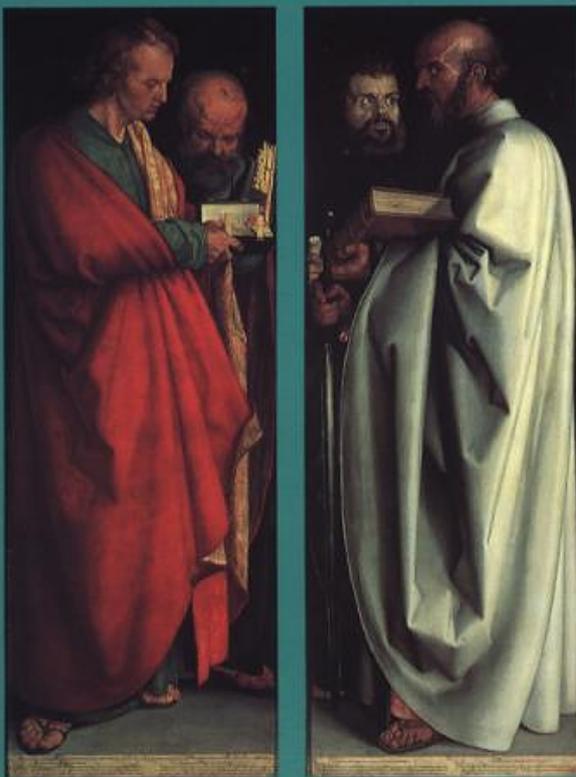


A HISTORY
OF THE
ENGLISH
BIBLE
AS LITERATURE



DAVID NORTON

A HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE AS LITERATURE

Revised and condensed from David Norton's acclaimed *History of the Bible as Literature*, this book tells the story of English literary attitudes to the Bible. At first jeered at and mocked as English writing, then denigrated as having 'all the disadvantages of an old prose translation', the King James Bible somehow became 'unsurpassed in the entire range of literature'. How so startling a change happened and how it affected the making of modern translations such as the Revised Version and the New English Bible is at the heart of this exploration of a vast range of religious, literary and cultural ideas. Translators, writers such as Donne, Milton, Bunyan and the Romantics, reactionary Bishops and radical students all help to show the changes in religious ideas and in standards of language and literature that created our sense of the most important book in English.

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- 7 Day and Seres edition of Tyndale's New Testament, 1551
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- 14 King James Bible, 1611. Title page
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- 16 King James Bible, 1611. A page of text

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Preface

My *History of the Bible as Literature* (1993) ran to two volumes and made large demands on the reader's time (and the purchaser's pocket). So the present book cuts down the material to more manageable proportions. It does so mainly by confining the focus to the English Bible, by reducing the number of examples and by omitting the appendices containing sample passages. What has sometimes felt like self-mutilation will be amply rewarded if the reader finds the result pleasing and interesting.

Abbreviations

AV	Authorised Version or King James Bible, 1611
CW	<i>Collected or Complete Works or Writings</i>
DNB	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
KJB	King James Bible or Authorised Version, 1611
NEB	The New English Bible, 1970
NT	New Testament
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
OT	Old Testament
PB	The Book of Common Prayer
Pollard	<i>The Holy Bible</i> (1911 facsimile of 1611 KJB with introduction and illustrative documents)
RV	Revised Version, 1885

CHAPTER ONE

Creators of English

THE CHALLENGE TO THE TRANSLATORS

To the early reformers, the Bible was a central part of religion hidden from the people in the occult language of the Church, Latin. For the sake of their souls, the people needed the Bible in their own language. So, in the latter part of the fourteenth century, John Wyclif and his followers, the Lollards, translated the Bible from the Latin Vulgate. Then, from 1525 to 1611 came the great period of English Bible translation. Making a fresh start, William Tyndale and Myles Coverdale translated the whole Bible into English from the original Hebrew and Greek. They, with other lesser-known figures, were the pioneers. A succession of translators developed their work into what became the King James Bible (KJB) of 1611. This Bible slowly became *the* Bible of the English-speaking world; more slowly, it became the Bible acclaimed as literature both for the great original literature which it represented and for the quality of its language.

