

## A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

### The Reformation Bibles

Various historical events began to converge in the late Medieval Period that paved the way for new translations of the Bible. These included the Renaissance, the fall of Constantinople, and the invention of the printing press. It might not seem as though the Renaissance, with its humanistic overtones, had much to offer the Christian church, but in fact, its revival of classical learning spurred a new generation toward a renewed appreciation of the original languages of the Bible.

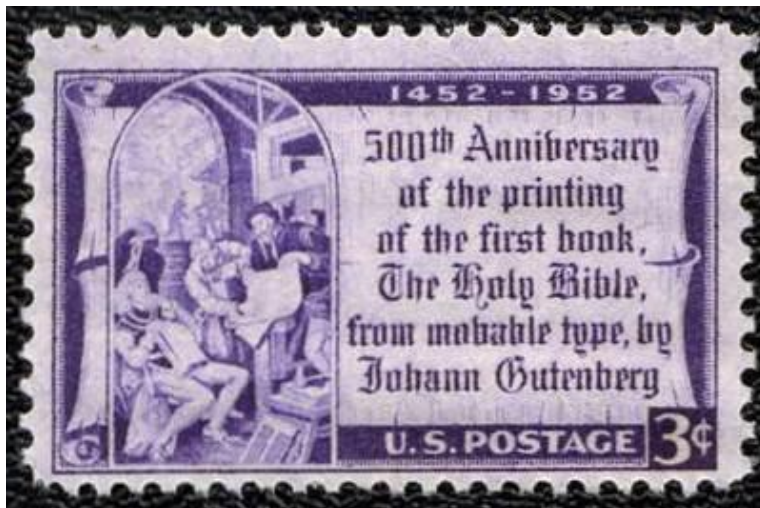
#### Codices of the New Testament

By the late 1300s, a professorship of Greek had been established in Florence (1396), and within half a century, Greek studies were firmly established in the West. Inevitably, these budding Greek scholars pursued not only the ancient texts of classical Greek thinkers, but also, the texts of the New Testament. In 1444, Lorenzo Valla published a comparison between the Latin Vulgate and the Greek original, and his writings would be prized by Martin Luther less than a century later. When Constantinople fell in 1453 to the Ottoman Turkish Sultan, Mohammed (Mehmet) II, Byzantine Christian refugees fleeing westward brought with them their literary, linguistic, and cultural legacy, which had been fostered by the Greek Church for centuries. Constantinople had been a great center of learning with many ancient manuscript copies of the Greek New Testament, which they had been using for over a millennium, and when these scholars fled westward, they brought their texts with them.

#### Codices of the Old Testament

The single most important Old Testament text is the Leningrad Codex, dated to 1008 or 1009. This text is widely recognized by scholars as the best available, and it is the world's oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible (currently housed in the Russian National Library). By this time, Jewish scribes had added vowel points to the consonantal text of the Hebrew Scriptures. A printed edition of the Hebrew Bible appeared in Venice in 1518, and it became the

accepted one for nearly four centuries. It would underlie the earlier translations of the English Old Testament.



*1952 American stamp commemorating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Gutenberg Bible*

#### The Printing Press

The technological innovation of Gutenberg's printing press opened up an entirely new dimension (1445). With the development of paper made from rags, which was much less expensive than parchment, literacy began to spread rapidly, and there was a growing market for less expensive books. The first complete book

printed in the Christian world, in fact, was the Bible in Latin, printed with movable type (1452). By roughly 1500, many Europeans could afford to read and buy books. Printing brought with it standardization of language disseminated by books. In England, the “King’s English” may have developed in London, but it was carried to Yorkshire and Wales in printed form.

### Printed Bibles

On the continent, a Czech priest from Prague named Jan Hus (1372-1415) was exposed to the Bible translation and theological works of John Wyclif. In his preaching, Hus began to underscore the role of Scripture in the authority of the church, and among other things, he revised a Czech translation of the Bible in order to help his parishioners read it. Though burned at the stake for his critique of the papacy, his martyrdom aroused national feelings among the Czech people that never completely died out. Indeed, when Pope John Paul II apologized for the burning of Hus on December 18, 1999, it was cause for great celebration in the Czech Republic.

By 1488, Jews in Soncino, Italy had printed a complete Hebrew Bible, and further editions would follow. In the early 1500s in Spain, the *Complutensian Polyglot* was published, consisting of the



Page from the 1521 Complutensian Polyglot showing columns of Old Testament text in interlinear Septuagint/Latin (left), Latin Vulgate (middle) and Hebrew (right).

Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint, the Greek New Testament, and the Latin Vulgate. Erasmus, the Dutch scholar, produced a Greek text of the New Testament in 1516. This Greek New Testament went through several editions and improvements. By the mid-1500s, a French printer was publishing the first of several critical editions of the Greek New Testament, which eventually came to be known as the *Textus Receptus*, that is, the text generally accepted.<sup>1</sup> This would become the underlying New Testament Greek text used in various English translations of the Bible prior to the modern period.

Because of increasing literacy and widening accessibility to printed material, the Reformers of the 16<sup>th</sup> century desired to make the Scriptures available to everyone in his/her native language. In Germany, Martin Luther's 16<sup>th</sup> century translation became the grandfather of all subsequent German translations. In a flurry of energy during two and a half months in 1522, he translated the New

Testament from Greek into German, and he completed his translations of the Hebrew Old Testament in stages between 1522 and 1532. The first complete German Bible appeared at

<sup>1</sup> The term “critical” refers to the effort to establish the earliest text by comparing the readings in various ancient manuscripts and seeking to determine the original reading.

Wittenberg in 1534. It is fair to say that the Reformation ideal of the Bible as the central Christian authority heightened the desire for accurate translations into the vernacular.

