William Tyndale as translator of the Bible

**Introduction**

In 1526 William Tyndale produced the first printed English version of the New Testament. He published a translation of the Pentateuch in 1530, a revised version of the New Testament in 1534, and was completing the Old Testament translation when he was arrested and put to death in 1536. Closely following the original text and written in clear English, Tyndale's Bible has become the model for all subsequent English editions. Especially the editors of Authorized Version (1611) were indebted to Tyndale's translation, as complete sections of the so-called King James Bible are Tyndale’s contribution. Himself influenced by the writings of the continental reformers and especially Martin Luther, Tyndale had consulted Luther’s German translation carefully and had incorporated many of the prefaces which Luther had written for the German Bible. The similarities between the prefaces, marginal notes, and translations led many to conclude that Tyndale’s English version was little more than a copy of Luther’s German rendition. However, studies have shown that Tyndale’s translation is based upon his own examination of the original Hebrew and Greek texts, and it is clear that Tyndale applied his own principles of translation.1

Following Luther, Tyndale was convinced that the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers implies that all believers should read Scriptures for themselves. In England the conviction that all should have direct access to the Word of God had been expressed by John Wycliffe already in the fourteenth century. But early in the fifteenth century a law had been passed which forbade the translation of Scriptures into the vernacular without special permission of the Church. It was for legal as well as theological reasons, therefore, that Tyndale wrote about the priesthood of all believers in *Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528). He states that “by the plain scriptures, and by the circumstances of the text, we should judge all men’s exposition, and all men’s doctrine, and should receive the best, and refuse the worst.”2 Pursuing the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers to its conclusion, Tyndale felt compelled to produce an English version of the Bible:

“I have perceived by experience, how that it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the Scripture were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue, that they might see the process, order, and meaning of the text.”3

**Wycliffite Bibles**

English Bibles had existed before 1534 only in manuscript form. The two most common versions were associated with John Wycliffe (1330-1384), although it is almost certain that the Oxford reformer did not write them. The first version dates to 1380-1384, the second to a time shortly after Wycliffe’s death in 1384. Whereas the virtue of these Wycliffite versions was that they were not instruments in the service of particular ecclesiastical reform and so were not marked by language burdened with extra meaning, their vice was that they were not translations of the Hebrew and Greek testaments but renderings of the Latin Vulgate. In other words, they were translations of a translation. Another disadvantage of the Wycliffite Bibles was that, since the printing press had not yet been invented, the manuscript copies contained numerous scribal errors.

The first Wycliffite version presents a word for word rendering of the Latin Vulgate. It also retains the sentence structure, word order, and idiom of the original language to such a degree that the English translation is unreadable by anyone not familiar with the Latin text. It was in fact the expressed aim of the translators to produce a version “according to the letter” of the source text. Of the several reasons which have been offered to explain this curious objective, the following seems most plausible. According to Wycliffe the Bible was “God’s Law,” that is, a “legal” document containing the rule of faith. And since verbal accuracy in matters legal was deemed important then
as it is now, Wycliffe may have taught that the form itself of Holy Writ contained such meaning and power that the Bible could only be rendered in the vernacular by a word for word translation. Perhaps the editors had been affected by such teaching when they produced a version that preserved Latin words and syntax even when these conflicted with English idiom current in the late fourteenth century. At any rate, it appears from the surviving manuscripts that the editors wished to provide a transliteration of the Latin Vulgate.

The second version, by contrast, was produced “according to the sentence (i.e. meaning)” of the Vulgate Bible. Evidently the authors of this edition did not feel obliged to render the words and syntax of the Latin exactly in English, and they issued a more free translation. This edition appeared some time after Wycliffe’s death, and it is commonly held that John Purvey, Wycliffe’s successor, was the main contributor to this translation. M. Deanesley, among others, has compared the two versions, and showed to what extent the second is much more readable and idiomatic. Intent upon conveying the meaning of the Latin text as clearly as possible, the editors of the second version employed the vocabulary, sentence structures, and expressions which contemporary readers could grasp readily. Clearly, different principles governed the translations of the two versions.

There is some debate concerning the extent to which Tyndale was influenced by these Wycliffite versions; although he seldom refers to these editions and rarely quotes from them, he was probably familiar with them. Whatever the extent of the influence of these editions on Tyndale, it is certain that Tyndale knew of the differing principles which governed these English versions and so had to decide which method he would emulate. This is a matter relevant to the investigation of the principles and practice of Tyndale’s Bible translation, and a matter which needs yet be fully examined. What shall become apparent below, however, is how carefully Tyndale’s translation balances fidelity to the original text with clarity of expression.