The translators would have been astonished to find their work acclaimed as literature, and many of them would have been horrified. Wyclif, for instance, condemns priests

who preach tricks and lies [japes and gabbings]; for God's word must always be true if it is properly understood . . . And certainly that priest is to be censured who so freely has the Gospel, and leaves the preaching of it and turns to men's fables . . . And God does not ask for divisions or rhymes of him that should preach, but that he should speak of God's Gospel and words to stir men thereby.¹

Similarly, Tyndale reviles the popular literature of his time while condemning the Catholic Church's refusal to let the people read the Bible:

¹ 'De Officio Pastoralis', ch. 21; F.D. Matthew, ed., *The English Works of Wyclif Hitherto Unprinted* (London, 1880), p. 438. Here and in some of the other quotations in this chapter the English is modernised, with original words given in square brackets. Spelling is modernised throughout. 'Divisions' signifies rhetorical divisions in sermons, or possibly verse divisions, that is, metrical lines.

that this threatening and forbidding the lay people to read the Scripture is not for the love of your souls . . . is evident and clearer than the sun; inasmuch as they permit and suffer you to read Robin Hood, and Bevis of Hampton, Hercules, Hector and Troilus, with a thousand histories and fables of love and wantonness, and of ribaldry, as filthy as heart can think, to corrupt the minds of youth withal, clean contrary to the doctrine of Christ and his apostles.²

Fundamentally, literature is a lying alternative to the book of truth.

Whatever we now think of the achievement of the translators must be set against an awareness that the creation of literature was no part of their intention. As the reception of the translators' work is followed, we will see that there was a long period in which the thought that they might have created something worthy of literary admiration would have seemed laughable. The much-repeated modern idea that the KJB is a literary masterpiece represents a reversal of literary opinion as striking as any in the whole history of English literature. One of the prime purposes of this book is to trace and account for this reversal.

Wyclif and his followers and, later, Tyndale and Coverdale were all educated as Catholics and did not necessarily set out to be enemies of the Roman Church, but they found themselves in conflict with it on the inseparable issues of the comprehensibility and the source of truth. In essence the Church was committed to a mystery religion of which it was the infallible guardian and interpreter. In this mystery the Bible was but one source of truth. The Church, directly guided by God, had laboriously developed a theological tradition based on interpretation of the Bible and the wisdom of the Fathers and their successors. The Bible alone was not enough – it was too difficult, too easily misunderstood. The Church, with the Bible and so much more, was the source of truth; moreover, the preservation of its secrets in an occult language to which it alone had access confirmed its power.

Naively, the translators might not see their work as challenging the established theology, but to give the people a basis on which to come at their own sense of the truth was to challenge the Church's power and inevitably to split Christendom. That the Church resisted this was not just a case of an institution protecting its power. Truth, power and the possession of Latin seemed inseparable. If the Church had spent centuries building up an inspired knowledge of the truth, with all the coherence that such knowledge must have, the poor uneducated individual, struggling to teach himself from the Bible alone, could not possibly come

² *The Obedience of a Christian Man; Doctrinal Treatises*, p. 161.

to know the truth as the Church knew it. For common men Christianity must remain a mystery religion: the salvation of their souls was at issue.

Forces of opposition, worldly and spiritual, gathered round the act of translation. The Church had grown ignorant, corrupt, hungry for power and money. Truth had to be rediscovered to reform or break its power and to bring about the same issue, salvation. If the Church was no longer credible as the voice of God, there was one possible and one sure place to find it, the inspired heart of the individual, and the Bible. Older translators such as Jerome had worked within the Church, facing scholarly and linguistic challenges only, but now language and the possession of the Bible were a major religious battlefield and the translators were in the front line, facing the enormous challenge of rediscovering the truth and creating a new church. The religious responsibility of translating had never been higher.

