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William Tyndale: Bible Translator

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Tyndale's inheritance

Perhaps it was his disillusionment with Oxford's teaching of theology that prompted Tyndale, having taken his MA, to move to Cambridge, where Erasmus had been teaching Greek and where the influence of the new learning was increasingly being felt. Erasmus's text of the Greek New Testament with his own Latin translation had been published in Basle in 1516; it was to be a watershed. To us 480 years on this seems a perfectly right and laudable thing to do, but we reckon without the bigotry of the Church of Erasmus' day. For though the New Testament was written originally in Greek, the authorised version for the Church was Jerome's Latin translation, the Vulgate, and none could expound and interpret it but those who were ordained and authorised to do so by the episcopate. Whether it was because of this or despite it (for it does no harm to be charitable) the Church at the turn of the sixteenth century was in a sorry state. Everyone knew that it needed to be reformed, but privilege prevailed and nothing was effectively done. The exactions of the papal court were unpopular with the clergy and those of the clergy were abhorrent to the laity. There were great numbers of priests and religious, many of whom lived idle and sometimes dishonourable lives. The ecclesiastical orders were hideously rich and enjoyed the privileges of benefit of clergy which protected both from taxation and the secular judicial system. Not surprisingly the laity were incensed and scandalised. In 1515 the Bishop of London demanded that an important case be withdrawn from the secular courts on the ground that no cleric could now expect justice from a layman.

If this was true of the Church at large, the state of religion in Gloucestershire, where Tyndale went after his years at Cambridge, was even more depressingly at a low ebb. The diocese of Worcester, of which Gloucestershire was an archdeaconry, had been presided over by absentee bishops, three of whom were Italians who lived in Rome and never set foot in England. Nevertheless the county claimed to have one of the most famous pilgrimage centres in England where at Hailes Abbey was the allegedly genuine relic of the blood of Christ which was guaranteed to ensure salvation to whoever looked at it. It was this which gave rise to the saying, 'as sure as God is in Gloucester', which, as far as I can make out, was never said with irony until much later when the relic was proved to be fraudulent. Perhaps it comes as

no surprise that Bishop Hooper's visitation of the diocese in 1551 showed that of 311 clerks examined, ten could not say the Lord's Prayer, thirty could not name its author or say where it was written and one hundred and seventy could not repeat the ten commandments. Little wonder then that William Tyndale's spirit was stirred within him and gave rise to the famous conversation told of him by John Foxe:

> Soon after, Master Tyndall happened to be in the company of a learned man, and in communing and disputing with him drove him to that issue, that the learned man said: We were better be without God's law than the pope's. Master Tyndall, hearing that, answered him: I defy the pope and all his laws; and said: If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the scripture than thou dost.

These oft-quoted words were in fact an echo of Erasmus, who in his preface to the Greek Testament had written:

> I vehemently dissent from those who are unwilling that the sacred scriptures, translated into the vulgar tongue, should be read by private persons. Christ wishes his mysteries to be published as widely as possible. I would wish even all women to read the gospel and the epistles of St Paul, and I wish that they were translated into all languages of all Christian people, that they might be read and known, not merely by the Scotch and the Irish, but even by the Turks and the Saracens. I wish that the husbandman may sing parts of them at his plow, that the weaver may warble them at his shuttle, that the traveller may with their narratives beguile the weariness of the way.

When William Tyndale began his work, he had before him few models and those which existed were based upon the Latin text of the Vulgate. There was no other, until Erasmus recovered the Greek. So what had been put into English by such as Wycliffe and Purvey was stilted and literal, more reminiscent of a schoolboy's attempt at translating a Latin prose than addressing the reader as a living word from God. Not untypical is the rendering of Psalm 23 that is found in the Rheims version and actually postdates Tyndale:

(1) Our Lord ruleth me, and nothing shall be wanting to me.

(2) In place of pasture there he hath placed me; upon the water of reflection he hath brought me up.

(3) He hath converted my soul; he hath conducted me upon the paths of justice for his name.

(4) For although I shall walk in the midst of the shadow of death, I will not fear evils, because thou art with me: thy rod and thy staff they have comforted me.

(5) Thou hast prepared in my sight a table against them that trouble me: thou hast fatted my head with oil, and my chalice inebriating, how goodly it is.

(6) And thy mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and that I may dwell in the house of our Lord in longitude of days.

