

**The Preservation of the Bible from the
Targums to William Tyndale**

History of Christian Missions Seminar Paper

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by

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Introduction

The Bible is the story of God's interaction with mankind. Paul Wegner defines the Bible as, "a collection of books that have been considered authoritative by the Christian church and have been used to determine its beliefs and doctrines."¹ The Bible provides an historical account of creation, fall, redemption, rebellion, and salvation. It tells the story of the early church's birth, growth, and challenges and provides instruction for Christians. Most Western Christians take access to the Bible in the vernacular language for granted, but it has not always been accessible to the masses.

Today, most of the developed world has access to the Bible either in their heart language or a bridge language. There are over 1500 languages with New Testament vernacular translations and nearly 700 complete Bible translations.² Technology makes accessing multiple versions of the Bible possible with only a few clicks. The Bible is the most translated book ever, but this has not always been the reality.³ Regarding church history, vernacular translation is a product of the last five hundred years.

Until the Protestant Reformation, access to the Bible was limited. Bibles were not found in homes or even in most churches. Even priests had challenges in finding

¹ Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 27.

² "Scripture & Language Statistics 2018," Wycliffe Global Alliance, accessed December 10, 2018, <http://www.wycliffe.net/statistics>

³ John Freivalds, "Biblically Speaking," *MultiLingual* 23, no. 2 (March 2012): 20.

copies of the Scripture. The one hundred and seventy copies of the Latin Vulgate sold out before they were finished printing.⁴ Even if a fifteenth century believer were to have been able to find a Bible, it would have most likely not been in a language most people could understand.

Prior to the invention of the printing press, the Scriptures were copied by hand using a tedious and time-consuming process. During the Middle Ages, thousands of monasteries were established across Europe. For some monks, their chief task was copying the Scriptures.⁵ Even the process of finding the paper, quills, and ink necessary for reproducing a Bible took significant effort and resources. A scribe copying the Bible could consume as many as eighty quills in one day.⁶ The cost of Bible reproduction prior to the printing press was both physical and financial. The method of copying Scriptures resulted in scarcity and an increased proclivity for error during the transcription.

The translation process involved a clear understanding and interpretation of the original languages. Translation required interpreting not only the words of the original text but also the culture. Noss describes the process as:

The Bible was originally transmitted in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. Unless the reader is fluent in all three languages, a translation is necessary to read the Bible. From the time of the Septuagint, the first translation of the Bible,

⁴ Wayne Walden, "Luther: The One Who Shaped the Canon," *Restoration Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (2007): 3.

⁵ "How was the Bible Distributed Before the Printing Press was Invented in 1455?" Accessed December 1, 2018. *International Bible Society*. <https://www.biblica.com/resources/bible-faqs/how-was-the-bible-distributed-before-the-printing-press-was-invented-in-1455/>

⁶ Ibid.

Scripture translation has always taken place in a particular social time and place. It has never been carried out in a vacuum. Significantly, the first Bible translation occurred in order to bridge an internal language barrier, not to cross an external ethno-cultural divide, as in the case with most translations. The Septuagint is a translation from Hebrew into Greek that was produced for the Jewish community resident outside their own land in the North African commercial and intellectual Hellenistic metropolis of Alexandria.⁷

Few scholars can read Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek and far fewer lay people are able to interact with the Biblical text in the original languages. Translation is necessary for God's people to have access to the message of the Bible.

What is the Bible?

The physical, modern-day Bible does not resemble the Bible as it was preserved for centuries. The books of the Bible and their order were not settled until long after the death of Christ. The structure of the New Testament was not settled until Johannes Gutenberg printed the Latin Vulgate in 1456.⁸ Prior to the printing of the Vulgate, different leaders and councils debated which books would make up the Bible and their order.

Western readers occasionally struggle to view the Bible as it existed prior to widespread literacy and the invention of the printing press. There is a temptation to view the Bible as one book instead of a book of books. The individual books were recorded by multiple people over hundreds of years and were preserved by the Holy

⁷ Noss, *A History of Bible Translation*, 4.

⁸ Charles Smith and James Bennett, *How the Bible Was Built*, (Grand Rapids: MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishers, 2005), 68.

Spirit. The Bible provides readers with an accurate account of God's interaction with ancient Israel and the church, found in the New Testament.

