

**This is the first in a series of four lectures to commemorate the 400th Anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible, given in the Cathedral on Monday 13 June 2011 by Dr Lynne Long, formerly of the Centre for Translation and Comparative Cultural Studies, University of Warwick**

## **Translating the Bible into English: History, politics, language and liturgy**

First of all may I say thank you for inviting me to Chichester and what a wonderful setting the cathedral is in which to give a talk about the English Bible.

The aim of this talk is to give you a new perspective on what is a very familiar work by looking at the Bible from a translation point of view. We shall consider how the Bible came to be translated into English and what impact on translation the areas of history, politics, language and liturgy have had on the translation journey the Bible has been through.

The title is of course is far too ambitious – no-one could cover all the Bible translation issues raised in those fields in 45 minutes. So we shall have to be content with snapshots of each area and with missing quite a lot out.

But in this year of homage to the KJ Bible, what you hear about the development of the Bible into an English text might change how you think about the KJV.

We'll begin by talking about the languages of origin, and as we go along we'll discuss some of the historical and political issues. I'll give a few examples of translation problems and then perhaps at the end as part of the discussion we can look at liturgy and translation.

So what is the Bible to us? It is a storehouse of literary treasures in terms of poetry and familiar narratives. It has been the source or the context of many masterpieces in the English language. Its theology and phrasing runs through much of our cultural capital, our literature and our rituals. Think of Milton's Paradise Lost, the works of Thomas Hardy, the poems of George Herbert and John Donne, the sermons of Launcelot Andrewes, Handel's operas and oratorios, especially the Messiah.

Through the centuries the English Bible has become domesticated into a document that represents English culture and tradition. I use the word "domesticated" purposely because in reality the Bible is composed of a set of foreign documents. They were written in other lands at various times in history by various authors from cultures with very different customs and practices. But in spite of its foreign origins the Bible has become an important cultural icon in England, in Britain and throughout Europe. Every self respecting language has the Bible translated into its vernacular; one of the ways of raising the status of a minority language has been by translating the Bible into it.

So why would we ever think about its origins? We have had the Bible in English for so long that many of us never think to question the language it is written in, except perhaps to discuss new modernised wording and compare it unfavourably with the old wording of our favourite passages. We like to think that we are well informed these days, as of course we are, but this has not always been the case. The spectrum of people who use the Bible is very wide indeed, and ranges from those who would consider themselves intellectuals to those whose perspective on life is very different.

Let me read you something from the New York Times of May 23<sup>rd</sup> 1881 p.8

... an agent of a Bible society was trying to collect money in a country church for a new translation of the Bible. The agent asked an old farmer in the congregation to contribute. "What's the matter with the good old King James version?" the farmer replied.

"That was good enough for St. Paul, and it's good enough for me."

Such comments only serve to illustrate that we very much take the Bible for granted as an English text and take ownership of it as such. It is so deeply rooted in our language that it seems never to have had any other identity than that of the coherent and familiar text we have always known. What we forget is that the language and the register of language that we read it in give it a homogeneity that the collection of original texts did not have.

I wonder if anyone here can claim to have read the Bible all the way through? Old and New Testament? Were you aware of any change in tone or register throughout the writing?

Well, to a translator's eye the Bible is a very large collection of different types of text. It contains historical narrative, parables, genealogy, psalms, proverbs, synoptic records of events (in the Gospels) and accounts of visions and revelations.

It was never composed as a homogenous unit, but gathered together as a selection of supporting documentation, documentation supporting the history of the Jewish people and their God, the covenant between the two and the fulfilment of that covenant in Jesus. It was written down in different cultures at various times in history by different people.

The Jewish Bible, the Torah, which forms part of the Old Testament, was written first in Hebrew and then translated into Greek in the third century BC, so by the time of Jesus there were already two language versions of that section.

In the original Greek manuscripts there were no chapters and verses; there were not even breaks between words as the material they wrote on was too precious to waste. In Hebrew the vowels were left out and written over the top, or not, because as the text was already familiar to the readers, they didn't need the vowels. And this is what complicates matters further, for much of the Bible existed orally before it came to be written down. In the early days of existence few people could read or write, so everything was kept in the memory and recited when it was needed. Linguistic historians will point out to you that there are traces in Genesis (the Flood story) of two narratives combined, and these can be separated. It seems that two traditions combined went into the written text to tell the story. Today we use the written text much

more for private and public worship and hardly ever recite it at length from memory.

