

CHAPTER THREE

The English New Testament in Print

The Printing Press

THE THREE QUARTERS of a century from 1450 to 1525 were momentous years in the history of Europe. Mid-century witnessed the invention of printing—an invention which seems so simple to us who are acquainted with it that it may seem surprising that no one had thought of it before, or at any rate had thought of it as a means for multiplying the output of books. Few inventions, apart from the invention of writing itself, have had such far-reaching implications for human life and culture. Henceforth, where formerly each individual copy of any work had to be laboriously transcribed by hand, hundreds or even thousands of identical copies could be produced at one printing. The credit for the discovery goes to Johann Gutenberg of Mainz in the Rhineland. The first dated printed work is a Latin Psalter of the year 1454; the first major work to emerge from the press was the Latin Bible of 1456—commonly called the Mazarin Bible, because of the interest excited by a copy of it belonging to the great library of the seventeenth-century French statesman Cardinal Jules Mazarin, but more justly known as the Gutenberg Bible.

The Pentateuch in Hebrew was printed at Bologna in North Italy in 1482, and the complete Hebrew Bible at Soncino, near Cremona, in 1488. The New Testament was first printed in Greek in 1514 at Alcalá in Spain, under the direction of Cardinal Ximenes. This printing formed part of the *Complutensian Polyglot* (so called from Complutum, the Latin name for Alcalá). In this the New Testament appeared with the Greek text and the Latin Vulgate in parallel columns; in the Old Testament section of the work the Latin Vulgate was flanked by the Hebrew and the Septuagint Greek (like our Lord

on the cross between the two thieves, commented the editor as though disguising his enthusiasm for the new learning). But while the New Testament part of the enterprise was printed in 1514, it was not published until some years later, when the whole work, running to six volumes, was complete. The first Greek Testament to be *published*, therefore, was the first edition prepared by the Dutch humanist Desiderius Erasmus, printed at Basel and published in March 1516. This first edition was followed in rapid succession by others in 1519, 1522, 1527 and 1535. It was one or another of the editions of Erasmus which formed the basis for Luther's German New Testament, first printed in 1522, and for William Tyndale's English New Testament, first printed in 1525.

William Tyndale's translation was the first English New Testament to be printed. Surprise has sometimes been expressed that no attempt had been made to print the earlier English New Testament, the second Wycliffite version, which enjoyed a wide circulation in manuscript throughout the fifteenth century. William Caxton set up his printing-press towards the end of 1476 at the sign of the Red Pale in the Almonry at Westminster (on the site of the modern Tothill Street). The output of his press was voluminous, including a number of his own translations, for he was an able linguist. Among his major editions were the works of Chaucer and Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. Had he been minded to print the Bible in Purvey's version, his press was certainly equal to the task, and the work would have been sure of an even readier sale than Chaucer and Malory. But the Constitutions of Oxford were still in force, and it would probably have been difficult to secure episcopal permission for such wholesale production and distribution of the English Bible.

Caxton did, however, print some portions of the biblical text in English in his translation of *The Golden Legend*. This work, originally compiled in Latin by one Jacobus de Voragine who later became Archbishop of Genoa, consisted mainly of lives of the saints, including the biblical patriarchs and apostles. The biographies of the biblical characters were to a large extent transcripts of the relevant biblical texts, and so Caxton's printing of this work included fairly literal renderings not only of parts of the New Testament but also of most of Genesis and part of Exodus. In 1509 a printed edition of

sermons by Bishop John Fisher was prefaced by an English translation of the penitential psalms.

The Revival of Learning

It was a happy coincidence that the discovery and rapid development of printing should have been followed so quickly by the Revival of Learning—or was it altogether a coincidence? Another important event which made its contribution to the Revival of Learning was the Turkish capture in 1453 of Constantinople, which for eleven hundred years and more had been the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire, the centre of Byzantine culture. The fall of the Eastern Empire led many Greek scholars to migrate to the West, together with their manuscripts; thus the study of Greek, and in particular the study of the New Testament in Greek, received a powerful impetus.

