

How the Bible Came to Us - #17

Putting the Bible into English

1. In the days before printing, John Wycliffe translated the Bible into English from the Latin Vulgate by the year 1382. He was condemned as a heretic and his writings were condemned. After he died of natural causes, his bones were dug up, burned, and thrown into the river.
2. One hundred forty years went by before anyone tried again!
3. Politics, however, played a large part in the Reformation in England. Henry VIII, who lived from 1491 to 1547, was always a staunch defender of the Catholic faith. He resisted reform theology to the day of his death.
4. But his desire to divorce Catherine of Aragon in order to produce a male heir to succeed him led to a break with Rome in 1533.
5. As a result of that and other conflicts with Rome, he dissolved the English monasteries in 1536 and again in 1539.
6. Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury (1489-1556), believed in the reform movement and assisted Henry VIII in his break from Rome.
7. After Henry VIII died, his son, Edward VI, was regent for a period of six years. Edward VI was guided during that period by the Protestant Archbishop, Cranmer.
8. In 1553, Mary Tudor, nicknamed "Bloody Mary," took control after the untimely death of Edward VI. She was the daughter of Catherine and Henry VIII and was determined to return Catholicism to England.
9. Mary ruled for only five years. In 1558, Elizabeth I became the new Queen of England, and her leanings were toward Protestantism. She ruled England from 1558 to 1603 and decisively determined that England would be a Protestant nation.
10. William Tyndale was born in 1484 just about 100 years after John Wycliffe died. He was from Gloucestershire near the border of Wales. From very early in his youth, he was a student at the University of Oxford and was "singularly addicted to the study of the Scriptures." At Oxford he studied in Magdalen Hall under classical teachers such as Grocyn, Latimer, and Linacre. About 1510, he left Oxford and went to Cambridge. There he studied with Erasmus, the famous Greek New Testament scholar and humanist. After approximately 10 years at Cambridge, Tyndale went back to his native countryside and served as a private tutor for Sir John Walsh. During those times away from the public and university setting, Tyndale had opportunity to interact with some "unthinking" churchmen. On one occasion he was reported to have said to one of them, "If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth with a plow shall know more of the Scriptures than thou dost." It was during Tyndale's time at Cambridge working with Erasmus that Erasmus produced his first Greek New Testament in 1516.
11. After a couple years in the countryside, Tyndale decided to go to London. He sought out Tunstall, the Bishop of London, but Tunstall would not "receive" him. But Tyndale found a friend in Monmouth who took him in and stated:

I took him into my house half a year; and there he lived like a good priest as methought. He studied most part of the day and of the night at his book; and he

would eat but sodden meat by his good will, nor drink but small single beer. I never saw him wear linen about him in the space he was with me. I did promise him 10 pounds sterling, to pray for my father and mother, their souls and all Christian souls. I did pay it him when he made his exchange to Hamburg.

Later, after Tyndale was accused of heresy, Monmouth was imprisoned in the Tower of London for the help he had given to Tyndale.

12. Tyndale learned a great deal while in London, but he later stated, "I understood at the last not only that there was no room in my Lord of London's Palace to translate the New Testament, but also that there was no place to do it in all of England."
13. So, Tyndale left England and traveled to the free city of Hamburg in 1524. Most of the following year he spent in Wittenberg studying under Luther. In 1525, he returned to Hamburg where he received money from his friend Monmouth. In April of that year, he went to Cologne to see if he could begin printing his New Testament. There he found an expert printer who began doing the work. But there were many enemies of the Reformation, and they discovered what Tyndale was doing. Although the work was supposed to be completely secret, the anti-Reformation group took the printers out to drink beer one evening and got them drunk to the point that they talked about what they were doing for England!
14. Tyndale's enemies then informed the city leaders of what was taking place and Tyndale's work was stopped. Tyndale and an assistant by the name of Roye grabbed what they could and escaped by boat up the Rhine River to Worms.
15. There, Tyndale found another printer by the name of Schoeffer. Cochlaeus, the anti-Reformation leader who was trying to stop Tyndale's work, informed the people in England about what Tyndale was doing. So, Tyndale changed the format completely and printed his New Testament in a new format with no introduction and with no notes in the margin. Three thousand copies were made initially. But then he returned to his original plan which he had begun in Cologne and printed his New Testament with many notes. Both of those editions were shipped into England secretly, hidden inside of other merchandise.
16. On December 2, 1525, Edward Lee, who later in 1531 became Archbishop of York and who was visiting "the Continent" in 1525, wrote to Henry VIII that "an Englishman, at the solicitation and insistence of Luther, with whom he is, have translated the New Testament into English, and within four days intendeth to return with the same imprinted into England."
17. One German scholar writing about the same time said of Tyndale that he was "so skilled in seven languages, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, English, French, that whichever he spoke you would suppose it his native tongue." Then he added that "the English, in spite of the active opposition of the King, were so eager for the gospel as to affirm that they would buy a New Testament even if they had to give 100,000 pieces of money for it."
18. As soon as word got around that Tyndale's New Testament was available in England, everybody wanted it. The common people wanted it to read it; the church authorities wanted it to destroy it!
19. A whole system of covert distributors developed in England and copies of Tyndale's translation were supplied from "the Continent." There was a desperate fight between those disseminating Tyndale's New Testament and those determined to annihilate it.

