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Question 71 - Who Was William Tyndale?

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101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

71. Who Was William Tyndale?

Tyndale, William– (1494-1536), Bible translator, reformer and martyr, born probably at North Nibley, Gloucestershire, England, descended from a Northumbrian family. Was in orders, having been ordained about 1521. While attending Oxford and Cambridge, became a very proficient Greek scholar. The Greek New Testament of Erasmus and the works of Luther awakened in him the desire to give the Bible to the common people in their own language. Went to Hamburg where he studied Hebrew with some prominent Jews. Not at liberty to write in England, he went to Germany to confer with Luther. Where he did his translating it is not known. However, his English New Testament was printed in Worms, Germany (1525-1526). English merchants smuggled his New Testaments into England. This translation of the New Testament, and of the Pentateuch, which he translated later and his book, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, had a vital influence upon the English people. He produced several other works which were written during those mysterious years of his life, in places of concealment and security. By 1534, believing that the Reformation in England had progressed far enough that it would be safe for him to come out of his concealment, he settled at Antwerp, Belgium, continuing his writing, and beginning the work of an evangelist. The king and the clergy of England were hounding him. He was arrested, imprisoned in the castle of Vilvorde, near Brussels, Belgium, tried, either for heresy or treason, or both, and convicted. First strangled and then burned in the prison yard on October 6, 1536. Very few of the details of Tyndale's life and death are known, less than almost any of his contemporaries. Wrote also *Parable of the Wicked Mammon*, and *Practice of Prelates*.

(*Who Was Who In Church History*. Elgin Moyer. Keats Publishing. New Canaan, Conn. 1974. p. 447)

The following statements have been gathered from various authors to provide additional insights into the life of this remarkable man.

- A. "One million dollars is the bid: Going once, going twice, sold! to the group from Japan."

Thus the sale of a first edition (1623) of Shakespeare's plays brought applause from the gallery of millionaires from around the world. The year was 1990. The place, Quaritch's Auction House in London.

Several years ago seven times that amount was offered to Baptist College in Bristol, England, for a small New Testament printed in 1525 by William Tyndale, the man who translated the 1522 edition of Erasmus' Greek New Testament into English for the first time. In the process, William Tyndale gave to his native England its language and its code of ethics for her posterity.

He enrolled at Oxford in 1505 and literally grew up at the university, receiving his M.A. (Master's degree) in 1515 at the age of twenty-three. It was not unusual for a young man demonstrating a keen mind to begin his studies at an early age. He proved to be a gifted linguist, as testified by an associate of later years in Germany. This associate described Tyndale as "so skilled in seven tongues, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Italian, Spanish, English, French [German is taken for granted] that whichever he speaks you might think it is his native tongue." This gift must have been useful in his successful evasion of the authorities during his exile from England.

Imagine an English-speaking world denied Shakespeare, Spenser, Tennyson, Bunyan, Newton, Wesley, T.S. Eliot, and C.S. Lewis. They all had one common influence, a man named William Tyndale, born in 1494, whose prose and creativity in designing our language is the most grossly overlooked contribution to western civilization in the annals of our history.

The ultimate test of a prophet in the historical, biblical panorama is for his prophecy to come to pass in the generations following. There is no single person in the annals of modern history whose words of prophecy have had the power of their truth whenever and wherever they were rediscovered and practiced as those penned by William Tyndale.

(*The Forbidden Book*. Lollard House. Shippensburg, PA. 1992. pp. 25, 27, 75)

- B. The difficulties of life on the run were not the only pressures on Tyndale. He also had the pressure of his exacting translation work. "Scripture derives its authority from him who sent it," he stated, and he never deviated from this conviction that he was translating the inspired Word of God. Such a task demanded the utmost care, no matter how adverse the conditions. Foxe reports that Tyndale would say: "I call God to record that I have never altered, against the voice of my conscience, one syllable of his Word. Nor would do this day, if all the pleasures, honours, and riches of the earth might be given me."

(*The Indestructible Book*. Ken Connally. Baker Books. Grand Rapids, Michigan. 1996. p. 143)

- C. Tyndale's possessions were seized for evidence on order of the attorney, and the prisoner was quickly conveyed to the castle of Vilvorde, established as a state prison. Tyndale was confined to the dungeon of this fortress, which was constructed in the style of the Bastille in Paris.

This dungeon was the last residence of William Tyndale. No hope really ever existed for his release. He spent his last five hundred days in a cold, dark and lonely cell deep inside the castle. The only record of this time is contained in a letter written to the prison warden requesting warmer clothes, a candle and, above all, his Hebrew Bible, grammar and dictionary.

I believe, right worshipful, that you are not ignorant of what has been determined concerning me [by the Council of Brabant]; therefore I entreat your lordship and that by the Lord Jesus, that if I am to remain here [in Vilvorde] during the winter, you will request the Procureur to be kind enough to send me from my goods which he has in his possession, a warmer cap, for I suffer extremely from cold in the head, being afflicted with a perpetual catarrh, which is considerably increased in this cell. A warmer coat also, for that which I have is very thin: also a piece of cloth to patch my leggings: my overcoat is worn out; my shirts are also worn out. He has a woolen shirt of mine, if he will be kind enough to send it. I have also with him leggings of thicker cloth for putting on above; he also has warmer caps for wearing at night. I wish also his permission to have a lamp in the evening, for it is wearisome to sit alone in the dark. But above all, I entreat and beseech your clemency to be urgent with the Procureur that he may kindly permit me to have my Hebrew Bible, Hebrew Grammar, and Hebrew Dictionary, that I may spend my time with that study. And in return, may you obtain your dearest wish provided always it be consistent with the salvation of your soul. But if, before the end of the winter, a different decision be reached concerning me, I shall be patient, abiding the will of God to the glory of the grace of my Lord Jesus Christ, whose Spirit, I pray, may ever direct your heart. Amen.

W. Tyndale. (*The Forbidden Book*. Lollard House. Shippensburg, PA. 1992. pp. 73, 74)

- D. Before Tyndale finished his revision work, he became involved in a dispute wherein a man charged that Englishmen were “better without God’s Law than without the Pope’s.” He replied with his now famous statement, “I defy the Pope and all his laws; if God spares my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou dost.”
- (*A General Introduction to the Bible*. Geisler and Nix. Moody Press. Chicago. 1991. p. 550)
- E. Tyndale’s dying words were, “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes.” Sadly, he was unaware that Henry VIII’s eyes were already opening. For more than a year a complete English translation of the Bible had been circulating in England. The Coverdale Bible had appeared with the king’s permission, if not his blessing.
- F. Here is a description of his death by one of his monk enemies: “On the day of St. Thomas the Martyr, Archbishop of Canterbury, John Wycliffe, the organ of the devil, the enemy of the Church, the confusion of the common people, the idol of heretics, the looking glass of hypocrites, the encourager of schism, the sower of hatred, the storehouse of lies, the sink of flattery, was suddenly struck by the judgment of God, and had all his limbs seized with the palsy. That mouth which was to speak huge things against God and against His saints or holy Church, was miserably drawn aside, and afforded a frightful spectacle to the beholders; his

tongue was speechless and his head shook, showing plainly that the curse which God had thundered forth against Cain was also inflicted on him." Archbishop Arundel complained to the Pope of "that pestilent wretch, John Wycliffe, the son of the old Serpent, the forerunner of Antichrist, who had completed his iniquity by inventing a new translation of the Scriptures."

(*General Biblical Introduction*. H. S. Miller. Word-Bearer Press. Houghton, N.Y. 1952. p. 324)