

A Bookworm

## **WORMING THROUGH OLD BOOKS**

By a Bookworm

*An Unrecognized Genius of English Prose: The Life and Fiery Death of William Tyndale, Translator of the Bible Back When That Was Bad*

It has long been the sense of the Bookworm, purely as a matter of personal taste and surely not as a statement of serious conviction for which he should be held in any way accountable, that the two Testaments that make up what is called in Christian lands the Holy Bible constitute an ultimately indigestible sandwich. This should not be surprising, as taken by itself, the Hebrew Bible (Christian-appropriation title: Old Testament) is sufficiently entangled as to have inspired two millennia of often contradictory Jewish commentaries – ranging from the literal to the ethical to the kabbalistical and eschatological – which commentaries themselves require and inspire further commentaries. Smack that vast anthology of Hebrew texts against an equally disparate assemblage of Greek texts compiled some eight centuries later, and you've got fixings enough for any sort of religious hoagie you might wish to serve.

Lest this seem to some sheer captiousness on the part of the Bookworm – whose own religious convictions admittedly tend in the direction of animistic worship of localized, scarcely discernible demi-deities who inhabit his bookshelves, pockets, and socks and who require of him oddly-timed penances and mortifications the like of which have left him tongue-tied on occasions in which speaking aloud might have spared him the worst accusations of knobheadedness and ninnyness – such readers should bear in

mind that the Bookworm is, in his apprehensions, in snugly broad agreement with the teachings of the Church in the rough millennial span from the fourth-century translation of the Testaments into Latin – known as the Vulgate – by St. Jerome and the onset of the sixteenth-century Reformation led by Martin Luther, translator of the Testaments into German.

During this span, it was the orthodox Christian conviction that the translation of the Bible into the vulgar spoken European tongues would be unwise in the extreme, as that could lead to weak-minded confusions amongst the faithful, at best, and the creation of heretical sects and movements, at worst. A paradox that did not seem as such to the Church consisted in the prominent role of St. Jerome, from the thirteenth century onward, in European devotional painting – in which he was often portrayed, against a background of ascetic isolation, crafting the Vulgate at his lectern with a lion at his feet and a skull beside his inkwell as a memento mori to spur his translation labors. St. Jerome was to be revered but not emulated, for the cost of the latter, from the Middle Ages onward, was the attention of the Inquisition.

William Tyndale (1494?-1536), who paid that cost, was born in Gloucestershire and educated at Oxford and Cambridge. In his late twenties, he formed the idea of putting his learned studies to use in the cause of the Christian faith by translating the Bible into English. In the sixteenth-century Protestant work commonly known as *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, by the Reverend John Foxe, the early Reformationist resentment by Tyndale – even prior to the founding of the Anglican Church by Henry VIII – against the papal prohibition of translations is portrayed so as to give us a sense of the personal voice of the great translator-to-be:

Tyndale happened to be in the company of a certain divine, and in disputing with him he pressed him so hard that the doctor burst out into these blasphemous words: 'We were better to be without God's laws than the pope's.'

Tyndale, full of godly zeal, replied: 'I defy the pope and all his laws' and added, that if God spared him life, ere many years, he would cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scriptures than he did.

There had been one previous such translation, composed by fourteenth-century followers of John Wyclif, an English precursor of the Reformation; that translation, copied out by hand before the advent of the printing press, had won wide interest but was in need of improvement. Having sought and been refused the support of Henry VIII for his project, Tyndale emigrated to Germany and thereafter never returned to England, ultimately establishing a base of operations in Antwerp. His biblical translations, frequently self-revised, were published in various European locales from 1525 through 1534.

During this period, the Bishop of London – in line with Henry VIII's opposition to translations that would breach papal wishes and hence make all the more difficult his pursuit of a royal annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, who had failed to bear him a male heir – sent an agent to Antwerp to purchase in bulk and burn Tyndale's just issued New Testament, an arrangement with which Tyndale pronounced himself, to that agent, well satisfied, "for these two benefits shall come thereof: I shall get money from him for these books and bring myself out of debt, and the whole world shall cry out on the burning of God's Word, and the overplus of the money that shall remain to me shall make me more studious to correct the said New Testament, and so newly to imprint the same once again; and I trust the second will much better like you than ever did the first."

His manner of death was set down by Foxe; let readers decide, based upon their own capacities, what license, if any, was taken in this account: “When he was brought out for execution, and was being tied to the stake, he cried with a loud and earnest voice: ‘Lord, open the King of England’s eyes!’ He was then strangled, and his remains burnt to ashes. Such was the power and excellence of this truly good man, that during his imprisonment he converted his keeper, with his daughter, and others of his attendants.”

Two years before Tyndale’s death, Henry VIII had founded the Anglican Church, and by its authority, which was his, he obtained his annulment and married famously five more wives thereafter. Sir Thomas More, a onetime nemesis of Tyndale, was martyred in the aftermath. While retaining Catholic teachings in most respects, Henry decided – while Tyndale remained a prisoner of the Inquisition – that an English translation of the Bible was only fitting for a nation that had now become a religion unto itself. Bishop Myles Coverdale was entrusted with that task.

The printing of *Matthew’s Bible*, as the royally sanctioned translation was entitled, occurred only months after Tyndale’s strangulation. The final versions of his translations from the Old and New Testaments were employed entire, with additional translations, notably of the Psalms, by Coverdale; the credit to Tyndale a translator was indicated merely by the initials “W. T.” The King James Bible of 1611 incorporated – with not so much as initials for acknowledgement – large portions of Tyndale’s English renderings, of which the following is a very brief sampling (from a compilation by the Tyndale scholar, David Daniell, who recently completed modern-spelling versions of Tyndale’s translations):

“And God said, Let there be Light, and there was light.” (Genesis 1);  
“Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4);

“The salt of the earth” (Matthew 5);

“Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Matthew 7);

“With God all things are possible” (Matthew 19);

“The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26);

“Eat, drink, and be merry” (Luke 12).

What is plain from these examples is that, for some four centuries of English readers of the Bible, the most emblematic and sustaining of its lines were fashioned by Tyndale, whom few remember. Today there are over 1700 translations in different world languages of the Bible. Catholics and Protestants alike promote the work for which Tyndale died, which just goes to show you that, in the world of old books as in all other worlds of which we know, timing is everything, without necessarily meaning anything.