WILLIAM TINDALE: SCHOLAR AND MARTYR
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BY THE EDITOR.

"GREAT characters have not infrequently been raised from an obscurity which baffles all research."

That is true of William Tindale, who, more than any other man, has left the impress of his character and scholarship upon the pages of our national Bible.

Of his early life little is known. He was born, probably about 1484, somewhere in Gloucestershire, a county which, in his day, was held to be the very stronghold of the Church. So predominant was the influence of the clergy that "as sure as God is in Gloucester" came to be a familiar proverb over all England. Nowhere was religion more entirely a thing of form and ceremony, and of all these ceremonies, in many cases meaningless, young Tindale, shrewd and thoughtful from his childhood, must have been a careful observer, for when at a subsequent period he directed all the energy of his pen against the superstitious practices allowed by the Church his recollections of what he had seen around him in his youth furnished him with endless illustrations with which to point his arguments.

The same obscurity which hangs over the year and place of his birth hangs over that of his parentage. Among the traditions regarding his family is one to the effect that they came from the North during the Wars of the Roses and for a time adopted, probably for purposes of concealment, the name of Hitchins, variously spelt Hotchyns, Hytchyns, Huchens, and Hychyns.

In Boas and Clarke's Register of the University of Oxford (1885) our young scholar is entered under the name of "William Huchens or Hychens," and in a number of documents he is referred to as "William Hitchyns sometimes called William Tindale." In the introduction to the first edition (1528) of his
William Tindale
From the Magdalen Hall Portrait now in Hertford College, Oxford
Obedience of a Christian Man, Tindale describes himself as “William Tyndale otherwise called William Hychins unto the Reader.”

The name of Hitchins was afterwards abandoned, and the family resumed their old and rightful name of Tindale.

At an early age Tindale was sent to Oxford, where he imbibed something of the new spirit of enthusiasm with which John Colet impregnated the scholars of his own and the succeeding generations. He was entered at Magdalen Hall, a dependency of Magdalen College, which later was incorporated as Hertford College.

John Foxe in his Acts and Monuments of the latter and perilous dayes touching matters of the Church . . . (1563) tells us “By long continuance he [Tindale] grew up and increased as well in the knowledge of tongues, and other liberal arts, as especially in the knowledge of the Scriptures whereunto his mind was singularly addicted; insomuch that he read privily to certain students and fellows of Magdalen College some parcel of divinity, instructing them in the knowledge and truth of the Scriptures.”

Having proceeded to the degrees of the schools (he took his B.A. in 1513 and proceeded to his M.A. in 1515 or 1516) Tindale removed to Cambridge, attracted no doubt by the fame of the teaching of Erasmus, who for several years, commencing in 1511, was giving instruction in Greek, beginning with the “Catechism” of Chrysoloras and proceeding to the larger grammar of Theodorus Gaza. It was here that Tindale perfected himself in Greek, for upon his arrival in London in 1523, as he himself tells us, he was able to produce as proof of his qualifications as a translator one of the “Orations” of Isocrates which he had translated from Greek into English.

The teaching of Erasmus at his time was revolutionary in the extreme and gave great offence to the Church authorities. He contended that men should no longer study theology in Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas, the schoolmen, but should go to the Fathers of the Church, and above all to the New Testament. He showed that the Latin Vulgate swarmed with faults, and he rendered an immense service to the truth by publishing in 1516 his critical edition of the Greek text of the New Testament, accompanied by a new Latin translation.
This was the scholar who exercised such a far-reaching influence upon Tindale, that he regarded him as his master and spiritual guide.

In 1521 Tindale left Cambridge to act as chaplain to Sir John Walsh at Little Sodbury, Gloucestershire, where he soon came into violent controversy with many of the Church dignitaries of the neighbourhood, and in order to refute their errors he did not hesitate to confront them with "the open manifest words of Scripture." This matter of fact way of dealing with the arguments of these divines gave great offence.

One day Lady Walsh who had listened to these heated arguments took Tindale aside and asked him whether it was reasonable that his opinions should be accepted rather than those of their learned guests. Tindale felt the rebuke, and at once set to work to translate from Latin into English a little book written by Erasmus in 1503, entitled Enchiridion Militis Christiani, or, The Manual of a Christian Knight, which was an outspoken protest against the wicked lives of the monks and friars. Here was the authority of his master and spiritual guide, the learned Erasmus, surely this would convince those who had refused to be persuaded by his own arguments and by Scripture. This he presented to Sir John and Lady Walsh, and after they had read the book, we are told, that the great prelates no longer found so ready a welcome awaiting them at Little Sodbury, and at last they discontinued their visits.

