Translating the Bible Into English (K. Barker)
A Series on How We Got Our Bible: Part 3

Latin never became the language of the ordinary people of the Roman Empire. And when the empire collapsed, fewer and fewer people, even among the well educated, spoke Latin. Most people spoke some form of tribal or regional language. In parts of the British Isles, that regional language was an early form of English. In the mid-seventh century a stable hand named Caedmon, with a gift for song, composed a musical paraphrase of Genesis, Exodus and part of Daniel. He also wrote paraphrase songs of the stories of the resurrection, ascension, second coming of Christ, heaven and hell.

Two bishops of the late seventh century gave us our first true translations of parts of the Scripture in the Anglo-Saxon language. Aldhelm, bishop of Sherborne, translated the Psalms, and Egbert, bishop of Lindisfarne, translated the four Gospels. In 735 A.D. Bede, the venerable monk and historian, translated the Gospel of John. Late in the ninth century King Alfred translated the Ten Commandments and the other Old Testament laws, which he placed at the head of all laws for England. He also translated the Psalms and was working on a translation of the Gospels at his death. Alfred's desire was "that all the freeborn youth of the kingdom should employ themselves on nothing till they could first read well the English Scripture."

In the middle of the tenth century a priest named Aldred made an interlinear Anglo-Saxon / Latin paraphrase of the Gospels, writing the Anglo-Saxon words between the lines of an existing Latin edition. Around 1000 A.D. Aelfric, archbishop of Canterbury, translated the Gospels, the first seven books of the Old Testament, Esther, Job, and a part of Kings.

When William of Normandy defeated Harold of Essex in the Battle of Hastings in 1066, the Anglo-Saxon era ended. The Normans imported French scholars and churchmen. Soon there were three languages in Britain: Norman-French, the language of the ruling class; Latin, the language of the church; and English, actually Old English or Anglo-Saxon, the language of the people. Though they could not banish the language from hearth and home, the ruling Normans prohibited use of English in government, books, school and writing. Two hundred years passed, and during this time the Anglo-Saxon, or Old English, evolved into Middle English.

In 1215 a monk named Orm made a paraphrase of parts of the Gospels and Acts in the developing language of Middle English. A century later William of Shoreham, a talented and scholarly priest from Kent, made a Middle English translation of the Psalms. Twenty years later, about 1340, a hermit poet named Richard Rolle revised the translation and added a verse-by-verse commentary. The Shoreham-Rolle translations enjoyed wide circulation and set the stage for a new wave of English Bible translation.

Half a dozen years after Rolle's Psalms appeared, in 1346, a promising youth of sixteen was admitted to studies in one of the colleges of the famous university of Oxford. His name was John Wycliffe. The young Yorkshireman eventually earned his doctoral degree and was ordained a priest. By the middle of the fourteenth century Oxford had eclipsed Paris as the center of European scholarship, and Oxford's foremost scholar was the pious and controversial John Wycliffe.

In the years between 1372 and 1384 Wycliffe was in almost continual conflict with the church hierarchy both in England and Rome, coming under attack from Pope Gregory IX and William Courtenay, Bishop of London. Wycliffe was a prolific writer. His writings singed the church hierarchy, arguing that the Bible was the only authoritative guide for faith and practice. He attacked the papacy and the wealth of the clergy. He denied transubstantiation. He filled the countryside with itinerant preachers who taught the people to look to the Scriptures – not man – for forgiveness of sins and spiritual guidance.

Wycliffe's teachings cost him his position at Oxford. He retired to Lutterworth as the rector of the parish church. There he continued his writing and supervised the work for which he is best known. In the waning years of his life he and his students translated the Scripture into English, completing the New Testament in 1380 and the Old Testament in 1382. Even before the invention of the printing press, it was widely circulated and received with joy.

But the leaders of the church were not very joyful. They were angry and afraid. If ordinary people could read the Bible for themselves, they would depend less and less on the church and the clergy. Wycliffe's work looked like an attack on the power and influence of the church.

Wycliffe suffered a stroke in church and died three days later, December 31, 1384. But, even after his death, his work lived on. His writings were banned, his students were banished from Oxford and his books, including the translation of the Scripture, were burned. But his translation of Scriptures continued to enjoy wide circulation. In response, the crown enacted laws making owning religious books or copies of the Scripture in English a criminal offense. Yet small pockets of his followers continued meeting and reading copies of his sermons. These groups kept Wycliffe's ideas alive for the next one hundred fifty years. Eventually the church leadership ordered his body exhumed and burned and his ashes scattered in a nearby creek.

