

## A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

### The Early Translations

#### The Earliest English Translations

#### An Example of Caedmon's Hymns

##### Old English

*Ne beoþ ge thy forþthan,  
theah the Faraon brohte  
sweordwigendra side  
hergas, eorla unrim! Him  
eallum wile mihtig drihten  
thurh mine hand to daege  
thiſsum daedlean gyfan,  
thaet hie lifigende leng ne  
moton aegnian mid  
ymthum Israhela cyn.*

##### Modern English

*Be not frightened thereat,  
though Pharaoh has  
brought sword-wielders,  
vast troops, men without  
number! To them all will  
the mighty Lord through  
my hand this very day a  
recompense give, that they  
may not live long to  
frighten with distress  
Israel's kin.*

While the first complete translation of the Bible into English did not occur until AD 1382 (Wyclif's Version), various parts of the Bible were available much earlier in Anglo-Saxon. Caedmon and others rendered biblical stories in verse and song (7<sup>th</sup> century). The Bede had translated all or most of John's Gospel by AD 735. Alfred the Great encouraged the translation of the Ten Commandments, the Psalms, and paraphrases of the gospels (ca. AD 950). The Lindisfarne Gospels,

made on Holy Island in northern England by leaders in the Irish missionary community, offered an interlinear Northumbrian dialect directly beneath the Latin text of the Vulgate (mid-10<sup>th</sup> century). The Wessex Gospels in Old English also appeared about the same time.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> century, major changes in English developed after the Norman Conquest (AD 1066), which brought elements of continental language into the English culture. The new ruling class was Norman French, and in a relatively short period, the Anglo-Saxon translations were seriously outdated and virtually unintelligible to the masses. It should be remembered, of course, that the average Englishman's knowledge of the Bible came from the public reading of Scripture in the churches. While some of the gentry might have owned Psalters or other parts of the Bible for private devotions, this was not the norm, nor for that matter, was literacy very widespread at this early period.



*The monastery at Lindisfarne on Holy Island in northern England*

By the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, an Augustinian monk named Orm had produced a poetical version of the Gospels and Acts. By the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Genesis and Exodus had been

translated into rhyming English verse, along with the Psalms. By the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the most important epistles in the New Testament had been translated. These Middle English translations seem quite antiquated to modern readers (often confused with Old English), but they served an important bridge for understanding the Bible. Most importantly, by the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century an Oxford scholar named John Wyclif directed an effort to translate the entire Bible into Middle English.

### The Wyclif Version

John Wyclif (or Wycliffe) was regarded as the most prominent scholar of the 14<sup>th</sup> century in England. As a professor at Oxford University, he became a leading philosopher and was invited to serve at court by John of Gaunt, the acting ruler (until

#### The Lord's Prayer

*Oure Fader that art in  
heuene, halewed be thi  
name. Thi kyngdom come  
to us. Thi wylle be don,  
as in heuene, and in  
erthe. Oure eche dayes  
breed yeue us to day.  
And foryeue us oure  
dettys, as we foryeue  
oure dettourys. And ne  
lede us not in  
temptacyon, but delyuere  
us of yuel. Amen.*

*Middle English translation of the  
Lord's Prayer*

#### THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

*Forms of the English language can be divided into historical periods, which in turn were influenced by such things as the Norman Conquest (Battle of Hasting, October 14, 1066), the printing press (ca. 1440), and the continuing development of English government (the "King's English").*

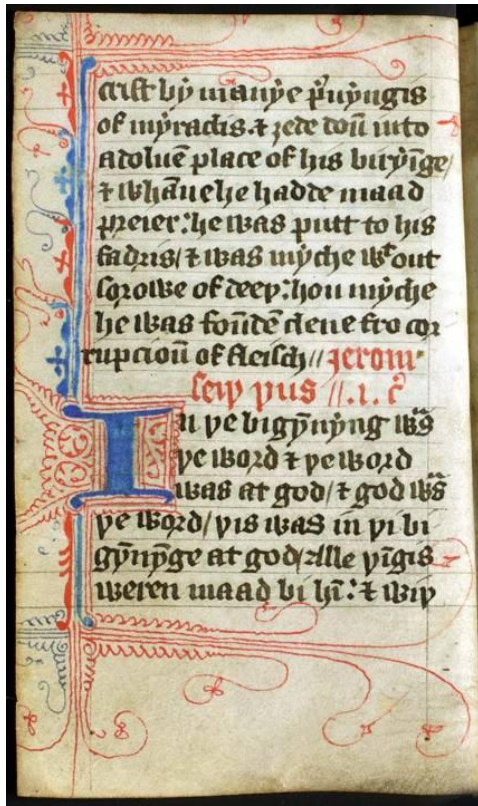
- Old English/Anglo-Saxon (ca. 450-1100)
- Middle English (ca. 1100-1450)
- Modern English (ca. 1450 and later)

