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The very first English Bible was not English as we know it, nor was it printed as we have it.

It was sung and in an English scarcely recognizable today.

Christianity came to England no later than the third century after Christ, and possibly earlier. But the Bible these Christians used was written in Latin.

That is, until a keeper of the animals in a monastery, whose name was Caedmon, had a dream some four centuries later.

In that dream a man stood beside Caedmon and asked him to sing a song. Caedmon replied that he could not. To this the man replied, "you shall sing of the creation of all things." And he did.

Indeed, he composed other Biblical songs in the English of his day by paraphrasing passages of Scripture which those who could read the Latin Bible explained to him. For this he was promoted from the cows to the cloister as a full fledged member of the monastery. All this happened about A.D. 670.

Caedmon's story was written by another monk named Bede who wrote the first history of the church in England. Though the Psalms had been translated into Old English in 700 by a very learned bishop named Aldhelm, Bede's contributions to learning were far greater.

Nevertheless, Aldhelm's Psalter was the first straightforward English translation of the Bible (in contrast to Caedmon's metrical paraphrases of Bible stories).

Most of Bede's work was written in Latin, but he yearned to give his fellow-countrymen some of the New Testament in English. So during his last illness he translated the Gospel of John.

On the last day of his life on earth Bede was dictating to one of his disciples his translation of the last chapter. Toward evening only one sentence remained. He worked quickly, finished the translation, said his prayers, and died. It was the year 735.

No copy of his translation of John remains.

A revival of religion in England came under King Alfred the Great (871-901) who was unusually literate for the times.

His assessment of conditions was this: "So utterly has knowledge fallen away in England that when I began to rule there were few men on this side of the Humber ~~who~~ could understand their Latin mass-books and offices in English. I cannot recall a single one south of the Thames."

To remedy these conditions the King gathered learned men around him; he himself translated many classic Latin works into Anglo-Saxon; and he translated parts of both the Old and New Testaments.

Sometimes an English translation was written between the lines of a Latin manuscript. This was called a "gloss" and meant that Englishmen could literally read between the lines in their own language.

One of the most beautifully decorated and glossed manuscripts is the Lindisfarne Gospels (now in the British Museum). It has a tenth century English translation written between the lines of a seventh century Latin Gospels.

In 1066 the Norman conquest of England brought, among other things, such radical changes in spoken English that the Old English translations became unintelligible to most people.

Some translations in Middle English were done during this time, but they were made only for the clergy. No one had yet entertained the idea

that ordinary people ought to be have an English Bible available to them until John Wycliffe and his followers came on the scene.

That English scene in which Wycliffe was reared was one of much unrest.

Roman Catholic clerics occupied important places in the government.

The English clergy claimed exemption from taxes and often lived in great luxury.

Wealth flowed out of England into the coffers of the popes.

During this time Wycliffe (who was born about 1328) was being educated at Oxford and gaining prominence as a champion of English independence from Rome and an outspoken opponent of the abuses and excesses of the priests.

He taught that people were directly responsible to the law of God. And by law of God he did not mean Catholic law, but the Bible.

If that was true then he realized that people would have to be able to read the Bible in their own English language if they were to obey God's law.

But even before the Bible was translated, Wycliffe wrote and argued against the papacy and the teachings of the Catholic church. He was a daring reformer long before the Reformation.

For example, concerning the Catholic dogma that the bread of communion is changed into the body of Christ, Wycliffe wrote: "And thus, as Christ became not a material nor an earthly vine, nor a material vine the body of Christ, so neither is the material bread changed from its substance to the flesh and blood of Christ."

On the sale of indulgences he said, "I confess that the indulgences

of the Pope, if they are what they are pretended to be, are a manifest blasphemy."

And on salvation he could not have been clearer: "Trust wholly in Christ; rely altogether on His sufferings; beware of seeking to be justified in any other way than by His righteousness. Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient for salvation. There must be atonement made for sin, according to the righteousness of God. The Person to make this statement must be God and man."

Little wonder that Pope Gregory XI issued five bulls against Wycliffe in which the Pope condemned Wycliffe's "wicked and most damnable heresies." A trial was begun but it was brought to a quick end when followers of Wycliffe burst into the chapel where it was being conducted.

