**Title:** William Tyndale and the Reformation of English Religious Language

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**Abstract**

Perhaps no other person in history had as large a linguistic impact on the English Bible, and by extension the language of English-speaking Christianity, as did William Tyndale. Although he did not produce the first English translation, and died before he could complete his translation of the OT, his work still influences English readers of the Bible today. Tyndale sought to present an English translation of Scripture that the common Englishman could readily comprehend. A significant majority of the language of the Authorized Version traces back to Tyndale’s work. Through this avenue, he has influenced centuries of religious thought and language. The first to translate the entire NT into English from Erasmus’s Greek text, Tyndale moved the language of his translation away from the ecclesiological language of the Latin Vulgate. He translated with the listener, rather than the reader, in mind. His translation fueled growing religious unrest in England so that, posthumously, he played a significant role in the English Reformation.

**INTRODUCTION**

This year marks the 500th year since Luther posted 95 theses at Wittenberg. His role in igniting the Protestant Reformation is unparalleled. However, one of his contemporaries played a crucial and often overlooked role in fanning the flames of reform in England. Perhaps no other person in history had as large a linguistic impact on the English Bible, and by extension the language of English-speaking Christianity, as did William Tyndale. He is un-sainted and largely unheralded today. Yet, although he did not produce the first English translation and died before he could complete his translation of the OT, his work still influences English readers of the Bible. His commitment to making the language of Scripture available to the common person presents a model for current discussions between church scholars, leaders, and laypeople.

**TYNDALE’S BACKGROUND**

William Tyndale was born circa 1494 somewhere near Wales, the exact date and location are unknown.[[1]](#footnote-1) He attended a local grammar school until the age of 12 when he transferred to Magdalen School at Oxford. He soon entered Magdalen Hall, later Hertford College, to complete a seven-year BA degree.[[2]](#footnote-2) Tyndale’s schooling thoroughly trained him in Latin, from grammar school through university. At Magdalen Hall courses were conducted in Latin to the degree that “undergraduates were forbidden to speak [English] within the precincts of the hall, except at feasts and on holidays.”[[3]](#footnote-3) However, Tyndale retained a love of English, “which doth correspond with scripture better than ever Latin may.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This love for English put him at odds with English academia.

During his school years at Oxford, Tyndale developed an interest in theology and began to resist what he considered the oppressive Scholasticism of the era. His love of the Bible created a conflict with what he saw as “false expositions and … false principles of natural philosophy” in the academy’s treatment of Scripture.[[5]](#footnote-5) He graduated with a BA in 1512 and an MA in 1515. Ordained to the priesthood, and following a compulsory year of service at Oxford, he took a position at Cambridge. The next year Luther published ninety-five theses to denounce various abuses of the church. This ignited the evangelical fire of Tyndale. Cambridge was a progressive institution and Tyndale likely became proficient in Greek during his time there.[[6]](#footnote-6) In 1520 the lord chancellor and special envoy of the Roman See, Cardinal Thomas Wolsey, visited Oxford. The pomp and display of wealth disgusted Tyndale, “who believed that priests should share the poverty of the apostles.”[[7]](#footnote-7) He nicknamed Wolsey “Wolfsee” and decried his sophistry and care for worldly and political concerns.[[8]](#footnote-8)

With the eruption of printed tracks and books, the writings of Erasmus, Luther, and other “heretics” began to flood England. The problem prompted Wolsey to build a bonfire of Lutheran books in London and Cambridge in 1521. That same year Thomas More penned Henry VIII’s *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum*, which defended Catholic orthodoxy and resulted in Henry VIII being crowned Defender of the Faith by the pope.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In 1522, Tyndale moved to the Cotswolds to become the tutor of Sir John Walsh. This gave him free time for his own study. Luther’s German Bible was printed during Tyndale’s tenure with Walsh and likely inspired Tyndale to attempt an English translation since he had “become increasingly convinced that both laity and clergy knew very little Scripture.”[[10]](#footnote-10) While living in Gloucestershire, Tyndale frequently preached in the surrounding country. Although all clergy conducted church services in Latin they made allowance for the sermon to be preached in English. However, the sermon usually revolved around one text, or a part of a text, read in Latin. Tyndale came to resent the church’s ban on translating the Bible into English since the populace remained largely ignorant of Scripture.[[11]](#footnote-11) His proficiency in Hebrew and Greek allowed him to translate from the original languages rather than from the Latin Vulgate as Wycliffe had done in the fourteenth century.

