

BIBLE TRANSLATIONS: IMPACT ON MODERN LANGUAGES

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Introduction

The Bible is more than a book of religious wisdom. It is the Book of light and life. Troubled souls and confident saints turn to the Bible for enlightenment from God. The Psalmist confessed, “The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple.”¹

The influence of the Bible and Christianity has spread, in general terms, one person at a time. That is the master plan of Christ’s Great Commission, to spread into all the world and to “make disciples” one by one. National conversions by fiat, such as Emperor Constantine’s or that of Russia’s Prince Vladimir, did not bring the heart of Christianity, but introduced only the shell of Christendom. The mere ethics and trappings of Christianity brought a form of godliness but could not bring the power to live in a godly fashion.²

This is not to deny the positive impact of Christianity upon western culture. Along with the outward forms of Christianity in the West there still came biblical principles, because even where nominal Christianity spread, the Bible was regarded as God’s book. To name a few, the Bible has influenced the traditional western beliefs of cosmology (God separate from His creation), anthropology (dignity of humanity juxtaposed by the fallen nature of humanity), and justice (universal and balanced). These beliefs, of course, have shaped western institutions and traditions.

Language: the Vehicle of Thought, Communication, and Action

There is one subtle area of Bible influence that is not common knowledge. Translations of the Bible into native tongues have helped shape, not only the thoughts and thought patterns of societies that have identified with nominal Christianity, but even the very languages themselves.

Biblical images and phrases reflect the values and thought of a Christian-oriented people; understandably, peoples of Asian or Arabic countries will not share these values or ways of thinking. Post-moderns still utter biblical maxims like “do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” or “let him who is without sin cast the first stone.” Politicians wanting to appeal to the religious sensibilities of their constituency borrow Bible pictures like a “shining city set on a hill,” “crucify mankind on a cross of gold,” or “a house divided against itself cannot stand.”³

In America’s case, the widespread use of the Bible and its systematic, weekly pulpit exposition over this country’s first four centuries ingrained a “shared cultural memory and language.”⁴ This truth is patently clear in view of the preponderance of idealistic religious immigrants to America in the 17th and 18th centuries, followed by their spread to the American

frontier in the 19th century. The vast majority of early universities in the new world and new territories were established by Christians to promote biblical knowledge.

Pioneer Bible Translations: Vehicles to Standardize Language

To come to the crux of this article, the first national translations of the Bible after the Latin Vulgate had a major impact on the shape of modern language. While there may be examples from other nationalities, two sample languages will be given: English and German.

An English Bible

When John Wycliffe was born in Yorkshire, England, in the 1300s, the nobility still spoke Norman French, the learned spoke Latin, and the common people spoke various regional Anglo-Saxon dialects. In 1362 English became the official language of the courts, but Middle English did not conquer all of England until two of its unofficial ambassadors made it popular in the hinterlands. Geoffrey Chaucer wrote enduring poetry that the common man could understand, and John Wycliffe produced the first full Bible in English. Wycliffe wanted his countrymen to know the Christ of the Scriptures. He believed that “Forasmuch as the Bible contains Christ, that is all that is necessary for salvation, it is necessary for all men, nor for priests alone,” and,

Christ and His Apostles taught the people in the language best known to them... Therefore, the doctrine should not only be in Latin but in the vulgar tongue and, as the faith of the church is contained in the Scriptures, the more these are known in a truer sense, the better. The laity ought to understand the faith and, as doctrines of our faith are in the Scriptures, believers should have the Scriptures in a language which they fully understand.⁵

Wycliffe translated the whole Bible from the Latin Vulgate into English. To this Oxford scholar, however, it was more than an academic exercise. He armed lay preachers with copied portions of the Scripture and sent them into the villages and countryside to preach the Word of life. Because Wycliffe was controversial, the upper classes also read his sermons and his Bible. It was at this point that the “midland English” of London, Oxford, and Wycliffe’s Yorkshire region began to prevail over the two other main Saxon dialects.

Wycliffe’s English translation would also influence later Bible translators. For good reason some have called him the “father of English prose.” William Tyndale, the martyr translator of the Reformation, would rely heavily on the phrasings of the “Morningstar of the Reformation.” The King James Version, 90% of which is based on the work of Tyndale, can trace influences back to the simple language of Wycliffe. His translation of John 3:16 is found in the KJV almost verbatim. The KJV follows his use of the word “charity” in the love chapter (1 Cor 13). While this indirect language connection between the KJV and Wycliffe’s groundbreaking translation stamps the KJV as from the broadening stream of Middle English, the

connection also argues for Wycliffe's lasting literary influence on the generations of Bible reading public that were weaned on the KJV.⁶

A German Bible

Tyndale of the 1500s, who would so strongly influence the shape of the Authorized version of King James, disdained the excessive use of technical or Latin terms in his Bible translating. The Bible was given for God's people, not just the scholars, and Tyndale wanted the plough boys to be able to understand God's Word.

