

Further notes on

THE BIBLE IN ENGLISH

The committee of fifty-four scholars who gave us the King James Bible were building on the work of previous translators of the Bible into English: most notably our October saints: Wyclif, Tyndale and Coverdale.

Wyclif translated the Vulgate—the Latin edition of the Bible into English in the 14th century. He believed that the Scriptures should be available to all who could read them, and not simply mediated through the church hierarchy. For the educated there was a translation of the Bible in Court French which the elite spoke; but Wyclif translated it into the ‘vulgar tone’. He was his own sort of firebrand in the 14th century. Martin Luther acknowledged his debt to Wyclif. He might have met an untimely and grisly death for some of his doctrinal views except for the powerful patrons who protected him and his right to speak against the Papacy and the episcopate. Retiring finally from a life marked by his outspokenness and controversy, he died peacefully while saying Mass at Lutterworth in 1384.

William Tyndale (1494-1536) is remembered chiefly as a translator for his English Bible but he was also a good theologian, as Rowen Williams emphasizes in his just published *Luminaries: Twenty lives that illuminate the Christian way* (October 2019). Williams notes also Tyndale’s gift of bringing back into the language of faith ‘some of that salty, vernacular touch that we find in the very best earlier, medieval writing’, e.g. ‘*So the Lord was with Joseph, and Joseph was a lucky fellow*’—one of Tyndale’s great phrases in translating Genesis. When the Tyndale Bible was imported into the King James Bible, some of the gentlemen translator imposed a measure of restraint on their predecessor’s translations. Tyndale lacked royal sanction for his translation and ended up strangled and burned at the stake in 1536.

Miles Coverdale, a Puritan divine, sometime Bishop of Exeter, often in exile on the Continent, depending on who was currently on the throne, was a contemporary of Tyndale. He completed his translation of the Bible into English in 1535 and it was issued as “The Great Bible” in 1539.

Some 80% of Tyndale’s Bible found its way into later translations, notably the King James Bible in 1611. Archbishop Cranmer adopted Miles Coverdale’s translation of the Psalter for the Book of Common Prayer. It is a beautiful Psalter, even if in places beautifully ‘mistranslated’ from the Hebrew. Don’t let any old curmudgeon lead you to eschew the Coverdale Psalter because of the accuracy of translation—cling to it and rejoice in the Lord, ‘in the beauty of holiness’ that it so admirably helps you enjoy.

In every age new translations have a mixed audience. For all the praise we heap on Wyclif for his early work in making the Bible available in English his contemporary detractors were not quiet. One such was Henry Knighton, an Augustinian canon at an abbey in Leicester. He knew Wyclif from Oxford and respected him as a scholar but as for the Wyclif translation of the Bible

he remarked that Wyclif had rendered a translation 'from the language of angels into the language of Angles'.