**METHODOLOGY, HISTORY, AND PURPOSE OF TRANSLATION**

Tyndale believed that the religion of the Bible differed greatly from the religion of the church, which he considered a religion of worldly, rather than heavenly, origin. After failing to convince the Bishop of London to sponsor an English Bible, he decided to undertake the task himself. Knowing what dangers lay along such an unorthodox path, Tyndale left England, not for fear of reprisals but in order to more freely go about his work. He claimed to not fear the power exercised by cardinals and bishops, nor even consider it to be any great power. He wrote:

Another comfort hast thou, that as the weak powers of the world defend the doctrine of the world so the mighty power of God defendeth the doctrine of God. Which thing thou shalt evidently perceive, if thou call to mind the wonderful deeds which God hath ever wrought for his word in extreme necessity since the world began beyond all man’s reason.[[12]](#footnote-12)

He reasoned that the Bible itself taught that religious services ought to be conducted in the native tongue of the parishioners. “For Paul commandeth that no man once speak in the church, that is, in the congregation, but in a tongue that all men understand, except that there be an interpreter by.”[[13]](#footnote-13) As far as Tyndale was concerned, Latin Scripture and services had allowed the church to depart from biblical doctrine without the knowledge of the parishioners. Tyndale hoped that an English Bible would reverse this situation. “Compare the Pope’s doctrine unto the word of God and thou shalt find that there hath been and yet is a great going out of the way, and that evil men and deceivers (as Paul prophesied 2 Timothy 3) have prevailed and waxed worse and worse, beguiling other as they are beguiled themselves.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Rather than seek to reform the church, Tyndale believed that reformation would arise naturally where the Bible could be read and understood.

Like Luther, Tyndale rejected those teachings and practices that he deemed to be against Scripture. These included penance, confession, worshipping saints, and absolution. He denounced the greed lurking behind offers of absolution. He said, “The friars run in the same spirit and teach saying: do good deeds and redeem the pains that abide you in Purgatory yea give us somewhat to do good works for you. And thus is sin become the profitablest merchandise in the world.”[[15]](#footnote-15) A primary purpose of his translation work was to make these errors clear.

Tyndale’s initial printing of the New Testament in Cologne (1525) was interrupted by an edict by the city authorities. The introduction, Gospel of Matthew, and part of the Gospel of Mark were rescued and taken with Tyndale to Worms where the work was begun again from the beginning and successfully completed in 1526. The intended order of the first printing would have placed the books of Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation at the end of the Testament without serial numbers. This followed the lead of Luther, who questioned their canonicity. It is not clear that Tyndale likewise questioned their canonicity.[[16]](#footnote-16) Charles Nesbitt estimates that six editions were printed between 1525 and 1529 with a total of 18,000 copies made. By Tyndale’s death in 1536 that number had reached approximately 50,000 copies.[[17]](#footnote-17) He views this as part of the “Big Business” of Bible printing in the sixteenth century and questions the financial motives of those involved in printing the Bible.[[18]](#footnote-18) Regardless of the motives of the printers it is difficult to assign a financial motive to Tyndale’s work since he foresaw exile and poverty as the sure end of his endeavor.

Cuthbert Tonstall, the Bishop of London, purchased a considerable amount of Tyndale’s initial printing of New Testaments in order to take them back to England and burn them. Tyndale made the arrangements for the transfer through an intermediary, Augustine Packington, and then used the money to free himself from debt and begin work on a second edition.[[19]](#footnote-19)

