

Lecture Seventeen

The First Efforts at Englishing the Bible

Scope: The subversive effect of Bible translation can be seen in the earliest efforts to render the Bible in English. Before the invention of printing (1382), John Wycliffe translated the entire Bible into English from the Latin Vulgate and was condemned as a heretic for his efforts. Possession of any part of the Bible in English was a capital offense. Despite this disincentive, William Tyndale translated and published the complete New Testament and parts of the Old Testament in English (1525–1534), an accomplishment that had great influence on later translators. Rapidly, other English versions appeared, by Myles Coverdale (1535) and “Thomas Matthew” (1537). Competition was offered from the Roman Catholic side by the Douai-Rheims translation of the Vulgate (1582–1610).

Outline

- I. The movement toward translating the Bible into English illustrates the mix of religious and political elements in the period of the Reformation, especially in England.
 - A. The Reformation in England had a distinctive character because it was tangled in the dynastic concerns of Henry VIII (1491–1547).
 1. Henry himself was “Defender of the Faith” and resisted reform theology until his death.
 2. His desire to divorce Catherine of Aragon, however, led to a break with Rome in 1533, and Henry dissolved the monasteries in 1536 and 1539.
 3. Thomas Cranmer, the archbishop of Canterbury (1489–1556), abetted Henry’s divorce and worked for reform.
 - B. Edward VI, Henry’s son by Jane Seymour, was regent from 1547 to 1553 but was guided by Cranmer.
 1. It was under Edward that England moved more toward the Reformation—we saw in a previous lecture the *Edwardian Homilies*, which were written under the influence of Cranmer.
 2. Cranmer composed the Book of Common Prayer in 1549.

- C. Mary Tudor (1516–1558), Henry’s daughter by Catherine, became queen in 1553 and turned England decisively and violently—her nickname “Bloody Mary” comes from the persecutions that took place under her—back to Roman Catholicism.
 - D. Elizabeth I (1533–1603), daughter of Henry and Anne Boleyn, ruled England from 1558 to 1603 and brought it decisively within the Protestant camp.
- II.** The first complete version of the Bible in English came from the efforts of John Wycliffe (c. 1330–1384), who anticipated the Reformation in many ways.
- A. Wycliffe was an Oxford don who studied philosophy and was outspoken in his criticism of the Church.
 - 1. He distinguished between a spiritual (“true”) Church and a material (“unworthy”) Church and argued for the supremacy of civil over ecclesiastical authority (*On the Truth of the Sacred Scripture*).
 - 2. In his book *On Apostasy*, he declared that civil government should reform the Church and that there is no basis for the monastic life in Scripture.
 - B. Wycliffe translated the Bible from Latin into English because of his conviction that it should be available to all.
 - 1. The Wycliffe translation (1382) was extremely literal, handwritten, and based on the Vulgate.
 - 2. Wycliffe was assisted in the translation by John Purvey (d. 1428) and Nicholas of Hereford (d. 1420), both of whom were also imprisoned because of their work.
 - C. Wycliffe was condemned by the Council of Constance. The movement called *Lollardy* (the *Lollards*) may have grown out of his views; in any case, it was a broad-based lay movement of dissent within Catholic England that helped prepare for the Reformation.
- III.** The greatest figure in the history of Englishing the Bible is William Tyndale (c. 1494–1536), whose work laid the foundation for all that followed.
- A. Tyndale studied at Oxford, then Cambridge, from 1510 to 1515; a skilled linguist, he knew Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Spanish, French, Italian, German, and English.

- B.** He wanted to translate the Bible in 1522, but the bishop of London refused permission (Luther’s works were burned at St. Paul’s in 1521); thus, in 1524, Tyndale moved to Germany.
- C.** He worked directly from the Hebrew and Greek. The printing of the first edition of the New Testament was in 1525, and it was attacked in England in 1526. He printed his translation of the Pentateuch and Psalms in 1530 and of Jonah in 1531. At his death, Job through 2 Chronicles was in manuscript.
- D.** From 1528 to 1530, Tyndale debated with Thomas More. In 1529, Henry proscribed Luther’s works and included Tyndale. In 1535, he was arrested near Brussels, strangled, and burned at the stake. Before his death, he is reported to have said, “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes.”
- E.** In 1537, Henry VIII allowed the English Bible to be distributed in his kingdom.
- F.** It is Tyndale who fashioned the idiom of “biblical English” that was taken up by subsequent translations, including the King James Version.

IV. Following Tyndale, a number of other English versions quickly appeared and found readers.

- A.** Myles Coverdale (1488–c. 1568) was an Augustinian friar who became a reformer and, while in exile on the Continent, produced (in 1535) a translation based on the Vulgate, Luther, and Tyndale, with 188 woodcuts and the Apocrypha placed between the Old and New Testaments. Anne Boleyn supported the effort.
- B.** John Rogers, under the pseudonym “Thomas Matthew,” died as a martyr under Mary Tudor but not before publishing (in 1537 in Antwerp) the Matthew’s Bible, based on Tyndale and Coverdale and dedicated to Henry VIII, who had licensed it. The order of the books was Luther’s; the Bible appeared in two folio volumes with 199 illustrations and 2,000 annotations.
- C.** John Tavener, a lawyer and competent scholar in Greek, educated at Oxford and Cambridge, produced a version of the Matthew’s Bible in 1539, which was the first actually printed in England.

- D. Thomas Cromwell (c. 1485–1540), a strong proponent of the Reformation, sponsored the publication of the Great Bible in 1539, named for its size (15 inches by 9 inches) and notable for its title page. This Great Bible is fundamentally the Coverdale Bible; the Great Bible is also called the Cranmer Bible because Thomas Cranmer wrote the preface.

Essential Reading:

Tyndale's New Testament, a modern-spelling edition of the 1534 translation, with an introduction by David Daniell.

Supplementary Reading:

John Wycliffe, *On the Truth of the Holy Scripture*, translated with an introduction and notes by Ian Christopher Levy.

Questions to Consider:

1. How do the stages of the English Reformation, and of the English translation of the Bible, illustrate the principle of Erastianism?
2. How did the growth of Humanistic learning, associated with the Renaissance, set the stage for English translations?