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The Anglo-Saxon Translations of the Bible

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English versions of the Bible have multiplied in the twentieth century. Since 1952, eleven major translations of the Bible into English have been produced. The quest largely has been for a translation that is accurate to the original languages without sacrificing clarity and literary quality.

The desire for a Bible in the English vernacular is not a new phenomenon. The English Bible has a rich heritage that originated in medieval England. Anglo-Saxon England possessed a fertile culture from which germinated a rich collection of vernacular writings. Within this milieu, various expressions of the Scriptures from poems to fluent translations originated. Today only a few primary sources of that period exist. Questions regarding the intention for these translations remain somewhat dubious. Were they for the benefit of the clergy, of the laity, or both? In this paper the writer proposes that the translations available were intended to serve both the clergy and the laity. This will be developed by examining the known Scriptural expressions that existed--songs or poems, glosses, and translations. The nature of each of these expressions and the historical context from which they originated will be briefly discussed to provide the tempered conclusion given.

Early Expressions of the Bible in the Vernacular

One means of expressing the Holy Writ in the vernacular was by means of poems and songs. This had an advantage in that it permitted those illiterate, even to their native tongue, to hear the biblical accounts. Bede wrote of one such man, Caedmon, who was deemed gifted by God to create such songs.¹ When this gift was discovered by ecclesiastical leaders, he was asked by the abbot to forsake his secular life and to become a monk. Caedmon assented, and thus devoted himself to putting into Old English verse the Scriptures as they were read to him in his native tongue. Bede

credited him with putting a significant amount of the Scriptures into verse.

He sang about the creation of the world, the origin of the human race, and the whole history of Genesis, of the departure of Israel from Egypt and the entry into the promised land and of many other of the stories taken from the sacred Scriptures: of the incarnation, passion, and resurrection of the Lord, of His ascension into heaven, of the coming of the Holy Spirit and the teaching of the apostles. He also made songs about the terrors of future judgment, the horrors of the pain of hell, and the joys of the heavenly kingdom.²

Bede quotes nine lines from one of Caedmon's songs, and today it may be all that exists of Caedmon's work. Although many religious poems have survived, it is uncertain which of them, if any, owe their origin to Caedmon, especially since it has been accepted as fact that "they are the work of more than one man."³ That others followed the precedent set by Caedmon is quite well-established. Bede comments that, "after him [Caedmon] other Englishmen attempted to compose religious poems, but none could compare with him."⁴

Although Caedmon's songs are not considered as translations, they still identify the early attempts to convey Scripture into the Old English vernacular. To what extent his songs were made available is uncertain. Nevertheless, Bede claims that, "By his songs the minds of many were often inspired to despise the world and to long for the heavenly life."⁵ Again he writes that "his [Caedmon's] teachers became in turn his audience."⁶ It appears that Caedmon's poems became known to both clergy and laity. Furthermore, it is likely that they were memorized and passed on orally. If so, then those without the ability to read Anglo-Saxon would be exposed to the vernacular expression of the Scripture in a popular yet dignified metrical verse.

Anglo-Saxon Glosses of the Bible

The glossing of Latin texts was not uniquely applied to the Scripture, but to other books as well. The word "gloss" is used to define two separate activities. First, it identifies a literal word for word translation from an unknown language (e.g. Latin) into the vernacular. Second, it is also used to describe the explanatory notes in the same language as the text.⁷ The former definition is the one with which this paper is concerned.

There exists in libraries and museums no less than a series of twelve Psalters containing word for word interlinear glosses. The dates for these range from the mid-ninth to the mid-twelfth century.⁸ In the New Testament glosses of the gospels were added to both the Lindesfarne and the Rushworth Gospels. The Lindesfarne Gospels were glossed in about the mid-tenth century. A scribe named Aldred supervised this project.⁹ The glosses of the Rushworth Gospels are generally considered to be based upon the Lindesfarne gloss, but at times supersede the definitions of a gloss, and it "reads as literal, continuous prose."¹⁰

The glosses cited were a further step towards producing the Scripture in the vernacular, but they had very limited constraints. One writer likens the early glosses as a "literalness just comprehensible."¹¹ This is because the nature of the gloss is such that it, "was neither a free nor yet a literal translation, but the interlinear insertion of the vernacular . . . so that the order of the former was really irrespective of idiom and usage."¹²

Though glosses do not suggest a sophisticated level of literacy, they served the pedagogical purpose of providing the necessary instruction in the vernacular to the novice of the monastic schools.¹³ Their intention appears not to have been primarily to replace the Latin, but to clarify it.¹⁴ Supporting this is the fact that some manuscripts contain only glosses to difficult words.¹⁵ Nevertheless, their extreme literalism may not solely be the product of instructional intentions, but may also be due to the attitude of the medieval translator who accepted Jerome's postulate that "every word of the text was sacred: even the order of the words is a mystery, and this mystery must be preserved in translation."¹⁶

Since "glossing was part of the Anglo-Saxon pedagogy," it would have been quite normal to use glossed portions of the Scriptures to introduce the new members of the monastic schools to the Holy Writ.¹⁷ Furthermore, it seems reasonable to assume that the glosses stimulated an added dimension in the monks' private devotions, for it provided a greater understanding of the portions of Scripture they would frequently recite in prayer.