Portions of the New Testament come from actual letters, but the majority of the Bible existed in an oral format prior to being written. Charles Smith wrote, "All sacred literature begins as oral tradition. People possess it in the form of stories and beliefs passed from one generation to the next by word of mouth."⁹ These stories and beliefs were eventually written down. The Bible was originally written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Any rendering of the Bible in a different language comes through translation. Unlike Islam, Christianity allows for translation into vernacular languages.

The Biblical Canon

The idea of the authorized Biblical Canon was established during the time of Athanasius in 367 AD.¹⁰ Many books and letters were circulating through the early churches which were not authentic. As Bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius produced a list of authoritative books in the Old and New Testaments in one of his Easter letters. He was the first to refer to the collection of approved books comprising the Bible as a Canon.¹¹ There was much debate during the first three hundred years of

⁹ Ibid., 97.

¹⁰ Taylor Smith, *How We Got Our Bible*, (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys Publishing, 1994), 52.

¹¹ Frederick Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1988), 17.

the church about which books were authoritative and which would be excluded from the Canon. Protestant Bibles consist of two Canons. The Old Testament Canon is the story of God's interaction with mankind before Christ, and the New Testament Canon is the story of Christ and the early church.

Old Testament

Most Jewish rabbis prior to the life of Christ accepted the Old Testament canon. One group of scholars believes that in the late first century, a group of rabbis gathered in the town of Jamnia to determine which Old Testament books were authoritative and which defiled the hands of God.¹² Not everyone agrees that this meeting ever took place or if it did take place, that the purpose of the meeting was to close the Old Testament Canon. F.F. Bruce wrote, "It is probably unwise to talk as if there was a council or Synod of Jamnia which laid down the limits of the Old Testament Canon."¹³

Prior to Jamnia, most Jewish leaders accepted the current Old Testament. The Sadducees were a notable exception to the agreement on the Old Testament Canon. This religious sect disagreed with the other Jews. They rejected the oral traditions and only accepted the Law as authoritative Scripture.¹⁴ Exactly when the Old

¹² Smith and Bennett, *How the Bible was Built*, 57.

¹³ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 34.

¹⁴ Smith and Bennet, *How the Bible was Built*, 57.

Testament Canon was settled is not certain, but it was clearly settled at an early date.

The Old Testament was originally written in Aramaic and Hebrew. For many years, the Jews live in exile of their homeland. The longer the Israelites lived outside of their homeland, the more they were exposed to other languages. As they began to use the new languages, it became more difficult to understand the Bible in their native tongue. Eventually, the diaspora Jews spoke more Aramaic than Hebrew. This challenge of understanding the Bible in Hebrew led to the first Bible translation.

The first translation work of Scriptures was the translation of the Old Testament into Greek in the third century BC.¹⁵ It consists of thirty-nine books recorded by various authors over a thousand years. The books provide historical records of the nation of Israel, poetry, psalms, wisdom, and prophecies. The purpose of Bible translation has always been to allow people the ability to interact with the Scripture of God.

New Testament

By the time of Christ, there was not a significant amount of controversy as to which books would comprise the Old Testament. The Old Testament Canon had been widely agreed upon by most religious leaders. The New Testament Canon was not as clear. It took hundreds of years for the New Testament to take the structure found in contemporary Bibles. These books of the New Testament primarily relate

¹⁵ Larry Stone, *The Story of the Bible: The Fascinating History of Its Writing, Translation, and Effect on Civilization*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 2012), 64.

to the life of Christ and the early church and were written between AD 49 and 95. The New Testament books are generally divided into four different categories: The Gospels, The Acts of the Apostles, The Epistles, and the Book of Revelation.

A heretic named Marcion was one impetus for the formalizing of the New Testament. Marcion decided that the Old Testament and the New Testament were incompatible. He developed his own collection of accepted books of the Bible. His Bible rejected the Old Testament and only included eleven books from the New Testament.¹⁶ Most of the books he kept were from the writings of Paul. The church rejected the work of Marcion, but the controversy created the necessity for the church to evaluate the materials being circulated and to formalize the New Testament.

The proliferation of false gospels and letters circulating in the early church during the first century was another motivation to canonize the New Testament.¹⁷ Many of these gospels or letters claimed to either be the words of Christ or to describe the actions of Christ. The early church needed a way to identify the inspired text from these apocryphal gospels. The church debated for much of the second and third centuries which books would be accepted as part of the New Testament Canon.¹⁸ Over almost three hundred years, Clement, Ignatius, Polycarp,

¹⁶ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 139.

