

SOLA SCRIPTURA AND THE REFORMATION: BUT WHICH SCRIPTURE, AND WHAT TRANSLATION?

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Abstract: *While Luther is rightly famous for his strong insistence on sola gratia, sola fide, and of course justification by grace through faith alone, from an historical point of view, it was probably his translation of the Bible from the original languages into ordinary German that had the largest impact on the general public and most furthered the ongoing Reformation. The placing of the Bible into the hands of everyone was the most revolutionary result of the Reformation. As it turns out, sola Scriptura is perhaps the greatest legacy of what happened 500 years ago.*

Key words: *canon, Latin Vulgate, Renaissance, Authorized Version, Geneva Bible, Erasmus's Greek NT*

Since then your ... majesty and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, neither horned nor toothed: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. ... May God help me, Amen.

— Martin Luther, *Reply to the Diet of Worms*, April 18, 1521¹

“While [the reformer] is always right about what is wrong, he is generally wrong about what is right.”

— G. K. Chesterton²

I. THE PRECURSORS AND THE PRELIMINARY TREMORS

In order to understand the Bible and its role in the various Reformations, German, Swiss, and English, it is necessary to go back to the period of the Renais-

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¹ *Luther's Works*, vol. 32: *Career of the Reformer II* (ed. George W. Forell; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1958), 112–13.

² *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, vol. 32: *The Illustrated London News, 1920–1922* (ed. Lawrence J. Clipper; San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), 475.

sance and get a running start.³ Shortly after 1266, the Franciscan Roger Bacon wrote in the first part of his *Opus majus* pleading for the study of “tongues” including the Semitic languages, Hebrew and Aramaic, not only because church life in the West was dominated by a secondary language that the Bible was not originally written in, namely Latin, but also because of: 1) the conversion of unbelievers, and 2) the presence of fundamental errors and numerous false statements in the key Latin theological texts which were the basis for church teaching.⁴ Because Bacon’s word carried so much weight, the Council of Vienne, which ended in 1312, insisted that chairs in Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, and Greek should be founded at the major European Universities in Oxford, Paris, Bologna, Salamanca, and the seat of the Papacy (then in Avignon).

The spirit of the Renaissance, the desire to go back *ad fontes* and study ancient texts in their original languages, so as to improve on existing translations and establish the most reliable texts possible, had finally prompted the church divines to do something to take advantage of this trend. Yes, one of the main reasons for this was so that Jews and Muslims could be converted to Christianity, but it is also true that it was recognized that the Bible should be studied in its original languages, and that good theology and ethics should be based on such study. In the Middle Ages, it was rare indeed to find a Christian theologian who emulated Jerome in a knowledge of the original biblical languages. One of these few was the venerable Bede of Jarrow (and Durham) the writer of the *Ecclesiastical History of England*, a work which settled the issue in the West of our calendar, in regard to when *anno Domini* began and when BC ended.⁵

The center of the Renaissance was originally Italy, and it was there that Gianozzo Manetti in Florence mastered Hebrew from local converts from Judaism in about 1440. Like Bacon and others, he had a concern about the Latin Vulgate and its accuracy. Between 1455 and 1458 he translated the NT from the Greek and the Psalms from the Hebrew.

As the interest in Hebrew (and Greek) spread among Christian professors, Konrad Pellikan issued what is probably the first Hebrew grammar produced by a Christian in 1506. But what about Aramaic? There were Aramaic portions of the OT (Jer. 10:11; Ezra 4:8–6:18; 7:12–26; Dan. 2:4–7:28). Sante Pagnini was the first Christian to issue an Aramaic dictionary in 1523, but it was Sebastian Munster who

³ I should say at the outset that I am deeply indebted to the various experts who wrote articles for *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. 3: *From 1450 to 1750* (ed. Euan Cameron; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016) without whom this lecture would have been far less substantive and on target, especially the essays by A. Hamilton (chap. 1: “The Study of Tongues: The Semitic Languages and the Bible in the Renaissance”), J. Kraye (chap. 2: “The Revival of Greek Studies in the West”), and R. Rex (chap. 3: “Humanist Bible Controversies”).