That the glosses were read in the sermons delivered after the mass is highly unlikely since they followed the word order and idiom of the Latin. Nevertheless, that they functioned as a lexical aid in the development of the sermon, or possibly in furnishing the cleric with a paraphrase for the congregation seems credible. Bede, in a letter of Egbert of York, an instructor of Alcuin, urged "the use of Latin to increase the knowledge of the faith," but tempered that

admonition in light of the reality that not all would know Latin.¹⁸ For those "priests and laymen, who know only the vernacular," he permitted its use.¹⁹ Put into historical perspective, this need for the vernacular is quite revealing. For according to Alfred's prose preface to Gregory's *Pastoral Care*, the height of learning in England was during the life of Bede.²⁰ Therefore, if the use of the vernacular was needed in Bede's day, how much more it would have been needed by the clerics in Alfred's day. These factors seem to indicate that although delimited by its very nature and intent, glosses had a great potential for use by the clergy.

Translations of the Bible in the Vernacular

The Anglo-Saxon translations of the Scriptures that exist are few in number. They make up the Psalter, the Pentateuch, a few historical books of the Old Testament, and the four Gospels. These alone remain, along with other primary sources, to outline the portions of the Bible once translated in the Anglo-Saxon tongue.

The earliest account of vernacular translations is of the Psalter in the early eighth century. Two men are given responsibility for this endeavor. The first of these men was Aldhelm (c. 709), the first Bishop of Sherborne. He is usually assigned credit as the first to translate a portion of the Scriptures. The second man, Guthlac, (c. 714), is also claimed as having translated the Psalter independently of Aldhelm. Unfortunately, it is commonly assumed that neither version survives today.

Another figure who is responsible for early translations is the Venerable Bede. He found it necessary to translate the Creed and the Lord's Prayer into the Anglo-Saxon because a large proportion of the clergy knew no Latin.²¹ A translation of the Gospel of John is also commonly attributed to him. Cuthbert, his disciple, remarks that he completed it just moments before his death. Once again, no copies of this work exist today.

The earliest surviving translation was part of the introductory section of "Alfred's Doom." It included Exodus 20-23 (often referred to as the book of the covenant), and a short passage from the Acts of the Apostles. Alfred the Great is also acknowledged now as the translator of the first fifty Psalms in prose which today constitutes the first portion of the Paris Psalter.²² He was known to have translated the Psalms for his own personal devotions, but he never finished.²³ The remaining Psalms were translated into verse at a later date.

Alfred's impact regarding vernacular renderings of the Scripture lies not primarily in his own translation efforts, but rather in his efforts to create a social environment that nurtured learning. Alfred attempted to bring this about in a number of ways, one of which was to translate into the vernacular important Latin works. In his prose preface to the translation of Gregory's *Pastoral Care* he writes, that there are some books,

which are the most necessary for all men to understand that we should turn these into that tongue which we all can know . . . that all youth that is now among the English race . . . may be committed to others for the sake of instruction, . . . until the time when they may know well how to read English writing.²⁴

Alfred's revival of the vernacular tradition of the Anglo-Saxon was accomplished in no less than three realms: the preservation of the Anglo-Saxon state from the Northmen invaders, his endeavors to start schools and render Latin classics in the vernacular, and last, his emphasis on providing England with a trained clergy.

Alfred died in 901, but his revival of learning advanced into the tenth century. Eventually, the monasteries experienced a Benedictine revival beginning in the middle of the tenth century. Three men supplied leadership at this time to restore English monasticism: Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury for twenty-eight years; Aethelwold, Bishop of Winchester from 963-984; and Archbishop Oswald, who succeeded Dunstan as Bishop of Worcester in 961.²⁵ The commentary of their efforts is well stated by one writer who remarks that, "In the new environment that they created, old books could be studied again and new ones written . . . Alongside Latin, English prose came to be valued."²⁶ It appears that Alfred's efforts had come to fruition.

During this time, a significant translation of the gospels originated--the West Saxon Gospels. This was a translation that expressed the four gospels in a fluent, simple, even idiomatic style without sacrificing accuracy.²⁷ Its success in fulfilling the purpose of an adequate translation is supported by the fact that the Royal MS contain glosses which show that it was "being seriously studied well into the thirteenth century."²⁸

Towards the latter half of the tenth century, an individual appeared whose labors in Bible translations were unprecedented. Aelfric lived c. 955 to c. 1010. During his early life he was a student at the monastic school at Winchester while Aethelwold was the

bishop. By this time, Winchester had "become the intellectual center of the reform movement."²⁹ Later, he became the Abbot of two new monasteries successively. There, he worked to produce his Bible translations.

