

Martyred for the Message

We've forgotten how much blood was spilled so that we could read God's Word.

Most believers today take the Bible for granted. If they aren't raised in a home that has one, they can easily purchase one—in any number of translations—from a local bookstore. New believers often receive one as a gift soon after they give their lives to Christ. Only in countries in which Christians are persecuted is the Bible a rarity.

Yet the most read book of all time has not always been so accessible—or so easy to understand. Many men and women have given their lives through the centuries to make it available to the common man.

One of the most significant was William Tyndale. Born in England in the late 1400s, he mastered eight languages. His vision was to “cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost.”

In Tyndale's time, only the clergy or other highly educated people had access to a Bible—and then only in the original languages or Middle English. Tyndale set out to provide an Early Modern English translation.

Opposed in his home country, he moved to Germany to work and soon translated the entire New Testament. It was a best-seller. The first edition was only 6,000 copies, but seven more editions followed in 10 years.

Tyndale's New Testaments were shipped home secretly, like Bibles smuggled into a communist country in recent times.

Their distribution initiated a massive move of God's Spirit. A translation of the Old Testament followed, and the result, John Foxe wrote in his Foxe's Book of Martyrs, was that "a door of light ... opened to the eyes of the whole English nation, which before were shut up in darkness."

For taking the Latin, Greek and Hebrew sources and putting them in common English—so that the "boy that driveth the plough" and many other English-speaking men and women could read and study the Bible in the vernacular—Tyndale paid with his life.

Envious authorities denounced his Bible translation and demanded his arrest. A false friend, Henry Phillips, found him hiding near Brussels, Belgium, and delivered him to his persecutors for money.

The translator refused a lawyer and spent his time in jail witnessing and leading others to Christ. In 1536, he was strangled and burned at the stake. His work, however, was not in vain; today more than 75 percent of the words in all English Bible versions can be directly attributed to his effort.

"Courageous. Brilliant. Relentless," says William Noah, founder and chief curator of a touring exhibit on Bible translation titled Ink and Blood, of Tyndale. "[Tyndale's] words and actions created the most spoken language in the world today—Modern English—and the most read book in history: the English Bible. He is the most influential English-speaking person that ever lived," he says.

Tyndale once told a friend regarding his translation that he

did not alter “one syllable of God’s Word” nor would have even if “all that is in earth, whether it be honor, pleasure, or riches, might be given me.” His last prayer before being martyred was that God would open the king of England’s eyes.

Only 75 years later, King James commissioned a new Bible—based on Tyndale’s translation—that eventually found its way around the world. It is what we now call the King James Version.

Tyndale wasn’t the only martyr who shed his blood for the dissemination of the Scriptures. The flesh of many saints who have gone before was burned or mutilated to ensure that millions of Bibles can now be read over morning coffee.

Who were these saints, and what were their roles? How did the Bible come to us from Jesus’ day?

The Bible Takes Shape

Recorded on clay tablets for centuries, the Old Testament writings were kept safe by Jewish scribes. About 200 years before Christ, the Septuagint—a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament—was written with berry juice on papyrus.

In 1947, the Dead Sea Scrolls—original Old Testament fragments and writings from Jesus’ time—were uncovered in local caves. Many scholars believe they verify the historical reality of God’s Word.

Jesus studied such Old Testament scrolls. After He ascended, His disciples preached what He had learned and then taught to them. The disciples’ letters and gospel accounts of Jesus’

words became authoritative, holy writ.

How did the men themselves fare in a time of Roman occupation? Stephen, the first martyr, was stoned for speaking Jesus' words. James, the son of Zebedee, was beheaded about 10 years later, in A.D. 44; Philip was crucified in A.D. 54; Matthew was killed with a battle-ax and the other James with a club.

Eleven of Christ's 12 disciples, plus Paul, were martyred. Five disciples wrote 21 of the 27 New Testament books. Under great persecution, they delivered the New Testament to the world.