Such a translation was the result of a veneration for the Latin text and a desire for verbal accuracy, coupled with an understandable but misplaced reluctance to reduce the wording of holy scripture to the language of the marketplace. But the resultant rendering comes across as a painful hybrid. Parts of it are simply not English. The words may no longer be in Hebrew or in Latin, but they have not yet become the language of England. As a translation it has not succeeded.

Other phrases from the New Testament show similar unreality. 'The spirit indeed is prompt, but the flesh infirm', 'Father, if thou wilt, transfer this chalice from me'. Or from Hebrews 4, 'All things be naked and open to his eyes, to whom a word to us' which Tyndale was to render 'All things are naked and bare unto the eyes of him of whom we speak' (AV: 'of him with whom we have to do').

Tyndale's aims

By contrast, Tyndale's aim, as Luther's was in his classic German translation, was to produce a version which was as accurate to the sense of the original as he could make it but which would not sound foreign to the reader's ear. He had before him three texts to work from when he launched into his translation of the New Testament. The first was the familiar Latin of the Vulgate; the second was Erasmus' Latin translation based on his version of the Greek New Testament, complete with notes; the third was Luther's German translation. The temptation would have been to work from these to make a pleasing English rendering, but Tyndale insisted on going first to the Greek to get the sense and being quite independent in putting it into the kind of English that conveyed both the meaning and the feel of the original. Bishop Westcott's conclusion ran as follows: The New Testament is 'the complete proof of Tyndale's independence .... It is impossible to read a single chapter without gaining the assurance that Tyndale rendered the Greek directly.... He deals with the text as one who passed a scholar's judgment upon every fragment of the work, unbiased by any predecessor'.

Nevertheless Tyndale had his idiosyncrasies. He would for instance alter connecting particles like 'and', 'but' and 'therefore' if he felt the sense was improved thereby. And his most famous corrections are in his modernising of festivals, so that Passover becomes Easter and Pentecost becomes Whitsun. He even goes as far as to translate 1 Cor. 1:14 as 'I thank God that I christened none of you'. But in each case his purpose was clear: to make the English version readable and recognisable to English readers.

More controversial were his renderings which may have reflected his doctrinal stance, for which he was taken to task in his literary disputation with Sir Thomas More. More accused him of wilfully mistranslating a number of key theological terms. *Ecclesia*, for instance, he regularly rendered as 'congregation' rather than as 'church'. *Presbyter* became 'senior', where the AV renders it 'elder', but More would have wanted it to be 'priest'. 'Repentance' was used instead of 'penance', 'love' instead of 'charity' (which may have been right for *caritas* but not for *agape* as in the original Greek) and

'favour' instead of 'grace', which of course had many theological overtones.

In these arguments it is easy to see how the minds of the two men worked. Tyndale, suspicious of the traditions of a corrupt Church, avoided the use of words which were loaded with contemporary meaning and sought to get back to language which would convey the innocence of first century connotations; and More, fearful that by translating the Bible into contemporary language, the authority of the Church would be undermined and established practices and doctrines questioned, struggled to discredit his opponent and scathingly denounced him for his lack of scholarship and heretical tendencies. It was a battle which More had to lose but, in the circumstances of the day and with the Church of the day, one must credit him with having seen the dangers inherent in the transfer of authority from Church to Bible and doing everything he could to prevent it from happening. Tyndale's death was a temporary victory for the voice of conservatism, but his work lived on after him and was unstoppable in effecting reformation.

The quality of Tyndale's translation

Part at least of Tyndale's attractiveness is his directness of expression. Illustrations of this are many but one I particularly like is found in 2 Thess. 1:3, which in the Authorised Version is 'We are bound to thank God always for you... because... the charity of every one of you all toward each other aboundeth'. Tyndale rendered it ' ...every one of you swimmeth in love toward one another between yourselves'. The Greek *pleonazei* means 'to be more than enough'. Similarly in Luke 9 the father of the epileptic boy pleads for his child saying, 'Look upon my son; for he is mine only child'. The Greek is *monogenes*, the same word that is used of God's only Son in John 3:16, and the AV is technically correct. But Tyndale catches the spirit of the father's urgent cry and renders it, 'Master, I beseech thee, behold my son for he is all that I have'. Or again in the opening chapters of Genesis at the moment of the fall, Tyndale renders 3:4 'Then said the serpent unto the woman: Tush, ye shall not die'. On this translator's gem, David Daniell, today's leading Tyndale scholar, writes as follows:

> The directness of Tyndale's expression is striking: 'tush ye shall not die' may be set against the Authorised Version's 'Ye shall not surely die', which makes the serpent curiously artificial and distant. Among modern versions, the Jerusalem Bible (1966) has 'Then the serpent said to the woman, "No! You will not die!"', which at least begins to catch the necessary sharpness. The New English Bible (1970) has 'The serpent said, "Of course you will not die"', which sounds like an impatient mother with a small infant who has just licked something worrying. The Revised English Bible (1989) has '"Of course you will not die," said the serpent', which has a tone from the world of children's stories. Tyndale does at least get across the immediate and sophisticated dismissiveness of the serpent. But what is also striking is how Tyndale, after that sentence, by following the Hebrew syntax closely, has produced a translation that goes some way to rendering in

English the rawness of the original. The Hebrew conjunction *waw*, in English 'and', is made by Tyndale to carry its full weight. The result is a forward movement of monotonous repetition and therefore of tragic inevitability, so that it conveys the terrible weight of being human, and fallen. Modern attempts to break that monotony with a 'brighter' syntax simply trivialise the tone, which becomes merely chatty: the experience turns into an account of suburban shopping — here is the Fall from The Revised English Bible:

> The woman looked at the tree: the fruit would be good to eat; it was pleasing to the eye and desirable for the knowledge it could give. So she took some and ate it; she also gave some to her husband, and he ate it.

Of course many of Tyndale's phrases have passed into the Authorised Version and are now built into the English language. Phrases like 'a man after his own heart', 'hewers of wood and drawers of water', 'tell it not in Gath', 'passing the love of women', 'is Saul also among the prophets?' Or from the New Testament we have 'the salt of the earth', 'the signs of the times', 'where two or three are gathered together', 'the burden and heat of the day', 'the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak', 'clothed and in his right mind', 'full of good works', 'the powers that be' and 'in him we live and move and have our being'. The list is endless and earns our respect and admiration.

No one would wish to claim that all of Tyndale's language has survived the ravages of time. Some of his phrases sound distinctly quaint in our ears. Probably the AV was right to substitute 'I was a stranger and ye took me in' for Tyndale's 'I was harbourless and ye lodged me'. And what do you make of Mark's (possibly) self-description in 14:51 as the 'certain young man having a linen cloth cast about his naked body' which Tyndale renders 'clothed in linen upon the bare'! There is however a special force, as well as linguistic accuracy in the curt and hurt dismissal of Abraham by Pharaoh after he has been deceived over Sarah's relationship to him. In Hebrew the four laconic words are 'lo, thy-wife, take and — go/walk'. The Authorised Version unexceptionally renders 'Behold thy wife, take her, and go thy way.' It is correct but lacks the bite in Pharaoh's voice. Tyndale has it: 'Lo, there is the wife, take her and be walking.'

Another such touch is used in 2 Sam. 13, where the crafty and lustful Amnon plots to rape his half-sister Tamar. Advised by Jonadab to pretend to be sick and to have lost his appetite he sends to David with the request: 'I pray thee, let Tamar my sister come and make me a couple of cakes in my sight, that I may eat at her hand.' The word for cakes is only found here and is a cognate of the verb that makes them or whatever the cooking procedure was. We might well say today, 'Cook me some cookies.' Tyndale, mindful of this and anxious to use a word which will call up the seductive nature of this shameful episode, goes for the unusual word 'fritters'. 'Let Tamar my sister come and make me a couple of fritters in my sight, that I may eat of her hand.' What could sound more innocent than a couple of fritters? But those fritters were as memorable as the folly of what then ensued, and Amnon paid for the

fritters with his life. For Absalom is determined to take revenge and after biding his time for two long years he eventually gets Amnon in his power, also by a cunning stratagem, and then calls on his own men to kill him. Again Tyndale rises to the occasion, saying not as AV, 'kill him, fear not: have not I commanded you? be courageous, and be valiant' but instead 'fear not, for it is I that bid you, be bold therefore and play the lusty bloods'.

A number of Tyndale's words have passed out of the language and are not even found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, or else they survive in Shakespeare and need an explanation. Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to seek Joseph's favour with a 'courtesy of honey', meaning a moderate quantity. In 2 Sam. 2:25 the children of Benjamin gathered themselves together after Abner 'on a plump', or massed together. Ruth asked her mother-in-law in Bethlehem if she could go out to the fields and 'lease and gather', meaning to glean the unharvested corn. In Numbers there is talk of a suspicious husband on whom cometh 'happily' the spirit of jealousy, where we might say 'perchance'.