For the 70 years before this happened the Popes had resided and ruled in Avignon, France. But in 1378 Gregory XI returned the papacy to Rome. However, he died soon after, and two Popes were elected--Urban VI in Rome and Clement VII in Avignon.

This schism brought great confusion and corruption, bewildering peasant and priest alike. In a pamphlet called On the Schism of the Popes Wycliffe urged England to end its allegiance to the papacy.

And he condemned the schism in the strongest terms: "Now is the Head of Antichrist cloven in twain, and one part contendeth against the other."

Though Wycliffe himself may have done little of the actual translation of the Bible, the work, done by his friends and colleagues, was completed by 1384. Because it was a very literal rendering of the Latin Vulgate, its understanding by the common people was somewhat limited.

But this was remedied by Wycliffe's faithful secretary, John Purvey who produced a complete and more readable revision of the Wycliffe Bible in 1396. For this great achievement Purvey and Nicholas of Hereford (who was heavily involved in the earlier Wycliffe Bible) endured time in prison while other followers of Wycliffe were burned at the stake for giving their people the Bible in English.

So adamant was the Catholic church against the use of the Bible in English that a synod in 1408 declared that no one should translate or read a Bible in English without express permission of the church.

But the Word of God could not be suppressed. Though every copy had to be made by hand, the Wycliffe Bible circulated as fast as copies could be made. It probably took up to 10 months to make a copy. It is said that a man would give a load of hay to have a single page to read in his own English language.

Yet the opposition of the church continued. Parents were urged to spy on their children and children on their parents if any was suspected of reading the English Bible. The hatred of the church came to a climax in 1415 when Wycliffe's writings were condemned and his body ordered to be exhumed. But the decree was not carried out until 14 years later when Wycliffe's bones were burned to ashes and cast into the Avon river.

The torch Wycliffe had ignited passed to William Tyndale.

Momentous changes took place in England and Europe during the years between these two men.

Nationalism was on the rise. Gutenberg printed the first Bible in 1456. Cheap paper came to Europe. Greek began to be studied publicly, and the first Greek New Testament appeared in 1516.

Gutenberg's Bible was Latin. The first vernacular version of the Bible was German, and by the end of the 1400s the printed Bible was issued in German, Italian, Spanish, French, Dutch, Danish, Russian, Slavic and Bohemian.

But not in English.

Printing had come to England in 1476, but it was 50 years later before the first printed English Bible appeared, and even then it was not printed in England. The religious climate was not yet favorable for Bible translation in English.

Tyndale was born about the year Columbus discovered America. He was about 30 when he made his famous statement "I will cause the boy that drives the plough to know more of the Scriptures than you." This was in response to a learned man who told Tyndale "we had better be without God's law than without the Pope's."

Henry VIII had not yet separated from the Roman Catholic Church. When Tyndale sought the patronage of Bishop Cuthbert Tunstall of London so as to be supported while he translated the Scriptures, he was refused. So at the age of 32 Tyndale left England never to return.

But his Bible did.

Printed copies of his New Testament in English reached England from Germany in 1526. Indeed, only a few fragments remain of the 15,000 copies that were printed before 1530. Those that were not bought and burned by the Bishop of London were eagerly acquired by the people.

Further literary efforts of Tyndale included the translation of the Pentateuch, the revision of his New Testament, and publication of numerous controversial works.

But his efforts were soon cut short. Arrested in 1535 and confined in a castle near Brussels, he was condemned to death. On October 6, 1536 he was tied to a stake, strangled by the hangman, then burned. He died crying, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."

Tyndale died not knowing that God had already begun to answer his prayer.

In 1535, the year before Tyndale's martyrdom, the first complete English Bible was published by Miles Coverdale. It was printed in Europe but quickly imported into England with a dedication to Henry VIII. The second edition of Coverdale's Bible (in 1537) was printed in England "with the kinges most gracyous licence."

Not only was Coverdale's Bible circulating in England before Tyndale's death, but it was largely dependent on Tyndale's translation of the Pentateuch and New Testament. For other parts of the Old Testament Coverdale relied on the Latin and the German translation of Luther since he was not able to translate from the Hebrew and Greek.