On their heels, first and second century church fathers labored to gather and organize the Scriptures.

In A.D. 108, Ignatius, Peter's successor as the bishop of Antioch, organized some of these New Testament writings, quoting them in letters and sermons.

Ignatius was ripped apart by wild beasts at the hands of the Roman authorities. "Now I begin to be a disciple!" he exclaimed while dying.

Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna, quoted 19 New Testament books in a single letter. Roman guards seized him; officials told him to recant faith in Christ.

"Eighty and six years have I served him," Polycarp replied, "and He never once wronged me; how then shall I blaspheme my King, Who hath saved me?"

A fire was lit for him, but a miraculous arch of flames spread over and around his body, not touching him. Finally, his frustrated killers stabbed him to death.

By A.D. 185, 23 of the 27 New Testament books had been identified—all but 1 Peter, 2 Peter, James and Hebrews.

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, used these holy books to counter rising heresies. It is believed he was martyred by the Roman emperor in A.D. 202.

Emperor Constantine's conversion to Christ in A.D. 312 allowed the Scriptures to be publicly affirmed for the first time. The entire 27 books of the New Testament were soon acknowledged as the clear New Covenant revelation.

"There had already been a great deal of discussion on the New Covenant revelation" in the first and second centuries, says Ligon Duncan, pastor, theologian and national evangelical leader. "The church wasn't creating the Bible in the third century; it was recognizing the Bible that already had been given to it."

As the church grew to include believers who spoke different languages in the then-known world, a need arose to write the Scriptures in one volume. Around A.D. 400, Jerome translated the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament into Latin, that era's more universal language. His translation, the Vulgate, means "common."

"Latin had truly achieved the status of a world language ... when Jerome's Vulgate" arrived, church historian Jaroslav Pelikan writes in *Jesus Through the Centuries*. God was using

men both to deliver the Bible to everyone and to increase people's literacy.

Monks copied the Vulgate onto tightened sheepskin—50 to 60 sheepskins for just one Bible. It was a one-year task. They devoted their lives to preserving God's Word for today.

One Vulgate version, called the Parisian Bible, appeared in 1240. It was the first to divide the Scriptures into chapters. With this improvement, the Bible's readability increased and its power spread.

The price, however, also increased—more martyrs' blood.

God's Word for the Common Man

Edward II was monarch of England in 1324, the year John Wycliffe, the "Morning Star of the Reformation," was born. During Edward's reign, Wycliffe was elected Archbishop of Canterbury, but he was soon removed by a new king, Edward III. Religion at that time was rife with superstition because God's Word in understandable form was not available to counter off-base ideas.

Wycliffe tried to work within the church but lost hope. Finally, he decided to translate pieces of the Bible into medieval English.

Many people were ready. They absorbed Bible passages. The most devoted were called Lollards, or "mutterers," because they spoke written portions of the Bible in common English. Many Lollards were martyred for speaking and spreading God's Word.

Wycliffe escaped martyrdom, though his body was later exhumed and burned, and the ashes scattered in a river.

The public dissemination of the Bible only gained momentum—particularly after 1453, when Johanne Gutenberg invented the printing press. This machine was capable of spreading ideas in written form with great speed and little outside control.

Church authorities now could not stop Bible printings. By 1455 Gutenberg printed his own Gutenberg Bible, a Latin Vulgate. Gutenberg's partner, John Fust, with Peter Schoeffer, later printed a smaller Gutenberg Bible, the first Bible exported from Germany.

Then, in 1483, in Saxony, Germany, Martin Luther was born. He mastered Greek and Hebrew, inspired by Erasmus—the world's then-greatest scholar. Erasmus may not have been a Christian, but he revived study of the ancient biblical languages of Greek and Hebrew needed to translate God's Word.

One day in a library, Luther "accidentally found a copy of the Latin Bible, which he had never seen before," Foxe says. He read it all "greedily, and was amazed to find what a small portion of the Scriptures was rehearsed to the people."

