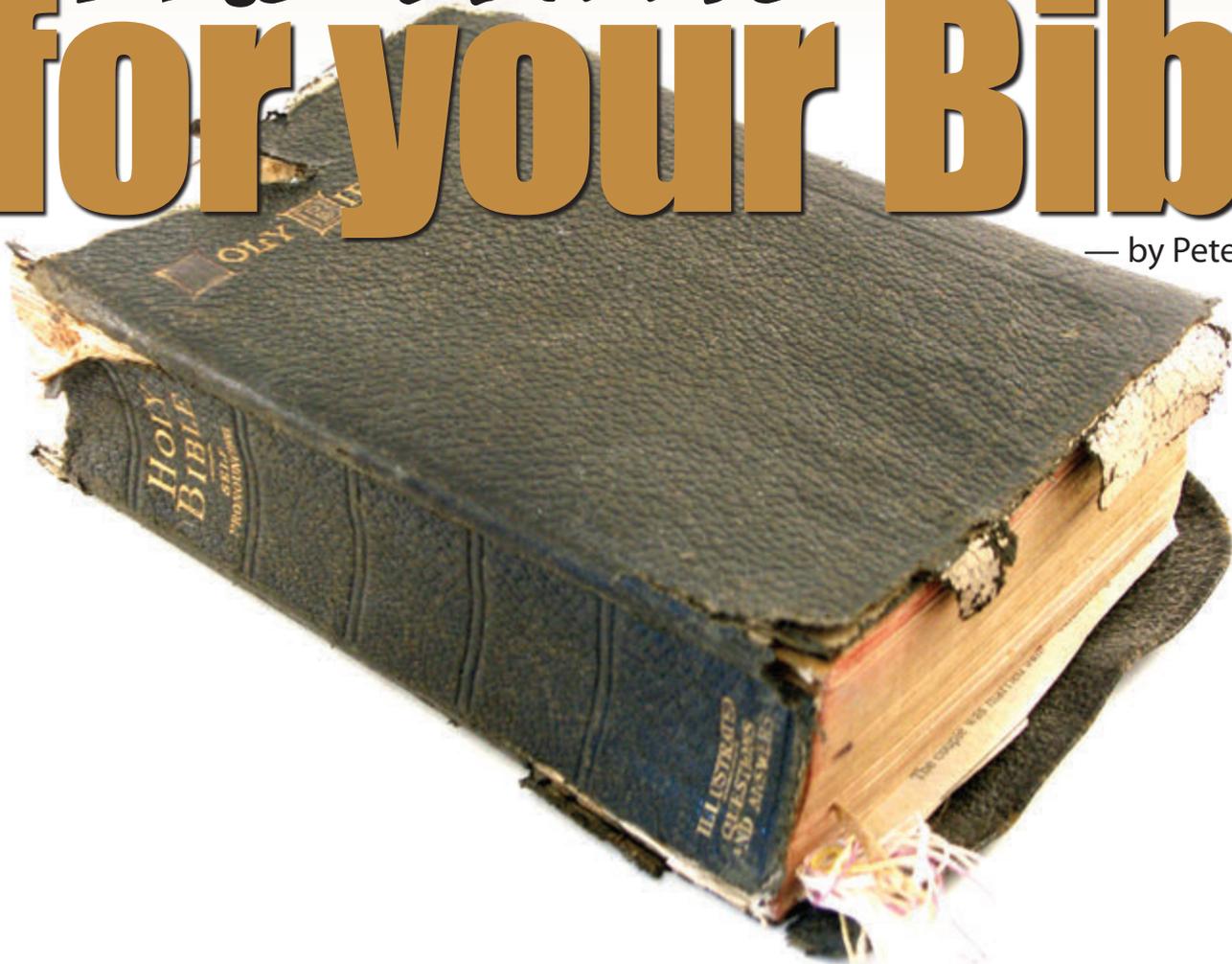


The battle for your Bible

— by Peter Hammond



Do you realise that many men, women and children died so you could have the Bible in your own language?

It may surprise most English-speaking Christians that the first Bible printed in English was illegal and that the Bible translator was burned alive for the crime of translating God's Word into English.

William Tyndale is known as the Father of the English Bible because he produced the first English translation from the original Hebrew and Greek Scriptures. 150 years earlier Professor John Wycliffe of Oxford University had overseen a handwritten translation of the Bible, but this had been translated from the Latin Vulgate. Because of the intense persecution and determined campaign to discover and burn these Wycliffe Bibles, very few copies remain. It took an average of eight months to produce a single copy of the Wycliffe Bible as each one had to be written out by hand.

The Banned Bible

The official Roman Catholic abhorrence of the Bible translated into English was expressed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Arundel: "That pestilent and most wretched John Wycliffe, of damnable memory, a child of the old devil and himself a child and pupil of the anti-Christ...crowned his wickedness by translating the Scriptures into the mother-tongue."

Catholic historian, Henry Knightom, wrote: "John Wycliffe translated the Gospel from Latin into the English...and made it the property of the masses and common to all and...even to women...and so the pearl of the Gospel is thrown before swine and trodden underfoot and what is meant to be the jewel of the clergy has been turned into the jest of the laity...and has become common..."