It appears that Aelfric's primary responsibility at Cernel, the first monastery, was to "organize the teaching program."³⁰ Nevertheless, his aim did not stop there. One writer comments that in his preface to the *Catholic Homilies* he expresses his additional concern for the laity for whom he sought "to provide for the 'unlearned of our race' knowledge for the salvation of their souls. He therefore has written in English, 'avoiding garrulous verbosity and strange expressions, and seeking rather with pure and plain words, in the language of their nation, to be of use to my hearers.'"³¹ The reason for this knowledge was to furnish the basis for orthodox belief and moral instruction.

All in all, Aelfric is credited with translating portions of the Pentateuch, selections of the historical books, and other excerpts from the Old and New Testaments. Many of these translations were parts of his homilies, which were intended to be sermons for the clergy to preach throughout the year to their congregations. It would be enlightening to know the extent these homilies circulated, for they had the possibility of disclosing the Scriptures in the vernacular to a broader audience than ever before.

Others were partakers of Bible translations during this period as well. The West Saxon Gospels are the best example. In addition, a response by Aelfric to a request by Aethelweard to translate a portion of Genesis is noteworthy. In his preface to Genesis Aelfric states, "You requested, sir, that I should translate from Latin into English the book of Genesis . . . for *someone else* had translated from Isaac to the end of the book." [emphasis added]³²

To what extent other such translations were made and circulated remains uncertain. Nevertheless, following Aelfric's death, available translations did circulate and were copied. References in the catalogues of medieval libraries identify the monasteries of Watham, Perham, Burton, Canterbury, Bath, and Exeter as those known to contain Anglo-Saxon Gospel books at about 1100.³³ With the advent of the linguistic changes brought about by the Norman conquest, the demand for Anglo-Saxon writings waned, and a different attitude toward the vernacular expression appeared.

Although the availability of the Bible in Anglo-Saxon England is incomparable with that of the twentieth century, significant portions of the Scriptures in the vernacular were available by the beginning

of the eleventh century. These served to instruct the monks, to aid them with liturgical functions, and to instruct the laity in orthodox belief and acceptable moral behavior. Not nearly dramatic or controversial as the later accounts of the vernacular translations in England, the Anglo-Saxon renderings deserve an honorable part in the rich heritage of the English Bible.

Notes:

- ¹ Bertam Colgrave and R A B Mynors, ed, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) 415ff
- ² Ibid, 419
- ³ Ibid, 418-19, n 2
- ⁴ Ibid, 415
- ⁵ Ibid, 415
- ⁶ Ibid, 419
- ⁷ Henry Hargreaves, "From Bede to Wyclif: Medieval English Translations," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* (Autumn 1965) 48:124
- ⁸ Ibid, 118-19
- ⁹ Geoffrey Shepherd, "English Versions of the Scriptures before Wyclif," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, G W H Lampe, ed (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969) 371
- ¹⁰ Ibid
- ¹¹ Hargreaves, 127
- ¹² John Eadie, *The English Bible: An External and Critical History of the Various English Translations of Scripture*, (London: Macmillan, 1876) 1:14
- ¹³ Shepherd, 370
- ¹⁴ William A Craigie, "The English Versions (to Wyclif)," *The Bible in its Ancient and English Versions*, H Wheeler Robinson, ed (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940) 129
- ¹⁵ Shepherd, 370
- ¹⁶ Hargreaves, 123
- ¹⁷ Shepherd, 371
- ¹⁸ Ibid, 372
- ¹⁹ Ibid, 372
- ²⁰ *The Whole Works of King Alfred the Great*, (New York: AMS Press, 1969; reprint, London, 1858) 2:64-66 (page references are to the reprint edition)
- ²¹ Judith McClure, "Bede's Notes on Genesis and the Training of the Anglo-Saxon Clergy" *The Bible in the Medieval World: Essays in Memory of Beryl Smalley*, Katherine Walsh and Diana Wood, eds (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985) 17
- ²² Allen J Frantzen, *King Alfred* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986) 91

- ²³ Shepherd, 370
- ²⁴ *The Whole Works of Alfred the Great*, 66
- ²⁵ James Hurt, *Aelfric* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1972) 17
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, 22
- ²⁷ Hargreaves, 127
- ²⁸ Shepherd, 377
- ²⁹ Hurt, 29
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, 32
- ³¹ *Ibid*, 42
- ³² *Ibid*, 101
- ³³ Margaret Deanesley, *The Lollard Bible: and Other Medieval Biblical Versions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920; reprint, 1982) 138