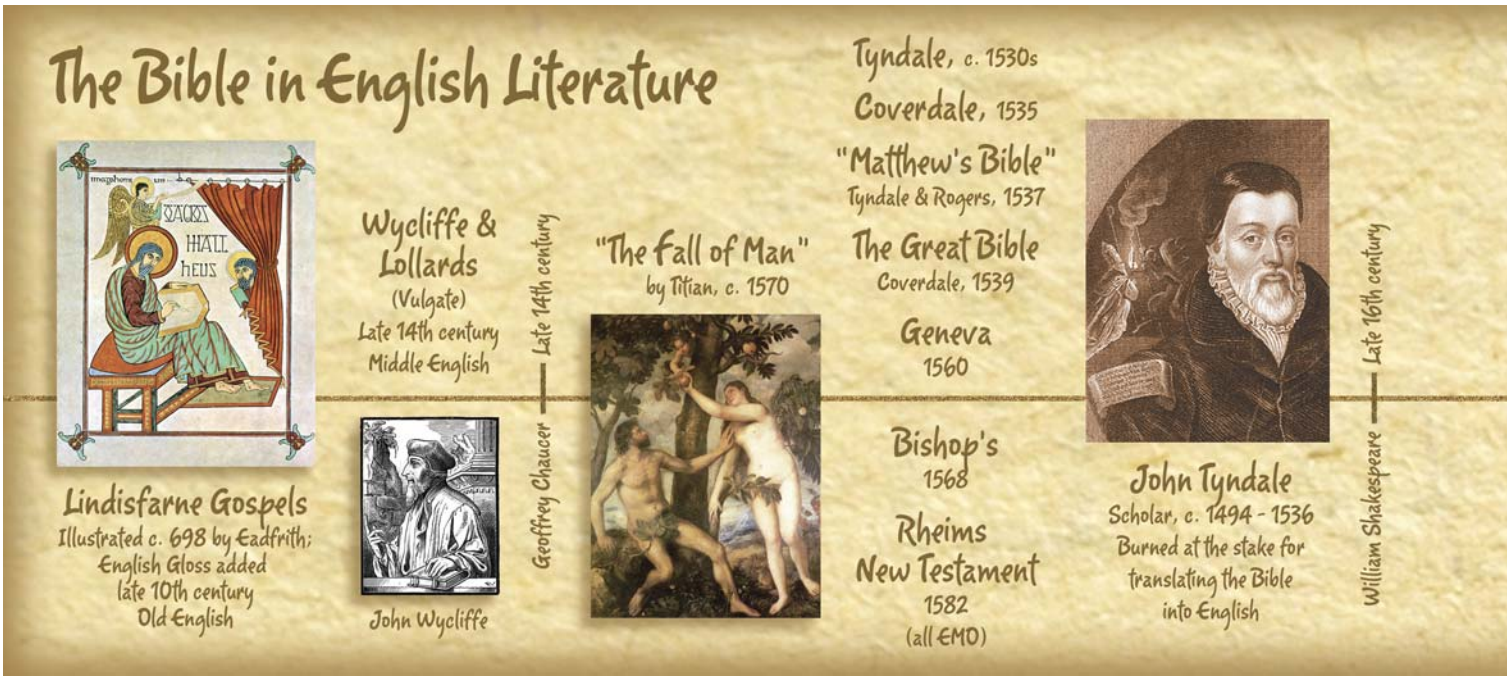
The Story of the English Bible: *An Introduction to Three Presentations*

BY MELISSA BROTTON

The 400th anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible (Authorized Version of 1611) recalls to us the story of the English Bible. The first known Bibles in English were the illuminated manuscripts. The Lindisfarne Gospels, for example, completed in the year 698 by the Monk Eadfrith on Holy Island off the northwest coast of England, contain the Latin text of all four Gospels. These were later glossed in the Northumbrian dialect of Old English by Bishop Aldred in the tenth century.[1] The pages of the Lindisfarne include colorful artwork of mixed Mediterranean and Insular styles. A large, decorated initial letter begins the text of John: "In principio erat Verbum." Matched word for word above this line, we read, "On fruman wǣs word." Between the gospel texts are the evangelists' pages, depicting Matthew, Mark, Luke and John with distinctive hair, eyes, and clothing. Additionally, the detailed cross-carpet pages boast a fine craftsmanship with their complex Celtic designs of spiral and animal interlacings. The scarcely dimmed pigments, gold leaf, and nineteenth-century jeweled cover remain the most remarkable characteristics of the volume, which is currently at the British Library in London.

The descendants of the illuminated manuscripts followed through the Middle Ages and, more legitimately, the fourteenth century with John Wycliffe's translation from the Vulgate, culminating in the mid-fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries with a series of translations, from Tyndale's New Testament in the 1530s to the King James Bible in 1611. The work of William Tyndale laid the most significant foundation for the readable English Bibles of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A brilliant scholar and master of several languages, Tyndale studied at Oxford, where he came into contact with the first manuscript



copies of the Bible. His increasing dissatisfaction with the state of the common people of England, most of whom could not understand the Latin Scriptures read to them in their churches, led to his desire to translate the scriptures into readable English. This idea, he knew, was dangerous. Latin, with its authoritative distinctions of classical learning and literature, was the ecclesiastic language of England. It was a breach of church-state authority to translate or to read the Bible in English, the vernacular of the masses, considered unfit to contain the word of God. Transgressors were commonly burned at the stake.