Luther had what he called his "Tower Experience" when he read in Romans that salvation comes only by faith in Jesus. On All Saints Eve—October 31, 1517—he posted his 95 Theses on the door of the Castle Church at Wittenberg, sparking the Protestant Reformation.

Rome's great thinkers kept debating Luther, but he ably refuted them from the Bible. His main trial was at Worms. Not long after he left there, the Word of God was further unleashed.

Hiding in a castle, Luther started translating the Bible into common German, using Erasmus' Greek New Testament. Luther's German New Testament was completed in 1522, and his entire German Bible in 1534, just eight years after Tyndale's English version of the New Testament appeared.

Germans suddenly could read about Jesus for themselves. The Bible soon surpassed the Mass in value to commoners because it let them better understand Jesus' life and ministry. "Jesus became a 16th century contemporary" to the average working person, Pelikan says.

Though Luther died of natural causes, he suffered great persecution during his life.

Sadly, some Reformers lost focus. Swiss Reformation leader Ulrich Zwingli tried to stifle others' Bible interpretations. Zwingli's own Greek and Hebrew students, Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz, came to believe—in contrast to Zwingli—that Scripture teaches believers' baptism over infant baptism, which had become Christendom's unchallenged practice.

One cold January day in 1525, Manz, Grebel and others sharing these new convictions met for earnest prayer. Then they all submitted to believers' baptism—a radical act of Christian heresy and defiance of state laws.

"This was clearly the most revolutionary act of the Reformation," says scholar William Estep, author of *The*

Anabaptist Story. He adds: "It was a culmination of an earnest searching of the Scriptures."

Manz and Grebel began to witness house to house, baptizing converts. Grebel soon died of the plague, but Manz was seized by the government.

As he walked to his death, his mother called out for him to stay faithful. Bound and placed in a boat in the Limmat River, he sang aloud, "Into thy hands, O God, I commend my spirit," and was toppled into the river to die on January 5, 1527.

Another Anabaptist martyr, Michael Sattler, knew both Greek and Hebrew. He codified Scripture into the Schleithem Confession of 1527, which contained seven articles of faith agreed upon by the Anabaptists, or Swiss Brethren. His goal was the same one Luther had in penning the 95 Theses: to combat the unsound teachings of the day with truth.

For this, his tongue was cut out and his flesh ripped apart; then he was burned alive. Sattler prayed: "I will with Thy help to this day testify to the truth."

Worldwide Distribution

Other translations of the Bible continued to make their appearance. In 1535, a year before Tyndale's martyrdom, the Coverdale Bible was printed by a Tyndale disciple. Matthew's Bible followed in 1537, also published by a Tyndale follower, John Rogers. It was the first to include margin notes.

Bloody Mary, then queen of England, condemned Rogers to

martyrdom. "That which I have preached, I will seal with my blood," he proclaimed as he burned, his wife and 11 children watching on.

In 1560 John Calvin, with his disciples, translated the Geneva Bible, creating the first translation with verse divisions. The Pilgrims used this version. Eventually, a half-million copies were circulated among England's 6 million residents.

Finally, in 1604, Puritan John Reynolds pressed the king of England for a new translation to rival the Geneva Bible. Forty-seven scholars worked at Westminster, Cambridge and Oxford for five years. The result in 1611 was the King James Bible, the most printed book ever.

Today, the Bible remains the world's best-seller. New English translations that take the evolving language into account—the New International Version, the New American Standard Bible, the New King James Version, and so on—help us gain an ever-greater understanding of the Scriptures.

Still, some people do not have the Bible in their own language. We may wonder how they shall be converted and disciplined, for Tyndale wrote that he had "perceived by experience how that it was impossible to establish the laypeople in any truth, except the Scriptures were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue."

One Cakchiquel Indian of Guatemala asked William Cameron Townsend, founder in 1942 of Wycliffe Bible Translators: "If your God is so smart, why doesn't he speak Cakchiquel?"