⁴ R. Bacon, *Opus majus* (trans. Roger Belle Burke; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1928), 1:87, 110.

⁵ Unfortunately, Bede based his opinion on the calculations of a monk named Dionysius Exiguus, who lived from about 470–544. This calculation placed the birth of Christ after the time of the death of Herod the Great, which the birth narratives in Matthew, especially, rule out. Herod died somewhere between 2 and 6 BC. See my forthcoming article in the Dec. 2017 issue of *BAR*, entitled “The Turn of the Christian Era.”

first clearly distinguished Aramaic from Hebrew in 1527, publishing an Aramaic grammar.

It is fair to say that actual knowledge of Greek in the Christian West was very rare in the late Middle Ages, though it never died out entirely. Of course, in the Christian East this was not a problem, but the Protestant Reformation did not arise as a response to the various Orthodox traditions, it arose as a response to Roman Catholicism and the Latin Vulgate Bible.⁶ Prior to the Reformation, things were actually *working backwards*. From the ninth to the thirteenth centuries Western scholars were busily translating Greek texts into Latin, the language of the Western Church! This is actually why Luther learned Greek in the first place.

Again, it was the Renaissance and its humanist movement and desire to get back to source texts (whether classical or Biblical) in their original languages, and particularly it was the work of Petrarch, which helped spur on this trend. Petrarch's interest was focused on the classics, in particular Homer's *Odyssey* and *Iliad*, and some works of Plato, but this interest led him to get Leonzio Pilato of Calabria to give lectures on Greek in Florence from 1360–1362. In the early 1380s, Simone Atumano, a Basilian monk, gave private Greek lessons in Rome where he was working on a planned trilingual edition of the Bible (in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin). One other factor of note is that various humanist scholars sailed to Byzantium/Constantinople in order to learn Greek there in the early 1400s.

In Byzantium/Constantinople, Cristoforo Persona actually became a part of the household of Cardinal Isidore of Kiev, who was a theologian, and he learned Greek there. Of especial importance is Guarino da Verona, who also studied Greek in Constantinople and came back to Italy and introduced Greek into the curriculum in Italian schools in Venice, Florence, and Verona, eventually setting up his own school in Ferrara in 1429. Students from all over Europe flocked to his school to learn Greek and Latin, including, importantly, Robert Flemmyng and John Free from England. The school became well-known for its students becoming proficient enough in Greek to translate works of Plutarch, Aesop, and John Chrysostom *into Latin*.

All of this is important because in 1453, Constantinople fell to the Osmanli Turks, the ones we call the Ottomans (thanks to British mispronunciations of the group's name). I need to stress that the main interest in learning Greek during this period had to do with interest in learning Greek philosophy and rhetoric, in order to read and teach those subjects. *The Bible was not the main focus of this academic thrust*. Nevertheless, the humanists *were mostly not secularists*; indeed many of their leading lights were devout Christians. Schools which offered Greek found that Christian

⁶ While Orthodoxy maintained a continual focus on the Greek of the NT, it also privileged the Greek OT, the LXX, and to this day Orthodox divines are resistant to the principle that translations of the OT should be based on the original Hebrew text. For them, the whole Bible is in Greek, and the Greek OT is authoritative and canonical. Not only did Protestantism react to the Latin Vulgate, its principle of original language as a basis for translation put it into conflict with Orthodoxy as well, though on a lesser scale. I remember having arguments in the early 1980s with a student of mine who was an Orthodox monk, in regard to what to make of Isa 7:14, which of course in the LXX has *parthenos*, whereas the Hebrew uses a broader and less technical term. For him, the LXX settled the matter.

texts already familiar to Western students in Latin were very helpful for beginners learning Greek—for example they would learn to translate the Lord’s Prayer or the beginning of the “Ave Maria” from Greek.

