

Sunday, September 15, 2019— Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 94 A Brief History of the English Language & the Origins of the Anglo-Saxon Gospels

Introduction

- Last week in [Lesson 93](#) we concluded our study of the “two streams of Bibles” model of transmission. This morning I would like to begin transitioning into a discussion of the origins of our English Bible specifically.
- I would like to do that by looking at the following points:
 - A Brief History of the English Language
 - The English Bible Before Wycliffe
 - Anglo-Saxon Gospels
- As we begin our study of the English Bible, it is important to realize that we are still in the manuscript period i.e., the period before the invention of Gutenberg’s printing press when preservation/transmission was being accomplished via handwritten manuscripts (MSS).
- Before 1455 all Biblical MSS in any language were preserved/transmitted through handwritten copies. Therefore, the first renderings of the Bible into Old English were done by scribes/translators working without the aid of the printing press.

A Brief History of the English Language

- “The English language, like all languages, has been evolving for centuries and will continue to do so throughout the twenty-first century. . . Compared with language development of many civilizations, however, English developed relatively rapidly. For instance, while the development of Greek and other ancient languages spanned several thousand years, the time it took for the Anglo-Saxon language (forerunner of modern English) to develop into words similar to those we speak today can be measured in a few hundred years.” (Brake—*King James Bible*, 21)
- Three distinct periods mark the development of English:
 - Old English—6th century to the Norman Conquest of 1066
 - Middle English—1100 to 1500
 - Modern English—1500 to the present
- When the Romans landed on the island of England a few years before the birth of Christ, English did not exist. The language of this time and place included both Germanic and Celtic elements.

It was not until the sixth century that a small percentage of people in Britain spoke a prototype of English. (Brake—*King James Bible*, 22)

- “During this period, from the sixth century until the Norman Conquest, the British were tossed about by an influx of invasions and missionary endeavors that added to the flavor and texture of the English language. The development of English was shaped, in part by the Germanic tribes, Angles, Saxons, Jutes, who battled for supremacy among themselves and with tribal Picts, Scots, and Gaels who inhabited the island. In the sixth century, Pope Gregory, who viewed the island dwellers as pagans, sent a monk named Augustine to convert King Ethelbert to Christianity. . . Augustine’s mission was successful and, over time, Latin and Greek words found their way into the English vocabulary. Over the course of one thousand years, these combined cultural forces created a hybrid language that assimilated elements of Roman, Saxon, Danish, and Norman into a new strain of English.” (Brake—*King James Bible*, 22)
- “The politics of invasion and conquest take language captive, along with its people. The early invaders’ language, today known as Old English or Anglo-Saxon English, formed a rudimentary base for the English we speak today. The Anglo-Saxon conquest was so successful that very few words have survived from the original British language (Celtic).” (Brake—*King James Bible*, 22-24)
- Viking invasions between 750 and 1050 also impacted the development of Old English. Monosyllabic words such as sky, skin, and root have their roots in the Old Norse language. (Brake—*King James Bible*, 24)
- “The English Language went through a period of severe neglect in the Middle Ages. The conquest of England by the Normans in 1066 (Battle of Hastings) had led to the suppression of English in public life. French—or, more accurately, the form of Anglo-French that arose after the Norman conquest—dominated public discourse, particularly government departments and courts. The English upper class spoke Anglo-French as a matter of principle, to distinguish themselves from the lower classes, who spoke Middle English. . .” (McGrath, 26)
- “The widespread perception that French had established itself as the lingua franca of the cultural elite of Europe inevitably led to English being dismissed as a crude language, incapable of conveying the subtle undertones necessary for diplomacy, the fine distinctions of philosophy, and the complexities of legal and financial negotiations. English would do very well for the common laborer; French was the language of choice for the elite.” (McGrath, 27)
- In the 13th and 14th centuries things began to change. William of Shoreham and Richard Rolle, both translated the Psalter into Anglo-Norman from the Latin Vulgate. From the middle of the 12th century a genuine English language began to replace the Anglo-Norman language. (Brake—*King James Bible*, 42)
- It was during this Middle English period that John Wycliffe began the process of translating the Bible into the vernacular English of his day. There was much anxiety amongst the academic elite

of England whether English as a language was capable of expressing the deep nuanced truths of the Bible in particular and the Christian faith in general. (McGrath, 33)

