

Tyndale's New Testament

In 1522 Martin Luther's German New Testament was published in Wittenberg, Germany.

In 1526 William Tyndale's English New Testament was published in Worms, Germany.

Tyndale's translation had a huge impact on English-speaking Christianity and on the English language.

Who was William Tyndale?

Here's a summary of Tyndale's life:

- ◆ He was born around 1494 and died in 1536. (Martin Luther was born in 1483 and died in 1546.)
- ◆ He was born in Gloucester in southwest England.
- ◆ He was educated at Oxford and Cambridge. He was also ordained as a Roman Catholic priest.
- ◆ At Oxford Tyndale learned Greek. He became familiar with Erasmus' *Novum Instrumentum*, a book that had the Greek New Testament alongside a fresh Latin translation by Erasmus. (The official Latin translation of the Bible, called the Vulgate, had been translated by Jerome around 400 A.D.) Tyndale later also learned Hebrew.
- ◆ Tyndale moved back to Gloucestershire and worked as a private tutor. In his own room in a country manor he did his translating of the Bible.
- ◆ A learned man once visited the manor and remarked, "We were better be without God's law than the pope's." Tyndale spoke up and answered, "I defy the pope and all his laws. If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough, shall know more scripture than thou dost."
- ◆ No one in England would print Tyndale's New Testament. He moved to Germany to have it published. There was an initial attempt to publish the book in Cologne, but the print shop was raided and no complete final copies were produced.
- ◆ Tyndale fled to Worms, where Peter Schoeffer printed the book in a run of at least 3,000 copies.
- ◆ Handheld copies were smuggled into English ports and bought and distributed throughout England. Church authorities, who adamantly opposed any translation into the people's everyday language, confiscated and destroyed many copies and punished the people who owned them.
- ◆ Tyndale moved to Antwerp. Printers continued to print his New Testament, and by the early 1530's there may have been as many as 30,000 copies in England.
- ◆ Tyndale revised his translation starting in 1534. He also began translating the Old Testament into English, but he never finished the task.
- ◆ In 1535 he was betrayed by a fellow Englishman. He was arrested in Antwerp for heresy and imprisoned in a dungeon in Brussels. In October 1536 he was strangled and his body was burned at the stake.

Why do you think church authorities were so opposed to Bibles in the people's everyday language?

Bible Translations

Before Tyndale's New Testament translation there were English Bibles, but the Bibles were based on the Vulgate, not the original languages. Many of the Bible verses from Latin were translated at the time of John Wyclif, who wanted the English-speaking people of the late 1300's to be able to read the Bible in their language. In the early 1500's Tyndale wanted a Bible based on the original languages that was readable by the people and accessible to them.

Tyndale chose to use the simpler, more direct style of the Anglo-Saxon roots of the English language as opposed to the lengthier Latin side to the English language.

Tyndale's translation became very influential on the later King James Bible.

Here are some features of Tyndale's New Testament:

- ◆ It has a short message to the reader, but there is no introduction to the New Testament nor any prefaces to the books as Luther included in his New Testament. Tyndale's edition has no margin notes. It is the simple bare text of the New Testament.
- ◆ There is some artist decoration in the printing. There are small color pictures of the authors at the beginning of several books of the New Testament. For example, there are color pictures of the gospel writers and of Paul and Peter. There are decorative letters at the beginning of each chapter.
- ◆ In the interest of space, some obvious letters are left out and marked with a dash above the preceding letter so the reader supplies the necessary letter.

Here is what Luke chapter 2 looks like. Here the missing letters are indicated by underlining.

- ◆ *Hit followed in those days: that there wet oute a commandment from Auguste the Emperour / that all the woorldde shulde be valued. This taxynge was first executed when Syrenus was leftenaunt in Siria. And every man wet in to his awne shyre toune / there to be taxed. And Joseph also ascended from Galile / oute of a cite called Nazareth / unto jewry: in to a cite of David / which is called bethlee / because he was of the housse and linage of David to be taxed with Mary his wedded wife / which was with childe. And it fortunued whill they there were / her tyme was come that she shulde be delyvered. And she brought forth her fyrst begotten sonne. And wrapped hym in swadlynge clothes / and layed hym in a manger / because there was no roume for them within / in the hostrey. And there were in the same region shepherds abydinge in the felde / watching their flocke by nyght. And loo: the agell of the lorde stode harde by the / ad the brightnes of the lorde shone roude aboute them / and they were soore afrayed. And the angell sayd unto them: Be not afrayed Behold I brynge you tydings off greate ioye / that shall come to all the people: for unto you is borne this daye in the cite of David a saveoure / which is christ the lorde. And take this for a signe: ye shall fynde the childe swadled / ad layed i a mager. And straight waye there was with the agell a multitude of hevenly sowdiers / laudyngge God / and saying: Glory to God an hye / and peace on the erth: and unto men reioysynge. And itt fortunued / as sone as the angels were gone awaye in to heven / the shepherds sayd wo to another: let us goo even unto Bethleem / and se this thyngge thatt is happened / which the lorde hath shewed unto us. And they ca with haste / and founde Mary ad Joseph / and the babe layde in a manger. When they had sene it / they publISHED abrode the saynge / which was told*

the off that chylde. And all that herde itt wondred / att thoose thynges which were tolde them off the shepherds. But Mary kept all thoose sayinges / and pondered them in hyr hert. And the shepherdes retourned / praysynge and laudyng God ffor all that they had herde and sene / evyn as itt was told unto them.

What do you observe about the English?

Here's a well-known section from Romans 8. See how smoothly you can read it.

- ◆ *What shall we then saye unto these thynges? yf God be on oure syde: who can be agaynst us? which spared nott his awne sonne / butt gave hym for us all: Howe shall he nott with hym geve us all thyngs also? Who shall laye eny thyng to the charge of goddes chosen? Hit is God that iustifieth: who then shall condempne? Hytt is Christ which is deed / ye rather which is rysen agayne / which is also on the right honde of god and maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from goddes love? shall all tribulacion? Or anyusshe? Or persecucion / other honger? other nakednesse? other parell? other swearde? As it is written: For thy sake are we kylled all daye longe / and are counted as shepe apoynted to be slayne. Neverthelesse in all these thynges we overcome strongly thorow his helpe that loved us. Ye and I am sure that nether deeth / nether lyfe / neither angell / nor rule / nether power / nether thynges present / nether thiges to come / nether heyth / nether lowth / nether eny other creature shalbe able to departe us from Goddes love / which is in Christ Jesu oure lorde.*

Comment on how meaningful it is for you to have these words in your language.

Why does it benefit you to know something about William Tyndale?*

*Sources for this Bible study include:

The New Testament: A Facsimile of the 1526 Edition. Translated by William Tyndale. With an introduction by David Daniell. Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 2008.

A History of Christianity by Kenneth Scott Latourette. Fourth printing in September 2000 by Prince Press.