Battista Guarini was to point out that Biblical texts were “admirably suited” for learning on one’s own “since a verse in the Latin translation is not a syllable longer or shorter than the Greek original.”⁷ Thus, it was thought students would readily pick up the vocabulary and syntax by comparing the two language texts. The main reason given for studying Greek in the 15th century was to enhance one’s knowledge of Latin, and it was done because the ancient Romans knew the Greek, and in particular it was done because the famous rhetorician Quintilian said that Latin literature flowed out of Greek literature and language; for example, Vergil in his *Aeneid* imitated Homer.

Pope Nicholas V (who ruled from 1447–1455) was himself a humanist, and sponsored the learning of Greek and the translating of Greek texts into Latin. He commissioned George of Trebizond to translate Eusebius’s *Praeparatio evangelica*, and the works of Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom. You will notice I have not mentioned any focus on the Greek NT, or indeed the dealing with the Bible at all in these humanistic projects, except indirectly through the translations of some of the Greek Fathers. This is of course because the language of the church, of its liturgy, and of the biblical texts it read in Church was Latin, and in the case of the Bible the Latin Vulgate, which of course was centuries old, going back ultimately to Jerome. As J. Kraye says “The Bible occupied only a marginal position in fifteenth century Greek studies, the main thrust of which was directed toward classical, and to a smaller extent, patristic texts.”⁸

Much can be said about the work of the great linguist, Lorenzo Valla, who could even be said to be the father of modern text criticism, for his study of the Latin Vulgate in comparison to at least seven different manuscripts of the Greek NT. Valla was careful, focusing on issues of grammar, vocabulary, and style in his some 2,000 annotations; nevertheless, he was able to find a whole range of mistakes in the Vulgate, which needed to be brought into line with the original Greek text, and as he was to say, with *the truth* of the original text of the NT.⁹ A language-based approach to the biblical text, rather than a philosophy-based approach, was what he said should be given priority, and he could hardly hide his contempt for medieval exegetes like Thomas Aquinas who “dared” to interpret the NT while being totally ignorant of the Greek!¹⁰ Not surprisingly, Valla never published his “Annotations” during his lifetime, though they circulated in a few circles, including that of Pope Nicholas.

⁷ B. Guarini, “A Program of Teaching and Learning,” in *Humanist Educational Treatises* (trans. Craig Kallendorf; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 296–97.

⁸ J. Kraye, “The Revival of Greek Studies in the West,” in *The Bible from 1450 to 1750*, 56.

⁹ L. Valla, *Collatio Novi Testamenti* (ed. A Perosa; Florence: Sansoni, 1970), 8.

¹⁰ Valla, *Opera Omnia* (ed. E. Garin; 2 vols.; Turin: Bottega d’Erasmus, 1962), 1:803–95 for his NT annotations. Here, p. 865.

Very, very few copies of Valla's two major works (*Collatio* and *Annotationes*) were made, but Erasmus had the good fortune of finding a copy of them both in the Abbey of Parc just outside Leuven in 1504, and they were both printed in Paris on his insistence in 1505. "This momentous event for the history of the Bible shows that sometimes what matters is not how many people read a book, but who reads it."¹¹ To give but one example of the importance of Valla's work to Erasmus, and to his later Greek NT: Valla insisted that the Vulgate of John 21:22 was corrupt in its reading "sic eum volo manere donec veniam..." which we would translate "so I wish him to remain until I come" but the Greek has "if I wish him to remain..." In the Latin, this amounted to a small emendation of "sic" to "si," but it also meant going against Jerome, who many would say had known Greek better than anyone did in the 15th century. And yet Chrysostom and Origen were clear that Jesus said "if..." It was a conditional statement.

The NT was the flashpoint when it came to the matter of rewriting the Bible, or better said, getting back to what the earliest text said. The proof of this was that in 1481 there was a publication of a bilingual Psalter with a new Latin translation on the facing page with the LXX Greek text. This produced exactly no reaction or criticism at all.