One intriguing feature is the rendering Tyndale occasionally gives for the Hebrew enclitic *na'*. This does not always need translating but where it does its force is 'I pray thee', or 'now', adding emphasis to a plea or a request. No less than eight times in the Pentateuch and the historical books of the Old Testament, Tyndale translates it 'a fellowship'. So, in 1 Sam. 26, Abishai seeks leave of David to smite Saul as he lies asleep in his tent: 'Now therefore let me smite him a fellowship with my spear to the earth, even one stroke and I will not smite him the second time.' David demurs but allows him to steal Saul's spear with the words, 'Now therefore take a fellowship the spear that is at his head and the cruse of water and let us go.' This really is very odd for clearly 'a fellowship' is not a noun but an adverbial phrase and no one seems capable of explaining how it came to be so. We know for sure that Tyndale knew the noun for he describes Samson's feast to which they brought thirty companions 'to bear fellowship' (AV: 'to be with him'), and we can only guess that the phrase 'a fellowship' had some meaning like 'in fellowship', suggesting like-mindedness and so encouraging another person to do what the speaker wants him to do as a friendly act of equality.

The overall impression given by Tyndale in his translation is that he had a good working knowledge of Hebrew and a still better knowledge of Greek, thanks no doubt to Erasmus and his Cambridge teachers. He would not allow himself to be confined by the forms of speech enshrined in the Vulgate but rendered the originals as faithfully as he could into English that was both lively and communicable. He was a translator of independent mind and had the rare gift, which Erasmus felt he never had, of being able to express himself clearly and with an easy rhythm in the vernacular. For translation is not a matter of just getting the words right. Tyndale eschewed the practice followed by some translators of using the same English word consistently to render an original Hebrew or Greek. He sought for variants that would nevertheless ensure that the sense was accurate though the words might differ. So the standard 'it came to pass' was varied with words like 'hap-

pened', 'chanced', 'fortuned' and 'followed'. And the word 'lo' could also appear as 'behold', 'mark', 'see', 'look' and 'take heed'. Sometimes he takes this too far and weakens the dramatic quality as in Matt. 24:34f, 'This generation shall not *pass*, till all be fulfilled. Heaven and earth shall *perish*, but my words shall *abide*'. The triple repetition of the Greek, correctly rendered in the AV, gives a much stronger sentence, whereas the sequence of *pass*, *perish* and *abide* is somewhat lame.

He did not always get it right. Indeed he was for ever going over old ground and improving on earlier translations in the light of further thought and knowledge. But his ear was good, and it was for this reason that so many of his memorable epigrammatic sentences were preserved into the AV and have passed down into the common currency of the day. He did not of course live to see his dying prayer answered in the dissemination in England of Matthew's Bible, but we can safely say that included in that volume were his Pentateuch, his historical books from Joshua to 2 Chronicles and his New Testament. For the remainder, Coverdale was used, including of course his famous Psalter.

Matthew's Bible

Despite Henry VIII's opinion that there was no need for a translation of the Bible since his subjects could learn all that was good for them to know from sermons, the mood in England was swinging in favour of reformation and it was not long before Thomas Cranmer made a further attempt to change the King's mind. In December 1534, just six months before Tyndale's arrest in Antwerp, Cranmer persuaded Convocation to petition the King to commission an English translation. Meanwhile Cromwell had independently encouraged Coverdale to produce a complete translation in English which was dedicated to the King and circulated freely in the country, though not at this stage officially licensed. Then a few years later a copy of Matthew's Bible was sent by Cranmer to Cromwell with the request that it be granted the royal licence, which was duly granted. The book was the work of one John Rogers, the English chaplain in Antwerp, who had known Tyndale in the months prior to his betrayal. He had put together Tyndale's work, augmented by Coverdale's, and added a dedication to Henry VIII over the pseudonym of Thomas Matthew. By this means Rogers protected both himself for having used the work of an alleged heretic and the Bible, which would never have received royal recognition had William Tyndale's name been attached to it. Fifteen hundred copies were printed and circulated in England and soon afterwards it was revised by Coverdale, on Cromwell's initiative, and became the Great Bible which was ordered to be placed in every parish church in the land. Between 1539 and 1541, six editions of this weighty volume needed to be printed to satisfy demand and, with splendid irony, the sixth edition contained the superscription 'Overseen by the right reverend fathers in God Cuthbert Bishop of Durham and Nicholas Bishop of Rochester'. Cuthbert was none other than Cuthbert Tunstall, who as Bishop of London, had thwarted Tyndale and pursued him at every turn.