A Synod of clergy in 1408 decreed: "It is dangerous...to translate the text of

Holy Scripture from one language into another...we decree and ordain that no-one shall in future translate any text of Scripture into the English tongue or into any other tongue, by way of book, booklet or treatise. Nor shall any man read, in public or in private, this kind of book, booklet or treatise, now recently composed in time of said John Wycliffe...under penalty of the Greater Excommunication."

On one day in 1519 seven men and women in Coventry were burned alive for teaching their children the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Apostles Creed – in English!

God's outlaw

William Tyndale was a gifted scholar, a graduate of both Oxford and Cambridge Universities. He was ordained into the ministry, served as a chaplain and tutor and dedicated his life to the translation of the

Scriptures from the original Hebrew and Greek languages. Tyndale was horrified by the ignorance of the Bible prevalent amongst even the clergy. To one such Catholic cleric he declared: "I defy the Pope and all his laws. If God spares my life, before many years pass I will make it possible for the boy who drives the plough to know more of the Scriptures than you do."

In 1524, failing to obtain any ecclesiastical approval for his proposed translation, Tyndale went into exile to Germany. In Germany he worked on the New Testament which was ready for printing by the following year. As the first pages began to roll off the printing press in Cologne, soldiers of the Holy Roman Empire raided the premises and William Tyndale had to flee with the pages that had been printed. Only one incomplete copy of this Cologne New Testament edition survives. Tyndale moved to Worms where Martin Luther had only a few years

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before made his famous speech before the Emperor: "My conscience is captive to the Word of God...here I stand, I cannot do otherwise, so help me God. Amen." By the next year, 1526, six thousand copies of the complete English New Testament had been printed in Worms.

Not only did the first printed edition of the English New Testament need to be produced in Germany but they had to be smuggled into England in bales of cotton shipped from Holland.

The Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall, preached against the translation of the New Testament into English and had copies of Tyndale's New Testament ceremonially burned at St Paul's. The Archbishop of Canterbury began a campaign to buy all these contraband copies of the New Testament in order to burn them. Only two copies of the original print-run of Tyndale's New Testament has survived.

Tyndale began all over again to print and smuggle into England a second, new, improved edition of the New Testament. By 1530 Tyndale's

translation of the first five books of the Bible -The Pentateuch (the Books of Moses)- were printed in Antwerp and smuggled in bales of cotton across the Channel. In 1535 Tyndale was betrayed by fellow Englishman, Henry Phillips, who gained his confidence only to treacherously arrange for his arrest. Tyndale was taken to the state prison in the castle of Vilvorde, now Brussels. For 500 days Tyndale suffered in a cold, dark and damp dungeon and then on 6th October 1536 he was taken to a stake where he was garroted and burned. His last reported words were: "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."

Answered Prayer

The Lord did indeed answer the dying prayer of Tyndale in a most remarkable way. Tyndale's book, "The Obedience of a Christian man", and his translation of the New Testament into English found a way to Queen Anne and were hidden and read in the king's bedroom. Thomas Crammer became Archbishop of Canterbury and Thomas Cromwell, the Chancellor. Both of these men were committed to the Protestant cause. They persuaded King Henry VIII to approve the publication of Coverdale's translation of the Bible into English. Miles Coverdale was a friend of Tyndale's, a fellow Cambridge graduate and a Reformer. His edition was the first complete translation of the Bible. It was mainly Tyndale's work, supplemented with those portions of the Old Testament which Tyndale had not been able to translate before his death. By 1539 every parish church in England was required to make a copy of this English Bible available to all its parishioners. At Archbishop Thomas Crammer's request, King Henry the VIII (who had declared Tyndale an outlaw) authorised that this Bible, now called The Great Bible, be published throughout the realm.

And so in this way, English Bible translator, William Tyndale's, dying prayer was spectacularly answered. The sudden, unprecedented countrywide access to the Scriptures created widespread excitement. Just in the lifetime of William Shakespeare two million were sold throughout the British Isles. About 90% of Tyndale's wording passed on into the King James Version of the Bible.

A World Language

Not only can William Tyndale be described as the Father of the English Bible but in a real sense the foremost influence in the shaping of the English language itself. Because Tyndale's translation was the very first from the original Hebrew and Greek into the English language, he had no previous translations to help in his choice of language. While Latin is noun rich, Greek and Hebrew are verb rich. At that time the English language had been heavily influenced by French and Latin. Tyndale went back to the original Saxon and found that the Saxon English was more compatible to the Greek and Hebrew than the Latin and French.

The clarity and poetic beauty which Tyndale brought into the English language through his Bible translations, served as a linguistic rallying point for the development of the English language. At the time of his translation there were so many variations and dialects of English and in many sections of the country the English language was being swamped with French words and Latin concepts. Tyndale's translation rescued English from these Latin trends and established English as an extension of the Biblical Hebrew worldview.

It is extraordinary that while English was one of the minor languages of Europe with less than three million speakers in the early 16th century, today it has become a truly worldwide language with over two billion people communicating in English. And so every person in the world who writes, speaks or even thinks in English, is to a large extent indebted to William Tyndale. He has been described as the most influential Englishman. ■