* Following the completion of his NT translation Tyndale began work on the OT. This work was interrupted by his arrest in May, 1535. However, he was evidently granted access to his Hebrew materials and continued work on the OT until his execution as a heretic on October 6, 1536, when he is famously reported as saying “Lord, Open the King of England’s eyes.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Tyndale’s death marked the completion of what he considered to be, simply, obedience. He wrote, “Now when we obey patiently and without grudging evil princes that oppress us and persecute us and be kind and merciful to them that are merciless to us and do the worst they can to us and so take all fortune patiently and kiss whatsoever cross God layeth on our backs: then are we sure that we keep the commandment of love.”[[21]](#footnote-21) The Coverdale Bible, printed in 1535, was the first printed English Bible and “was mainly Tyndale supplemented by Coverdale and others.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

**ANALYSIS OF TRANSLATION**

The historical context of this translation makes its quality all the more fascinating. That Tyndale was forced to flee from city to city, working under duress and imprisonment, should be kept in mind while critiquing his work. Teams of scholars have poured over these same texts for centuries and yet the majority of Tyndale’s translation decisions are arguably still valid.

As Tyndale was the first to translate the Bible into English from the original languages his version was much better than anything that came before. He primarily used Erasmus’s Greek New Testament and the Hebrew Old Testament. He also had access to Luther’s German Bible and the Latin Vulgate, although it is unclear whether either had a great influence on his translation.[[23]](#footnote-23) He claimed that he “had no man to counterfeit [imitate], neither was helped with English of any that had interpreted the same.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Since no one had published an English translation from Greek this is an entirely reasonable claim. Everett Ferguson notes that he seems to have been a more able Greek scholar than Luther and that his translation is closer to the Greek.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Tyndale avoided using certain terms associated with Catholic ecclesiology. These included “priest,” “church,” and “penance.” Instead he used terms such as “elders,” “congregation,” and “repentance.”[[26]](#footnote-26) He preferred non-ecclesiastical words that would communicate the basic idea of a Greek word. The Authorized Version would later render Matt 18:3, “Except ye be converted, and become as little children.”[[27]](#footnote-27) But in his translation, Tyndale prefers, “Except ye turn and become as children.”[[28]](#footnote-28) The simplicity and clarity of Tyndale’s version has a persistent appeal. Indeed, later revisions of the Authorized text sometimes corrected what was deemed an inferior translation in favor of Tyndale.[[29]](#footnote-29)

According to Thomas More, who himself was martyred by Henry VIII, Tyndale’s translation was of such inferior quality that it should not rightly be called a translation but rather a counterfeit. Bruce describes More’s position that “to search for errors in it was like searching for water in the sea; it was so bad that it could not be mended, ‘for it is easier to make a web of new cloth than it is to sew up every hole in a net.’”[[30]](#footnote-30) More’s reputation as an eminent scholar lent weight to his attack. However, his critique certainly rested on his defense of Catholic authority and orthodoxy rather than on a critical comparison of Tyndale’s translation and Greek and Hebrew manuscripts.

On the other hand, the merits of Tyndale’s translation appear in their long ranging effects on the English language itself. Robert Alter ably describes the impact that the Bible has had on even modern English discourse:

The story of the powerful afterlife of the Bible in the prose style of American fiction is a prime instance of how any verbal culture remains dialogically engaged with its own earlier strata. In the evolution of culture, and perhaps verbal culture in particular, very little is altogether discarded. Once a text, together with the language in which it is cast, has been authoritative, that authority continues to make its force felt in the work of later writers, even those who no longer assent to the original grounds for the authority.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Of course, Alter was referring to the King James Bible, not the Coverdale Bible. However, an analysis of the Authorized Version, carried out in 1998, found that “Tyndale’s words account for 84 per cent of the New Testament, and for 75.8 per cent of the Old Testament books” in that version.[[32]](#footnote-32) Ferguson puts the percentage of NT words closer to 90% and states that “much that is admired in the Authorized Version for its literary beauty is rooted in Tyndale.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Consider the following excerpts from the prologue of John in Tyndale and the Authorized Version:

In the begynnynge was the worde, and the worde was with God: and the word was God. The same was in the begynnynge wyth God. All things were made by it and with out it was made nothinge that was made. In it was lyfe and the lyfe was the light of men. And the light shyneth in the darkness but the darknes comprehended it not.