II. "ERASMUS LAID THE EGGS THAT LUTHER HATCHED"¹²

There is much to be said for the suggestion that the objections to the revising of the Latin Vulgate on the basis of the Greek text in the 15th century were to be replayed in modernity by Protestants who decided that the KJV was sacrosanct, the completely inerrant translation of the Bible, and shouldn't be revised or tampered with in the light of the Masoretic Text of the OT or the Greek NT. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

What one would have expected on the basis of the work of Valla, and then later in the work of Giannozzo Manetti who knew both Hebrew and Greek and worked on the rendering of the Psalms, was that there would be a revision of the Vulgate. But Pope Nicolas, who had supported this work, died in 1455, and Manetti himself died in 1459, and the moment when change could have happened passed. It would be quite late in the 16th century, more than a hundred years later, that such a project would be undertaken in earnest. By then, the Protestant bull had left the barn, Erasmus had produced his Greek NT and Luther his German translation and Tyndale his English one, and there would be no looking back. I need to stress again that the work of Valla survived in very few manuscripts, and did not have a major impact, except on Erasmus, whereas the work of Manetti was basically unknown until the 20th century. Erasmus is *the* crucial figure.

In fact, "It was Desiderius Erasmus who rescued Valla's scriptural labours from obscurity. Erasmus stumbled across the manuscript of the *Annotationes* at the

¹¹ Krayer, "The Revival of Greek Studies in the West," 58.

¹² This is an actual aphorism coined in the 1520s.

Abbey of Parc, near Leuven, in 1504 and published it the following year.”¹³ Surprisingly, there was no pushback. Erasmus was prepared, however, for criticism when he prepared his Greek NT, and he got it, though there was a bit of a delayed response. The first edition in 1516 produced few ripples, but when the second edition was published in 1519 this set off the fire alarm bell. Erasmus would argue that correcting errors in a translation or a copy of an original biblical text did not in any way amount to disputing the inspiration of the divinely inspired text. If someone argued it was impious to change anything in Holy Writ, he retorted that it must be worse then to allow scribal errors to stand uncorrected, as they obscured the original meaning of Scripture!

Erasmus, in fact, when he published his own annotations, not only borrowed the title of Valla, but simply reran various of Valla’s notes. Note that Jacques Lefèvre d’Étaples also followed Valla’s lead, and mentions him in his 1512 commentary on Paul’s epistles. This is important for our purposes because Lefèvre’s is the work on which Martin Luther based his game-changing Wittenburg lectures in 1515–1519. And here is where I note that it was Lefèvre’s commentary on Romans that produced the phrase “by faith alone” which seems to have been noticed by no one—*except Luther*, who then mistranslated Rom. 1:17 as “for the righteousness of God was revealed by faith alone,” though it actually reads *δικαιοσύνη γὰρ Θεοῦ ἐν αὐτῷ ἀποκαλύπτεται ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν*.¹⁴ That last phrase can be rendered “from faith for faith,” or “from the faithful (one) unto faith,” but it cannot be rendered “by faith alone.” So much for the Lutheran stress on *sole fide*.

Erasmus’s first edition of his Greek NT appeared in 1516 and had a facing Latin translation on each page, with a plethora of textual annotations. The early reactions to the first edition were largely favorable, except for Lefèvre’s criticism of the translation of Heb. 2:7 (“thou hast made him a little lower than the angels”). He argued that it should have read like the original Hebrew which had the probable reading “a little lower than God” (depending on what one makes of *elohim* in Ps. 8:6). Lefèvre argued that the author of Hebrews surely must have originally followed the Hebrew, but Erasmus was simply following the Vulgate of the OT word for word at this point, which in turn was an exact rendering of the original Greek. It was an objection that insinuated Erasmus was flirting with heresy, since Christ could not be lower than angels, and Erasmus was deeply hurt by this objection, coming as it did from a well-respected scholar. Erasmus wrote a fiery response, an *apologia* really, and had a difficult time moving on.

