

Reformation History

3. The Vernacular Bible

Martin Luther and William Tyndale

Martin Luther and William Tyndale, together with Huldrych Zwingli, are the best-known Reformation advocates for the translation of the Bible into the language of the people.

Luther's influence was enormous because he established the essential principles by which vernacular Bibles should be prepared. Although the full German Bible of Martin Luther did not appear until 1534, he had begun translating scripture in 1517 with his rendering of the Psalms into his native language. After his dramatic stand in front of Charles V at the Diet of Worms in 1521, Luther was held captive in the fortress of the Wartburg, where he set about translating Erasmus' New Testament into German. The result, which became known as the September Testament, was prepared in a remarkable eleven weeks, and was hugely popular. Luther was not the first to translate the Bible into German, but without doubt his knowledge of Greek and Hebrew and lively sense of powerful phrasing and beautiful poetry led to the creation of an extraordinary text that continues to be read today.

During his studies at the University of Erfurt Luther had gained a strong knowledge of Latin, Hebrew, and Greek, the foundation of a humanist education. But what made him truly distinctive was his gift for translating these languages into the world of the common people. Luther's German reflected, as he had wanted, the conversations he heard in the streets and households. The biblical languages, he argued, were to be brought into the language of a mother speaking to her child, of merchants' negotiation in the market. He followed Jerome's model of a sense-for-sense translation that avoided the

ugliness of a literal reading of scripture. The Word of God should live. Luther's grasp of Hebrew and Greek was not as strong as that of his friend and colleague Philip Melanchthon, who aided in the translation of the Bible; but he was unsurpassed in his ability to craft the German of his day. Luther wrote that "in my translation of the Bible I strove to use pure and intelligible German. Our quest for an expression could sometimes last four weeks without us being happy with our work. (...) In addition, I have not worked on my own: I recruited assistants from everywhere. I tried to speak in German, not Greek nor Latin. But to speak German one should not turn to texts in Latin. The house-wife, children playing, people in the street are those to learn from: listening to them teaches one how to speak and to translate – then they will understand you and know how to speak your language" (Luther, An Open Letter on Translating).

Even in the turbulent world of the early Reformation Luther continued to labor on his translations of the Bible: the year after his New Testament appeared, the reformer produced the Pentateuch in German, and the following year came the Psalms, based on the Hebrew and the Greek of the Septuagint.

As mentioned, the great work came in 1534 with a complete translation of the Old and New Testaments. Luther did not work alone, but with colleagues such as Caspar Cruciger, Justus Jonas, Mattäus Aurogallus, and Philip Melanchthon, all close friends committed to a German version of the Bible for the use of the church. The Bible was a publishing success and many editions followed, one of which was illustrated by Albrecht Dürer, another by Lucas Cranach the Elder. By 1543 over 5000,000 copies of the Bible were available across Germany and they were printed in over ninety cities.

Luther's approach to translation was to keep as close as possible to the original Hebrew and Greek, but he was also familiar with the different forms of literature in the text, such as poetry and historical narrative. A great lover of music, Luther sought to capture the tone and cadence of the original languages in his German. He was also the author of numerous hymns that came from his close work on the Bible. Music was a crucial part of Lutheran worship.

Nevertheless, the task was daunting, and Luther was faced with difficult theological decisions in shaping the German language. At the heart of his theological convictions lay the doctrine of justification by faith alone, which Luther brought into his reading of the Bible. Further, in translating the psalms, for example, Luther's belief that they anticipated the coming of Christ is everywhere evident. Nevertheless, he took great care in reading through the various translations of the Bible, such as the Vulgate of Jerome, the Septuagint, and other German versions in attempting to find the most accurate forms for his Bible.

William Tyndale

Luther's work on the Bible greatly influenced the young Englishman William Tyndale, whose greatest achievements were his translation of the New Testament and parts of the Old. Four years after Luther, in 1526, Tyndale produced the first English New Testament from the Greek, a work that would have tremendous influence on all subsequent English versions up to and including the King James in 1611. The numbers vary somewhat, but it has been estimated that over three quarters of the wording of the King James Bible has its roots in Tyndale's work in the 1520s and early 1530s.