- In 1401 a debate over the use of English in church life ensued at Oxford. In 1407, Thomas Arundel, archbishop of Canterbury issued the following statement:
 - “We therefore legislate and ordain that nobody shall from this day forth translate any text of the Holy Scripture on his own authority into the English, or any other, language, whether in the form of a book, pamphlet or tract; and that any such book pamphlet or tract whether composed recently or in the time of John Wycliffe, or in the future, shall not be read in part or in whole, in public or in private.”
- “English thus became the language of the religious underground. To write in English was tantamount to holding heretical views.” (McGrath, 33)
- “The Hundred Years War (1337-1453) served to consolidate the growing popular impression that French was the language of England’s enemy. . . The war with France at an end, English became the language of choice of the upper class and government departments. No longer was English dismissed as the language of the lower classes; it was now the language of choice of a nation with an increasing sense of national identity shared purpose, strengthened by England’s growing maritime enterprise.” (McGrath, 29-31)
- “The story of the King James Bible cannot be told without an understanding of the remarkable rise of confidence in the English language in the late sixteenth century. What was once scorned as the barbarous language of plowmen became as the language of patriots and poets—a language fit for heroes on the one hand, and for the riches of the Bible on the other. Gone were any hesitations about the merits of the English language. Elizabeth’s navy and armies had established England’s military credentials; her poets, playwrights, and translators had propelled English into the front rank of the living European languages. The King James Bible consolidated the enormous advantages in the English language over the centuries, and can be seen as the symbol of a nation and language that believed that their moment had finally arrived.” (McGrath, 24-25)
- “In his 1589 *Art of English Poesy*, written at the height of the Elizabethan Age, George Puttenham declared that English was just as sophisticated as Greek or Latin, and perfectly capable of expressing the full range of human emotions and thoughts.” (McGrath, 25)
- “To write in English—or translate into English—was a political act, affirming the intrinsic dignity of the language of a newly confident people and nation. Any why should not that nation have its own bible in its own language?” (McGrath, 26)

The English Bible Before Wycliffe

- According to Bible historian Donald L Brake, “no complete Bible in the language of the people of England existed before the fourteenth century. Even for the mostly educated clergy, the Bible was inaccessible—available only in the Latin Language.” (Brake—*English Bible*, 34)
- David L. Brake also notes the connection between the Gothic Bible (See Lessons 87 and 93) and the Anglo-Saxon language of the Old English period:
 - “A Gothic translation of the Gospels called *Codex Argenteus* or “Silver Book,” so called because it was copied in letters with a silvery hue, represented a pre-English language. Translated by the famous missionary Ulfilas in about AD 360 for the heathen Goths, it represents a pre-Old English version in the first vernacular translation ever produced. It is also a prototype of the Old English. Several phrases when compared, reveal many similarities of the Germanic tongue to Old English.” (Brake—*English Bible*, 38-39)
- Brake reports that, “The earliest portions of Scripture in Anglo-Saxon were songs set to verse by a layman, Caedmon, at Yorkshire monastery. A legend describes his habit of singing portions of Scripture in a highly complicated vernacular meter. The only surviving manuscript attributed to Caedmon is a hymn about creation.” (Brake—*English Bible*, 38-39)
- The first known translation of an actual Biblical text into Old English was a portion of the Psalter (Psalms) which dates from the beginning of the eighth century (700s). The work was the product of Aldhelm, the first Bishop of Sherborn in Dorset. Upon his death, the work was continued and completed by the Venerable Bede according to church tradition. Unfortunately, no copies of this Psalter are known to be extant. (Brake—*English Bible*, 40)
- The greatest achievement in terms of Bible translation during the Old English period was far and away the Lindisfarne manuscript.
 - “The Old English period (to AD 1066) is characterized by its interlinear glosses in Latin manuscripts. Glossing, an Anglo-Saxon pedagogical method for introducing Latin to the reader, placed a word-for-word vernacular translation in direct juxtaposition to the Latin text. Undoubtedly the most famous example of this is seen in the eighth-century Lindisfarne manuscript, which contains a literal rendering of the text into an Anglo-Saxon dialect by the scribe named Aldred. . .the first extensively written Old English that has survived. Later scribes drew from these glosses to craft their translations.” (Brake—*English Bible*, 40)
- In 2003, Yale professor and author David Daniell penned a massive work titled *The Bible In English: Its History and Influence*. Regarding this “glossing” described by Brake during the Old English period, Daniell stated the following:
 - “The Gospels, Psalms, and other parts of the Old Testament were several times translated: most often only as Old English glosses between the lines of the Latin, keeping the Latin word order rather than writing fluent English. Old English prose—for the language, the phrases ‘Old English’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ are usually interchangeable—is capable of stylistic excellence, even nobility, but the glory of Anglo-Saxon literature is in its poetry, of which thirty thousand lines have survived. Most of the poetry has some