As Rex says, it really was the emergence of Luther and his own critiques of Catholicism, that led to a more profound and widespread critique of Erasmus, and the whole humanist enterprise of text criticism in an effort to recover the original texts of ancient manuscripts. For example, in February 1518, Johann Eck, who had already taken public exception to Luther and various of his theses, added to that complaint his own misgivings about the work of Erasmus. There were hostile ser-

¹³ R. Rex, “Humanist Bible Controversies,” in *The Bible from 1450 to 1750*, 64.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 67.

mons against Erasmus in Bruges, Cologne, and Leipzig in 1518 and from Antwerp, Louvain, and Strasbourg in 1519.

When one gets to the spring of 1519, a conspiracy theory was being noised about that Luther and Erasmus were in league together. It was true that in that same year Luther wrote Erasmus looking for his support. Erasmus however demurred having no wish to be leading the charge of “a new movement.” Luther of course had no such qualms. He would be the standard bearer for the first major salvo that came to be called the Reformation.

Erasmus noted later that he had heard a sermon in 1521 in Paris identifying the four horsemen of the Apocalypse—Luther in Germany, Lefèvre in France, an anonymous Franciscan in Italy, and Erasmus himself in the Netherlands. And this critique was to go on. Diego López de Zúñiga entered into a 10-year-long pamphlet war with Erasmus, accusing him of heresy and being the source of Lutheranism (in 1522), and Erasmus in turn responded in 1524 by pointing out that he disagreed with Luther on the issue of the freedom of the will, which helped him to get the Vatican to tell Zúñiga to call off the barking dogs. On the whole, the judgment of Rex seems mostly apt that “the story of the humanist Bible controversies, then, should not be told as a whiggish narrative of philological progress paving the way for theological revolution. It was the Reformation that made biblical humanism controversial.”¹⁵ Not quite. There had already been some objections to the text-critical enterprise of Valla and Manetti before Luther entered the fray with his 95 theses.

What is the case is that the rise of Luther led to increased criticism of Erasmus, including the odium of theological heresy, as people began to realize the connection between revising translations of the Bible based on the Hebrew and Greek originals, which in turn meant the revising of some deeply cherished medieval theological and historical notions which proved to be wrong (e.g. the association of Mary Magdalene with Mary of Bethany and the sinner woman of Luke 7). If Holy Writ was to have the last word on theology and ethics and praxis, one needed to know what the original inspired text actually said. In our final section of this essay, we must turn to the production of the Bible itself in the age of Luther.¹⁶

III. SOLA SCRIPTURA—BUT WHICH ONE?

The age of the printed book had begun already in the mid-1450s in Mainz with the so-called Gutenberg Bible. This was simply a production of the Latin Vulgate, the Bible Jerome had produced in Latin in 380 AD. It was the Catholic Bible, and so it included both a translation of the Hebrew OT and the Greek NT, plus Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Sirach, Baruch, some additions to the book of

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁶ There is an excellent book by Andrew Pettegree entitled *Brand Luther: 1517, Printing, and the Making of the Reformation* (New York: Penguin, 2015), in which Pettegree stresses that the rise of the printing press and Luther's clear-sighted exploitation of it to publish not only his tracts and theses and commentaries but also especially his translation of the Bible was a crucial factor in producing the Protestant Reformation.

Daniel, plus 1 and 2 Maccabees. This was indeed by and large the Bible that existed in the West at the time of Luther and the beginning of the Reformation in 1517.¹⁷ *De facto* Jerome's Vulgate was still the Bible heard in churches and recited as part of the Catholic liturgy, whatever small revisions were being made by scholars in their own writings and publications.