Between the end of the fourteenth century (Chaucer) and the Renaissance (Shakespeare), as English began to regain a more privileged national and literary status, some began to question the established position on English scriptural translations. Tyndale's questioning led him to translate into English the New Testament from Greek and 14 books of the Old Testament from Hebrew sources. His gift for creative phrasing as well as his meaning-for-meaning in place of word-for-word rendering gave his translations exceptional qualities of accessibility and clarity for the English speakers of his day and even influenced the Elizabethan writers. Scholar David Daniell demonstrates that it was Tyndale's use of plain-style Saxon diction and syntax that made for his cogent, readable text, as he rephrased Latinate lines like "'The elevation of thy recliner and perambulation imperative is'" to "'Take up thy bed and walk.'"[2]

Tyndale's influence has been felt in various Bibles published since his martyrdom, such as the Matthew's, the Geneva, the Bishops', the Great, and the King James. Today we can see Tyndale's influence in the New International Version and the Revised English Bible, among others. The reformation spirit of giving the Bible to the people in their own vernacular contributes immeasurably to our reading of the Bible. More compelling is the thought of God's revelation being expressed through human language at all. English, with its inherent flexibility, mixed heritage, and continued growth, is now considered by most a viable and even a powerful language for Biblical translation, capable of preserving and revivifying God's word.

"This Book of Starres": The Bible in English Literature

The literary quality of the English Bible influenced generations of literature, as "would-be poets cut their teeth on paraphrasing the Psalms or the Song of Songs."[3] Ballads on Biblical stories such as Queen Esther, Jonah, and David and Bathsheba abounded. Proverbs and Biblical songs proliferated as literacy grew and private reading began to replace public, oracular reading.[4] The beginning of the seventeenth century saw an English language enriched by its Elizabethan predecessors, all of whom used Biblical themes, imagery, or allusions. The King James Version, appearing just a few years before the death of Shakespeare (1616), was well-positioned to continue this influence. George Herbert admired the Bible in his second *Holy Scriptures* this way:

Oh that I knew how all thy lights combine,
And the configurations of their glorie!. . .
Starres are poore books, & oftentimes do misse:
This book of starres lights to eternall blisse. (II.1–2; 13–14)[5]

Scholar John Drury believes Herbert's stars may have referred to the asterisks which appeared in the sparsely annotated Authorised Version of 1611, a fact which may point to Herbert's special preference for it.[6]

The Fall Through Literary Time: John Milton

One Biblical theme—the Fall—can be traced through literary time. John Milton's epic *Paradise Lost* tells the story of the Fall and of God's redemptive plan. *Paradise Lost* contains corollaries to seventeenth-century intellectual life and civil war politics as well.[7] Through it Milton takes the opportunity to explore pre-enlightenment questions such as angel anatomy, mortalism, and predestination. Through Adam and Eve's loss of Eden, Milton inscribes the loss of his political dream of the Puritan Commonwealth with its aftermath of the restoration of Anglicanism, Milton's imprisonment and near death decree, and his hope for God's grace to restore "Paradise within…happier far."[8]

Milton's final scene in *Paradise Lost* depicts the sorrowful Adam and Eve as they are forced to leave their garden home:

Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;
The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:
They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.[9]

Adam and Eve are comforted by the promise of God's provision for their physical and spiritual needs though they have been exiled from their original home. Just so, Milton believed God would provide for the needs of His chosen people in England.

Since its reception *Paradise Lost* has exerted a tremendous influence on Christian consciousness, providing a significant treatment of Lucifer's rebellion against God in heaven and "the doctrine of the fortunate fall." Milton's representation of Eve as complexly subordinate to Adam has been a source of contention in the history of English poetry, leading to revisions of Eve by later poets. Milton's Satan is rendered sympathetically as a character who reveals his almost-human indecision and self-doubt, a quality that has led some readers to question whether Satan might not be the real hero of the epic. Another thought is that the reader of *Paradise Lost* is the real hero. According to scholar Stanley Fish, Milton consciously created a vicarious experience for his readers in his poem.[10] And as we experience temptation and sin in our own pages of *Paradise Lost*, we too will feel that God's grace persists toward us just as the opening lines of Milton's epic persist in the minds of those who admire their wonder and beauty:

Of man's first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world and all our woe
With loss of Eden till one greater Man
Restore us and regain the blissful seat
Sing Heav'nly Muse. . .[11] ■

Footnotes

1. Daniell, David. *The Bible in English*. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003), 21.
2. Daniell, 138.
3. Hill, Christopher. *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution*. (London: Penguin, 1994), 338.
4. *Ibid*., 339.
5. Drury, John. "George Herbert." *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible in English Literature*. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 256.
6. *Ibid*., 255.
7. Hill, Christopher. *Milton and the English Revolution.* (London: Penguin, 1979).
8. Milton, John. "Paradise Lost," XII: 587.
9. *Ibid*., XII: 645–49.
10. Fish, Stanley. *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost*. 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997), 1.
11. Milton, I: 1–6.

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