20. An English merchant by the name of Packington working at Antwerp in Belgium was a friend of both the Catholic Bishop Tunstall in London and of Tyndale. The Bishop contacted Packington and asked him to buy all the copies of the English Bible that he could possibly find before they reached England. The Bishop assured him that he would pay whatever price was necessary to get them. He intended to burn them publicly at St. Paul's Cross in London. So, Packington approached Tyndale, explained the situation, and offered Tyndale a high price for his product. Tyndale produced the Bibles for Packington who in turn gave them to the Bishop of London. The Bishop had the books, Packington his thanks, and Tyndale the money! Tyndale used that money to print many more copies.
21. Of those first two editions from Tyndale, only a very few copies remain. Only 31 pages of the "quarto edition" are available today and of the "octavo edition," one copy perfect except for a missing title page and another copy very imperfect are in the library at St. Paul's in London. Of some 18,000 copies printed between 1525-1528, those "bits" and the one full copy are all that we know that remain!
22. Because of his linguistic skills, Tyndale, of course, translated directly from the Greek to produce his New Testament. Around 1528, feeling that he had done his job with the New Testament, he turned to the Old Testament and in the next two years translated the Pentateuch. In his translation of the Pentateuch, there were many marginal notes which were extremely controversial and inflammatory. In 1531, he actually produced a translation of the small book of Jonah. Before going on with his translation of other portions of the Old Testament, he decided to go back and revise what he had done in the Pentateuch. He later revised his New Testament yet again.
23. Tyndale had enjoyed a fairly safe time working at the "English house" in Antwerp. He worked among a number of merchant friends. But his enemies in England were not quiet. They decided to send an Englishman by the name of Henry Phillips, a staunch Roman Catholic, to see if he could discover where Tyndale was hiding and working. In May of 1535 after pretending friendship with Tyndale, he betrayed him into the hands of officers of Emperor Charles V who seized him and carried him off, imprisoning him in Vilvorde Castle near Brussels. During his imprisonment he apparently was allowed access to some of his documents and his Greek New Testament. So, he once more revised his New Testament. He may also have translated Joshua through 2 Chronicles but he was never able to publish that during his lifetime. His friend John Rogers was left with that task.
24. On October 6, 1536, Tyndale was taken to trial, "proved" to be a heretic, and condemned to death. He was tied to a stake and strangled and burned with these words being his final message: "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."
25. Tyndale's work had enormous and far-reaching consequences. His simple and precise language was exemplary. His scholarship was excellent. Ninetypercent of Tyndale's work was preserved in the King James Version. His translation became so popular that it set a standard for the English language for hundreds of years to come.
26. In 1537, one year after Tyndale's death, Henry VIII allowed the English Bible to be distributed in his kingdom.
27. Although Tyndale was gone, the influence of his work was not. A close friend, Myles Coverdale

(1488-1568), a former Augustinian friar, became a friend of Tyndale and a reformer on “the Continent.” In 1535 he produced a translation based on the Vulgate, Luther, and Tyndale. Two years later, John Rogers under the pseudonym “Thomas Matthew” published the Matthews Bible—based on Tyndale and Coverdale and dedicated to Henry VIII!

28. John Tavener again took up the work of John Rogers after Rogers was martyred by Mary Tudor and produced a version of the Matthews Bible in 1539 which was the first one to be actually printed in England.
29. Finally, Thomas Cromwell was able to produce the Great Bible printed in England in 1539. It was essentially the same as the Coverdale Bible but it is sometimes called the Cranmer Bible because Cranmer himself wrote the preface.

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