Word for word translations had been discussed since classical times, when Cicero and Horace, two literary critics who influenced scholarship in the Reformation and Renaissance, wrote about the task of translating. In their treatises on methods of translating secular Greek classics into Latin, Cicero and Horace taught that a word for word translation neither did justice to the meaning of the source text, nor produced a clear text in the target language. According to them, the translator has a difficult, twofold responsibility of accuracy to the source text and clarity of expression in the target language. This responsibility includes proper appreciation of matters of style, and figures of speech and thought.

Contrary to these classical literary critics was a school of thought, traced by some to the Talmud, which held that certain texts, especially sacred texts, can only be translated word for word, on the grounds that a special power resides in the collocation of the characters which form the words and sentences of that text. R. Copeland has argued that Jerome made just such a claim when translating Scriptures into the Latin Vulgate. Jerome advocated a strict transliteration so as to preserve the mystery of the divine “logos,” or “thought/word.” Jerome was of the opinion that the Ciceronian dictum, “not word for word,” did not apply to translation of Scripture, for he believed that even the characters contained a divine quality. What is more, Jerome feared that the translator might permit the rhetoric and style of his own day to colour the translation. Such thinking was pervasive throughout the Middle Ages, and was employed by the Romanist church in its opposition to the vernacular editions of Luther and Tyndale.

A very important contribution of the Reformers to the discussions about Bible translation was the teaching that the words of Scripture contain no special powers in and of themselves. Although they were fully aware of the divine inspiration and authority of Scripture, the Reformers taught that the meaning of the Bible is conveyed through both the form and the substance of the text. They aimed at accuracy in interpreting the thought and meaning as well as the letters and words. Thus Erasmus, Luther, and others taught that besides the words of Scripture the translator must consider other aspects of literary communication such as structure and style. Tyndale followed this line of reasoning when he sought to convey the original Scriptures into English not only by translating words accurately, but also by translating accurately the syntax, tone, and style of the source text.

As one cannot translate without a prior analysis and explanation of the text (exegesis) and a study of the principles and methods of interpretation (hermeneutics), Tyndale spent no little energy in
assessing both contemporary and medieval teachings on these matters. Again following the continental reformers, Tyndale realized that the system of exegesis and hermeneutics that had been practiced by the leaders of the Romanist church since the time of Origen and Jerome was often unscriptural. This system, according to which the text of the Bible has “four senses,” is discussed critically by Tyndale in the final paragraphs of Obedience of a Christian Man. It is worthwhile to consider his views briefly here, as they affect his theory and practice of translation.

**The “four senses” of Scripture**

Medieval scholarship had advocated the somewhat Platonic notion that there is an opposition between literal and spiritual, and that the words of the Bible are no more than containers which hold a deeper, mystical truth. Basing their claim upon a wrong interpretation of 2 Corinthians 6:3 (“the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life”), scholastics sought to go beyond what they called the human, literal meaning, and to grasp a divine, spiritual one. According to the system of the “Four Senses,” every word of the Bible can be interpreted upon the following levels:

1) literal,
2) allegorical,
3) tropological, and
4) anagogical.

The literal sense, sometimes also called the historical sense, was the meaning of the text in its temporal and local context. The allegorical level, which was “above” the literal one, was the level at which the words of Scripture presented concepts or ideas in addition to the meaning at the literal level. The third level was called the “tropological” level. At this level one discovered figures, called “tropes,” of vice and virtue. This level often concerned morality and codes of behaviour for Christians. The fourth level was called “anagogical.” This term comes from a Greek word which means to rise up, and it refers to the most elevated or exalted sense in the words. Frequently the anagogical sense is eschatological: it points to future glory and the consummation of all things. This sense led the soul to a contemplation of heavenly glory and perfection. And when the soul had reached this most spiritual level, the mind moved well beyond the literal, earthbound meaning of the text.

One example of fourfold interpretation illustrates how the system was applied. In the Bible “Jerusalem”

1) literally denotes the historical city of the Jews;
2) allegorically refers to the church of Christ;
3) tropologically denotes the human soul; and
4) anagogically stands for the heavenly city.