Since the time of John Wycliffe, Bible translation has grown, at least in part, out of theological motivations. Wycliffe, the Morning Star of the Reformation, opposed the excesses of the Pope and Roman Catholic Church. His translation of the New Testament grew directly out of these disputes. He wanted the common people to know the Bible, knowledge the church was unwilling to provide. A similar sentiment moved another English scholar and priest named William Tyndale. One hundred fifty years after Wycliffe's death, Tyndale took up where Wycliffe had left off. Tyndale's writings, especially his sermons, were strikingly similar to Wycliffe's, indicating that he probably knew Wycliffe's work well.

Tyndale knew the Scriptures. He knew the doctrines taught publicly by priests of the church could not be supported from Scripture. Sadly, serving in a church plagued by centuries of decline, many of those priests were teaching false doctrine because they, themselves, knew little or nothing about the Bible and its teachings. Tyndale decided he would, by God's grace, ensure that the simplest English plowboy would know more about the Holy Scriptures than the ignorant priests of the Roman church. At first, Tyndale sought official sponsorship from the bishop of London to translate the Bible into English. He was rebuffed.

But Tyndale would not be denied. He took his work to the European continent. From there he smuggled his new English translation of the Bible, as well as his Old Testament commentaries and New Testament expositions, back into England. Like Wycliffe, Tyndale was opposed by church hierarchy and King Henry VIII, who was furious.

Henry VIII appointed Thomas More to refute the teachings of Tyndale and to oppose his English translation. More called Tyndale a "devilish drunken soul." He was angered by Tyndale's translation of some ecclesiastical and doctrinal terms. Instead of "church", Tyndale used "congregation". He chose "senior" over "priest" and "repentance" over "penance". And Tyndale included harsh marginal notes which, while often accurate, did nothing to win him or his translation favor with the king and church. For example, Exodus 36:5-7 records the collection for building the tabernacle. When enough had been collected, the people were told to stop giving. In the margin Tyndale added, "When will the Pope say 'Hoo!' and forbid an offering for the building of St. Peter's church? …Never until they have it all."

The king dispatched spies who tracked the young translator all over Europe, even offering a reward for his capture. But Tyndale's work continued undaunted for nearly a decade. Fleeing from one hiding place to another, Tyndale continued his work, smuggling the printed sheets back to England. His New Testament, the first ever mechanically printed in English, was published in 1526. Portions of the Old Testament were released over the following years – until Tyndale was captured and imprisoned. In 1536 he was tried and executed.

Tyndale was dead, but Henry could not escape the dead man's influence. Tyndale's translation opened a floodgate. By 1536 no fewer than fifty thousand copies of Tyndale's New Testament were in circulation. The people had discovered the Bible in their own language, and they were not about to be denied access to its message. The king was between a rock and a hard place. He opposed the Protestant influence of Tyndale, but he did not want to seem opposed to the Bible – especially when it was gaining such popularity. He was under growing pressure from Hugh Latimer, his chaplain; Thomas Cranmer, his archbishop; Thomas Cromwell, the vicar-general of the church and even Queen Anne. So Henry compromised.

Though King Henry hated the Pope and the Roman church for personal and political reasons, he remained doctrinally Roman Catholic. As might be expected, many of Henry's bishops shared the king's religious ideas. His Archbishop, on the other hand, had become a thoroughgoing Protestant. Archbishop Cranmer won a license from the king to publish and circulate the Bible among the people. But the bishops did not share Cranmer's enthusiasm for an English Bible. When they dragged their feet, the Protestant Archbishop threw his support to the work of Myles Coverdale.

Coverdale was not nearly the scholar that Tyndale was, but he shared Tyndale's theology. He wanted the English people to have the Bible in their own language. He translated those parts of the Old Testament not already completed by Tyndale, leaning heavily on Luther's German translation. This dependence on the German led to some unusual and unsatisfactory constructions in English. The Coverdale Bible appeared in 1535. Two of its innovations are familiar to most Bible readers. Coverdale introduced the translation "Forgive us our debts," in the Lord's Prayer. He also segregated the Old Testament Apocrypha from the canonical books, a move which reflected his Protestant thinking.

The second English Bible to receive royal license was the Matthew's Bible, translated by John Rodgers and published in 1539. Rodgers, a colleague of Tyndale, worked under the pseudonym Thomas Matthew to avoid the persecution that had claimed Tyndale's life before his work was finished. Like the Cloverdale Bible, the Matthew's Bible was published on the European continent and exported to England.

Thus, by 1539, the English people had two versions of the Scriptures, both licensed by King Henry VIII but neither one authorized for public reading in churches. To meet this need Thomas Cromwell, the vicar-general of the English church, asked Myles Coverdale to make a revision incorporating the best of the two popular versions. The result was the Great Bible, which won its name because its pages measured 11 by 16-1/2 inches. The clergy were instructed to place a copy of this Bible in a convenient location in every church. A second edition, published in 1540, carried Archbishop Cranmer's instructions that "This is the Byble apoynted to the use of the churches."