So far as the history of the English Bible is concerned, three representatives of the Revival of Learning are specially worthy of mention. Erasmus (1466–1536) and Sir Thomas More (1480–1535) have already been mentioned, but when we think of them we must not forget a man who influenced them both—John Colet (c. 1467–1519), who became Dean of St Paul's in London in 1505 and founded St Paul's School five years later. Colet in 1496 returned from a prolonged continental visit to his own University of Oxford, and there delivered a course of lectures on the Pauline Epistles (primarily the Epistle to the Romans) which made a deep impression on many who heard them. In his principles of biblical interpretation he made a clean break with the methods of the mediaeval scholastics, and expounded the text in accordance with the plain meaning of the words viewed in relation to their historical context. Erasmus spent some time in Oxford in 1499, and met Colet and More. To Colet he owed much of his insight into the true methods of biblical interpretation, as contrasted with the scholastic way.

Erasmus paid a second visit to England in 1506, and a third in 1511. His third visit was his longest; it was spent mainly in Cambridge, where he served both as Professor of Greek and as Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity. During his years at Cambridge he gave himself especially to the study of Jerome and of the New

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Testament, and laid the foundations of his edition of the Greek Testament that was to appear very soon afterwards. It has sometimes been suggested that one of his pupils at Cambridge was William Tyndale; unfortunately the evidence is against this. Erasmus left Cambridge in 1514, and Tyndale probably did not arrive there before 1516 at the earliest. But the influence of Erasmus remained even when the man himself had returned to Europe.

Luther and his influence

In November 1515 Martin Luther, Augustinian monk and Professor of Sacred Theology in the University of Wittenberg, began to expound Paul's Epistle to the Romans to his students. As he prepared his lectures, he came more and more to grasp the crucial character of Paul's teaching about justification by faith. When at last he understood what Paul was getting at, and applied it to himself, then, he says, "I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before 'the righteousness of God' had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven." But no greater challenge to Paul's teaching about justification by faith, as understood by Luther, could be conceived than the views of justification in God's sight popularized at that time by Johann Tetzel, commissioner for the collection of money for the indulgences which the Papacy had been issuing since 1506 to defray the expense of building the new St Peter's in Rome. Justification by grace through faith—or justification by the purchase of a papal indulgence? To Luther the issue seemed clearcut, and in October 1517 he nailed to the doors of the castle church in Wittenberg his Ninety-Five Theses—points intended for academic debate, bringing out various corollaries of the New Testament doctrine of justification and exposing the abuses of the indulgence system. Thus: "every Christian who feels true repentance has as of right full remission of penalty and guilt, even without letters of pardon."

Luther himself did not foresee what his action would lead to, but in the light of the sequel we look back to that action as the one which more than any other sparked off the Reformation. And the progress

of the Reformation in the years that followed is closely bound up with the history of the first printed Bibles in the vernaculars of western Europe, including the first printed Bibles in English. This, then, brings us to William Tyndale, to whom we owe the first printed English Bible.

Tyndale's Earlier Years

William Tyndale (who sometimes used the alternative family name of Hutchins) was born in Gloucestershire in 1494 or 1495. He went up to Magdalen Hall, Oxford at what would now seem an impossibly tender age, became Bachelor of Arts in 1512 and Master in 1515. Every Master of Arts was required to lecture in the schools for a year after taking his degree, so Tyndale presumably remained at Oxford until 1516 at least. Then he moved to Cambridge—too late, as has been said, to sit at the feet of Erasmus. But Cambridge was then more advanced than Oxford as a home of the new learning; in 1518 Richard Croke, who had spent several years on the Continent and occupied the Chair of Greek at Leipzig, returned to Cambridge and began to give lectures on Greek. Tyndale's competence in the Greek language may well owe much to Croke's lectures at Cambridge.