For the Church, translation and heresy went hand in hand, but the early heretics were still sons of the Church and could not, even if Tyndale wished to, rid themselves of the belief that the Bible was difficult. They had learnt that there were levels of meaning beyond the literal, they had learnt too that every detail of the text was to be pressed for its sacred meaning. This might all seem a heritage of moribund pedantry but it could not be dismissed. The words they chose would not be the whole truth and might perhaps be no more than the beginnings of truth, but they would certainly be examined minutely: if the scholarly did not dismiss them out of hand, they would examine them for their fidelity to the detail of the text (that is, the Vulgate), and if the unscholarly were to use them as the translators wished, it would be with an equal, though sympathetic, attention. Further, the people Tyndale and Coverdale worked for would have the translation alone as the key to truth: such people could not use it as a way to the genuinely sacred text, Latin, Greek or Hebrew, nor could they use it side by side with other translations as an approximation to the truth; they could not even use it with a gloss, since vernacular commentary on the text had yet to be created. The translation had to be, as nearly as possible, perfect in itself.

The challenge to attain accuracy was, from these points of view, enormous. The translators had available to them no sophisticated theory of how accuracy might be achieved, nor did they spend much time developing such a theory. The simple answer was to be, in the first place, literal. Consequent on these overwhelming pressures and this simple answer were other challenges, the first being to make the translation comprehensible to the people.

Roughly, there are four levels of language available to translators, the literal (wherein the vocabulary, idiom and structure of the original language dominate the new language), the common, the literary and the ecclesiastical. All four can be subdivided and each can merge into the other. Ecclesiastical English had yet to be created, and English, in spite of the achievements we now recognise in the late medieval period, and even in the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean times of the KJB translators, had no prestige as a literary language. Given the early translators' hostility to the literary, it is hardly likely they would have used such a register even if it had had some prestige.

Thus the only kind of English acceptable as a first move beyond the literal was common English, and this fitted Tyndale's ideal of making the Bible, at its verbal level, comprehensible to the people. But the common language presents its own challenges. Beyond the fact that it shades into a variety of dialects and may have no established standard, there is the question of its expressive adequacy. When in doubt, older translators had not scrupled to borrow from the original languages, but if the English translators were to do the equivalent and borrow from the Vulgate, they would not only be departing from the common language but also retaining the language of the Roman Church. The linguistic issue was again clouded by the battle of the Reformation. Further, there is the complex matter of prestige. Unless special circumstances such as a reaction against excesses in literary language exist to give prestige to the common language, it is the lowest form of the language. On the other hand the Bible was the highest of books, and there is, usually, a desire to have the prestige of the language match that of the book, that is, a desire to have the feeling evoked by the language match the divine heights of the meaning. Literal translation, with its mysterious dislocations of language and novelties of vocabulary, may perhaps produce some feeling of awe, but a common language version, lacking any such strangeness, demeans. In moving beyond the literal, the early translators had little choice but to abase the Scriptures; if there was a challenge to preserve the prestige of the Bible, it was reserved for their successors.

The early Reformation especially was a time for heroes – heroes on both sides, Sir Thomas More as much as Tyndale. Persecution was inevitable, the martyr's bitter crown likely. Beyond the enormous challenge to definition and accuracy, beyond the challenge to common clarity, there were the challenges of simply finding the courage to work, and then of finding ways of staying alive to prosecute the work and, somehow, to publish it. There were the difficulties of textual scholarship,

of discovering the true original texts, of learning Greek and Hebrew with little or no aid from the scholarship of others, there was the sheer size of the undertaking – and so one could go on. The modern scholar, safely salaried in a university, free to pursue his studies with ready access to an enormous accumulated community of learning, can only stand in awe that the work was achieved at all, and he must guess that the early translators must have possessed a certain simplicity not to be daunted into silence by the weight of the task and the pressures of the time. That simplicity, perhaps, mitigated the challenges sketched here: they had to shut their eyes, deafen their ears and work as best they could. Hasty, instinctive answers to enormous problems must often have had to suffice. In short, the reality of getting the work done, the greatest challenge of all, must have rendered manageable all the other challenges.