Although there are a number of places in Scripture which operate on one or more of these levels, it would be incorrect to apply the system to all passages in the Bible. One danger of the method was that it led to free associations and arbitrary interpretations. For example, according to the medieval system, in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) the son literally referred to the young man who had departed from his paternal home, allegorically was a figure of publicans and sinners, and anagogically represented the future calling of the gentiles. Another consequence of such interpretation was that Scripture lost its historical dimension, for persons and events were turned into types of moral values or of Christ himself; all Scripture was turned into parable. Not only was redemptive history ignored, so too the history of revelation. Instead there was a tendency to view Scripture as a repository of eternal spiritual truth which needed to be extracted from the text. Like human beings, whose mortal bodies were deemed prisons of eternal souls, Scripture was viewed as consisting of words which house eternal truth. It is obvious that Tyndale had to confront such principles and practices of interpretation when he sought to translate Scripture into English.

**The “literal-spiritual sense” of Scripture**

I have discussed the fourfold system of Bible interpretation in order to clarify what Tyndale and the Reformers meant by promoting a “literal-spiritual” method. Of course, Tyndale does not deny that
Scripture contains allegory, but he argues that the allegorical sense is always dependent upon the literal one. He points out that allegories function as examples or as comparisons to “declare a text or a conclusion of the Scripture more expressly, and root it ... in the heart (432).” Allegories are employed in the Bible to “express more plainly that which is contained in the scripture, and to lead you into the spiritual understanding of the text (348).” In short, allegories by themselves prove nothing, but illustrate the literal meaning. Origen and other advocates of the “Four Senses” had depreciated the literal meaning of Scripture; Tyndale sought to direct attention again to the sense conveyed by the words of the Bible.

In reaction to the so-called allegorical interpretation Tyndale adopts the literal-spiritual method which also Luther had advocated. The “spiritual” meaning of the text was not some hidden, mystical sense far removed from the literal one, but the sense intended by the Spirit, the divine author of Scripture. Tyndale reminds us that Scripture came “not by the will of man” (2 Peter 1:21) but by the impulse of the Holy Spirit. Scripture is therefore the revelation of God Himself, a revelation “wherewith God draws us unto Him, and not wherewith we should be led from Him. The scriptures spring out from God, and flow unto Christ, and were given to lead us to Christ. You must therefore go along by the scripture as by a line, untill you come to Christ, which is the way’s end and resting-place (353).” No secret message is embodied in the text of Scripture, argues Tyndale; to the contrary, Scripture is clear and simple. One need not find an allegorical interpretation for every passage of Scripture; the literal sense provides the meaning which the Holy Spirit intends. After all, writes Tyndale,

> “God is a Spirit, and all His words are spiritual. His literal sense is spiritual, and all His words are spiritual (345).”

There is no secret “mystical” sense in Scripture; in the Bible one will find “spirit and life and edifying in the literal sense: for it is God’s scripture, written for your learning and comfort (346).” Instead of four senses, Tyndale writes, “Scripture has but one sense, which is the literal sense. And that literal sense is the root and ground of all, and the anchor that never fails, whereto if you cleave, you can never err or go out of the way. And if you leave the literal sense: you cannot but go out of the way (340).”

Equipped by the power of the Spirit, the believer is able to comprehend the true meaning of the Bible. For Tyndale, then, there is no opposition between the letter and the spirit of Scripture. And in accord with this reformed principle of exegesis and hermeneutics, Tyndale’s translation sought to preserve the primary, literal meaning of the original text.

Since the literal meaning of Scripture is the primary meaning, Tyndale knew that it was important to establish first, as accurately as possible, the correct text of the Hebrew and Greek testaments. The profession that the Bible is the Word of God Himself implies that the translator must have utmost respect for the authority of the text. The movement in the Reformation to return to the sources is a crucial development in the history of Bible translation, for it drove the translators beyond the Latin Vulgate to the manuscripts. The movement also involved acquiring a thorough knowledge of the languages and cultures in which the original texts were written. Thus to prepare himself for the translation of Scripture, Tyndale produced an English version of a speech by the Greek orator Isocrates (436-338 BC). It may be worth noting that Isocrates advocated a clear style of speaking and writing, and that he was famous for his direct and well-composed sentences.

