attempted to prevent him. {GC 90.3}
24. Finally, Wycliffe was summoned to Rome. As he was considering whether he should go, he

suffered a stroke and was not able to travel. Instead, he put together a very powerful letter outlining his arguments. It seemed like pope, king, and bishops were absolutely determined to destroy him.

25. Because of his repeated attacks against church and papal abuses and his efforts to translate the Bible into the local language, he became the major focus of attack by the papal forces in England.
26. But God had a work for Wycliffe to do and he would not be destroyed until his work was finished. The entire British islands were impacted by his translation of the Latin Vulgate into everyday English. Even the wife of the king was among his converts. After finishing his work, Wycliffe finally died of a lingering illness.
27. The papists had failed to work their will with Wycliffe during his life, and their hatred could not be satisfied while his body rested quietly in the grave. By the decree of the Council of Constance, more than forty years after his death his bones were exhumed and publicly burned, and the ashes were thrown into a neighboring brook. "This brook," says [96] an old writer, "hath conveyed his ashes into Avon, Avon into Severn, Severn into the narrow seas, they into the main ocean. And thus the ashes of Wycliffe are the emblem of his doctrine, which now is dispersed all the world over."-- T. Fuller, Church History of Britain, b. 4, sec. 2, par. 54. Little did his enemies realize the significance of their malicious act. {GC 95.2}
28. Wycliffe's New Testament was finished around 1380. Within two more years, the whole Bible appeared in English. Wycliffe did not do all the work himself. It is likely that much of the Old Testament translation was done by a close disciple and fellow worker, Nicholas of Hereford. There is a manuscript still available in the Bodleian Library at Oxford which is almost certainly the work of Hereford, but it stops at Baruch 3:20. Some believe that it stopped there because Hereford was arrested for teaching heresy.
29. Much of Hereford's English was not typical of the nation as a whole and is somewhat stilted and mechanical. Soon, there were attempts to update and revise his translation. A revision of the entire Bible came out in 1408. That revision was enormously popular and quickly took the place of its predecessor. As soon as the revision became available, it was proscribed by Archbishop Arundel, thus making it a crime to read any of Wycliffe's works anywhere in the province of Canterbury. By 1414, a law was passed that any person that read the Scriptures in the "mother tongue" would forfeit land, cattle, life, and goods for their heirs forever! Despite such actions, about 170 known copies of the Wycliffe Bible remain.
30. Wycliffe's Bible and the subsequent revisions formed a kind of catalyst for the English language, thus forming the early antecedents of the language we use today.
31. Let us remember that in Wycliffe's day, printing had not yet been invented. Every copy of his Bible or any portion thereof had to be written by hand. It was not until 1731 that a few portions of Wycliffe's translation were actually printed in English. The entire Wycliffe Bible was finally printed in about 1850.

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