It needs to be understood that at this point in history, the Bible was not a book owned by the general public. There were pulpit Bibles usually chained to the pulpit, there were manuscripts of Bibles in monasteries, there were Bibles owned by kings and the socially elite, but the Bible was not a book possessed by many. Furthermore, the Bible was basically not in the language of the people. Yes, the well-educated socially elite could read Latin, but your average resident of England or France or Germany or Italy or Spain knew only snippets of Latin from the Latin Mass. And indeed, often enough they garbled the snippets they knew. For example, the Latin for Jesus's words "this is my body" is "hoc est corpus meum." This was transformed by some lay person into *hocus pocus*, the actual origin of that phrase! If you want to get a good feel for how bad the situation was in terms of Biblical literacy in the general public in this era, read Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written between 1387–1400 in Middle English.

Luther realized that if things were really going to change, it would not come just by debating theology with other learned souls in the 16th century. The Bible needed to be made available in the vernacular, in this case in German. In my view, the most dangerous thing Luther ever did was not nail the 95 theses to a door. It was translating the Bible into ordinary German, first the NT in 1522, and then the full Bible by 1534, which included what came to be called the Apocrypha, those extra books from intertestamental Judaism. Luther kept revising this right into his waning years of life, for he realized what a major change agent this act of translating was.

But what version of, for instance, the Greek NT did Luther base his translation on? It was none other than Erasmus's much critiqued 2nd edition of the Greek NT. Luther was not afraid of controversy, and he did not hesitate to use Erasmus's work. He did not translate directly from the Latin Vulgate, and for some this amounted to heresy. As I mentioned, Luther had learned Greek the usual way, at Latin school at Magdeburg, so he could translate Greek works into Latin. There are tales, probably true, that Luther would make forays into nearby towns and villages just to listen to people speak so that his translation, particularly of the NT, would be as close to ordinary contemporary usage as possible. This was not to be a Bible of and for the elite.

Philip Schaff, the great church historian, opined: "The richest fruit of Luther's leisure in the Wartburg [castle], and the most important and useful work of his whole life, is the translation of the NT, by which he brought the teaching and example of Christ and

¹⁷ I am aware there was some minor modifications to the Vulgate made before the time of Luther, and Luther's German translation had some precursors. However, the precursors had little or no effect on the general public in the way Luther's translation did, and the minor modifications to the Vulgate by Valla and others were just that—Erasmus kept finding more mistakes when he did his Greek NT.

the Apostles to the mind and heart of the Germans in life-like reproduction. ... He made the Bible the people's book in church, school, and house."¹⁸ This act by Luther opened Pandora's box when it came to translations of the Bible, and there was no getting the box closed thereafter. Needless to say, this worried church officials of all stripes because they no longer had strict control of God's Word.

Too few people however have said enough about the *precursors* to Luther's act of translating the Bible into the vernacular. For example, John Wycliffe's team preceded Luther by a good 140 years with his translation of the Bible into Middle English between 1382 and 1395. Wycliffe himself was not solely responsible for the translation; others, such as Nicholas of Hereford, are known to have done some of the translating. The difference between the work of the Wycliffe team and Luther, is that no textual criticism was involved, by which I mean the Wycliffe team worked directly from the Latin Vulgate. Not so Luther.

In addition, Wycliffe included not only what came to be called the Apocrypha, he threw in 2 Esdras and the 2nd century work *Paul's Letter to the Laodiceans* as a bonus. Like the work of Luther, Wycliffe's work was not authorized by any ecclesiastical or royal authority, but it became enormously popular. The blowback against this act by Wycliffe was severe. Henry IV and his archbishop Thomas Arundel worked hard to suppress the work, and at the Oxford Convocation of 1408 it was voted that *no new translation of the Bible should be made by anyone without official approval*. Wycliffe however had struck a match, and there was no putting out the fire.

Perhaps the most poignant tale of this era is not Luther's tale, but that of William Tyndale. Tyndale lived from 1494–1536 and was martyred for his translating of the Bible into English. Tyndale, like Luther, translated directly from the Hebrew and the Greek, leaving the Latin Vulgate out of the process, except presumably for cross-referencing and checking. He actually only finished about half his OT translation, and all of the NT, but since he lived in the age of the printing press, his was the first mass-produced Bible in English.

