

KEITH R. CRIM

## TRANSLATING THE BIBLE INTO ENGLISH: THE FIRST THOUSAND YEARS

**Dr. Keith Crim** is an Old Testament specialist and a member of the TEV Old Testament Committee.

The story of the Bible in English is part of the story of the English-speaking people and the story of the changing English language. The Bible first came to England in Latin, but the gospel story was soon being told in the language of the people. Poets sang its message, and scholars translated large sections, sometimes writing the Old English between the lines of the Latin manuscripts, and sometimes producing independent translations. Venerable Bede, church historian, and Alfred, king of Britain, are among the early translators who dedicated their talents to putting the Bible into English.

Toward the end of the fourteenth century, England was full of new religious and social ideas. The existence of two rival popes—one at Avignon in southern France and one at Rome—undermined the Church's claim to have all the answers. And in England itself restless peasants were demanding fair treatment. In the literary world Geoffrey Chaucer was writing poetry that mirrored daily life. And large numbers of people were eager to have the Bible in a language they could read and understand.

A member of the royal family, John of Gaunt, gave help and protection to an Oxford scholar named John Wycliffe, who was rethinking the current religious ideas. He taught that every one was responsible for obeying the Bible. The next step was clear. In order to obey the Bible you have to know what it says, and that means making the Bible available in the language of the day. Wycliffe may not have actually translated the Bible himself, but under his inspiration his friends and colleagues produced a new translation in contemporary English. Later, after Wycliffe's death, they revised it to get away from a literal, foreign-sounding style and produce a text that was smoother English and easier for the common people to understand.

These translations were based on the Latin Vulgate, since Greek and Hebrew were not studied in England then. Moreover, copies were scarce, because Bibles were still copied by hand. Printing, commonplace in the Far East, had not yet reached Europe. Copies of these two versions inspired by Wycliffe survived the period of reaction that soon set in. Leaders in the English church condemned Wycliffe's teachings and his translation, but the manuscripts continued to circulate, and people continued to read them. Many readers probably did not know the origin of the Bible they read; its appeal did not depend on the fame of the translators.

Changes began to come faster and faster. In Germany, Johann Gutenberg was the first to use movable type to print books, and a flood of books and pamphlets increased the exchange of old ideas and the birth of new ones. Voyages of discovery stretched European minds, and thinkers were questioning traditional religious beliefs and practices. When the rediscovery of Greek and Hebrew toppled the Latin Bible from its position of supremacy, Martin Luther in Germany, and then a growing host of gifted and dedicated men,

began to translate the Bible from the original languages directly into the languages used by ordinary men and women.

In England the central figure in the struggle to make the Bible available was William Tyndale, a scholar and a man of action. Early in 1524, unable to find anyone in England who would sponsor his work, he sailed for the continent. There he completed his translation of the New Testament, and it was published at Worms in Western Germany towards the end of February 1526. Almost at once shipments of merchandise to England included copies of the new translation.

Tyndale, however, was suspected of being tainted with Lutheranism, and the Bishop of London became alarmed at finding the New Testament circulating freely. He began to buy up as many copies as he could find and burn them, but the seller was a friend of Tyndale's, and the money was used to print more copies and circulate them even more widely. Tyndale revised the New Testament and translated and published much of the Old Testament before he was kidnapped and in 1536 burned at the stake for heresy.

It was a man named Miles Coverdale who carried on Tyndale's work. An active churchman, his fortunes rose and fell with the ups and downs of English politics. The first complete Bible in English was his work. It was published on the continent in October 1535, dedicated to King Henry VIII, and quickly imported into England. Royal approval made it possible for it to circulate widely.

Coverdale was not the scholar that Tyndale had been, and he could not make use of Greek and Hebrew, but he wisely based his work on Tyndale's, modifying it in the light of Latin translations and translations into various modern European languages. He found a sponsor in King Henry's second queen, Anne Boleyn; with her death, the Coverdale version lost much of its influence, although it was reprinted as late as 1553.

Royal sponsorship also produced "The Great Bible", a revision by Coverdale of a revision of Tyndale's work. The process of revising and revising again had begun. And other translations were coming. The most influential was the Geneva Bible, published on the continent in 1560 by British Calvinists. It was immensely popular, to the irritation of those who objected to the doctrinal slant of its extensive marginal notes. It became the Bible of Shakespeare and of the Pilgrim Fathers, the family Bible of English-speaking Protestants. A rival translation was the Bishops' Bible, sponsored by the Church of England. Nineteen editions were published between 1568 and 1606, and it was placed in churches around the country. But it started off under a heavy handicap. A better translation—the Geneva Bible—was already available.

These translations were impressive achievements. They reflected the new learning of the day and the exuberance that writers felt in the rapid development of the resources of the English language. Any translator who produced a wooden, literal rendering had to face the competition of translations in natural, readable English, readily understood by ordinary people.

The period of intense activity in Bible translation in England came to an end when the King James Version appeared in 1611. It was prepared by forty-seven of the ablest scholars in the country, working under the patronage

of King James I, who took an active part in organizing the work. The translators went to the original languages of scripture, but they also "diligently compared and revised" the earlier translations.

Although it met with opposition, it grew steadily in popularity, and before long it had established its position as *the Bible* in English, a position it maintained well into the twentieth century. Its excellence is due in no small measure to the translators' skill in finding the English words most appropriate for each context. They knew that the meaning of the individual Greek and Hebrew words changed in relation to the other words used with them. So, for example, they translated one Hebrew word as "adversity", "affliction", "distress", "sorrow", and "trouble". And one Greek word as "call in question", "condemn", "determine", "esteem", "judge", and "think".

Another point of excellence is the natural rhythm of the great prose passages, a feature that made the King James Version especially well-suited for public reading. Sound and sense were blended in a happy combination.

And so when the Bible Societies were founded in the early years of the nineteenth century there was a great translation ready for them to distribute, a translation that had proved its value.

ESKO RINTALA

## AN INTERESTING INSTANCE OF THE USE OF THE CLOZE TECHNIQUE

The Rev. Esko Rintala is General Secretary of the Finnish Bible Society.

Three months after the translation work to produce a dynamic equivalence Finnish New Testament had started during the UBS Translations Seminar at Arnoldshain, Germany, a motion was carried in the Assembly of the Lutheran Church of Finland that it should be investigated whether the officially authorized Finnish Church Bible of 1938 needed revision or retranslation.

For those who are acquainted with the difficulties in many English-speaking churches of deciding whether a Bible translation dating from the year 1611 should still be read to the congregations or not, a time span of little more than forty years may seem very short indeed. The Finnish Bible of 1938 was, moreover, quite modern in its time. It was a new translation, and it soon displaced in actual use its predecessor, the Old Church Bible of 1776.

However, during the late sixties, there was a growing awareness among some of the parish pastors that the Epistle lessons which were being read in the Sunday services, were not really understood or attentively followed by the congregation. The doubt was widespread enough to make the Church Assembly in 1968 concerned, and one year later, after some preliminary studies, the Enlarged Bishops Conference asked the Church Research Institute to apply a readability test to the existing official Church Bible.