¹⁷ Arthur G Patzia, *The Making of the New Testament: Origin, Collection, Text & Canon*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press Academic, 2011), 89.

¹⁸ Bart D Ehrman. *A Brief Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 20014), 7.

Justin Martyr, Marcion, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Hippolytus, Origen, and Eusebius all provided versions of what should be included, but it was not until Athanasius' Easter letter that the Canon was decided.¹⁹

Important Bible Translations in History

Targums

The first example of translating Biblical text into a vernacular language was the Targums. The uneducated Jews living in the diaspora spoke Aramaic and very little Hebrew. Eventually, these diaspora Jews were unable to understand the Hebrew spoken by the rabbi and required an interpretation into Aramaic. These interpretations birthed the first Targums. These were not word-for-word translations; they were paraphrases of the Hebrew text.²⁰

Originally the Targums were an oral interpretation of the Hebrew text but eventually were written alongside the Hebrew text.²¹ David Burke classified the Targums as "homiletic expansions or Midrashic explanations since their objective

¹⁹ Wegner, *The Journey from Text to Translation*, 144.

²⁰ George Schodde, "The Targums," *The Old Testament Student* 8, No. 7 (July 1889), 262.

²¹ Harry Meyer Orlinsky and Robert G Bratcher, *A History of Bible Translation and the North American Contribution, Biblical scholarship in North America* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 5.

was a practical one – to get the meaning across to people without Hebrew facility, and not to prepare literal translation in Aramaic.”²²

The Targums were never intended to be meticulous translations standing on their own. Hebrew cultural context was needed for understanding. Smolar and Aberach explained the purpose of the Targums:

It cannot be sufficiently emphasized that the central purpose of the Aramaic translation of biblical texts was not to provide an accurate rendering for the benefit of scholars, but to instruct the masses with an up-to-date version of the Scriptures, one which perforce had to agree with current laws and customs. Inevitably, accuracy and historical truth had to be sacrificed on the altar of halachic orthodoxy.²³

The Targums were important interpretations used to communicate to a significant population who were unable to understand Hebrew, but their purpose was not scholarly, nor should they be viewed as detailed translations. Translations always represent an interpretation of what the translator is communicating into the receptor language. Bruce Metzger describes this process with the Targums as, “Targums differ in that they are interpretive as a matter of policy and often to the extent that far exceeds the bounds of translation or even paraphrase.”²⁴

²² David G Burke, “The First Versions: The Septuagint, the Targums, and the Latin,” in *A History of Bible Translation*, ed. Philip Noss (Roma: Edizioni de Storia della Letteratura, 2007) 76.

²³ Leivy Smolar, Moses Aberbach, and Pinkhos Churgin, *Studies in Targum Jonathan to the Prophets, The Library of Biblical Studies* (New York: Ktav Publishing House: Baltimore Hebrew College, 1983), 61.

²⁴ Bruce Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 25.

Septuagint

As a result of the conquests of Alexander the Great, fourth century BC experienced an expansion of the Greek language and influence throughout the world of the Jews.²⁵ This influence was greatest in the urban centers where many Jewish children were educated in Greek schools and did not speak Hebrew. Within just a few generations, the Greek language replaced Hebrew as the language of broader usage. Many Jews were unable to understand Hebrew.

The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. It is considered the first translation of the Bible.²⁶ Unlike the Targums, which originated out of an oral interpretation of Hebrew for the Aramaic speakers, the Septuagint was an intentional, scholarly, and meticulous translation. The translation took place in Alexandria, but the usage of the Septuagint quickly spread throughout the Greek-speaking world.²⁷

According to the *Letter of Aristeas*, the Egyptian ruler Ptolemy II Philadelphus (285 – 247 BC) built a vast library and desired to collect all of the books of the world. The librarian convinced the ruler to commission seventy-two Jewish scribes, six from each of the twelve tribes, to prepare a translation of the Old Testament

²⁵ John Riches, *The Bible: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 36.

²⁶ Philip Noss, "A History of Bible Translation: Introduction and Overview," in *A History of Bible Translation*, ed. Philip Noss (Roma: Edizioni de Storia della Letteratura, 2007), 1.