The later translators, from William Whittingham and his colleagues at Geneva to the scholars assembled under the auspices of King James, were all, more or less, revisers rather than pioneers. Their work was not attended by the same perilous, solitary urgency that had been Tyndale and Coverdale's lot, and the changing nature of their task may readily be imagined. It will be of central interest to see if they believed themselves able to go beyond questions of scholarly accuracy and theological definition to tackle as artists the question of the English of the Bible.

LITERAL TRANSLATION: ROLLE'S PSALTER AND THE WYCLIF BIBLE

The Bible was translated into the English vernaculars in several ways before the time of Wyclif, including verse paraphrases of parts of the Bible such as the poems associated with the seventh-century monk Caedmon, but the main line of English translations starts with the literal, as exemplified by the Psalter of the hermit of Hampole, Richard Rolle (d. 1349). Rolle regarded the Latin Psalms as the 'perfection of divine writing',³ and clearly loved them as spiritual teaching, perhaps also as literature. In spite of this, in spite also of their obvious poetic aspects, he made no effort to produce a literary translation. Rather, his work is a guide, first to the meaning of the Latin, second, through a commentary, to the meaning of the Psalms. It is not an English equivalent of the Latin, but a literal crib accompanied by a commentary. He describes his intentions thus:

³ Hope Emily Allen, ed., *English Writings of Richard Rolle* (Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 6.

In this work I seek no strange/strong⁴ English, but lightest and commonest and such that is most like unto the Latin, so that they that know not Latin, by the English may come to many Latin words. In the translation I follow the letter as much as I may, and where I find no exact English equivalent, I follow the gist of the text, so that they that shall read it, they need not fear going wrong. (*English Writings*, p. 7)

The first two verses of Psalm 23 show just how closely he ‘followed the letter’:

Dominus regit me et nihil mihi deerit: in loco pascuae ibi me collocavit. Lord governs me and nothing shall me want: in stead of pasture there he me set.

Super aquam refectionis educavit me: animam meam convertit. On the water of reheting [refreshment] forth he me brought: my soul he turned.⁵

The commentary, which follows each verse, makes up the bulk of the work.

Thus the only real precedent for the translators of the Wyclif Bible, a precedent approved by the Church, was a literal interlinear guide to the Latin. Rolle was treating a limited part of the Bible in a limited way, opening the literal meaning of the words to his audience but not returning the reading of the Psalms to a literal level. The presence of the gloss, which was largely a translation of earlier, orthodox works, ensured this. Rather than presenting an English Psalter to the people, he was presenting them with the Latin Psalter as understood by the Church. Further, it was not the largely illiterate masses to whom Rolle was presenting this work, but a small number of literate people who could afford the substantial cost of a manuscript or were in a position to copy it for themselves. Nor, given the same factors of general illiteracy, and the cost and difficulty of producing manuscripts, could the Wyclif Bible be a work for the masses, no matter how much they themselves might want it.

The precise history of the Wyclif Bible is not known. It is a convenient but inaccurate misnomer to speak of ‘the Wyclif Bible’, both because John Wyclif himself (c. 1330–80) probably only had a minor hand in the work itself and because there are two distinct translations involved. ‘The Wyclif Bible’, then, refers to an effort at translation lasting perhaps as long as twenty years from some time in the 1370s. This effort was made by a group of scholars of whom Wyclif was the leading figure if not the chief executant. The two versions of the Wyclif Bible, early and late, represent logical stages in the development of a vernacular Bible.

⁴ The original has ‘strange’; it may have either of these meanings.

⁵ *The Psalter or Psalms of David*, ed. H.R. Bramley (Oxford, 1844), p. 83.