Tyndale's legacy

What finally do we say of Tyndale's legacy to the English-speaking world? First and foremost there was the unique contribution that he made to the formation of English as a literary language. Before he set to work on his translation few writers in England attempted to express their ideas in anything but Latin. English as a spoken language was just too down-market. Thomas More wrote his *Utopia* in Latin: it was the language of scholarship and had a dignity to which English was believed unlikely to attain. But Tyndale was striving not so much to impress as to inform. He wanted the teachings of Scripture to be available to the common man in language he could hear and understand, even if he could not yet read. Furthermore he came to the early conclusion that English was a better vehicle for the rugged simplicity and directness of *koine* Greek and Hebrew than Latin ever was. He wrote:

> The properties of the Hebrew tongue agreeth a thousand times more with the English than with the Latin. The manner of speaking is both one: so that in a thousand places thou needest not but to translate it into the English word for word, when thou must seek a compass (a circuitous phrase) in Latin, and yet shall have much work to translate it well-favouredly, so that it have the same grace and sweetness, sense and pure understanding with it in the Latin, and as it hath in the Hebrew. A thousand parts better may it be translated into the English than into the Latin.

So he did his best to ensure that his language was plain and unpretentious, preferring Anglo-Saxon forms to Latinisms. There was an asceticism, a frugality about his language, but there was also beauty and colour, without literary affectation. And there was rhythm. A sentence or a phrase needed to sound right as well as convey the correct meaning. It was intended to be read out loud (as Hebrew always had been). He doubtless remembered that the Hebrew word for 'to read' was the same as 'to cry out', 'to call'. So the ear was more important than the eye, and maybe that is why so much of what he wrote has been effortlessly committed to memory by generation after generation of Bible readers. Most would admit that our loss of the Authorised Version being read in schools and churches has resulted in incalculable impoverishment to our nation's memory. Fortunately much has lived on in the Revised Version, the RSV and the NIV, but they will never be quite the same.

David Daniell sums it up as follows. If Luther gave to Germany its language, so Tyndale's New Testament

> gave to English its first classic prose. Such flexibility, directness, nobility and rhythmic beauty showed what the language could do. There is a direct line from Tyndale to the lucidity, suppleness and expressive range of the greatest English prose that followed.... The later poets — Shakespeare above all — showed that English was a language which could far out-reach Latin in stature: but Tyndale and

> his successors made an English prose which was a more than worthy vehicle for the most serious matter of all.

And all, I dare to say, because he never forgot the ploughboy for whom he was writing.

Secondly, there was his use of Scripture, a concern which dominated the prologues he wrote to each of the books of the Bible he translated. On Genesis for instance he said:

> This comfort shalt thou evermore find in the plain text and literal sense. Neither is there any story so homely, so rude, yea or so vile (as it seemeth outward) wherein is not exceeding great comfort.... As thou readest therefore think that every syllable pertaineth to thine own self, and suck out the pith of the scripture, and arm thyself against all assaults.

With words like these he jettisoned the criteria applied to the Bible by the contemporary Church. Instead of the allegorical or other tangential approaches to hermeneutics, he plumped firmly for the 'plain text and literal sense'. In his prologue to the book of Jonah he elaborated this approach:

> But thou reader think of the law of God how that it is altogether spiritual, and so spiritual that it is never fulfilled with deeds or works, until they flow out of thine heart, with as great love toward thy neighbour... as Christ loved thee and died for thee, for no deserving of thine.... And of the gospel or promises which thou meetest in the scripture, believe fast that God will fulfil them unto thee, and that unto the uttermost jot, at the repentance of thine heart, when thou turnest to him and forsakest evil.

These and other prologues introduce the reader to a style of biblical devotion which was little known in the sixteenth century, though it soon became a tradition which we have been fortunate to inherit. He was not of course the only voice to speak in those terms, for they reflect the biblical spirituality of the Reformers, which inspired his translation of the scriptures and reinforced his desire to make the text plain to whoever it was who was reading it.

He has left few memorials except in his writings, though his old Oxford College, Hertford, has honoured him with a window in which he is portrayed. The window gives the impression of a sage and elderly divine and it may be that he did look older than his years, but the viewer has consciously to remember that William Tyndale did the major part of his life's work while still in his thirties and by the age of forty-two he was dead. His burial-place is unknown. His epitaph is to be found in the pages of the Authorised Version.

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