²⁷ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 45.

writings from Hebrew to Greek.²⁸ The translation under Ptolemy was limited to the Pentateuch, but Jewish scholars did complete translating the entire Old Testament, and the Septuagint is generally identified with the entire Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures.²⁹

The actual process of the Septuagint translation is uncertain. Philo believed that the entire process of translating the Pentateuch took place over just seventy-two days. He further understood seventy-two translators, working independently, arrived at the same translation of the complete Old Testament. He wrote:

Therefore, being settled in a secret place, and nothing even being present with them except the elements of nature, the earth, the water, the air, and the heaven, concerning the creation of which they were going in the first place to explain the sacred account; for the account of the creation of the world is the beginning of the law; they, like men inspired, prophesied, not one saying one thing and another, but every one of them employed the self-same nouns and verbs, as if some unseen prompter had suggested all their language to them.³⁰

Most modern scholars believe that this story is likely an embellishment which grew over time.³¹ Assuming the story was an embellishment, it still does not diminish the contribution the Septuagint had for Greek-speaking Jews and the role it played for the New Testament Church. This translation was added to his great library, but

²⁸ H Thackeray, "Translation of the Letter Aristeas," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 15, no. 3 (April 1903): 343.

²⁹ Norman Geisler and William Nix, *From God to Us: How We Got Our Bible*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1974), 201.

³⁰ Philo. *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*. Translated by Charles Yonge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993) 494.

³¹ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 44.

perhaps the greater contribution of this effort was its use by the Greek-speaking Jews.

The Gothic Bible

The Goths were an Eastern Germanic people during the third through the sixth centuries. They were an unruly, nomadic people who were prone to war and were seen by outsiders as uncivilized.³² The height of their power came in the fifth century when they aligned with Constantinople to conquer the barbarian Italian King and establish the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy.³³ At one point, over one-third of Europe was under the rule of the Goths.³⁴

The religion of the Goths, prior to Christianity, was “Nordic paganism which emphasized the close presence of the spirits of the land, one’s ancestors, and the primacy of the Norse gods.”³⁵ There were Christians among the Goths in the third century, but their presence was small, and they mostly were from conquered peoples. The observance of traditional Gothic religion made them suspicious of Christianity. Christianity was viewed as a foreign, Roman religion with both

³² Joshua Mark. “The Goths.” *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. Accessed December 1, 2018. <https://www.ancient.eu/Goths/>.

³³ Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 38.

³⁴ Harry Freedman, *The Murderous History of Bible Translations Power, Conflict, and the Quest for Meaning*. (London: Bloomsbury Press, 2016), 39.

³⁵ Mark, “The Goths.”

religious and political motivation. As a result of this perception, there was severe persecution of outsiders who tried to bring the Christian faith to the Goths.³⁶

Ulphilas, born in 311, was a third generation Goth. The grandson of slave Christians who had been captured by the Goths, he became a Christian missionary to his people.³⁷ Trained in the classical languages, he was greatly respected by Catholic leadership. When he was just thirty years old, he was named the Gothic bishop. Philostorgius II records that Constantius II compared Ulphilas to Elijah and called him the Moses of his time.³⁸ Late in his life, he was a part of the great Arian controversy of the church, but this does not overshadow his translation of the Bible to the Goths.

The greatest contributions of Ulphilas were the development of the Gothic alphabet and the translation of the Bible into the Gothic language.³⁹ The task of translation was difficult because, until this time, the Gothic language was not a written language. Ulphilas did not develop a new Gothic letter system. Instead, he chose to utilize a form of the Greek script for the Gothic alphabet.⁴⁰ The creation of

³⁶ Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 76.

³⁷ Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, 82.

³⁸ Philostorgius II 5. Auxentius (*Max Diss.* 62); Streitberg, *Die gotische Bibel 1: xvii*, quoted in Herwig Wolfram, *History of the Goths* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 76.

³⁹ Erroll Rhodes, *Secondary Versions: Arabic to Old Slavic in A History of Bible Translation*, ed. Philip Noss (Roma: Edizioni de Storia della Letteratura, 2007), 101.

⁴⁰ Mark, "The Goths."

this script was the first time a Northern European language was written down.⁴¹ Another challenge for translation was the lack of words for many of the Biblical terms in the Gothic language. Ulfilas created the words to fill in for these gaps. Many of these words continue to be used today in other translations.

Ulfilas and his assistants translated nearly the entire Bible. He chose not to translate the books of Samuel and Kings. He believed that if he added these books to the Bible, it would “inflamm[e] the military temper of the Gothic race with their records of war and conquests.”⁴² Very little of the Gothic translation remains today. When the Goths lost power in the fifth century, most of the work was lost.