There is no firm evidence of literary awareness in the making of the Wyclif Bible. This is what one would expect both from the rigid distinction the Lollards made between literature and religion, that is, between lies and Truth, and from their situation as the first English translators of the whole Bible. The Wyclif translators began with something very like Rolle's work, an extremely literal version that was primarily a guide to the Latin. Then, in the late version, they moved towards a more readable English rendering, one more obviously capable of standing by itself without reference back to the Latin. The difference between the two stages is visible in the opening verses of Psalm 23. In the early version they read, 'the lord governeth me, and no thing to me shall lack; in the place of leswe [pasture] where he me full set. Over water of fulfilling he nursed me; my soul he converted'.⁶ Like Rolle's version, this is highly literal, dependent on the Latin for word order and some of its vocabulary. Only the absence of the Latin prevents it from being an interlinear gloss. The late version shows revision of vocabulary though it remains heavily dependent on the Latin; more significantly, there is a cautious movement towards a natural English word order: 'the Lord governeth me, and no thing shall fail to me; in the place of pasture there he hath set me. He nursed me on the water of refreshing; he converted my soul'. In spite of the changes, this is still literal.

The late version has a prologue which, in its fifteenth chapter, discusses problems involved in the making of an English translation and pays particular attention to grammatical equivalence.⁷ It begins by arguing the need for vernacular Scriptures and alleges that, 'although covetous clerks . . . despise and stop holy writ as much as they can, yet the common people cry after holy writ to know [kunne] it and keep it with great cost and peril of their life' (*Wycliffite Writings*, p. 67). Thus a desire for the Bible among an educated laity is seen as a desire to understand the basis of the Christian life.

The author describes the purpose of the translation as 'with common charity to save all men in our realm whom God will have saved', and goes on to describe the methods by which the work sought to produce accurate knowledge. Bibles, commentaries and glosses were collected and collated in order to get the best Latin text possible, the text was studied anew, and the older grammarians and divines were consulted on difficult words and sentences to see 'how they might best be understood and

⁶ Quotations from the Wyclif Bible are taken from the Forshall and Madden edition. The Wyclif Bible numbers this Psalm as 22.

⁷ Chapter 15 of the prologue is given in Hudson, *Wycliffite Writings*, pp. 67–72.

translated'. Finally, he tried 'to translate as clearly as he could the meaning, and to have many good and knowledgable [kunnynge] fellows at the correcting of the translation'. Some details of the principles of translation are given: 'the best translating is, out of Latin into English, to translate after the meaning and not only after the words' (p. 68). This closely relates to the difference between the early and the late versions. Hudson comments that 'after the words'

has here a specialised sense: the invariable translation of one Latin word by one English word, neither more nor less, and the adherence in the English version to the exact word order of the Latin original. The debate is not, as a modern critic might suppose, between a close and a free rendering, but between a transposition of Latin into English and a close translation into English word order and vocabulary. (*Wycliffite Writings*, pp. 174–5)

The result of this 'best translating', according to the prologue, is 'that the meaning is as open or opener in English as in Latin, and go not far from the letter; and if the letter may not be followed in the translating, let the meaning ever be whole and open, for the words ought to serve the intention and meaning, or else the words are superfluous or false' (p. 68). The principle that the translation should be as clear as or clearer than the original is at odds with some ideas of faithful translation, for it involves a kind of correction of the original. Nevertheless, the Protestants, or proto-Protestants, preferred to emphasise the comprehensibility of the text and to play down ambiguity and difficulty.

The author's main point, however, is that, providing a truthful and clear rendering of the meaning is not damaged, literal translation is best. Where literalism may damage meaning it may be dispensed with. He develops this by observing that many changes of grammatical constructions are needed for clarity, particularly changes of ablative absolutes, participles and relatives. His guiding principle is that these changes 'will in many places make the meaning open, where to English it after the word would be dark and doubtful'. Not only the words but the grammar must be translated. Fidelity is the key, and the result is a movement away from making English conform to Latin and towards natural English. This enforces on the translator care for the quality of his English: we may say that 'good English' is intended. The author defines 'good' as accurate and clear, but the result may be 'good' in a more literary sense, even though he had no such intentions.