It was about this time that Tindale announced his intention of translating the Bible into the language of the people. Happening one day to enter into argument with one of the reputed learned divines, who in the heat of controversy asserted that "we had better be without God's laws than the Pope's," Tindale startled those around him by declaring, "I defy the Pope and all his laws . . . if God spare my life, ere many years, I will cause the boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou dost"; words which were suggested to Tindale by a striking passage in the Paraclesis ad lectorem pium, or, Latin Exhortation, prefixed by Erasmus to his edition of the Greek-Latin New Testament, which being translated reads: "I would to God the ploughman would sing a text of
the Scripture at his ploughbeam, and that the weaver at his loom
with this would drive away the tediousness of time. I would the
wayfaring man with this pastime would expel the weariness of
his journey. And to be short I would that all the communication
of the Christian should be of the Scripture, for in a manner such
are we ourselves as our daily tales are."

It soon became evident to Tindale that Little Sodbury was
no longer a safe retreat for one who gave utterance to such views,
and he resolved to remove to London in the hope of finding a
sympathetic patron in the Bishop of London (Cuthbert Tunstall),
whose great learning had been praised by Erasmus.

In the middle of May, 1523, Tindale made his way to London,
and after a year’s residence there, he found that not only was
there no room in London, but that there was no place in all
England in which to carry out his self-imposed task. If it could
only be done in exile, and in peril of life, these were but potent
reasons why it should be done and done quickly.

Tindale did not hesitate to give up his country in favour of
his work, and in May, 1524, he proceeded to Hamburg, where in
little more than a year he completed his translation of the New
Testament.

Of his movements during this period, and of what he ac-
accomplished, little is known, but there is no doubt that his earliest
efforts to benefit his countrymen was the publication of a separate
edition of the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark, in confir-
mation of which a number of documents could be cited. Un-
fortunately not a single copy of these “first prents” is at present
known.

In order to get his New Testament printed, Tindale made
his way to Cologne, a town famous for its printers, where he
entered into arrangements with Peter Quentel to print it.

The work of printing had not proceeded beyond the end of St.
Matthew’s Gospel when further progress was frustrated by one of
the bitterest enemies of the Reformation, a man named Johann
Dobneck, who called himself “Cochlæus,” at whose instigation
the Senate prohibited further progress with the work. Fortu-
nately news of this action on the part of the Senate reached
Tindale’s ears, and he was able to snatch up the sheets that
had been printed off, and steal away by ship to Worms, a city in every way favourable to his purpose, since it was the head-quarters of Lutheranism, where four years earlier Luther had triumphantly defended his doctrine before the Emperor Charles the fifth, whereas Cologne was devoted to the Roman faith.

By the end of 1525 some thousands of copies of the New Testament were ready for distribution, and arrangements were made for their transport to England, in defiance of the orders of the King and Wolsey, who did everything in their power to prevent this invasion of England by the Word of God.

To what extent Tindale was dependent on other versions, in the epilogue at the end of the Worms edition "To the Reader," Tindale declares, "I had no man to counterfeit neither was holpe with englysshe of any that had interpreted the same or sôch lyke thige í the scripture befortyme . . ."

A careful examination of Tindale's version reveals the fact that he translated direct from the Greek, using as collateral helps the Latin Vulgate, Erasmus's Greek-Latin Text (1522), and Luther's German New Testament (1522). We have Tindale's assurance that he neither visited nor conferred with Luther, but a comparison of Luther's New Testament with that of Tindale shows that our translator was greatly dependent upon Luther's version.

The English Bible with which we are so familiar is in its form and substance the work of Tindale. Neither did the scholars of King James's day, who were responsible for the "Authorised Version," nor the Revisers of 1881, produce a new translation. Indeed, the many revisions undertaken since Tindale's day have been built, one and all, upon his version, which was taken and simply compared with the Greek and Hebrew texts.