In the case of the New Testament the action took place mostly in the Aramaic language, which was the language that Jesus and his disciples spoke. The gospels were written down (some years after the events) in Koine Greek, which itself was not the language of the region but a kind of lingua franca used mainly for trading. And as you might imagine, the people who wrote it down had various levels of accomplishment in Greek. Saint Paul's Greek was excellent, but Mark the evangelist wrote Greek that was full of grammatical mistakes. He was about A level standard.

And to back up what I am saying I'm going to quote what CFD Moule says about the writer of the Apocalypse. He was a Greek New Testament scholar of some reputation.

Moule writes: "the author of the Apocalypse...writes like a person who, nurtured in semitic speech, is only just learning to write in Greek. He is capable of horrifying grammatical blunders and patently semitic idioms..."

What he means is that although the Apocalypse was written in Greek, the writer kept lapsing into expressions that were from Hebrew and sounded odd in Greek. He also made grammatical mistakes.

Mistakes, especially grammatical mistakes, in the original text pose a problem for translators. What to do with them? Leave them as they are or correct them? If you leave them you look as if you don't know what you are doing yourself, but if you correct them you are not giving a true picture of the original. The status of the Gospels and the regard in which they were held led translators over the centuries to tidy up mistakes in the Greek and when translating into Latin, to take the opportunity to elevate the language even embellish it a little.

If you are interested further in the original languages of the New Testament I can recommend his book *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* by CFD Moule available from Amazon (Cambridge University Press).

But let us return to the story of how the Bible came to be in English.

In the early days of the Christian Church there were many translations of the Gospels circulating in both Latin and Greek, and in the fourth century, when the canon of the Bible had been set by the Church Fathers, (and it took them some time to decide what to include and what to leave out) the next step was to produce one version for the purposes of defining doctrine. It was not sensible for theologians to be working from different versions of the sacred text.

Jerome was commissioned by Pope Damasus to make one Latin version out of the many Latin and Greek texts available, first of the New Testament and later of the Old. Latin was at the time the main language of the Roman Empire and of scholarly interaction. This Latin Bible that Jerome produced became known as the Vulgate, because at the time it was the common language, the *vulgata* of communication.

When Augustine of Canterbury and his missionaries came to England at the end of the sixth century charged with the conversion of England to Roman Christianity, they brought this Vulgate with them.

It remained the source text for teaching and sermonising and translation of the Bible into English until the fifteenth century. It was the source text for the Wycliffite Bible of the 1380s at which point the translation had been around for nine hundred years and had been copied and recopied.

But before the Wycliffite versions there were many partial translations, probably far more than we actually know about.

On this slide we have the Venerable Bede in the top left hand corner, King Alfred top right and Aelfric of Eynsham below.

A century or so after Augustine came, the Venerable Bede wrote The Ecclesiastical History of the English People. Not a very snappy title, and he wrote it in Latin, but it is available in English translation from Amazon and is quite a good read. In it he tells us the story of Caedmon, an illiterate cowherd, who turned Bible stories into Anglo-Saxon poetry. Bede himself is translated the Gospel of St John into the contemporary version of English, Anglo-Saxon, for his students, finishing it on his death bed. This was in the seventh century.

In the ninth century, when he had finally achieved peace with the Vikings, King Alfred set up a translation school to boost English culture after the Vikings

wars had destroyed so much of it. Since the most important philosophical and religious works were written in Latin he wanted them in the English of the day so that men who knew no Latin could be properly educated. He had many people working on translations and is reputed to have translated the Psalms into English himself.

Aelfric of Eynsham, whose most famous work is a Latin primer for his students, translated several sections of the Old Testament for a group of friends in the tenth century. After a while though he refused to do any more because he was nervous about how the text would be read and understood. By the time of the Norman Conquest there was a complete translation of the synoptic gospels circulating in what we now call Middle English.

There were also glossed versions of the Gospels, manuscripts annotated with the Anglo-Saxon words where the Latin had become obscure or was being forgotten. The Lindisfarne Gospels are probably the most famous of these. You can see the Anglo-Saxon glosses in the smaller lettering over the top of the Latin.

When we consider what was involved in making a translation, even a partial one, in those early times, we can understand why there were so few. First of all you had to find someone who had an original Latin Vulgate manuscript and was willing to lend it to you, or allow you sit in their library and use it. Then you had to assemble what few aids there were in terms of commentaries – no dictionaries, grammar books or on-line forums to ask advice from and most importantly you had to have yourself or know someone who had facility in Latin.

There were detailed commentaries of the Bible in Latin, like that of Nicholas of Lyra explaining the theology but firmly based on the literal rendering. Lyra's commentary and a copy of the Vulgate were the only tools the Wycliffite group had when they translated the complete Bible in the 1380s.