Townsend worked 10 years to produce a Cakchiquel Bible. He was

committed to the task of making it possible for every man, woman and child to read God's Word in his own language.

Even before Townsend's time, the written Word of God had begun to move beyond Europe to span the globe. Matthew's Gospel was translated into Malaysian as early as 1629. American John Eliot translated the Bible into the language of the Massachusetts Indians in 1662.

By 1800, as many as 66 languages had some portion of Scripture and 40 had the whole Bible, according to Wycliffe Bible Translators. From 1793 to 1834, William Carey translated or helped translate Scripture into 45 languages and dialects.

Starting in 1804, Bible societies began to form to translate, publish and distribute Bibles worldwide. Many modern missionaries still die for this goal. Jim Elliot, Nate Saint, Ed McCully, Pete Fleming, and Roger Youderian—college graduates turned translators—were speared to death in 1956 by Ecuadorian Indians when they tried to bring the gospel to these isolated people.

God's Word still spreads, mingled with the blood of martyrs. About 1,640 languages have Bible translations in progress; 876 have at least one book; 1,079 have the New Testament; and 422 have the entire Bible.

Yet of the world's 6.5 billion people, more than 270 million still have no Bible in their native tongue. Considering that "the Word is the Spirit's only sword, the Spirit's only tool for accomplishing the work and will of God," as historian and editor Stanley Burgess says, what is to be our response? Will Spirit-filled believers today risk all to spread God's Word—in

the hope of saving a plowboy's soul?

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The Blood Still Flows Today

By Ken Walker

Three years ago Augustin and Kalai Joseph* (pseudonyms were used in this story to protect missionaries' identities) were returning to their central India village when someone stopped their Jeep. When Augustin got out to ask why, an armed Maoist guerilla took him away. Another 100 comrades dressed in camouflage clothing waited nearby.

Pushing her way out of the car, Kalai ran to her husband. Although the couple had discussed what they would do if they encountered terrorists, nothing came to her mind. "Please let us go because we have a little girl back home," she pleaded.

Because Kalai spoke the tribal language fluently, a female commando assumed she was a local resident and let them go. Later, they learned when the commando discovered their Christian identity, she threatened to burn their vehicle if she saw them again, and kill Augustin if they ever visited the interior villages.

That hair-raising incident is only one of many the Josephs have encountered since they settled with the Gaita* tribe in 1994 to put the group's first language into writing and produce a Bible they can read.

The Gaitas are animists, attributing conscious life to objects of nature and often turning to witchcraft for healing or various celebrations. Animists who object to the Josephs' work find willing allies in the Maoists.

In addition to such obstacles, Augustin says they have paid a price in being rootless, often moving from place to place. "Our families have almost disowned us because we are involved in Christian work," says Augustin, who grew up in a Catholic family. Kalai came from a Hindu background.

Currently on a study leave at Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California, they hope to complete their doctoral studies by 2010—Augustin in linguistics and Kalai in anthropology. Despite opposition that includes destruction and killings by the resurgent Maoists, the couple plans to return home next year.

The Josephs are among thousands worldwide still facing persecution as they seek to translate God's Word to groups who lack access to the Scriptures in their native tongue. Bob Creson, president of Wycliffe Bible Translators, has faced hostilities throughout his 23 years with the Orlando, Florida-based ministry.

Even during his first assignment in Cameroon, where many people appreciated his work, Creson sensed an underlying antagonism. "You think about all the things going on in the world—Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, communism, animism—you can imagine the spiritual opposition in those parts of the world to our work," Creson says.

The agency's 6,600-plus personnel have partnerships with

12,000 expatriates and national workers from more than 60 nations. Although the agency has helped complete more than 600 translations in its 70-year history, its workers face continuing danger as they seek to introduce the Bible to another 2,500-plus languages.

“The easy places are gone,” Creson says. “We’re working in more than 1,300 places around the world, but we don’t talk a lot about it because there’s a lot of risk. It’s more and more of a challenge to get people into those areas.”