Christian basis, and much of it is directly biblical in origin, as will be seen: no account of the Bible in England should neglect this body of superb poetry. (Daniell, 44)

- Stemming the tide of the Viking invasions, Alfred the Great (AD 849-901) contributed to the development of English by insisting that schools teach in the vernacular. Alfred even learned Latin at the age of 40 so that he could translate various Biblical texts into Old English: Ten Commandments, Exodus, Acts, and a form of the Golden Rule. (Brake—*English Bible*, 41)
- The tenth-century translation of the four Gospels into Old English known as the Wessex Gospels is the first extended portion of the Bible into English. The Wessex Gospels is anonymous and does not bear a date. The earliest known manuscript dates from the 12th century. (Brake—*English Bible*, 41)
- Daniell reports the following regarding the English Bible after the Norman conquest of 1066:
 - “After 1066 there is no record of new attempts to translate the Bible into English for two and a half centuries. The Bible in England was in either Latin, or, occasionally, part of it in Norman French. In spite of the strength of their earlier work, the ordinary English people became deprived of access to much of the Bible. . .” (Daniell, 56)
- Thus, in summation, the pre-Wycliffe period epitomized the notion that only the clergy could own and read the Scriptures. The clergy not only prevented the laity from reading the Scriptures; copies of the sacred text were simply not available. They were either not in the laity’s language, or they were too expensive to purchase. Thus, the use of the Bible by the poor was not possible until the end of the fourteenth century. (Brake—*English Bible*, 43)
- Condit records that, at the Council of Toulouse in 1229, the Catholic move to canonize the functional situation that had been in existence in England for some time and that it banned layman from possessing the scriptures in the common tongue.
 - “We forbid that Laymen be permitted to have the books of the Old and New Testaments, unless some out of Devotion desire to have the Psalter or Breviary for Divines Offices, and the Hours of the Blessed Virgin; but even these, they may not have in the Vulgar Tongue.” (Condit, 19)

Saxon Gospels

- Blackford Condit author of *The History of the English Bible: Extending from Earliest Saxon Translations to the Present Anglo-American Revision, With Special Reference to the Protestant Religion and the English Language* (1882) states the following regarding the Saxon Gospels:
 - “The Anglo-Saxon versions of the Four Gospels may be referred to as the age of Alfred; though the manuscripts differ widely from the time of Bede to that of the Norman Conquest.” (Condit, 35)
- Joseph Bosworth added the following regarding the Old English Bible in his *The Gospels: Gothic, Anglo-Saxon, Wycliffe, and Tyndale Version Arranged in Parallel Columns*:
 - “We are not certain as the names of those patriotic Anglo-Saxons, who devoted their time, talents, and learning to the translating of the Scriptures into Anglo-Saxon, that they

might be read by the people, and their churches; but we have an indisputable evidence in the Rubrics, printed in our notes from the MS that they were constantly read in Anglo-Saxon churches, as the rubrical directions declare what part of the Scriptures was appointed for successive seasons. We have no more knowledge of the exact date when the Gospels were first translated into Anglo-Saxon, than we have of the translators.” (Bosworth, xii)

- Bosworth repeats the common speculation from the pen of Cuthbert, a pupil of the Venerable Bede, that Bede finished his translation of St. John on his death bed in May of 735. Since John is the fourth gospel, it is extrapolated by some that Bede succeeded in translating the Gospels into Anglo-Saxon before his death.
 - “We have no satisfactory evidence to prove that his was the first translations of the Gospels, nor that Bede’s version has come down to us. The Scriptures, in their own tongue, were revered by the Anglo-Saxons, for Alfred the Great placed the Commandments at the head of his Laws, and incorporated many passages from the Gospels. Subsequent translations would naturally avail themselves of the versions made by their predecessors, and write them in the orthography, the language, and the style of the time in which they lived.” (Bosworth, xii)
- In his “Preface” Bosworth catalogues the extant textual witnesses to the Anglo-Saxon gospels. Please note the following summary points from Bosworth’s “Preface”:
 - “I. B. . . . is said to be copied from an older MS. Before the Conquest [1066]. I think between A.D. 990 and 1020. . .

II. C. denotes the MS. Of the Anglo-Saxon Gospels, in the University of Cambridge marked Ii. 2.11. This MS. is small folio, written in a good clear hand about the time of the Norman Conquest if not earlier, it is very valuable for its accuracy in grammatical forms, and orthography as adopted in the best West-Saxon; and because it is the only copy which has the Rubrics complete and written in the same hand and just after the other parts of the MS.