Tyndale had acquired a copy of Luther's work, but he too relied on Erasmus as the basis for his translation of the NT. Tyndale originally sought permission from Bishop Tunstall of London to produce this work, but was told that it was forbidden, indeed heretical, and so Tyndale went to the Continent to get the job done. A partial edition was printed in 1525 (note the date and compare the date of Luther's publication) in Cologne, but spies betrayed Tyndale to the authorities and ironically he fled to Worms, the very city where Luther himself was brought before a Diet and tried. From *there* Tyndale's complete edition of the NT was published in 1526.¹⁹

As Alister McGrath was later to note, the so-called King James Bible, or Authorized Version, of the early 1600s (in several editions including the 1611 one) was

¹⁸ P. Schaff, "Luther's Translation of the Bible," in *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 6: *Modern Christianity: The German Reformation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), 341. Emphasis added.

¹⁹ The Catholics were comparatively slow off the mark when it comes to publishing a version authorized by Rome that was in English. The first was the Rheims NT published in 1582. By then Tyndale and others had long since made their mark on the English language and English religious life.

not an original translation of the Bible into English but instead a rather wholesale taking over of Tyndale's translation with some help from the Geneva Bible, and other translations.²⁰ Many of the memorable turns of phrase in the King James which became standard English—"by the skin of his teeth," "am I my brother's keeper?," "the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak," "a law unto themselves"—are in fact phrases that Tyndale coined. He had a remarkable gift for turning Biblical phrases into memorable English. Indeed, the KJV owed Tyndale a mighty debt for his memorable English prose.

But even the "Authorized Version" was not the first authorized English translation of the Bible. That distinction goes to the Great Bible of 1539, authorized by Henry VIII himself. Henry wanted this Bible read in all the Anglican Churches, and it was Miles Coverdale who produced the translation. Basically, Coverdale simply cribbed from Tyndale's version, with a few objectionable features removed, and he completed Tyndale's translation of the OT plus the Apocrypha. Note, however, that Coverdale used the Vulgate and Luther's translation in making this translation. In fact, he did *not* use the original Hebrew or Greek in making his translation, but rather *previous translations*.

For this and various other reasons, many in the budding Protestant movement on the Continent and in Great Britain were not happy with the Great Bible. The Geneva Bible had more vivid and vigorous language and became quickly more popular than the Great Bible. *It* was the Bible of choice of (1) William Shakespeare; (2) Oliver Cromwell; (3) John Bunyan; (4) John Donne; (5) the pilgrims when they came to New England. It was the Bible that accompanied them on the Mayflower, *not the KJV*.

One of the things that made this Geneva version of the Bible popular was not only that it was mass produced for the general public but that it had a variety of annotations, study guides, cross references to relevant verses elsewhere in the Bible, introductions to each book that summarized content, maps, tables, illustrations, and even indices. In short, it was the first study Bible in English, and again note, it preceded the KJV by a half century. Not surprisingly for a Bible produced under the aegis of John Calvin's Geneva, the notes were Calvinistic in substance, and Dissenting in character, which is one of the things that prompted the kings of England to respond and produce "the Authorized Version." They needed a Bible that didn't question *Dieu et mon droit*.

The notable thing about the Geneva Bible is that it was the first to produce an OT translation *entirely from the Hebrew text*. It, like its predecessors, included the Apocrypha. And yes, the King James Bible of 1611 also included the Apocrypha including the Story of Susanna, the History of the Destruction of Bel and the Dragon (both additions to Daniel) and the Prayer of Manasseh. *In short, none of the major Bibles translations that emerged during either the German or the Swiss or the English Reformation produced a Bible of simply 66 books. It is true that beyond the 66 books the other 7*

²⁰ See A. McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Anchor, 2002).

(or more) were viewed as deuterocanonical, hence the term “apocrypha,” but nonetheless, they were still seen as having some biblical authority.

