

Sunday, January 19, 2020—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*  
 Lesson 106 William the Translator: Tyndale as the Rough Draft for the KJB

## **Introduction**

- The previous two Lessons ([104](#) and [105](#)) comprised a detailed study of the life and times of William Tyndale. Understanding the historical context in which he labored to give us the Bible in English is paramount in terms of appreciating its full impact and importance. Tyndale's Bible not only changed English society, but it established modern English and served as the rough draft for the King James Bible.
- In this Lesson we want to focus our attention on Tyndale's work as a translator in an attempt to ascertain the enduring impact of his Bible upon the English language and subsequent 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century English translations.
- In order to accomplish this task, I have elected to utilize the scholarly work of Dr. David Daniell and Dr. David Norton. The late Dr. Daniell (1929-2016) is arguably the foremost scholar on the life and writings of William Tyndale from the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. On behalf of Yale University Press, Dr. Daniell edited and published the text of Tyndale's 1534 revised New Testament (1989) as well as Tyndale's Old Testament (1992). Moreover, Daniell wrote the introduction to Hendrickson's facsimile reprint of the 1526 Tyndale New Testament as well as penning *William Tyndale: A Biography* (1994) in addition to his massive history of the English Bible titled *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (2003).
- Meanwhile Dr. David Norton is one of the foremost scholars in terms of the history of the King James text. His contribution in *A Textual History of the King James Bible* (2005) and *The King James Bible: A Short History from Tyndale to Today* (2011) are essential in terms of ascertaining an accurate understanding of this subject matter.

## **William the Translator**

- David Daniell does an excellent job in terms of setting the stage for understanding the enduring impact of Tyndale's Bible.
  - “The Bible translations of William Tyndale in the 1520s and 1530s are the reason why, reading the English New Testament, and thus in English speaking churches, we do not say at Matthew 6:11,

We should be obliged for Your attention in providing our nutritional needs and for so organizing distribution that our daily intake of cereal filler be not in short supply,

but ‘Give us this day our daily bread.’ The first passage was written in the 1940s as a parody: but the point is that the language of civil servants in London just after the Second World War is both dated and datable, whereas Tyndale's sentence in the Lord's Prayer is timeless. The simplicity of those seven words, in Saxon vocabulary and syntax, matching the original *koine* (common) Greek, has continued since 1526 in almost all English Bible

translations, in the twentieth century made in their scores, with only occasionally the substitution of ‘today’ for ‘this day.’ So it is with hundreds of memorable phrases on English-speaking New Testament Christianity: ‘blessed are the poor in spirit’ (Matthew 5:3); ‘I am the good shepherd’ (John 10:14); ‘Fight the good fight of faith’ (I Timothy 6:12; and many, many more.” (Daniell, 133)

- Daniell explains how Tyndale was uniquely equipped to produce a translation that would transcend time in its ability to communicate the truth of God’s word in English to people centuries later.
  - “Tyndale’s gift not only to English-speaking Christianity, but to language and literature, secular as well as religious, came from a unique ability as a translator. He had the technical skills of fluent and accurate Greek, Hebrew, Latin, and German (and other languages) and the machinery of recent dictionaries and grammars. He had a complete understanding of the complex art of rhetoric. His twin achievements as a translator, still admired, were accuracy and clarity, the latter allowing him variety of expression. Feeling himself free not to use the same English word every time for the same word in Hebrew or Greek (a method labelled in the late twentieth century ‘formal correspondence’), he made his own meaning-for-meaning translations (lately labelled ‘dynamic equivalence’). [I am not convinced that Daniell is using these concepts accurately.] Tyndale’s simplicity, for example in narrative, where he was always superb (as in the Passion narratives in all the Gospels), comes also from a carefully judged flexibility.” (Daniell, 133-134)

### **Tyndale as a Rough Draft of the KJB**

- In his book *The King James Bible: A Short History from Tyndale to Today*, Professor David Norton argues that the translational work of William Tyndale served as the rough draft for the KJB.
  - “The KJB translators thought of themselves as revisers, not as creators of a new translation. In the preface, ‘the translators to the reader,’ they say:

Truly, good Christian reader, we never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one... but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones one principal good one, not justly to be expected against, that hath been our endeavor, that our mark.