From Cambridge Tyndale went in 1522 to Little Sodbury in Gloucestershire as tutor to the children of Sir John Walsh, twice high sheriff of the county. While there he translated Erasmus's *Enchiridion Militis Christiani* ("The Christian Soldier's Handbook"), a short treatise on the Christian's spiritual equipment and discipline which the Dutch scholar had written in 1502. This work insists on the duty of studying the New Testament, and making it the court of appeal in questions of life and doctrine. Tyndale's employer and his wife were greatly impressed by reading Tyndale's translation of the little book, but the ecclesiastical authorities of the county were less favourably disposed towards him, the more so as some of them had experienced his powers in debate at his master's dining-table. He was summoned before the Chancellor of Gloucester diocese to answer a charge of heresy, but the charge was not sustained.

Such experiences, however, led Tyndale to the conviction that the root cause of much confusion in people's minds on the matters then

under debate was ignorance of the Scripture. If this ignorance could be corrected, the eyes of all would be opened and the truth made clearly known. And the ignorance was not confined to the humbler laity; it was shared by many of the clergy. A first-hand account of Tyndale's career at this time, which John Foxe later incorporated in his *Book of Martyrs*, reports one conversation which shows the direction of his mind.

Soon after, Master Tyndall happened to be in the company of a learned man, and in communing and disputing with him drove him to that issue, that the learned man said: "We were better be without God's law than the Pope's." Master Tyndall, hearing that, answered him: "I defy the Pope and all his laws"; and said: "If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost."

In these words we may certainly recognize an echo of words appearing in Erasmus's preface to his Greek New Testament of 1516:

I totally disagree with those who are unwilling that the Holy Scriptures, translated into the common tongue, should be read by the unlearned. Christ desires His mysteries to be published abroad as widely as possible. I could wish that even all women should read the Gospel and St Paul's Epistles, and I would that they were translated into all the languages of all Christian people, that they might be read and known not merely by the Scots and the Irish but even by the Turks and the Saracens. I wish that the farm worker might sing parts of them at the plough, that the weaver might hum them at the shuttle, and that the traveller might beguile the weariness of the way by reciting them.

Erasmus's desire was shortly to be translated into fact by Tyndale, so far as the needs of the English people were concerned.

No room in England

Perhaps the knowledge that Luther had given his countrymen the German New Testament in 1522 was a further stimulus to Tyndale to do the like service for *his* countrymen. But it would not be politic to mention Luther's name in this connection. Luther was

disapproved of in the highest quarters in England; in 1521 King Henry VIII had published his *Assertion of the Seven Sacraments* against Luther, and received thereby from Pope Leo X the title "Defender of the Faith", which his successors have borne to this day. And the very fact that Luther had issued the New Testament in the vernacular might well arouse suspicion against anyone else who proposed to do the same.

In any case, the Constitutions of Oxford were still in force, and Tyndale could not carry out his heart's desire anywhere in England without episcopal licence. To which bishop should he apply? Cuthbert Tonstall had recently become Bishop of London; he was reputed to be favourably disposed to the new learning; Erasmus spoke well of him. To him, then, Tyndale decided to go. So, taking leave of Sir John Walsh, and bearing a letter of introduction from him to the controller of the king's household, Tyndale went to London in the summer of 1523, and in due course obtained an interview with the bishop.

His hope was that the bishop would look kindly on his project and not only authorize the work of translation but provide him with a residential chaplaincy while he was engaged on it. In order to show the bishop his quality as a translator from Greek, he had transmitted to him a speech of the Athenian orator Isocrates which he had translated into English. But the bishop was not very encouraging; he told Tyndale that he had no vacancies in the palace at the time, and advised him to find suitable employment elsewhere in London.

No doubt Tyndale could have found employment suitable to his attainments, but what he wanted was leisure to permit him to translate the Bible. Fortunately, he found a friend in Humphrey Monmouth, a wealthy cloth-merchant, who took him into his house for six months, a kind action which brought Monmouth himself into serious trouble some years later. But it became increasingly evident that he would have to go abroad in order to carry out his work of translation; as he puts it later in the preface to his translation of the Pentateuch (printed in 1530), he "vnderstode at the laste not only that there was no rowme in my lorde of londons palace to translate the new testament, but also that there was no place to do it in all englonde, as experience doth now openly declare."