The Latin Vulgate

Jerome was born in 347 to a prosperous, Christian family. At the age of twelve, his parents sent him to Rome for formal education. He learned under the best teachers of his day.⁴³ After his studies, he began a monastic, hermit lifestyle with several of his friends. During this time, he lived in isolation and learned Hebrew and Aramaic.⁴⁴ He was unable to continue this lifestyle, in part, due to his difficult personality. This characteristic was a recurring theme throughout his life.

⁴¹ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 49.

⁴² Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 39.

⁴³ Freedman, *Murderous History*, 44.

⁴⁴ Bruce, *Canon of Scripture*, 88.

After a life-changing dream, Jerome undertook an aesthetic lifestyle and dedicated himself to the Bible and the works of the Church Fathers.

In 382, Jerome traveled to Rome and began to work with Pope Damasus. The Pope was impressed with his scholastic abilities and gave him great responsibility during his reign. By the fourth century, there were many different Latin translations of the Bible, but there were also many inconsistencies in the different versions. The Pope commissioned Jerome to oversee a new Latin translation of the Bible.⁴⁵

It is unknown who first translated the Bible into Latin, but it most likely occurred in the second century. The number of translations increased significantly over the next two hundred years, but not much care was given to the translations.⁴⁶ Not only were there transcription errors as the scribes copied the scribes, but there were also errors in translation.⁴⁷ After working on his translation, Jerome confirmed the problem by complaining in the Epistle Prefatory to the Gospels that there were nearly as many inconsistencies as there were copies.⁴⁸

Jerome had a unique style of Bible translation. He gathered the oldest known Latin and most reliable Septuagint texts for review in preparation to create a new, updated Latin Bible. Eventually, he realized that he could create a much better

⁴⁵ Paul Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 254.

⁴⁶ Clinton Arnold, *How We Got the Bible: A Visual Journey*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 32.

⁴⁷ Freedman, *Murderous History of Bible Translation*, 46.

⁴⁸ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 88.

translation by consulting the original languages.⁴⁹ He abandoned reliance upon the Septuagint, and the Old Testament translated directly from the best Hebrew texts.⁵⁰ Another characteristic of Jerome's translation style was a sense for sense translation. He wrote, "Everyone must recognize that a fine phrase in one language is not necessarily a fine phrase in another if translated word-for-word. The translator should, therefore, render sense for sense and not word-for-word."⁵¹ Unlike the previous Latin and Greek translations, Jerome attempted to translate the meaning of the text instead of focusing on a rigid, word-for-word translation. This model of translation would influence many future translators and was a significant improvement from the older translation models.

There is no way that Jerome or Pope Damasus could have known the impact of this translation. Known as the *Vulgate* (meaning common or plain), this translation became the main Bible for Christendom for over a thousand years. On April 8, 1546, the Council of Trent would declare the Latin Vulgate as the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church.⁵² Future translations of the Bible would utilize some of the word choices used by Jerome.⁵³

⁴⁹ Riches, *The Bible*, 38.

⁵⁰ Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, 88.

⁵¹ H Sparks. "Jerome as Biblical Scholar." Chapter. In *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, edited by P. R. Ackroyd and C. F. Evans, 1:510-541. The Cambridge History of the Bible. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 523.

⁵² Wegner, *Journey from Texts to Translations*, 255.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 256.

The Wycliffe Bible

Over a thousand years after Jerome finished the Latin Vulgate, John Wycliffe believed that his fellow Englishmen should have the Bible in English. Born 150 years before Martin Luther, Wycliffe was a reformer before the reformation existed. Just as with Luther and other reformers, the Roman Catholic Church opposed Wycliffe's translation into the vernacular. The Vulgate was still the Bible used throughout Christendom, but there were challenges. Bibles were still being copied by hand by scribes. This led to the same transcription and gloss errors which created the need for the Vulgate.⁵⁴

Since his fellow Englishmen communicated with each other in English and prayed to God in English, Wycliffe was convinced they should likewise have access to the Bible in English. French kings ruled England for over four hundred years. During that time, the language of governmental proceedings was a French dialect. Higher learning was done in either the French dialect or Latin. Finally, England had a King whose mother tongue was English. King Richard II had been born in France but grew up in England. There was a nationalistic pride occurring in England. English was gaining prestige, literature was written in English, and there were even Bible portions in the vernacular.⁵⁵ The time was ripe for change.