Another key influence on Tyndale besides Wycliffe was Martin Luther. There is speculation that Tyndale was able to visit Luther in Wittenburg in the 1520s. Luther had completed his NT translation into German in late 1521 and was working in committee to produce the OT in the following years. Even if the two reformers did not meet, Luther's German Bible, the first of its kind on the continent, established the paradigm for reformation translations.

Luther's acid test in translating was, "did it sound right?"—not, "did the words and constructions make sense on paper?" The right words and phrasings were chosen to appeal to the ear, for Luther intended to unpack and proclaim God's Word in preaching to the common man.

Only the middle class could afford a Bible, and literate Germans hungrily purchased it as the first mass-produced book; there was no affordable, literary competition. It became the sole, common possession of many homes and, thereby, the possession of the German people as they proudly read and re-read its pages in the midst of the political controversy surrounding Luther. Germans could relate to the language of the Bible because of Luther's keen sensitivities in translating. Luther, a man of the people, used his brilliance and training to frame his translation of Scripture for the people. In the Bible's phrasings and market language they recognized their own phrasings and market language.

Anyone who has translated knows the difficulty of faithfully representing the message of the mother tongue. What Luther made look easy in his work of translation really was an arduous labor. He reveals the difficulty of the task in a comment on his committee's OT translation:

We are now sweating over a German translation of the Prophets. O God, what a hard and difficult task it is to force these writers, quite against their wills, to speak German. They have no desire to give up their native Hebrew in order to imitate our barbaric German. It is as though one were to force a nightingale to imitate a cuckoo, to give up his own glorious melody for a monotonous song he must certainly hate. The translation of Job gives us immense trouble on account of its exalted language, which seems to suffer even more, under our attempts to translate it, than Job did under the consolation of his friends, and seems to prefer to lie among the ashes.⁷

The translation committee persevered because of the supreme importance of the goal. Under Luther's guidance both testaments were finally made available in the mother tongue to the masses.

So universal was its appeal, and so thoroughly did it embrace the entire range of the German tongue, that it formed a linguistic rallying point for the formation of the modern German language. It helped formally restructure German literature and the German performing arts.⁸

To appreciate this claim one must realize that the German language of that day was made up of several regional dialects, much like Wycliffe's England of 150 years earlier. Luther borrowed colloquialisms from each region, but the essence of his Bible language was a more refined High German of the cultured southlands.⁹ Especially the popular use of his German Bible eventually led to universal adoption of High German as the national standard.

Conclusion

In early May of this year the German public was polled to determine the top ten Germans in their history. Hitler and the Nazis were deliberately excluded from the survey. Initial returns favor the poet Goethe and some of the great music composers. Also ranking high are German tennis stars and contemporary politicians. But in this made-for-TV poll, Luther does not show on the radar screen.

A poll of world historians, however, generally ranks Luther among the top three Europeans in history. Some scholars call him the most influential German who ever lived. That influence spread through his writings, his hymnology, and through the Christian denomination that bears his name. His greatest legacy, however, was his giving God's Word to the heart of Europe.

More than the vibrant form of the German Bible that shaped a national tongue, the power was in the message of the Word that God used to bless many generations. Families and individuals who came under its power were brought into obedience to Christ, and thus a nation changed and was blessed from heaven.¹⁰

¹ Ps 119:130.

² 2 Tim 3:5.

³ In order these were key campaign slogans of G. H. W. Bush, W. J. Bryan, and Abe Lincoln.

⁴ This phrase is cited by D. G. Hart, *Princeton Theological Review*, 28:30, in his review of *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777-1880*.

⁵ Cited in "Why Wycliffe Translated the Bible into English," *Christian History* 2:2 (1983): 26.

⁶ Well should John Wycliffe have a modern Bible translation society named after him. The following link provides Wycliffe's entire Bible online: <http://wesley.nnu.edu/wycliffe/>.

⁷ Cited in Henry Zecher's "The Bible Translation that Rocked the World," found in *Christian History Magazine*, Issue 34, and online at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/holidays/nbw/features/34h035.html>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "High German" takes its name from the southern region that rose in elevation toward the Alps.

¹⁰ 2 Cor 10:4; Ps 33:12.