Richard II was old enough to reign). However, Wyclif had a penchant for church reform—and this about a century before the Protestant Reformation. He deeply cared for the poor and railed against the abuses of the clergy. The church owned a third of the land in England, and Wyclif offended church hierarchy by supporting the right of the government to seize the property of corrupt priests. Priests were often illiterate and immoral. Offices in the church were bought or given away as political favors (called Simony after the incident in Ac. 8, where a certain Simon attempted to buy spiritual power). To make matters worse, Wyclif believed that some of the church's teachings had significantly departed from the Bible. He began to argue against what he considered the errant theologies of the medieval church, especially the doctrine of transubstantiation (the belief that the bread and wine transform into the literal body and blood of Christ), the notion of purgatory, and the sale of indulgences (purchased reprieves for the dead from purgatory). He

claimed that Christ was *spiritually* present in the Eucharist, but the bread and wine were still bread and wine. He rejected ceremonies that were not specifically described in the Bible, and he argued that they interfered with the true worship of God. He also dismissed the medieval notion that God's people needed a priestly mediator in order to commune with God.

During Wyclif's career, the so-called Great Schism occurred in the Roman Catholic Church. Two popes, one in Rome and the other in Avignon, France, each claimed to be the only true pope, and each excommunicated the other. Such a debacle naturally contributed to Wyclif's radical ideas

that the papacy was merely a political force constantly striving for mastery, and the end was nothing less than sheer worldliness. In view of what Wyclif saw as the spiritual bankruptcy of the pope's office, he determined to place Christ and the Bible at the center.



*14<sup>th</sup> century page from the Wyclif Version (the beginning of John's Gospel is indicated by the large blue capital "I". This hand-written edition was pocket-sized.*

His views, as might be expected, were condemned by Pope Gregory XI in 1377, and bulls (papal decrees) against Wyclif were sent to the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of London, and King Edward III. Gradually, he was deserted by many of his friends in high places. Church authorities forced him to leave Oxford University. In 1382, he retired to live at his parish in Lutterworth in the Midlands, where he eventually died of a stroke on New Years Eve in 1384.

While in Lutterworth, however, he began a project that would forever endear him to future generations. He and his loyal friends undertook to translate the Latin Vulgate into English. They worked from a Latin text more than 1000 years old! Their efforts were driven by the belief that Christians are directly responsible to God, and in order to know and obey God, they must be able to read the Bible for themselves. Scholars today point to both an earlier and later version, the former (an incomplete version) produced while Wyclif was still alive and the latter completed after his death. Both, of course, were hand written, since the printing press was still a future technology. Popularly known as the "Wyclif Bible," It became the first full translation of the Old and New Testaments into the English language.

In the process of his life, John Wyclif set the tone for church reform and is justifiably dubbed "the morning star of the Reformation." Followers from his Oxford days spread across Leicestershire and beyond, where they became known as "Lollards," a group with their own ministers and popular supporters.<sup>1</sup> These "poor preachers," as they were called, began to take the Word of God to the common people across the land...in their own language! They

*"These thingis Jesus spak; and whanne he hadde cast up hise eyen into hevene, he seide: 'Fadir, the our cometh; clarifie thi sone, that thi sone clarifie thee; as thou hast yovun to hym power on ech fleische, that al thing that thou hast yovun to hym, he yyve to hem everlastynge liif. And this is everlastynge liif, that thei knowe thee very God aloone, and whom thou has sent, Jesu Christ.'"*

Wyclif's Version  
John 17:1-3

<sup>1</sup> The origin of the term Lollard is not entirely certain, but it was coined as a popular derogatory nickname. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century it had come to mean a heretic in general.



contended that the main task of a priest was to preach the Scriptures. The Bible should be available to everyone in his own vernacular.

Such ideas might seem rather innocuous to a modern person, but they were quite radical for their time and could hardly avoid the heavy hand of repression. Wyclif was formally condemned at the Council of Constance some thirty years after his death. Orders were given to destroy his writings, exhume his bones and burn them, and as far as possible, erase his memory. In spite of



*Statue of Wyclif at Frederick's Church, Copenhagen, Denmark*

this condemnation, Wyclif's ideas could not be obliterated. As Wyclif himself put it:

*God's words will give men new life more than the other words that are for pleasure. O marvelous power of the Divine Seed which overpowers strong men in arms, softens hard hearts, and renews and changes into divine men, those men who had been brutalized by sins, and departed infinitely far from God. Obviously, such miraculous power could never be worked by the work of a priest, if the Spirit of Life and the Eternal Word did not, above all things else, work with it.*

Wyclif's followers remained loyal and thrived in some parts of England. In significant ways, they were the forerunners of the Protestant reformers who would come a century later. They taught the mystical and real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but continued to reject the idea of transubstantiation. They did not believe baptism or confession were necessary for salvation, and they denied any special status to the priesthood. They challenge the practice of clerical celibacy and considered

prayers to the saints or to the dead to be a form of idolatry without scriptural basis. Most importantly, they urged that people deserved a copy of their own Bible, and given that these copies were all hand-written, not to mention the low literacy levels in England, it was a difficult goal.