Although we do not know for certain, it is thought that Tyndale was born in Gloucester around 1495, making him a little more than ten years younger than Luther. He had two brothers, John and Edward, who were sympathetic to Luther's reformation message and possibly played a role in William's spiritual formation. At the age of twenty, Tyndale had completed his studies at Oxford, which gave him a firm grounding in the liberal arts of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. John Foxe, the sixteenth-century historian and author of the famous martyrology, informs us that Tyndale "increased as well in the knowledge of tongues," learning Greek, Latin, French, and possibly German.

For the last ten years of his life, from 1526 until 1536, Tyndale devoted himself to work on the Old Testament, which he read in Hebrew, and to revising his 1526 New Testament. The task was far from easy. Having been forced to flee England on account of his heretical views and sympathies for Luther, Tyndale lived on the Continent as a fugitive and exile, frequently hunted by those who wished him dead. The city with which he was most closely associated was Antwerp, where he sought to work unnoticed by the authorities, keeping himself to a small group of friends and supporters who sustained him with money. Tyndale was closely associated with a group of English merchants, who carried his work back to England, where he acquired a considerable following as well as the wrath of Henry VIII.

Tyndale was an accomplished Hebraist and, like Luther, a master of the vernacular language. He had worked with Jewish scholars in Wittenberg and Worms to improve his grasp of Hebrew, and he published his translation of the first five books of the Old Testament in 1530. Not long afterwards, editions of Tyndale's work began to appear in England, contrary to the decrees of the English government.

It is fair to say, however, that it was Tyndale's New Testament of 1526 (and subsequently revised) that was his master achievement. The work defined the English of his day and his phrases remain familiar to us today: "Blessed are they which hunger and thirst for rightewesnes: for they shalbe filled" 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. 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.

It has long been known that that Tyndale gave us many words and phrases in English that he drew from the Hebrew and Greek. We might think of Shakespeare, but it was Tyndale who gave us "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). It is also in Tyndale that we find 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."

There were few controls on printing in the sixteenth century, and it was not long before pirated editions of Tyndale's work began to appear. Much to his exasperation, many of these editions changed his wording and introduced numerous errors. Tyndale was more determined than ever to ensure he produced the best possible English translation, and he undertook a major revision of his 1526 New Testament. His

commitment to the task is recorded in a famous statement that appeared in his 1526 edition, in which he promised the reader that “in tyme to come . . . [we] will endever oureselves, as it were to sethe [set] it better, and to make it more pate 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 receaved of god for the same purpose. The grace that commeth of Christ be with them that love hym. praye for us.”

As scholars have noted, 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. In 1534 he had produced an even better version of the Bible, a small, thick book of four hundred pages that was intended for easy handling by the reader. A copy is to be found in the Yale Beinecke Library. Tyndale’s 1534 New Testament is six inches tall, four inches wide, and about one and a half inches thick. Most striking is the glorious rendering of the language, which is both simple and clear, paving the way for the English Bibles that were to follow over the next century. Tyndale’s readership was made up 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.”

Tyndale’s labors on the Old Testament were cut short by his death, but following the Pentateuch he completed translations of Jonah and Joshua to 2 Chronicles, none of which he lived to see in print. The work was taken up by his friend John Rogers, who included Tyndale’s work in the 1537 “Matthew Bible.”

In German and English Martin Luther and William Tyndale shaped the Bible translations of their cultures and beyond that the very languages in which they wrote. They embraced Erasmus' call for the return to the original languages as well as the humanist's belief that scripture should be available to all. Erasmus never produced vernacular translations, but Luther, Tyndale and others took up the task with zeal. Luther would die in his bed in 1546 at the age of sixty-three, but Tyndale paid the ultimate price. In 1536 near Brussels, after a period of imprisonment, he was strangled and his body burnt.

Questions for discussion:

Why was the translation into the vernacular so important for the development of Christianity?

What are the advantages and disadvantages of translating literally from the biblical text, or of translating more colloquially?

Why was translation into the vernacular seen as such a threat by authorities?

For further reading:

Timothy J. Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther: An Introductory Guide* (Baker, 2013). Very accessible work written by a fine scholar of Luther.

David Daniell, *William Tyndale. A Biography* (Yale, 2001). Esp. Chapter 5.