Voice of the Martyrs has encountered suffering saints in some of those tough regions. Todd Nettleton, the ministry’s director of media development, recounts numerous horror stories of vicious opposition to Bible translation and distribution. Among them: the Vietnamese authorities who poured boiling water down the throat of a believer in an attempt to force him to disclose where he had obtained the Bible in his ethnic language.

“It’s illegal to print anything in an ethnic minority language because they want everyone to speak Vietnamese,” Nettleton says. “We helped to finance the finishing up of the translation.”

Nettleton lists North Korea as the world’s harshest persecutor, recalling the time teachers encouraged third-grade students to let them know if their parents had “this special book.” After a girl reported her parents did, they vanished and were never seen again.

Saudi Arabia is another. Although foreign visitors may have one Bible for personal use, a native resident who possesses a

copy will face serious trouble, Nettleton says. When a media storm erupted over one copy of the Quran allegedly being flushed down the toilet at Guantanamo, Nettleton thought, Wait a minute; thousands of Bibles are being destroyed in Saudi Arabia.

Regardless of the form of persecution, Kalai Joseph knows its roots are spiritual. Several times her daughter and husband faced life-threatening situations the year after they moved onto the field for translation work.

Kalai says after God turned away the threats, she recognized Satan opposed their starting a mission that would bring the Bible to a lost tribe. "The enemy wanted to finish us off before we even began," she says.

William Tyndale ()

William Tyndale was a religious reformer and scholar who translated a large portion of the Bible into the common English of his day. Born in England, he attended both Oxford and Cambridge and became fluent in Hebrew and Greek.

From the time he was young, he was a strong supporter of the movement for reform in the church, and his opinions often created a stir among fellow clergymen. He had been chaplain in the house of Sir John Walsh for only about a year when he was brought before the Chancellor of the Diocese of Worcester and accused of heresy.

By this time, Tyndale had already decided to translate the Bible into English. He believed the way to God was through His Word and that the Scriptures should be available to everyone—not just the clergy. He told a colleague who took the

opposite view, "If God spare my life, ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough to know more of the Scripture than thou dost."

Tyndale went to London but received no support from the bishop there, who was opposed to the concept of a Bible in the vernacular. With the aid of a local merchant, he left England under a false name and in 1524 landed in Hamburg, Germany.

The following year he completed his translation of the New Testament (from the Greek compiled by Erasmus in 1516), which he had begun while still in his home country. After some difficulty, it was published in 1526 in Worms, and 15,000 copies in six editions were smuggled into England in the next five years.

The church banned the translation and burned the copies that could be confiscated, but it was unsuccessful in stopping the influx of Tyndale's Bibles from Germany—or the move of God that they fueled.

Tyndale remained in hiding to work on a translation of the Old Testament, but in May 1535 he was betrayed by an English spy near Brussels, Belgium, arrested and imprisoned. More than a year later he was tried and condemned as a heretic.

On October 6, 1536, he was strangled, then burned at the stake. An associate named Miles Coverdale completed the task he had begun on the Old Testament, using what Tyndale had translated up to the time of his arrest.

Maureen D. Eha

John Wycliffe ()

John Wycliffe was an eminent English theologian, often called

the “Morning Star of the Reformation,” who laid the groundwork for religious reform in his country. He received a doctorate of theology degree from Oxford University in 1372 and was appointed Rector of Lutterworth in Leicestershire by King Edward III two years later. From this post he diligently taught against the excesses and deception that were rampant in the Roman Catholic Church, attacking such practices as the sale of indulgences and deference to papal authority.

Wycliffe believed that the way to stop the abuses in the church was to make the truth of God’s Word available to the people, both by preaching it to them and by giving them direct access to it in their own language. At this time, portions of the Bible had been translated into English, but not the entire book.