If you are wondering when and where the “Protestant Bible” of 66 books shows up, this practice was not standardized until 1825, when the British and Foreign Bible Society in essence threw down the gauntlet and said, “These 66 books and no others.” But this was not the Bible of Luther, Calvin, Knox, or even the Wesleys, who used the Authorized Version. What led to this exclusion was that Protestants had long treated the extra books as at best deuterocanonical, and some had even called them non-canonical, and there were some precedents for printing a Bible without these books. For example, there was a minority edition of the Great Bible from after 1549 that did not include the Apocrypha, and a 1575 edition of the Bishop’s Bible also excluded those books. The 1599 and 1640 printings of the Geneva Bible left them out as well. *De facto*, though not *de jure* until the 19th century, these books were not treated as canonical by many Protestants.²¹

IV. AND SO?

Luther could not have imagined in 1517 that his most influential act during the German reformation, the act which would touch the most lives and affect the budding Protestant movement the most, would not be his Galatians or Romans commentaries, or his theological tracts like “The Bondage of the Will” or even his insistence on justification by grace through faith alone. No, the one thing he did which was the biggest rock he threw into the ecclesiastical pond, which produced not only the most ripples, but real waves, was his production of the Luther Bible. But he was not a lone pioneer. He and William Tyndale deserve equal billing as the real pioneers of producing translations of the Bible from the original languages into the language of ordinary people, so they might read it, study it, learn it, be moved by it, and be shaped by it. The Bible of the people, by the people, and especially for the people, did not really exist before Luther and Tyndale.

Today, to speak just of English, there are more than nine hundred translations or paraphrases of the NT in whole or in part into our language. Nine hundred! None of the original Reformers could have envisioned this, nor for that matter could they have imagined many people having Bibles not just in the pulpits and pews, but having their own Bibles in their own homes. The genie that was let out of the bottle at the beginning of the German Reformation turned out to be the Holy Spirit, who makes all things new. This includes ever-new translations of the Bible, as we draw closer and closer to the original inspired text of the Old and New Testaments, through the finding of more manuscripts, the doing of the hard work

²¹ Here is not the place to rehearse the complicated history of the rise of textual criticism of ancient manuscripts including the Bible. For an excellent review of the attempts to get back to the original source texts written by the original writers see E. J. Epp’s “Critical Editions of the New Testament, and the Development of Text-critical Methods: From Erasmus to Griesbach (1516–1807),” in *The Bible from 1450 to 1750*, 110–37.

of text criticism, and the producing of translations based on our earliest and best witnesses to the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts of the Bible.

When the Luther Bible was produced based on Erasmus's work on the Greek NT, there were only a handful of Greek manuscripts Erasmus could consult, and they were not all that old. When the KJV was produced in 1611, there was the same problem both in regard to the OT and the NT.

Today, we have over 5,000 manuscripts of the Greek NT, most of which have been unearthed in the last 150 years and some of which go back to the second and third centuries AD. We have the discoveries at the Dead Sea and elsewhere providing us with manuscripts more than 1,000 years closer to the original OT source texts than the Masoretic text, and closer than we were in 1900. God in his providence is drawing us closer to himself, by drawing us closer to the original inspired text of the Bible in the modern era.

The cry "*sola Scriptura*" can echo today with a less hollow ring than in the past, because we know today the decisions made by the church in the 4th century to recognize the 27 books of the NT and the 39 books of the OT (plus a few), were the right decisions. The canon was closed when it was recognized that what we needed in our Bibles were the books written by the original eyewitnesses, or their co-workers and colleagues in the case of the NT, and those written within the context of the passing on of the sacred Jewish traditions of Law, Prophets, and Writings that went back to Moses, the Chroniclers, and the great Prophets of old.

While we owe our source texts to the ancient worthies who wrote things down between the time of Moses and John of Patmos, we owe our Bibles in the vernacular to our Protestant forebears—Luther, Tyndale, Calvin, and others. Perhaps now, as we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the German Reformation it is time to say that without Protestantism, we might not have Bibles in the hands of all of us, in the languages of all of us. Thank God for the cry "*semper reformanda*," which still rings true today.