The ‘good one’ they were to make better was the official Bible of the Church of England, the Bishops Bible 1568, the ‘many good ones’ were the Testaments and Bibles made by William Tyndale and his successors. These men drafted and re-drafted the KJB.” (Norton, 7)

- While he does not call Tyndale a rough draft of the KJB, Dr. Daniell presents the following statistical information that supports Dr. Norton’s thesis.
  - “Tyndale clarified the English language. Since the early eighteenth century, the greatest praise has been heaped upon the language of the King James Bible (the ‘Authorized

Version'), made in 1611. Yet over four-fifths of the New Testament of that version is simply Tyndale's work from eighty years before ["Eighty-three per cent of the King James ('Authorized') Version New Testament is directly from Tyndale in 1534." (Daniell, 152) "It has been estimated that 80 to 90 percent of the King James Version is the direct expression of Tyndale." (Brake, 106)]. In 1611, one of the last years of Shakespeare's writing life, the English language was at a peak. It surprises nobody that the Bible from that time has immortal glory. Yet it should surprise everyone. The work of Tyndale that was taken over in 1611 was done three generations before, when the English language was a poor thing indeed, almost dead at the bottom of the pond [See [Lesson 94](#) for A Brief History of the English Language.]. (Daniel, 136)

- In assessing Tyndale's impact on the English Bible, Dr. Norton states:
  - "Without Tyndale, the English Bible would have been a different and, in all likelihood, lesser thing. Reading the KJB, we are for long stretches reading Tyndale, sometimes little revised, sometimes substantially worked over. A single spirit animates the Protestant—even, to a significant extent, the Catholic—English Bible from Tyndale to the KJB, and Tyndale was its first and most important manifestation." (Norton, 8)
- In terms of his translation work in English, Tyndale truly was a pioneer. While manuscripts of Wycliffe's Lollard Bible were still extant and available for Tyndale to use, Dr. Norton presents the following reasons for why imitating Wycliffe was out of step with Tyndale's goals [See [Lesson 97](#) for evaluation of Wycliffe impact on Tyndale and later English Bibles.]:
  - "I had no man to counterfeit [imitate], neither was helped with English of any that had interpreted the same like thing in the Scriptures beforetime' . . . He was indeed a pioneer, yet, as this recognizes, there had been other translations of the Bible or parts of it into English. Most notable among these was the Wycliffe or Lollard Bible which appears in two version about 1382 and 1388. This pre-Reformation manuscript Bible was translated from the Vulgate, first with such literalness that it is like a crib for the Latin, then revised toward slightly more idiomatic English. Tyndale may have been familiar with this, but the Latin source, the very dated English and the excessive literalness would have made it a model to avoid." (Norton, 8)
- Moreover, with the possible exception of Luther, Tyndale did not have very many non-English models to follow when conducting the work of translating. Therefore, Tyndale was very reliant upon original language texts. Tyndale's last surviving letter, written from prison while awaiting martyrdom, asks for "the Hebrew bible, Hebrew grammar, and Hebrew dictionary, that I may pass the time in that study." Regarding this request Dr. Norton writes:
  - "We should not take this as suggesting that he continued his translation in prison—he would have needed much more for that, paper not least—but it does show what he considered basic for this study: text, grammar, and dictionary." (Norton, 9)
- Tyndale's 1534 revision of his New Testament bears similar witness to Tyndale's reliance upon Greek. The title itself reads, "diligently corrected and compared with the Greek." Moreover, his preface "W.T. unto the reader" Tyndale states the following:

- “I have looked over it again (now at the last) with all diligence, and compared it unto the Greek, and have weeded out of it many faults, which lack of help at the beginning, and oversight, did sow therein. If ought seemed changed, or not altogether agreeing with the Greek, let the finder of the fault consider the Hebrew phrase or manner of speech left in the Greek.” (Tyndale 1534)
- Therefore, Professor Norton writes, “Tyndale’s first study was the original language text, and his primary effort was to be as true to it as possible, including keeping to its ‘phrase or manner of speech.’” (Norton, 9) In addition to original language texts, grammars, and dictionaries Tyndale also had the following additional helps:
  - “For the NT he had Erasmus’s Greek text and Latin translation, and the Vulgate; he appears also to have had a general knowledge of other translations, for he writes of ‘all the translators that ever I heard of in what tongue soever it be.’ And he had Luther. Martin Luther, giant among giants of the Reformation, published the first edition of his German NT in 1522; the Pentateuch followed in 1523, and Joshua to the Song of Solomon in 1524. For the OT, Tyndale had the Vulgate, the Septuagint, Luther, and possibly Pagninus.