III. This is what remains of the once fine MS. written on vellum before the Norman Conquest, and denoted by Cot. because it is in the Cotton Library, British Museum, Otho C. I. . . Planta, in his Catalogue of the Cotton MSS., describes it as “once containing 290 leaves but now (1802) so much burnt and contracted as to render the binding of impracticable [Accounts differ as to the extent of the damage.]. . .St. Luke is nearly complete, and occupies fol. 39-93. St. John fills fol. 95-135, and is nearly perfect especially in the latter part. There are no rubrical directions, and only a few badly formed capital letters of a dingy red colour in this MS.

IV. H. The Hatton MS. No. 38 in Bodleian, Oxford, is the size of a large 8vo. and written on vellum in a very uniform and beautifly, but late hand about the time of Henry II. The letters are so uniform, upright, and near together, as to appear like printing in facsimili types. . . The four Gospels are arranged not in the usual order, but St. Matt. Is placed after St. Luke; thus, Mark, Luke, Matthew, and John [The only Anglo-Saxon Rubric is at the beginning of St. John.]

V. This MS. denoted by RL is in the Royal Library, British Museum, I.A. XIV. It is very similar to the Hatton in the 8vo. size, but a little smaller. The writing is somewhat earlier in date, and less regular than Hatton. The Rubrics are very few, and of a brighter red than Hatton. . . The four Gospels are placed in this order,--Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John. . .

VI. O. The Oxford MS. in the Bodlean, No. 441, is closely allied to the best MSS. B, C. and Cot.; names to I, II, and III.—This Oxford MS. of the four Anglo-Saxon Gospels is in a small folio, written before the Norman Conquest, in a fine bold Anglo-Saxon character. . . The Rubrics are written in small and recent hand, between the paragraphs or, for want of room in the margin. . . The first [printed] edition of the Anglo-Saxon Gospels by John Foxe, in 1571 was printed from this Oxford MS. No. 441. It was also the basis of the edition of Junius and Marshall in 1665.

VII. The Latin of the Lindisfarne Gospels, or the Durham Book, is said to have been written about A.D. 687 by Eadfrith, a monk, and the interlinear and verbal Anglo-Saxon Gloss by Aldred a Priest, between 946 and 968. Both Eadfrith and Aldred became Bishops of Durham. It is one of our finest MSS.

VIII. The Latin of the Rushworth Gospels appears to have been written about the end of the 7th century; and the interlinear and verbal Anglo-Saxon Gloss of the 10th. . .” (Bosworth, xiii-xvi)

- David Daniell reports that one result of the Norman Conquest in 1066 was that “the capacity to read Anglo-Saxon had been quite lost.” He also reports that:
 - “The Old English versions of the Bible were rediscovered and published in the second half of the 16th century [1500s] for antiquarian, linked with nationalist reasons by Elizabeth’s first Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker: before the ‘Norman Yoke’, the sturdy English yeoman had no truck with papist practices.” (Daniell, 59)
- In terms of printed editions, Bosworth’s “Preface” includes the following entries:
 - 1571—“The Anglo-Saxon Gospels were first printed at the suggestion of and expense of Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury, under the care of John Foxe, the Martyrologist, . . .”
 - 1665—“A much improved edition of the Anglo-Saxon Gospels was published with the Gothic by Junius and Marshall, in 1665. . .”
 - 1842—Benjamin Thorpe printed “a very neat and handy edition of the Anglo-Saxon Gospels.”
- Textually, like the Gothic Bible, the extant Anglo-Saxon Gospels represent a *mixed text*. In terms of major variants, the Anglo-Saxon Gospels include the long ending of Mark (16:9-20) and the Woman Taken in Adultery (John 7:53-8:11).
- The following is a portion of a popular meme that we discussed in Lesson 89 when we looked at the Old Latin and Latin Vulgate.



- Of the sixteen verses listed on this meme, nine of them are taken from the Gospels. When one compares the extant Anglo-Saxon Gospels against this list of verses that are missing from modern versions, one observes the following:
 - The extant Anglo-Saxon Gospels contain all the following verses: Matthew 12:21, 18:11; Mark 7:16, 9:44, 46, 15:28; Luke 17:36; John 5:4.
 - Only Matthew 23:14 is missing in its entirety whereas Mark 11:26 is missing the second half of the verse.
- From this we can conclude that the extant Anglo-Saxon Gospels are in far better textual shape than are modern versions.
- In the next Lesson we will look at the translation of John Wycliffe.

Works Cited

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