Wycliffe, with his associate, Nicholas of Hereford, took on the task of translating the Latin Vulgate into their native tongue. Though the success of the project is credited to Wycliffe’s initiative and leadership, it is difficult to know for certain his role in the actual translation.

Scholars have determined that Wycliffe is primarily responsible for the translation of the New Testament, while Nicholas translated the majority of the Old Testament under Wycliffe’s supervision.

Though the printing press had not yet been invented, handwritten copies of Wycliffe’s Bible began to circulate. “Bible men”—later called Lollards—whom Wycliffe trained, carried it or portions of it with them as they went around the country two by two preaching the truth of God’s Word to all who would listen. In this manner Wycliffe’s reformist theology as well as the Scriptures spread rapidly, and Wycliffe’s

influence on the nation grew. Though the pope and his supporters vigorously opposed Wycliffe, his connections at Oxford and in the parliament protected him from the assaults.

In 1384, Wycliffe died of natural causes. However, more than 40 years later, his ecclesiastical enemies exhumed his body, burned it publicly and threw his ashes in the Swift River near Lutterworth in an unsuccessful attempt to limit the spread of his ideas.

Maureen D. Eha

Polycarp ()

Polycarp was the bishop of Smyrna (now Izmir in Turkey) in the second century. He became a Christian when he was a child and lived at the end of the age of the original apostles. He is believed to have been a disciple of the apostle John and was both converted and consecrated a bishop by some of the apostles appointed by Jesus.

Historical records indicate that he was a gifted teacher, and because of his association with John he played an important role in transmitting and verifying Christian revelation at a time when New Testament writings were just beginning to gain acceptance. He was particularly effective in combating Gnosticism, an early cult, and converted many Gnostics to Christianity.

Polycarp left behind only one piece of writing, a letter he wrote to the church at Philippi. It contained a number of references to the New Testament and showed the author to be a humble, unpretentious man.

When he was 86, Polycarp was taken from his home by Roman

soldiers and interrogated by the local proconsul. After their conversation, which Polycarp knew in advance by supernatural means was the precursor to his being burned alive, the soldiers made ready to nail him to a stake.

The prisoner stopped them, saying: "Leave me as I am. For He who grants me to endure the fire will enable me also to remain on the pyre unmoved, without the security you desire from nails."

Within a year of his death, Polycarp's martyrdom was recorded by an eyewitness of the event. The account is considered the earliest record of a Christian martyrdom in post-New Testament church history.

Maureen D. Eha

Michael Sattler ()

Michael Sattler was a Benedictine monk who left the monastery during the Protestant Reformation to become one of the leaders of the Anabaptist (Swiss Brethren) movement. He was born around 1495 in Staufen, Germany, near Freiburg. After attending the University of Freiburg, he entered the nearby cloister of St. Peter and was eventually appointed the prior.

Undoubtedly influenced by reformation theology and his own study of the Scriptures, however, he left the Roman Catholic Church in 1523 and joined the Swiss Brethren in Zurich. He married the same year.

Sattler and his wife, Margaretha, were banished from Zurich in 1525 and went to labor among the Brethren in Horb, Rottenburg and eventually Strasbourg. In February 1527, Sattler hosted a meeting of the Swiss Brethren at Schleithem, during which he

presented a confession of faith he had authored, later called the Schleithem Confession.

The Confession flew in the face of Catholic doctrine on several points, including the denial that the body and blood of Christ are actually present in the Eucharist and that infant baptism is efficacious for salvation. It was unanimously adopted by those present.

A few months later, the Sattlers were arrested by Catholic authorities, along with several other Anabaptists. Michael was tried and sentenced to be executed as a heretic. His sentence consisted of having his tongue cut out, having his body torn numerous times with “glowing iron tongs” and finally being burned to death.

Convinced that the beliefs he held in opposition to the Catholic Church were founded on Scripture, Sattler refused to denounce them and endured the persecution in a heroic manner, praying for his judges and encouraging the people to repent. His wife was drowned for her beliefs two days after his execution.

Maureen D. Eha