

Two Key Scholars – Erasmus and Tyndale

Two significant events in the 14th century enabled the translation and production of the Bible into several European languages.

- ❶ The fall of Constantinople in 1453 caused Greek scholars to migrate westward to Europe taking their manuscripts and books with them.
- ❷ By 1454, the development of moveable metal type for printing had reached the point where large numbers of books could be printed. Multiple printing of text also eliminated copyists' errors.



The convergence of these events in the 1450s set the scene for translations of the Bible to be made from Greek and then Hebrew manuscripts into European languages. The advent of the printing press enabled multiple copies of the Bible to be produced for large scale circulation. The first book known to have been printed with moveable metal type was the Gutenberg Bible (a Latin Vulgate translation) which was issued in 1455-6.

Erasmus the Scholar

The Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus (1465?-1536) spent some of his early years in the Augustine monastery at Steyn where he read Latin works. He disapproved of the monastic system and was critical of the prevailing Church practices. Erasmus was one of the most outstanding scholars of Latin and Greek of his age. His contribution to the development of the English Bible was to produce the first printed Greek New Testament in 1516 which was compiled from Greek manuscripts. He then produced a new Latin translation from the Greek New Testament and published them together in the same book.

That caused a stir in scholarly circles for Erasmus demonstrated that Jerome's Latin Vulgate used by the Church contained many errors and inaccuracies, when compared with the original Greek manuscripts. Among the translation errors he identified in Jerome's Latin Vulgate was Matthew 3:2: "*Do penance for the kingdom of God is at hand.*"

Erasmus asserted that the most natural translation of the Greek New Testament word, was "*repent*". Repentance is a personal matter between sinners and God. The involvement of the clergy in providing penance was therefore unnecessary. The teaching of Jesus and the Apostles teaches us that what is required of us is a personal matter of a change of heart and commitment to a new way of life.

Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but **now commands all men everywhere to repent**, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31).

If anyone thirsts, (says Jesus) let him come to me and drink (John 7:37).

Erasmus and the Scriptures

In the preface to his 1516 Greek New Testament Erasmus wrote of the Scriptures:

I wish that the husbandman may sing parts of them at his plough, that the weaver may warble them at his shuttle, that the traveller may with their narratives beguile the weariness of the way.

Erasmus was a scholar who embraced a humanist philosophy. He travelled around visiting many European seats of learning including Paris, Rome, Strasbourg, Mainz and Turin. He made six visits to England between 1499 and 1517 and studied at Oxford and Cambridge Universities. At the invitation of the University Chancellor, Bishop John Fisher, he became Professor of Divinity and Greek at Cambridge (1511-14) where he applied himself to working on his first edition of the Greek New Testament.

Erasmus stayed with Sir Thomas More for about a year in Canterbury prior to taking up the invitation to a Professorship at Queens' College, Cambridge. More was also a humanist, who later was to become a persecutor of the protestant reformers. Erasmus' published Greek New Testament laid a foundation on which William Tyndale was to build. As more Greek manu-



scripts became available he produced further editions of the Greek New Testament. His fifth and final edition of his Greek text was published in 1535. This text, among others, became a text for the King James Version of 1611.

Tyndale - Father of the English Bible

William Tyndale was one of three sons of Northumberland parents who moved to the West Country. They changed the family name to 'Hychens' also spelt 'Hochyns' during the Wars of the Roses. William is believed to have been born in Gloucestershire near the Welsh border around 1594. He has fittingly been called the 'Father of the English Bible'. For he took the next step in bringing the English Bible to the people of England and showed exceptional courage and determination in making that attempt. It fell to William Tyndale to translate Erasmus' Greek New Testament into English.

At the time Latin was the internation-

al language of Europe: it was the language of academics, the Church and the Government for diplomatic communications. Tyndale like Wycliffe before him was determined to ensure that the Bible was available for all to read in the English language. On one occasion, Tyndale was in a heated debate, arguing the case for a vernacular Bible with “a Popish Clergyman”. The clergyman is reputed to have said, “We had better be without God’s laws than the Pope’s!” Tyndale replied with similar sentiments to those of Erasmus, “I defy the Pope and all his laws and if God should spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than thou dost”.

Early Life

Tyndale was educated in Oxford. His grammar school education took place at Magdalen Hall, preparatory for entry to Oxford University. He graduated from Oxford with a Bachelors Degree in 1512 and a Masters in 1515 and was ordained to the priest-



hood the same year. Tyndale had a keen and alert mind, and was a brilliant scholar fluent in Hebrew, Greek, Latin and several European languages.

Tyndale found work as a tutor to the children of the Walsh family who lived at Little Sodbury Hall. The Walshes were known for their hospitality. Clergy and other men of learning were frequently invited to dine with them. Tyndale also sat with these guests, but it was here that he made enemies.

A Heretic?

At dinner table discussions Tyndale was critical of the greed and superstition of the clergy. They could not gainsay his knowledge of the Bible and in response accused him of preaching heresy. In anger, they denounced him secretly to the Gloucester chancellor John Bell, chief administrator of the diocese. He was a skilled interrogator of Lollards and suspected heretics.

Early in 1523 Bell summoned Tyndale to appear before him. Tyndale demanded that his accusers face him. Local Priests were at the hearing but none was prepared to come forward to witness against him. Bell concluded the proceedings with threats and insults and set Tyndale free with a warning about the views he was expressing.

Tyndale was apparently a member of the Society of Christian Brethren. The Society included Protestant merchants who secretly traded in forbidden Christian literature from the Low Countries and Hamburg. In this way, Tyndale obtained a copy of Luther’s 1522 German New Testament. This proved to be a stimulus for his own work on an English New Tes-

tament.

Tyndale's Plan

By midsummer 1523 Tyndale appears to have first mentioned to a friend that he planned to translate the Bible into English. That carried great personal risk. The 'Constitutions of Oxford' drawn up by Thomas Arundel, Archbishop of Canterbury in 1408, was still in force.

It prohibited the production of any English versions of the Bible in full or in part without the permission of the Church authorities. In 1519 a woman and six men had been burned as heretics at Little Park, Coventry. Their crime was that they had taught their children the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed in English.

The prayer the Lord Jesus taught his disciples teaches us that we should also pray for God's Kingdom to come on earth. The opening words teach us what we should pray for.

...Our Father in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:9-10).

Unstoppable!

The Word of God cannot be thwarted by oppression and persecution. The more the Church tried to stop the English Bible reaching the population of England, the greater became the thirst for knowledge of God's Word. Tyndale believed the Bible to be the inspired Word of God and the only authority in matters of life and death. He took it at its word when it says that it is powerful and offers us a hope of life and salvation. As the apostle Peter expressed that truth:

All flesh is as grass, and all the glory of



man as the flower of the grass. The grass withers, and its flower falls away, but the word of the Lord endures forever.' Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you (1 Peter 1:24,25).

Tyndale left Gloucester for London seeking a sponsor to support him while he worked on translation. He also wanted to reduce the exposure of the Walsh family to the increasing hostility they faced while he was a member of their household.

Tyndale arrived in London around July 1523 and hoped to see the Bishop of London, Cuthbert Tunstall who had the power to lift the Constitutions of Oxford and thereby enable the translation of an English Bible to take place. His hopes were dashed, permission was never obtained. It turned out that Tyndale had completely misjudged the Bishop and his circumstances.

Peter Moore

Next: Tyndale goes abroad