So to recap, the Latin Vulgate came to England with Augustine and was the only source text. People began translating parts of it for students or friends and the Latin manuscripts were sometimes glossed when they began to forget the Latin. It was the source text for the Wycliffite versions of the 1380s.

But having only the Latin to translate from brought its own linguistic complications. Latin has no definite or indefinite article. In other words there is no way of saying “the” or “a”. In English we have to put one or the other in front of every noun.

Latin presents the noun by itself, so the translator cannot tell whether to translate “shepherd” for example as “a shepherd” or “the shepherd”, but of course has to put one or the other. Greek, however, has a definite and indefinite article, so the Greek text would have been a great help to the Wycliffite group, had one been available. It would have enabled them to write in John 10:11 “I am the good shepherd” instead of “I am a good shepherd”, for the article is emphasised in the Greek.

The line of Latin reads:

I	am	shepherd	good
Ego	sum	pastor	bonus

The Greek is more specific. It says:

I	am	the	shepherd,	the	good.
Ἐγώ	εἰμι	ὁ	ποιμήν	ὁ	καλός

And while we are on the subject of shepherds, you might be interested to know that in the Latin Vulgate of Psalm 23, or 22 according to how you count, there is no shepherd.

The Vulgate says: The Lord rules me and nothing is lacking to me

The later Latin version reads: the Lord pastures me

The Greek uses a verb that conveys shepherding

But there is no shepherd. Who would dare to remove the shepherd out of the Lord is my shepherd now?

But to return to our story of the English Bible

As you know, John Wyclif was a reformer who, with other voices in Europe like Jan Hus in Prague, protested loudly about what he saw as abuses that had crept into the church. Making the Bible available in English, or indeed in any vernacular, was not only a way of showing people how they should be living, it was also a way of exposing the poor practices of some of the clergy. It is unlikely that Wyclif was ever involved personally in the translation process but his ideas were what inspired his followers to take on the project of translating the whole Bible.

There were many pressures on the Wycliffite group of translators. In some respects the lack of translation tools was the least of their worries. In those times the church and the state were very closely allied, they supported each other, and the church had enormous power. As you might imagine, criticism of the church was unwelcome and the translators had to work in secret because translating the Bible was seen as a seditious act. It was dangerous even to possess a copy of part of the Bible in English.

After the Wycliffites had dared to produce an English Bible, there was a huge debate in Oxford as to whether the Bible should be in the vernacular. The irony in the debate lay in the fact that the Latin Vulgate was the vernacular of the time when it was first done.

The reasons given for not translating the Bible into the vernacular were carefully argued by the clergy over a considerable period of time.

The Bible in English would be incorrect because of the translation process, or miscopied and so full of mistakes. The fact that the Vulgate was already full of mistakes and miscopyings was not mentioned. Lay people should not read the Bible because they need the help of a priest to explain it and the human intellect is insufficient to understand it without help. To allow lay people to have the Bible would break the class order (hierarchy was very important to the medieval system) and cast pearls before swine.

I was interested to hear a few days ago of the Archbishop of Canterbury's concern about the distinction being drawn between the deserving and the undeserving poor. In medieval times there was a distinction between the

deserving and the undeserving laity. Basically the rich laity were worthy to read the Bible and the poor weren't.

The Bible is too subtle and the literal sense is inadequate to explain its meaning. It is too mysterious and impossible to translate. And of course women might read it.

(see Margaret Deanesley: *The Lollard Bible* reprinted and available on Amazon)

To us these excuses sound feeble, but they have to be set in context. Biblical scholarship was not so far advanced in those times and the wealth of information available today to the translator and to the Bible scholar could not have been imagined then. There were few people proficient in Greek and Hebrew, and in any case the Greek texts were not available.

There were parts of the Bible, mostly the Old Testament, that were very difficult and no-one yet understood them. Take Isaiah chapter 53 for example, or the Song of Solomon. Even today these are difficult passages; then they were incomprehensible and there was no English vocabulary to support the ideas expressed, particularly in the Song of Songs.

In those times too, the fear of heresy and misrepresentation was great because it not only meant burning at the stake, but hell and damnation afterwards. There was also fear on the part of the church that the Bible would lose its high status if everyone had access and that control over the dissemination of the content would be lost.

And of course once translation was allowed, it would be very difficult to return to a point where it was not allowed, should the process be a disaster.

The arguments for and against translation continued over the following century, as did the movement towards reform of the Church. There remained many poor practices in the church of the time as things had not improved since Wyclif's day.