Chapter 15 ends the prologue. The previous fourteen chapters are all aimed at helping the reader's understanding of the Bible by summarising its contents and explaining their significance. Comments on the prin-

ciples of translation are, then, a last word after the basis for understanding the Bible has been established. Both the general tone and the non-literary sense of the Bible can be seen in the description of the OT as consisting of three parts, which are called 'moral commandments, judicials, and ceremonials': 'moral commandments teach to hold and praise and cherish virtues, and to flee and reprove vices . . . Judicials teach judgements and punishments for horrible sins . . . Ceremonials teach symbols and sacraments of the old law that symbolised Christ and his death, and the mysteries of the Holy Church in the law of grace' (ch. 2; Forshall and Madden edn, I: 3). In short, the Bible is teaching, teaching and more teaching. Even when the prologue treats books known to be poetic, it is resolutely unliterary. The Song of Songs forces on translators the questions of whether they will allow any literary sense of the text and whether they are prepared to allow the text to speak for itself and therefore possibly be read as secular love poetry. This is what the prologue says:

The Song of Songs teaches men to set all their heart in the love of God and of their neighbours, and to do all their business to bring men to charity and salvation, by good example, and true preaching, and willing suffering of pain and death, if need be . . . and this book is so subtle to understand, that Jews ordained that no man should study it unless he were of 30 years and had able mind to understand the spiritual secrets of this book; for some of the book seems to sinful men to speak of unclean love of lechery, where it tells his spiritual love and great secrets of Christ and of his Church. (Ch. 11; I: 40, 41)

The prologue, then, is explicitly afraid of any literal, worldly reading of the text, and the insistence on religious reading is carried over into the presentation of the text. The Early Version ensures spiritual and allegorical understanding by interpolating speakers. The beginning of the Song reads:

The Church, of the coming of Christ, speaketh, saying, Kiss he me with the kiss of his mouth. The voice of the Father. For better are thy teats than wine, smelling with best ointments.

The Late Version follows a different route to the same end. Omitting the voice directions, it substitutes lengthy notes. Typical is the gloss on 'thy teats':

that is, the fullness of God's mercy is sweeter to man's soul, than wine most savoury among bodily things is sweet to the taste. In Hebrew it is, *for thy loves are better than wine, etc.*; that is, the love of God is more savoury to a devout soul than any bodily thing to bodily taste.

In these ways the translators make every effort to impose a spiritual reading on the text, and clearly intend that the text should be studied minutely rather than flow as an open piece of literature.

The intentions and implications of the Wyclif Bible are resolutely theological. If, from the perspective of several centuries, a modern critic can see literary value in the relative Englishness and clarity of the Late Version, that is a perspective that has nothing to do either with the translators' intentions or the Lollard readers' attitude to the text.

WILLIAM TYNDALE

Introduction

William Tyndale (?1494–1536) rightly believed himself to be a pioneer. He wrote of his work, 'I had no man to counterfeit [imitate], neither was helped with English of any that had interpreted the same or such like thing in the Scripture beforetime' (1526 NT, p. 15). The Wyclif Bible had been largely suppressed so that he was working almost without English precedent to open the Bible anew to the people. He had to invent his own appropriate English. No subsequent English translators, not even his immediate successor, Myles Coverdale, ever again found themselves in this situation. Tyndale's English became the model for biblical English and he is indeed the father of English biblical translation. From a larger perspective, Sir Thomas More's jibe at the deficiencies of his English vocabulary, that they were such that 'all England list now to go to school with Tyndale to learn English' (*Works*, VIII: 187), has turned out true: more of our English is ultimately learnt from Tyndale than from any other writer of English prose, and many erstwhile illiterates did indeed 'go to school with Tyndale' and his successors.

One such illiterate was William Maldon. His story not only shows the connection between Tyndale's work and reading but movingly illustrates the internecine strength of the conflict over the vernacular Bible. He relates that when he was a young man in the reign of Henry VIII

divers poor men in the town of Chelmsford in the county of Essex where my father dwelt and I born and with him brought up, the said poor men bought the New Testament of Jesus Christ and on Sundays did sit reading in lower end of church, and many would flock about them to hear their reading, then I came among the said readers to hear them reading of that glad and sweet tidings of the gospel, then my father seeing this that I listened unto them every Sunday, then came he and sought me among them, and brought me away from the

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