A driving force behind Jerome's Latin translation was to unify the existing translation into an updated common Latin, the language of wider communication.

⁵⁴ Louis Brewer Hall, *The Perilous Vision of John Wyclif* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983), 140.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 145.

Over a thousand years later, priests still used Latin. Their Bibles, if they had one, were in Latin. The mass was in Latin. One challenge facing the church during the fifteenth-century was a significant number of priests who could not read or understand Latin. Their preparation was limited, and they merely needed to show proficiency in reciting the mass. Some priests had learned and memorized the mass, but they could not explain what they were saying.⁵⁶

The educational system during the periods before Wycliffe was poor to non-existent for a majority of people. Only the nobility had access to higher learning. Illiteracy was overwhelming during this period. The local parish priest was no exception to the challenge of literacy. Margaret Deanesly offered this analysis of the parish priest during this period:

The medieval parish priest was not normally the graduate of a university. This explains the astonishing difference of intellectual level between the books we know to have been common in libraries for biblical study, and the educational standard required for institution to a living: the gulf between the apparently conflicting statements, that the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard was the normal text-book of theology, and that the minimum knowledge of Latin required for institution to a benefice was: ability to say certain short formulae by heart, and to read the Latin services.⁵⁷

The challenge was not limited to poorly educated priests; at least one bishop was unable to read or understand Latin.⁵⁸ Wycliffe desired to prepare a translation of the

⁵⁶ Ibid., 141.

⁵⁷ Margaret Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible and Other Medieval Biblical Versions*, *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought* (Cambridge: University Press, 1920), 158.

⁵⁸ Hall, *The Perilous Vision of John Wyclif*, 142.

Bible which could provide access for both the common man, the parish priest, and the learned scholar.

Wycliffe was the beneficiary of having received a good education. He was also actively involved in politics. After study and reflection, he became convinced of the need for the separation of church and state. He sought freedom not only for the church but also for individuals. He was a proponent of what he called “dominion grace,” whereby Christians are responsible directly to God for their actions and obeying His laws.⁵⁹ Of great concern to Wycliffe was the challenge of people not being able to have access to or understand God’s Word. Small portions of Scripture and sermons were translated into English, but widespread availability was limited.⁶⁰ The scant resources in the vernacular included at least two different versions of Psalms, devotional books used by the nuns, and sermons.⁶¹ Prior to Wycliffe’s translation, there was no complete Bible in English. There was not enough access to God’s Word in the vernacular for people to understand how to be obedient to the teachings of Scripture.

Even if a local church was fortunate enough to have a priest who could read Latin, many churches did not have access to a Bible. Hall writes, “If a church had an illuminated missal, gospel book, or psalter, the book would be one of the church

⁵⁹ F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English: From the Earliest Versions*, 3d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 12.

⁶⁰ Tim Machan, *Language Anxiety: Conflict and Change in the History of English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 144.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, *The Perilous Vision of John Wyclif*, 141.

treasures and was locked in the libraries of the largest abbeys, monasteries, and college halls. A complete Bible could be found only in the libraries of the largest abbeys, monasteries, and college halls.”⁶² Access to Scriptures was not common outside of larger churches, but even when a church had a Bible, it was not widely utilized. Not one of the priests who worked on the Wycliffe Bible at Oxford had Bibles of any type in their churches.⁶³ Wycliffe realized that a new, vernacular translation was needed if they were going to be able to understand their responsibility to God for their actions.

The Wycliffe Bible, as it is known today, was created by a translation team of Wycliffe’s followers at Oxford University. The scholars who worked on the translation “included some of the most learned scholars of the university.”⁶⁴ F.F. Bruce claims that “it is doubtful if Wycliffe himself took any direct part in the work of Bible translation, but we need to have no qualms about referring to the Wycliffite Bible, for it was under his inspiration and by his friends and colleagues that the work was done.”⁶⁵ Wycliffe was the visionary of this movement, but most scholars agree that most of the work was completed by the broader team.

The Wycliffe Bible was produced in two different versions. The first version of the Bible was a rigid translation from the Latin Vulgate. Bruce observes that the

⁶² Ibid., 143.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Deanesley, *The Lollard Bible*, 231.