What was more, over the centuries the Latin Vulgate text of the Bible had become seriously flawed. The text been corrupted by scribes whose Latin was

not good, by copyists whose concentration was not good and by people who thought they knew better than the text in front of them.

This happened in the case of the Acts of the Apostles chapter 9 verse 25 (Actus Apostolorum 9:25). This is the part where Paul escapes by being let down by his friends in a basket through a hole in the wall.

<sup>25</sup>accipientes autem discipuli eius nocte per murum dimiserunt eum submittentem in sporta

Then the disciples took him by night, and let [him] down by the wall in a basket

When some scribes came to copy the phrase “in sporta”, “in a basket” they did not recognise the word “sporta”, so they left out the s and turned it into a word they did know, “porta” a door. Unfortunately this makes nonsense of the passage. It is not a serious mistake, but it does obscure the sense.

As well as being corrupted by poor copying and by general wear on the manuscripts, the Latin Vulgate had also departed from the original texts by being upgraded and embellished by the translators before Jerome and by Jerome himself. This was done with the best of intentions and with the idea of adding status to the text, but nevertheless took it further from its roots and from how it was originally written.

And I think most of us would agree that while literary translations may be creative and amount to adaptations or paraphrases, sacred texts are a special category and while adaptations and paraphrases may be made, there needs to be a periodic return to the roots of the text to make sure the original still speaks.

Having the original text in a dead language is an advantage because that at least does not change as our living languages do. The reason that our Bible translations sound archaic after a few centuries and eventually need revising is because a living language has a life of its own and develops to meet the needs of each generation. The English we use today is very different even from fifty years ago, but we do not notice because we are using it all the time. The King James Version of 1611 was revised in the eighteenth century; if we did not

revise our bible it would eventually become as unintelligible as the Latin or Greek versions.

On this slide clockwise from left to right we have Desiderus Erasmus, Thomas More, Martin Luther and John Colet.

Two things happened at the end of the fifteenth beginning of the sixteenth centuries that were to have a profound effect on the history of the English Bible. These were the invention of printing and the rise of a group of international scholars called Humanists. The term humanist in this context is applied to scholars and theologians who focussed their studies on a return to the original texts, to the rereading of classical works and the preservation of manuscripts and scholarly collections.

Some of the more famous ones in this particular group that you might have heard of include Desiderus Erasmus, Thomas More, John Colet and Martin Luther, but it is Erasmus that we are particularly interested in at the moment.

Erasmus, like many of the humanist scholars, hoped that a restoration of the central Christian text, the Vulgate, would spark the beginning of a greater renewal of the whole church. Luther was thinking on similar lines, Thomas More was at first an enthusiastic supporter but was chancellor to Henry VIII who was particularly conservative in his views on religion, apart from when he wanted a divorce or the church's money.

Erasmus had discovered the philological notes of an earlier humanist scholar called Lorenzo de Valla. What Valla did was to look at the Latin New Testament and compare it with the Greek manuscripts. He found a lot of discrepancies in the register and use of language. Erasmus was inspired by Valla's findings to undertake a revision of the Vulgate New Testament. He set about collecting and borrowing manuscripts, particularly old Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, and used these to justify his corrections.

It was quite a brave thing to do in the current climate, and he was very careful to validate all his suggestions with notes and commentaries. The availability of a printing press and the added spur of another polyglot version of the Bible almost ready for the press in Alcala, Spain, hurried him into publication in 1516.

His aim was to restore the Latin text to accuracy, but what he unexpectedly achieved was something much more radical. Because of the printing press technology available to him, he was able to give the reader three reference text simultaneously; the traditional vulgate with its mistakes and discrepancies, a Greek New Testament previously inaccessible to Western Scholars and a new Latin translation based on the Greek where the Latin was deficient. He did not translate the Bible into English, but he provided future translators with two source texts that complemented each other. He also took the precaution of publishing Valla's notes as further justification for change.

Martin Luther used these sources to translate the Bible into German and to present the Bible as an alternative authority to the church (NT 1522). Many Lutheran ideas were taken up by those in England sympathetic to reform of the church, not least by William Tyndale, whose determination to translate the Bible as an alternative authority to the church led to him fleeing to Germany to do it. He used many of Luther's prologues and notes, just translated them into English from the German.

Tyndale's New Testament was printed in 1525/6 and formed the basis of all the English translations that followed even though his name did not appear on them. The English authorities pursued him because of his Lutheran connections and because of his overt challenge to the church by his translation of certain words, not because of deficiencies in his translation skills.