In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darknesse, and the darknesse comprehended it not.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Part of the genius of Tyndale is that he translated with an ear for spoken language. He employed a linguistic rhythm familiar to the common reader and hearer, as can be recognized in his reading of Matt 6:9-13.

O oure father which arte in heven, hallowed be thy name

Let they kingdom come; thy wyll be fulfilled as well in erth as hut ys in heven

Geve vs this daye oure dayly breade

And forgeve vs our treaspases, even as we fogeve them which treaspas vs,

Leed vs not into temptacion, but delyvre vs from yvell

He used a variety of English words that helped avoid a woodenly literal translation. This does not mean he was imprecise. On the contrary, “his revision of 1534 shows his careful work in ever aiming at greater accuracy and more effective English.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

His translation was not without mistake. For instance, in John 3:16 he treats the aorist verb ἔδωκεν (“he gave”) as a perfect, “he hath given.”[[36]](#footnote-36) He translates the subjunctive προσευξώμεθα (“we might pray”) as the infinitive “to desire” in Rom 8:26.[[37]](#footnote-37) But an appeal to examples of imperfection also serve to highlight the quality of his work since those examples are significantly fewer than can be cited in, for instance, Wyclif’s earlier translation. For his part Tyndale realized that further refinement of his translation was necessary and set about that work after the first printing of the NT. In the 1525 edition Eph 5:19 reads “singing and playing to the Lord,” but he edited this verse to read “singing and making melody to the Lord” in the 1534 edition.[[38]](#footnote-38) This wording is still familiar to readers today.

**CONCLUSION**

Tyndale’s legacy continues to this day. The Authorized Version of 1611, the Revised Version of 1881–85, and the American Standard Version of 1901 are “overwhelmingly Tyndale’s Bible.”[[39]](#footnote-39) As seen in the table below, Tyndale’s words have found their way into modern English usage, even in non-religious contexts.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Text | Tyndale | Modern English Idiom |
| John 8:7 | Cast the fyrst stone | Cast the first stone |
| Rom 13:1 | The powers that be | The powers that be |
| Matt 16:3 | The signes of the tymes | The signs of the times |
| 1 Cor 15:52 | In the twinclinge of an eye | In the blink of an eye |
| Matt 13:4 | Fell by the wayessyde | Fall by the wayside |
| Luke 11:9 | Seke and ye shall fynde | Seek and you will find |

On the one hand, his desire to share Scripture in language that the common man could understand is echoed in the work of recent dynamic equivalent translations. On the other hand, his commitment to deal faithfully with the original languages of Scripture is shared by the work of essentially literal translators. Perhaps one of the unsung heroes of the English Reformation, he left an indelible mark on English Christianity in both the Old World and the New.

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1. Brian Moynahan, *God’s Bestseller: William Tyndale, Thomas More, and the Writing of the English Bible—A Story of Martyrdom and Betrayal* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002), 2. Tyndale viewed Latin as having a high-ecclesiology emphasis not found in Scripture (from Tyndale’s perspective at least). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. William Tyndale, in Moynahan, *Bestseller*¸8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and development of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1999), 285. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Moynahan, *Bestseller*, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See Ibid., 24–25. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (London: Penquin Books, 2000), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 77–78. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid., 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See F. F. Bruce, *The English Bible* (London: University Paperbacks, 1963), 33–34. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Charles F. Nesbitt, “Mercenary Motives in the Production of the English Bible in the Early Sixteenth Century,” *AThR* 34 (1952): 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Bruce, *English*, 37–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Harold B. Hunting, *The Story of our Bible* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1915), 257–58. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Everett Ferguson, “William Tyndale and the Bible in English,” *ResQ* 14 (2016): 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See Marion Simms, *The Bible from the Beginning* (New York: Macmillan, 1929), 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. William Tyndale, in Ferguson, “Tyndale,” 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Matt 18:3, KJV. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Ibid., 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Ferguson, “Tyndale,” 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Bruce, *English*, 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Rober Alter, *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Moynahan, *Bestseller*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ferguson, “Tyndale,” 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Moynahan, *Besteller*, 390. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Ferguson, “Tyndale,” 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Ibid., 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Moynahan, *Bestseller*, 390. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)