### William Tyndale

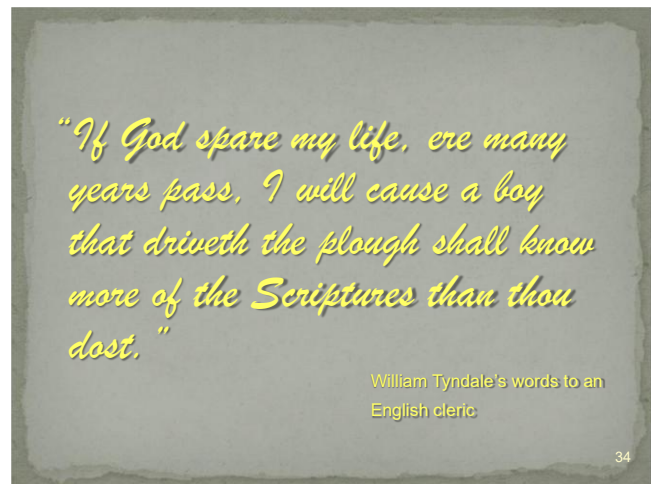
William Tyndale (1492-1536) is justly named “The Father of the English Bible.” The idea that the Scriptures should be available in the common language so that anyone and everyone might read them was not immediately popular. In 1408, out of fear of John Wyclif’s followers, the English Parliament passed the “Constitutions of Oxford,” which forbade anyone translating or even reading a part of the Bible in the language of the people without permission from church authorities. People were burned at the stake for teaching their children in English the Apostles’ Creed, the Lord’s Prayer, and the Ten Commandments. By the middle of the 1400s, it was now possible—though not yet legal—to publish the Bible in more easily available quantities and without the hand-written errors of copyists.

William Tyndale, who studied at Oxford and Cambridge, determined that he would do exactly that—translate and publish the Bible in English—whether legal or not. By reading Erasmus’ Greek edition of the New Testament, Tyndale came to understand just how ignorant of the Scriptures the people in England really were, not to mention the clergy. The translation of the Bible became his burning passion for which he eventually would give his life.

At Magdalen Hall, Oxford, and later at Cambridge, Tyndale was educated in Greek.

(Later, he would learn Hebrew while on the run in Europe.) Hoping to win the support of Cuthbert Tunstall, the Bishop of London, Tyndale appealed to him for support. However, the London bishop was more interested in suppressing the spread of Lutheran ideas than he was in promoting the study of Scripture, and in the end, Tyndale’s support came not from any entity in the church, but from a number of London merchants, like Humphrey Monmouth, who already had been smuggling Luther’s writings into England. Given Tunstall’s refusal and the restrictive Constitutions of Oxford, it would have been extremely dangerous for Tyndale to attempt any translation and publication in England. Hence, he removed to Europe, where the winds of change already were briskly blowing. By early 1525, his New Testament translated directly from the original Greek was ready for printing. Narrowly escaping arrest at Cologne, he was able to see the publication completed later that same year at Worms, Germany. The New Testament in English was then smuggled back into England.

The English powers were incensed, of course. King Henry VIII, Cardinal Woolsey, and Sir Thomas More joined forces to suppress it. Woolsey issued a warrant for Tyndale’s arrest. More wrote a tractate that Tyndale had deliberately distorted the text and that his translation was full of heresy. The English bishops devised a plan to buy up Tyndale’s smuggled English Bibles, and they





located and bought as many as they could. Ironically, the money they paid was funneled back to Tyndale in Europe, enabling him to print more Bibles in improved and corrected editions. His New Testaments ended up in strange places, not the least of which was in the hands of Anne Boleyn (and Henry VIII actually borrowed her copy and read it, too)! When Tyndale left Worms, he was constantly on the run, polishing his knowledge of Hebrew, translating Old Testament texts, and hiding in Hamburg and Antwerp. By 1529, his name was openly linked by the authorities to the word “heretic,” and in this period of Europe, such an appellation was extremely dangerous. Luther had the advantage of a large university library, a sympathetic faculty, and the strong protection of the Elector of Saxony. Tyndale had none of these. Still, while on the run, he finished his translation of the Pentateuch. Yet, every place he might attempt to get it printed was already compromised. To make matters worse, a ship on which he was passenger on his way to Hamburg wrecked on the coast, and he lost all his valuable manuscripts, his money, and his long efforts of many months of hard work. Nevertheless, his translation of the Pentateuch was finally printed and smuggled into England by the summer of 1530.



*Statue of William Tyndale along  
the south side of the Thames,  
London*

And so it went. Tyndale running with agents from England close at his heels. Eventually, Tyndale was betrayed by Henry Phillips, a young man who had agreed to entrap Tyndale. Traveling to Antwerp in 1534, he located Tyndale and won his confidence. After making arrangements with officers for an ambush, he led Tyndale straight into their net. Tyndale spent 18 months in a dungeon, cold, shivering, and beset with incessant coughing. In October 1536, after a trial that was little more than a charade, Tyndale was strangled and burned at the stake. His last reported words were, “Lord, open the king of England’s eyes.”

Some 90% of his words would later pass into the King James Version of the Bible. Indeed, it has been said with some merit that every English New Testament until the 20<sup>th</sup> century was simply a revision of Tyndale. Here is his translation of the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 13:

*Though I speake with the tonges of men and  
angels and yet had no love I were even as  
soudynge brass: and as a tynklynge  
Cymball. and though I coulde prophesy and  
vnderstode all secretes and all knowledge:  
yee if I had all faith so that I coulde move  
mountains oute of there places and yet had  
no love I were nothyng. And though I  
bestowed all my gooddes to fede the poore  
and though I gave my body even that I  
burned and yet have no love it profeteth me  
nothyng.*