Estimates of Tyndale’s dependence on these aids vary. Westcott and Hammond are most persuasive. Westcott demonstrates that ‘both in his first translation and in his two subsequent revisions [1534, 1535] of the NT, [Tyndale] dealt directly and principally with the Greek text. If he used the Vulgate or Erasmus or Luther it was with the judgment of a scholar. His Greek was proficient, but he probably needed more help with the Hebrew, since he began to learn that language late, probably about 1526. . .

While truth to the original languages was Tyndale’s scholarly priority, his motivation was to make the Scriptures comprehensible to his fellow countrymen.” (Norton, 9-10)

- Dr. Norton chronicles how Tyndale’s Bible literally touched off a linguistic and literary revolution.

“The Bible in English shaped Protestant English-speaking culture. It was not just that the Bible was read, heard and known: the Bible in English made the individualistic act of reading and understanding primary, creating a culture wedded to the belief that understood words were of the highest importance. Besides this, the Bible, more than any other writing in English, shaped the English language. This was an unlooked-for consequence of Tyndale’s work, for he never set out to create a linguistic or literary revolution. Yet this, besides the religious revolution, is what he created. The decisions he made as to the kind of English he should use have affect every speaker and writer of English. Thomas More, his arch-antagonist, mockingly suggested that ‘all England must now to go to school with Tyndale to learn English. His point was the difficulty of Tyndale’s language. That we now find it remarkably straightforward and even powerful is precisely because all England went to school with Tyndale and learned English from him and his successors, most notably from the principal form his work took, the KJB.” (Norton, 11)

- In his book, Dr. Norton highlights a point that we discussed in [Lesson 94](#) when I presented A Brief History of the English Language, namely, that before Tyndale, English was not perceived as a suitable language for literature or scholarship much less the Bible.
  - “In spite of the many English literary achievements we now recognize for times before Tyndale, English had no prestige as a language for literature or scholarship. . . to translate the Bible into English was both to debase it and put it into a language many felt had not the ability to express meaning.” (Norton, 11-12)
- Given his goal to provide the plough boy with a Bible he could read while at the same time being accurate to the original languages, Tyndale elected to approximate the English he heard spoken around him in his Bible.
  - “He had his duty to the text, and we have already seen that he tried to shape his style to its styles. He also had his duty to his audience, images as the ‘boy that driveth the plough’ (we would say, the man in the street): it was a duty to be comprehensible to an unsophisticated audience, so the unavoidable choice was to write in a way that approximated the English he heard spoken all around him. These two duties were paramount, and the choices seem inevitable.

He probably had two other choices. One was to make the translation thoroughly literal, following the word order of the original and imitating its vocabulary whenever possible. This would sometimes have worked against the duty to be comprehensible. Another way to try to write appropriately majestic religious English, if only such a thing existed—but it did not. The nearest he might have come would have been to try to write majestically by shaping his language according to the best standards of eloquence he knew, those of the classical Latin and Greek. Again the question of comprehensibility would have arisen, for the audience he had in mind did not know Latin. Latin was far less assimilated into English then than it is now. The common people would have heard much of what we take for granted as English as a foreign language only partly assimilated into their own, and they would have found Latin sentence structures very alien to their own way of talking. Any attempt to write with the eloquence of the classics would have sinned against both comprehensibility and the English language just as much as a literal translation would have.

There was a further, political reason for avoiding a Latinate way of writing, either in vocabulary or sentence structure. It would have seemed too close to the language of the Vulgate and the Catholic Church, and so to be supporting the institution he opposed.

Tyndale’s choice was to attempt a balance between ordinary English and the ways of writing he found in the original languages. Fortunately, as he observed, the Hebrew (and to some extent the Greek) way of writing, especially in its simple sentence structures and its vocabulary tied to the very word, fitted well with English. . . [Tyndale stated the following in *Obedience of a Christian Man*]

Saint Jerome also translated the Bible into his mother tongue. Why may not we also? They will say it cannot be translated into our tongue, it is so rude. It is not so rude as they are false liars. For the Greek tongue agreeth more with the English than with the Latin. And 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 in the 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, as it hath in the Hebrew. A thousand parts better it be translated into the English than into the Latin.

This perception of qualities in English that matched the Greek and, especially, the Hebrew is crucial to the way Tyndale translated. He could often translate ‘word for word,’ that is, literally, and still write natural English that would reveal the full meaning of the original. It would be as true to the meaning of the Vulgate, and truer to the way the originals were written. This in general terms, was to be the method, style, and purpose of the KJB.” (Norton, 12-13)

### Works Cited

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