Coverdale's Bible was the first to separate the books of the Apocrypha from the books of the Old Testament and to place them by themselves as an appendix to the Old Testament.

By 1537 Tyndale's translation was also circulating in England in the Matthew Bible. It was edited by Tyndale's associate, John Rogers, who used Tyndale's New Testament, his Pentateuch, and other parts of the Old Testament Tyndale had translated but which had never before been published.

Like the second edition of the Coverdale, Matthew's Bible was "set forth with the kinges most gracyous lycence."

This royal approval opened the flood gates for the circulation and translation of the English Bible.

Clergy were encouraged to study it and people to read it.

A decree issued in the king's name in 1538 required every church to set up a Bible where people could read it.

In 1539 Richard Taverner revised Matthew's Bible, improving the New Testament translation especially.

The King's decree of 1538 had to be modified the following year to forbid the reading of the English Bible aloud while church services were in progress. Apparently many preferred to listen to what the Bible said rather than what the preacher said!

In the meantime Coverdale's revision of Matthew's Bible (which was itself a revision of Tyndale's) appeared in April 1539. Because of its size, this Bible was known as the Great Bible, and it appeared in seven different editions between 1539 and 1541.

The woodcut on the title page of the first edition shows Henry VIII on his throne handing the Word of God with his right hand to his archbishop, Thomas Cranmer, who in turn hands it to the clergy, and with his left hand to his deputy, Thomas Cromwell, who hands it to the people.

The Great Bible is also called Cranmer's Bible because of the prologue he wrote which appeared in the second and following editions.

The second edition also said that "This is the Bible apoynted to theuse of the churches." Strictly speaking the Great Bible is the Authorized Version, not the King James which was never officially authorized.

The third and fifth editions of the Great Bible bear the name (and



approval) of Cuthbert Tunstall on the title page--the same Tunstall who burned as many of Tyndale's New Testaments he could locate about 10 years before.

The title page of the fourth edition (November 1540) shows a blank circle about an inch in diameter where the coat of arms of Thomas Cromwell was cut out. Cromwell had fallen from favor and had been executed the previous July.

During the closing years of the reign of Henry VIII the possession, use and reading of the Tyndale and Coverdale Bibles were banned. But how could such a ban be enforced since the Great Bible, which was the work of Coverdale and which contained Tyndale's translation, was still the version "appointed to the use of the churches"?

When Edward VI succeeded Henry VIII, the anti-Bible trend was reversed. During his reign (1547-53) there were 16 printings of the Great Bible, 18 of Tyndale, 3 of the Coverdale, 3 of the Matthew, and 6 of the Taverner, and 18 of Tyndale. What an influence Tyndale had, for all these other translations contained his work.

When Mary came to the throne in 1553 she reversed her brother Edward's pro-Bible policy. Many Bibles were burned. Archbishop Cranmer and John Rogers (the translator of the Matthew Bible) were martyred, and Coverdale had to flee from England. No Bible translation was allowed in England during her reign.

But Englishmen were busy translating the Bible in Geneva, Switzerland. William Whittingham produced an English New Testament which contained a preface by John Calvin. But the most important effort during this time was the production of the Geneva Bible in 1560, which was

translated by Englishmen living in Geneva.

So popular was this translation with its many explanatory notes that 140 editions were issued before it was finally eclipsed by the King James version.

Although the Geneva Bible was not printed in England until 1575, it was an instant success in there.

Sometimes it is called the Breeches Bible because in Genesis 3:7 it says that Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together and made themselves "breeches."

It was the Bible of Shakespeare.

It was the version quoted in the preface to the King James Bible!

So obviously superior was the Geneva translation to the Great Bible that it became increasingly difficult for the church to insist on the use of the Great Bible.

What to do?

The bishops of the Church of England would undertake a new translation.

So in 1568 the Bishops' Bible appeared, and every bishop, cathedral and church was ordered to have a copy. Instant success!

The Bishops' Bible contained many marginal notes which attempted to counter the strong Calvinism in the notes of the Geneva Bible.