⁶⁵ Bruce, *The History of the Bible in English*, 13.

first translation followed a word for word correspondence from the Latin, “even at the expense of natural English word-order.”⁶⁶ The team was successful in the translation into the vernacular, but the insistence upon maintaining a direct quotation hindered the effectiveness of the first translation. The second version of the Bible was finished after Wycliffe’s death. This new Wycliffe Bible was still a translation from Latin but was rewritten using the English sentence construct and was much more popular in England.⁶⁷

Wycliffe’s vernacular Bible provided access to the Scriptures in the language of broader communication, but physical access to the Bibles was still limited to churches and persons of financial means. The printing press still had not been invented, so copies were hand-written. There was significant demand for the new Bible. It was expensive, but not as expensive as the Vulgate which cost the equivalence of a farm.⁶⁸

Opposition to the Wycliffe Bible from the Roman Catholic Church was swift. Many thought the English language was the speech of the illiterate and providing them access to the Bible would be disastrous.⁶⁹ Another Catholic leader wrote,

This master John Wyclif translated from Latin into English – the tongue of the Angles, not the Angels – the scriptures that Christ gave to the priests and wise men of the church so they could minister to ignorant and weaker souls. By this translation the scriptures have become vulgar, and they are more

⁶⁶ Ibid., 16.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 17.

⁶⁸ Hall, *The Perilous Vision of John Wyclif*, 151.

⁶⁹ Freedman, *Murderous History of Bible Translation*, 43.

available to lay, and even to women who can read, than they were to learned scholars, who have a high intelligence. So the pearl of the gospel is scattered and trodden underfoot by swine.⁷⁰

The disparagement of the translation from the church did not dissuade Wycliffe or his followers from their efforts. Wycliffe responded to the criticism by explaining that Moses heard from God in Hebrew, the Apostles in Greek, those from Italy in Latin, and so the Englishmen would learn Christ's law in English.⁷¹ John Wycliffe was a reformer before Luther and Calvin were born. His desire to see the Bible in the vernacular is an example that will be repeated.

Tyndale's New Testament

William Tyndale truly brought the Bible into the vernacular for English speakers. Wycliffe was the visionary behind the first English translation, but Tyndale built upon the vernacular demand and greatly improved upon the work of Wycliffe. Tyndale was a brilliant scholar who studied at Oxford and Cambridge. He spoke seven languages and could read both Hebrew and Greek.⁷² Tyndale read Erasmus's Greek New Testament and desired that English speakers have the same access to God's Word that he had read Greek.

⁷⁰ Knighton, *Chronica*, II, 152, quoted in Louis Brewer Hall, *The Perilous Vision of John Wyclif* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983), 149.

⁷¹ Freedman, *Murderous History of Bible Translation*, 150.

⁷² Mark Galli, "What the English Bible Cost One Man." *Christian History* 13 (3): 12.

Less than one hundred fifty years passed between the translation of the Wycliffe Bible and the printing of Tyndale's New Testament. Jerome's *Vulgate* translation had been the only Bible of the Roman Catholic Church for over a thousand years, but in the short time between when Wycliffe dared translate the Bible into the vernacular and Tyndale, the world changed. There are at least five major developments between the Tyndale's Translation and the Wycliffe Bible which impacted Bible translation forever.

First, the advent of the printing press revolutionized communication and the flow of information. Michael Welte declares, "From the point of view of cultural history, modern times began with letterpress printing."⁷³ Information now flowed freely. No longer could a small group of people or institutions control the flow of information. Timothy George compares the communication changes due to the advent of printing with the changes brought about by modern computers.⁷⁴ As a result of the printing press, the reproduction of the Bible was now much faster, cheaper, and of higher quality. Exact replicas were now possible, eliminating errors in transcription or scribal glosses which became part of the text in previous Bible copies. Instead of making dozens of copies, now Bibles could be reproduced by the

⁷³ Michael Welte, "The Problem of Manuscript Basis for the Earliest Printed Editions of the Greek New Testament," in *The Bible as Book: The first Printed Editions*, ed. Paul Saenger and Kimberly Van Kampen (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 1999), 117.

⁷⁴ Timothy George, "Tyndale's One Thing," *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 14, no. 4 (2011): 30.

thousands. The first printing of the Tyndale New Testament was for 6000 copies.⁷⁵ For the first time, Bibles and religious literature were truly available to the masses.

The second major difference between the translations is the effect that Erasmus and humanism had on the thought processes of Tyndale. Desiderius Erasmus was an influential person for the reformation movement. He was known as the “Dutch Prince of the Humanists,” and while he translated the Bible into Greek, he was much more than just a Bible translator.⁷⁶ As a humanist, he desired to go back to the original sources for information. He believed the Latin Vulgate had become unreliable due to the glosses and the transcription problems, so he printed his own translation of the Greek New Testament in March 1516. This translation influenced the translations of both Tyndale and Luther.