Apparently the people of the realm took the Archbishop's instructions to heart. Many came to church when no services were in session just to read the Bible. Others found the reading of the Scriptures in their own language more interesting and appealing than listening to the preacher. The king had to issue a decree banning the reading of the English Bible aloud during church services. Even then, the bishops continued to complain that the people were reading the Bible instead of listening to the sermon.

During the latter years of his reign, Henry became increasingly reactionary. As Protestant doctrine grew in influence, the king moved to suppress the influence of Tyndale and Coverdale. All but the Great Bible were outlawed – even though that edition was, essentially, the work of Tyndale and Coverdale. Bible burning came back into vogue. Preaching and the public reading of Scripture were strictly licensed and restricted. However, with the death of Henry in 1547 and the accession of the boy-king Edward VI, nearly all such restrictions were lifted. Protestant influence set the religious tone of the nation for the next six years, and Bible publishing and reading flourished.

All that ended when Mary, the Roman Catholic daughter of King Henry and Catherine of Aragon, became queen in 1553. A reign of terror swept away some of the most noble Protestants. John Rodgers was the first to be burned at the stake. He was followed by Archbishop Cranmer and Bishops Latimer and Ridley. Others, including Coverdale, escaped to the European continent, where they sought refuge among friendly Protestants. One such exile was Oxford Scholar William Whittingham, who settled in Geneva. Along with other scholars, Whittingham set out to revise the entire Bible. His work was published in 1560 and became known as the Geneva Bible. The cost of the translation was borne by the English colony in Geneva, and the translation itself was dedicated to the new queen, Elizabeth I.

The Geneva Bible was an immediate success in England. It contained a number of marginal notes which, while not so harsh as Tyndale's, were clearly anti-Roman Catholic. And the English people, still chafing from Mary's harsh rule, welcomed that sentiment. The Geneva Bible offered other attractive features. For the first time, the English Bible was divided into verses, a helpful innovation introduced by Robert Stephanus in his Greek New Testament in 1551. The text was set in Roman type, which was much easier to read than the old-fashioned gothic type. English words, which did not appear in the Greek of Hebrew text, were printed in italics.

The Geneva Bible was never appointed for reading in churches in England, but it was adopted in Scotland. The Geneva Bible was the Bible of Shakespeare, the Puritans and the Pilgrims.

So, once again, the English people had two versions of the Scriptures, the Great Bible and the Geneva Bible. The Great Bible was authorized by the English church, but the Geneva Bible was embraced by the English people. The Geneva Bible was clearly the better translation. However, it contained an abundance of Calvinistic marginal notes that were too hard for many of the English clergy to swallow. In 1563 Archbishop Matthew Parker initiated a revision to replace the Great Bible. The resulting edition, which was published in 1568, expunged the controversial notes of the Geneva Bible and improved on the weak points of the Great Bible. It was known as the Bishop's Bible because it had the support of the English church hierarchy. It won official approval of the church and replaced the Great Bible as the edition appointed for reading in churches, but it never succeeded in unseating the Geneva Bible as the popular choice. Throughout the reign of Elizabeth the two versions existed side by side in the religious culture of England. They were separated, not so much by the quality of the translation as by the theological leanings of the translators.

When Elizabeth died in 1603, she was succeeded by her cousin King James VI, who had already been king of Scotland for thirty-six years. He took the title James I of Great Britain, France and Ireland. On his way from Scotland to England, the new king was presented with a petition explaining the grievances of the Puritans within the English church. He responded by calling for a conference in Hampton Court to review the complaints. The conference failed to settle any major issues. However, during the course of the conference Dr. John Reynolds, an Oxford scholar and a leader of the Puritan party, raised the subject of the deficiencies of both the Geneva and Bishop's Bibles. Richard Bancroft, Bishop of London, supported Reynolds. The conference passed the non-binding resolution:

> "*That a translation be made of the whole Bible, as consonant as can be to the original Hebrew and Greek; and this to be set out and printed, without any marginal notes, and only to be used in all churches of England in time of divine service.*"

Though the resolution lacked the force of law or royal decree, the king saw the project as a chance to unite the squabbling factions. King James, himself, was just as disturbed as his bishops over the way some terms were translated in the Geneva Bible. He believed the inflammatory marginal notes undercut the divine right of kings and the authority of the Church of England. He wanted a version of the Bible that would be acceptable to all English Protestants, and he believed Reynold's suggestion provided the opportunity.

Thus was the stage set for the production of the best known English translation of the Bible. The theology of Wycliffe, Tyndale and the reformers had thrust the Bible into the public consciousness. Through no fewer than five revisions, the Scriptures had been a battleground for men of differing theological persuasions. King James sought to end the tug of war with a Bible that would satisfy both the Puritans and the English churchmen. He could not have known that his support would result in a Bible that would serve all English - speaking people for centuries to come.

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