Had the Geneva Bible not existed, the Bishops' would have been successful. But the Geneva was clearly the better translation and its notes more popular.

And it was these notes that so irked King James that he agreed to sponsor a new translation which became known as the King James Bible.

What a rich heritage we have! Let us never forget our debt to those pioneers like Wycliffe, Tyndale, Coverdale, Rogers and others who saw the need, who used their knowledge, who thought little of their own comfort, and who in some cases gave their lives that we might have such a rich heritage of the Bible in English.

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Here are some sample verses from the various translations. I think I should let you decide which ones you want to put together. I don't see any reason why you have to break the lines as was done in the original printings, but I have given them to you that way.

Caedmon's Old English poetic rendering of Exodus 14:13 (A.D. 670)

Ne beoth ge thy forhtran, theah the Faraon brohte  
sweordwigendra side hergas,  
eorla unrim!

And a translation of this in modern English:

Be not frightened thereat, though Pharaoh has brought  
sword-wielders, vast troops,  
men without number!

Aldhelm's translation of Psalm 103:1 (A.D. 700)

Bletsa, mine sawle, blidhe drihten;  
and all min iuneran his thaene ecean naman!

King Alfred's translation of Matthew 6:9-10 (900)

Uren Fader dhic art in Heofnas,  
Sic gehalged dhin noma,  
To cymedh dhin ric,  
Sic dhin uuilla sue is in Heofnas and in eardho.

Wycliffe (1384)

Oure fadir that art in hevenes,

halewid be thi name;  
Thy kyngdoom come to; be  
thi wille don in erthe as in hevene.

To show the difference between the Wycliffe's literal translation of the  
Latin Vulgate and Purvey's more idiomatic English of Hebrews 1:1--

Wycliffe (1384)

Manyfold and many maners sumtyme God spekinge to fadris  
in prophetis, at the last in thes daies spak to us in the sone.

Purvey's revision (1396)

God, that spak sum tyme bi prophetis in many maneres to oure  
fadris, at the laste in these daies he hath spoke to vs bi the sone.

Tyndale (1526)

O oure father which arte in heven/halowed  
be thy name. Let thy kyngdom come. Thy wyll  
be fulfilled/as well in erth/as it ys in heven.

Coverdale (1535)

O oure father which art in heaven, hal-  
owed by thy name. Let thy kyndome come.  
Thy wyll be fulfilled upon earth as it is in  
heaven.

Great Bible (1539)

Oure father which are in heaven, halo-  
wed be thy name. Let thy kingdome come.  
Thy will be fulfilled, as well in erth, as it  
is in heaven.

Also Great Bible (1539) Matthew 16:18

I wil bylde my congregacion. (The Great Bible and previous English Bibles  
had regularly used "congregation" to translate the word "church." With  
the Geneva Bible the word "church" was used.

Geneva Bible (1560)

Our father which art in heaven,  
halowed be thy Name.  
Thy kingdome come. Thy will be do-  
ne even in earth, as it is in heaven.

Matthew 16:18 in the Geneva "I will builde by Church."

<sup>(1568)</sup>  
Bishops' Bible (Ed: remember it is Bishops' not Bishop's)

O our father, which art in heaven,  
halowed be thy name.  
Let thy kyngdome come. Thy wyll  
be done, as well in earth, as it is in heaven.

100

200

300 Christianity comes to England

400

500

600

670 Caedmon's Biblical songs

700 Aldhelm's Old English Psalms

735 Bede's Gospel of John

800

900 King Alfred's partial translations

1000 English "gloss" in Lindisfarne Gospels

1066 Norman Conquest of England

1100

1200

1300 1384 Wycliffe Bible

1396 Revision of Wycliffe Bible

1400 1415 Wycliffe's writings condemned

1456 Gutenberg Bible

1500 1516 First published Greek N.T.

1526 Tyndale's N.T. reaches England

1535 Coverdale Bible

1537 Matthew Bible

1539 First Great Bible and Taverner Bible

1539-41 Six additional Great Bibles

1560 Geneva Bible

1568 Bishops' Bible

1600 1611 King James Bible