The copies of his New Testament were confiscated and burnt, and he himself was eventually captured and burnt at the stake for heresy. His perceived heresy (and these were the main points in More's tract against the translation) derived from the way in which he translated three words: priest, church and charity.

So to recap, the Latin Vulgate provided the source text for the Wycliffite version in 1380s. In 1516 and the years following, Erasmus published a restored Latin text and the Greek codex to support the changes. Luther used these for his German NT in 1525, so did Tyndale for the English NT in 1535.

Why did Tyndale's translation cause such a stir? The Greek *presbuteros* means an elder, a respected person in a community, which in past times was usually synonymous with priest. But by using the word elder as substitute for priest,

Tyndale displaces the full religious significance and authority with a word that in English is much less specific and entirely secular. Of course this is exactly what he meant to do; he wanted to challenge the authority of the clergy and improve the status of the people. His translation of *ecclesia* as congregation supports the same aim. The word congregation loses all the preconceptions of authority and institution implied by the word Church. It is a much less specific entity and could refer to the common people (as indeed the word elder might refer to an ordinary person).

The case of the word for love is again, on the surface, a question of whether the Greek or Latin source text is preferred. Underneath lies a more complex theological point.

One of the things about the English language is that we can stretch one word to mean several quite specific things. If I say "I love pasta" or "I love my children", the person listening will know that I am not using the word in the same way. Other languages demand a more specific use of words.

In Latin there are two words for love, *caritas* for friendship, brotherly love; *amor* for physical love. In Greek there are four words for love; *agape* for unconditional love, *eros* for passionate love, *philia* for friendship and *storge* or affection.

Let us take Paul 1 Corinthians 13 as our example

Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

When Paul wrote those verses in Greek, he used *agape*, the word for unconditional love, for sacrificial love. He did not use *philia*, friendship or *storge*, affection. Jerome translated *agape* into the Latin *caritas*, and one can see why as his choice was limited. When Tyndale translated, he had the Greek at hand, thanks to Erasmus, and he translated as love, causing considerable outrage. Such an outrage, that the King James translators (I just quoted the KJ

translation) kept to *charity*. But theologically and linguistically Tyndale was right. The Geneva Bible has love.

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century Latin plainchant used as inspiration for a piece of music in the recent royal wedding, the writer has both. *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.*

After Tyndale the reformation gathered momentum - remember Luther was working in Germany at the same time – and the translation of the Bible into the vernacular was very much seen as part of the reformation process. After Tyndale was executed, Coverdale revised his New Testament in the hope of making it more acceptable. Then a further revision by Thomas Matthew was revised again by Coverdale.

When Henry VIII died the reformers made good progress under Edward, but after Edward's early death, Mary tried to return England to the Catholic faith.

During Mary's reign protestant exiles produced the Geneva Bible. This was an excellent translation but had extremist notes and commentary. When Mary died and Elizabeth came to the throne, Catholic exiles gathered in Rheims and produced the Rheims New Testament and later an Old Testament in Douai.

When James I came to the throne he wanted a Bible that was not the product of a particular faction. The Geneva Bible was the one in daily use in England, but it came with puritan footnotes and a seditious commentary. The King James Bible was to be the one to unite all England, at least in worship.

Interestingly, when Miles Smith was writing the preface to the King James version, explaining the remit for translation and the methodology of the panels of scholars involved, when he quoted from the Bible he quoted from the Geneva version, because that was the one he was most familiar with.

And so we can see that the English Bible we have today was composed from the translations and editings of various people or groups of people at different periods of time from the beginning of the Reformation proper to the establishment of the King James Bible as the main source to be used in churches throughout Britain. The process of translation was affected by the source texts and the biblical scholarship available.

Tyndale's was the first in a line of translations, most of which kept his phrasing or added to it or improved upon it. So when we consider the King James Version, we have to remember that it is the result of a process of revising and editing that went on for over a century.

David Daniell, author of *The Bible in English* (Yale University Press) says of the King James Bible that "one of the first things to do in studying the making of the KJV is to recognise the nature of its particular dependence on its predecessors".

One of the things that David Crystal sets out to find out in his book *Begat* (OUP 2010) is just how many of the biblical expressions in common use in our language today come from the King James Bible. He concludes that of the 257 expressions that are regularly used today, only 18 appear exclusively in the King James Version. The others appear also in one or more of the preceding translations.

In *The Translators to the Reader*, the preface to the King James Bible, Miles Smith explains the purpose of the translation. I think we will allow him the last word:

Truly good Christian reader, we never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one, but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principle good one, that hath been our endeavour, that our mark.