**Features of Tyndale’s English Bible**

For Tyndale the doctrine of divine inspiration and authority of Scripture also meant that he should give due consideration not only to the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words, but also to the form and manner in which the meaning was expressed. G. Hammond points out that Tyndale had such respect for the authority of the source text that he attempted to preserve even the word order and idiom of the original text wherever the English language permitted it. A good instance is Tyndale’s borrowing of the Hebrew “noun of noun” constructions; such expressions as “the valley of the shadow of death” (Psalm 23:4), though awkward in sixteenth century English, occur in Scripture under the influence of the Hebrew language. Especially in those passages in which the
meaning of the original was reinforced by the word order, Tyndale was careful to preserve that order, even to the point of straining English convention. Thus characteristics of the Hebrew or Greek languages, such as repetitions, parallelisms, figures of speech and figures of thought, were retained in the translation. What Tyndale intended to achieve by this method was a translation of the substance and the form of Scripture. Complete fidelity to the original was one of Tyndale’s principles.

This is not to say that Tyndale strove for a word for word translation. Wherever the repetitiveness of the original text had semantic or stylistic importance, Tyndale rendered the words strictly; but wherever the tone or style of the original promoted it, Tyndale freely opted for synonyms and variation of expression. He had rejected the notion that a sacred quality resided in the words or in the order of the words of Scripture. Stylistic embellishments in the original were conveyed in the most appropriate form in English. The tone of the Hebrew and Greek passages were preserved by means of the closest equivalent tone in English. In short, everything which contributed to the full meaning of the original text was conveyed as accurately as possible in the vernacular.

Knowing that the Hebrew and Greek testaments were written in a language and style which, though at times poetic or involved, were readily grasped and appreciated by the first readers, Tyndale used English words common to his own time. Unlike the editors of the Authorized Version who purposely included words of Latin and French origin in the translation in order that the Bible might appear antiquated and venerable, Tyndale opted for diction which was truly Anglo-Saxon, native to England, and modern. He did not wish to contribute to the development of special church jargon or clichés. In fact, wherever possible, Tyndale used words which had not been invested with special ecclesiastical meaning. Here one might note that Tyndale did so to a fault, as when he avoids the word “church” altogether. The editors of the Geneva Bible, although they adopted many of Tyndale’s renderings, rightly replaced the word “congregation” with “church” where appropriate. And as the critics of the English Bible of 1534 quickly noted, at times Tyndale’s translation and marginal notes serve the intentions of the Reformers. Like Luther, Tyndale could not refrain at all times from infusing his translation with language that subverted wrong Romanist doctrine and practice. He knew full well that merely providing an English translation of Scripture would suffice to reveal the errors in Roman Catholicism.

Tyndale avoided using expressions which might form into clichés; unlike the editors of the Authorized Version he does not often use “verily, verily,” a repetition that loses its force if it occurs too frequently. He did not wish to create a special language associated with Scripture, for he had observed the detrimental effect of such jargon in the Romanist church. He used words which were not jaded or ambiguous. And as he had a musical ear, Tyndale provided a translation which could be read aloud in the home and in the worship services. Harmonious cadences and proper sound effects reinforced the tone of Scripture. In sum, Tyndale’s translation combined the simple, direct form of the spoken language with a dignity and harmony suitable for rendering Scripture.

In providing the first printed vernacular edition of the Bible, Tyndale rendered a significant service to the English-speaking world. Following the lead of the continental reformers, Tyndale surpassed the editors of the Wycliffite versions by returning to the primary sources of Scripture, the Hebrew and Greek testaments. Bowing before the Bible as the Word of God Himself, Tyndale exercised the doctrine of the inspiration and authority of Scripture by seeking to understand fully the meaning of the original texts. In rejecting the allegorical interpretations of Scripture, Tyndale helped to restore the literal meaning of the Bible to its rightful place. Following Luther’s example, Tyndale produced a vernacular which conveyed the meaning of the Bible in all its clarity and directness. While remaining faithful to the original text, Tyndale’s English Bible was remarkably readable. In uniting grammatical, historical and theological meanings at the primary textual level of Scripture, Tyndale offered a method of translation all subsequent editors would seek to emulate.
Already in 1868 B. Westcott had suggested Tyndale’s translation was a product of autopsy of the original texts, in A General View of the History of the English Bible (London, 1905), 146-147; the dominant view that Tyndale’s work is derivative was corrected by L.J. Trinterud in “A Reappraisal of William Tyndale’s Debt to Martin Luther,” Church History 31 (1962) 24-45. More recently G. Hammond has investigated the extent of Tyndale’s dependence on Luther especially in the 1530 translation of the books of Moses; see “William Tyndale’s Pentateuch: Its Relation to Luther’s German Bible and the Hebrew Original,” Renaissance Quarterly 33 (1980) 351-381.


From the Preface to the 1530 edition of the translation of Genesis.


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Thus Daniell, William Tyndale, 116.