The third major difference between the Tyndale New Testament and the Wycliffe translation was Tyndale’s use of the Greek and Hebrew texts for the source material for his translation. Wycliffe’s team used the Latin Vulgate as their source. Their work was a translation from a translation. Due greatly to the influence of Erasmus, Tyndale created a translation from the original languages.

The fourth major difference was the emphasis on translating the Bible into the vernacular as it was actually spoken. There was no attempt to translate the Greek, Hebrew, or Latin sentence structure. The influence of Erasmus is again

⁷⁵ Timothy George, “The Translator’s Tale: Celebrating the Five-Hundredth Birthday of William Tyndale, the Father of the English Bible,” *Christianity Today* 38, no.12 (October 24, 1994): 37.

⁷⁶ Freedman, *Murderous History of Bible Translation*, 89.

evident. William Tyndale desired to see the Scriptures translated into the vernacular so that everyone would be able to read God's Word. George Foxe tells the story of how Tyndale was arguing with a learned man about God's laws and the Pope's laws when he replied "I defy the people and all his laws. If God spared him my life, ere many years he would cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than he did."⁷⁷ His goal was to bring the Bible into the "plain plowman's English."⁷⁸ Unlike the Wycliffe translation, Tyndale did not preserve the original language form. He chose a sentence-for-sentence translation, rather than a word-for-word-translation.

The fifth difference was the maturation of the English language. Prior to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, English was seen as "uncouth, the language of plough-boys and ditch-diggers."⁷⁹ By the sixteenth century, the English language had come of age, and the English people desired to have things printed in their language. The Catholic prohibition of reading the Scriptures in English only created more demand. An anonymous pamphleteer wrote, "The experience of reading God's word was perilous, exciting, intoxicating, and illegal. It is proved lawful of God, that both men

⁷⁷ John Foxe and William Forbush, *Foxe's Book of Martyrs: A History of the Lives, Sufferings, and Triumphant Deaths of the Early Christian and the Protestant Martyrs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 225.

⁷⁸ George, *The Translator's Tale*, 38.

⁷⁹ Elizabeth Cahill, "A Bible for the Plowboy: Tyndale at the New York Public Library," *Commonweal* 124, no. 7 (1997), 19.

and women lawfully may read and write God's law in their mother tongue."⁸⁰ The popularity of English books was not limited to nobility. "The readers included barrel-makers, weavers, tailors, monks, curates, journeymen, nail-makers, pewter-workers, furriers and carpenters, and their wives, sisters, and daughters. It is a religion of the little people."⁸¹

Conclusion

Bible translation allows God's Word to be understood by all peoples. It helps readers transcend both linguistic and cultural barriers to understanding.

Translation is much more than simply changing one word in the original languages to a substitutionary word in the receptor language. Translation requires creation and contextualization. Brian Moynahan describes translation as:

Translation is often seen as a 'lesser' act of literary creation – if it is seen as one at all – in part because of the unexamined assumption that it is primarily if not solely 'functional.' Tyndale's work, however, illustrates for us that function and beauty in translation are not only not mutually exclusive, but ideally complementary.⁸²

From the Targum translations to William Tyndale, the purpose of translations has been to allow access to God's Word to the masses in a way that is understandable.

⁸⁰ Brian Moynahan, *God's Bestseller: William Tyndale, Thomas More, and the Writing of the English Bible – a Story of Martyrdom and Betrayal*, 1st U.S. ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 108.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Daniel Pinti, "Tyndale's Gospel of St John: Translation and the Theology of Style," *Journal of Anglican Studies* 6, no. 1 (June 2008): 94.

Because of the efforts of Wycliffe, Tyndale, Luther, and countless others, the church has transitioned from a time when it was illegal for anyone other than a priest to own a Bible, to a time when multiple translations of the Bible are accessible, in the majority of contemporary spoken languages, with little cost or effort through the internet. It is important for Christians never to forget the great sacrifice that many made for this privilege. Timothy George expresses this concern as: “The almost universal access to the Bible is a wonderful thing, but it carries a risk as well; that we forget the great price paid by William Tyndale and others to give us the Bible in our language.”⁸³

⁸³ George, *Tyndale's One Thing*, 34.

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