

## **Early translations** by *Mary Alexander*

No-one ever decided that the Bible must always be in Latin: it was an accident of history and geography. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew (and some other Middle Eastern languages) and the New Testament was written in Greek, which was the language of educated people around the eastern Mediterranean at the time. Indeed, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC the Old Testament was translated into Greek by Jews living in Alexandria, in Egypt. It was called the Septuagint, which means ‘seventy’ after the number of scholars said to have translated it. This is the version that Jesus and the apostles knew and quoted from, though they also knew the original Hebrew, and so they sometimes appeared to be mis-quoting. Later scholars agonised over this: how could Jesus get the scriptures wrong?

The Roman Empire spread Latin around the Mediterranean and soon a Latin translation was made, but by the 4<sup>th</sup> century there were so many variants that about AD 382 the pope asked St. Jerome to produce a correct version. It was finished in 405 and was called the Vulgate, from a word meaning ‘vulgar’ in the sense of common or general: it was a Bible for everyone.

The church continued to use Latin after the Roman Empire had ended, and preserved learning during the upheavals that followed as peoples migrated and new nations grew up. Naturally, all learning was carried out in Latin. As the services had been carried out in Latin for centuries there seemed no need to change them, especially as the congregation had little involvement.

In England the language Anglo-Saxon developed (also known as Old English). The Lord’s Prayer was translated, and parts of the Bible to help with sermons. The Venerable Bede translated St. John’s gospel in the early 8<sup>th</sup> century, but it does not survive. In the late 9<sup>th</sup> c Alfred the Great had parts of the Bible translated to encourage learning in a country disrupted by Viking invasions, and sent them throughout the area he ruled.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> century there were no official translations, but parts of the Bible were translated into verse, in the Middle English of the time (and of Chaucer). One long poem known as *The Southern Passion* today is a translation of all four gospels, from the Vulgate, skilfully handling the areas where they differ and sticking closely to the wording of the original. The author was clearly trying to be faithful to the originals, rather than re-telling the story in verse. It is very likely that it was written by a friar, for use in preaching, around 1285-95, because of the way it addresses the audience. Friars were set up specifically to travel around teaching. The poem is often found within *The South English Legendary*, a collection of saints’ lives, also in verse, in which St. Dominic is highly praised, making it likely that the *Passion* was written by a Dominican friar. If so, it has a particular interest for us as it may well have been recited by a friar from Guildford’s Dominican Friary to an audience in the High Street.

By the late 14<sup>th</sup> century the friars had lost their reputation for learning and holiness, and the reformer John Wycliffe complained about them preaching in rhyme. Wycliffe started a group known derisively as the Lollards, who were very similar to the later Protestant reformers.

Wycliffe went to Oxford in 1345 and stayed there for much of his life, gaining a reputation for scholarship and a lively mind. He was ordained a priest and gained a doctorate. He became critical of the hierarchy and traditions of the church, because there was no mention of them in the Bible, and particularly of the great wealth and the corruption of the church. This had been made very clear by the rival popes of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Wycliffe also developed the idea of the need for God's grace, rather than the church's teaching that one could earn salvation through good works and prayers, and that the pope could grant indulgences to shorten one's time in purgatory. He also saw the need for an English Bible, and for people to read it for themselves. Naturally, he was suspected of heresy.

In the 1380s he arranged for a translation of the Bible. English was becoming more important as a language. French and Latin had been used by the government, but English was replacing French and also developing as the language of literature. Translating was difficult because English had not developed a vocabulary for abstract thought or theology, and the translation is somewhat awkward. Wycliffe also organised travelling preachers to spread his new doctrines. Unfortunately some Lollards became involved in the Peasants' Revolt, which linked Wycliffe and his Bible with rebellion and condemned all the reformers. Encouraging people to think for themselves about religion was dangerous, and led to them questioning other hierarchies. It was because of this that a statute authorising the burning of heretics was passed in 1401. Wycliffe died in 1384, but in 1428 his bones were dug up and burnt. Translating the Bible was forbidden in 1408, which was why later translators had to work abroad.

Lollards and their Bible were outlawed, but the Bibles, and the beliefs, remained in circulation, secretly, until newer translations became available in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. There was hunger for knowledge of the Bible which could never be destroyed.

Mary Alexander, January 2011.