There can be no better testimony to the value of Tindale's work than that provided by the Revisers of 1881, who admitted that the new version was to all intents and purposes Tindale's work, and that eighty per centum of the words of the "Revised New Testament" stand as they stood in Tindale's revised version of 1534, for they could not find in the English language more felicitous phrases than those employed by our translator.
Considered as a literary undertaking Tindale's work marks an epoch in the literary history of our country. As a master of English prose Tindale stands unrivalled. We often speak of what Shakespeare did for our language, forgetting that nearly a century before his day, at a time when the language was still unformed, when as yet it had not been made the vehicle of any great literary undertaking, Tindale proved to the world that it was possible to express the highest truths in the clearest manner with simplicity and with grace, thus exercising a permanent influence of the most beneficial kind on the literary taste of the English-speaking people. That is what made the appeal immediate and widespread in Tindale's day, and that is what must keep it fresh and searching while the English tongue is spoken among men.

Of the purity of Tindale's motive we have ample evidence in the fact that the New Testament was issued without the translator's name until 1534, when he was moved to write an address under his full name "Willyam Tindale, yet once more to the christen reader," in which he defends his own translation against the pretended corrections in a so-called revision of his translation by George Joye. It was not intended to secure his fame. He had not laboured for money or for applause, but, to quote his own words in the preface to The Parable of the Wicked Mammon, "was content patiently to abide the reward of the last day."

After the completion of the New Testament, Tindale settled down to study Hebrew, in order to qualify himself to deal with the books of the Old Testament as he had done with those of the New. Hebrew was not studied at Oxford at the beginning of the sixteenth century, and Robert Wakefield, the first Hebrew Professor at Cambridge, only commenced his lectures in 1524, the year Tindale quitted England. Many Jews were to be found in the old German towns, so that he would experience no difficulty in obtaining the necessary instruction.

In 1527 Tindale found it necessary to change his place of residence, on account of Wolsey's vigorous efforts to get him into his power, removing from Worms to Marburg in Hesse-Cassel, where he spent the greater part of the five years following, leaving Marburg for Antwerp in 1531. Here in the intervals of
study and work upon the Old Testament he found time to issue the three principal doctrinal and controversial works which constitute his manifesto.

The first to be published, in 1528, was *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon*: an exposition of the parable of the unjust steward, in which the writer makes an attack on the so-called spirituality, which had taken away the key of knowledge and had beggared the people; and at the same time expounds the doctrine of justification by faith. This work threw the Church authorities into a state of great rage, it was condemned on all sides, and was held up to public detestation.

Tindale felt that this manifesto was insufficient, so he followed it up, in the same year, by *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, and how Christian rulers ought to govern: wherein also if thou mark diligently thou shalt find eyes to perceive the crafty conveyance of all jugglers. He knew that to teach the views he expressed could only be done at the risk of his life, but he was ready to dare all, if need be to die, in order to expose the infamy of the Church, and to set men free from the debasing teaching of its hideous hypocrisy. It is one thing to see the falseness of error, but it is not always so easy to see the trueness of the truth, and Tindale, not content merely to overthrow the hypocrisies of Rome, builds up a simple faith in the Gospel.

The bishops at their wit's end to know how to arrest the progress of this heresy decided that as the press had been instrumental in circulating the poison, it should be employed to circulate the antidote. Consequently, Sir Thomas More, at that time indubitably the greatest literary genius in England, was requested to take up the pen and champion the cause of the Church, which he did, and before the end of the year (1528) he had published his *Dyalogue*, the first instalment of his long controversy in which he attacked not only Tindale but Barnes, Frith, and Sir John Soame. This literary combat lasted for five years, but in the end Tindale won, for, as More himself confessed, if brevity is the soul of wit it is also the essence of retort, and a confutation ten times the length of the work it is intended to demolish is a failure.

In 1530-1531 Tindale printed the Pentateuch at Antwerp at
the press of Johann Hoochstraten under the fictitious imprint of "Marlborough," from which press a number of other books, including his three indictments of the Roman hierarchy, were also issued, the latest of which, *The Practice of Prelates*, excites the fury of King Henry, since in it Tindale had the temerity to denounce the King's divorce proceedings.

In 1531 the translation of the Book of Jonah was completed, and this also was probably printed at Antwerp.

Feeling that his security was now very precarious Tindale quit the Low Countries and for many months wandered up and down Germany like a fugitive, hoping in that way to baffle the ingenuity of his pursuers.

Finally he determined to settle in Antwerp, there to watch the progress of events in his native land. Here he returned with all his energies to his great work of translation. In 1534 he re-issued the Pentateuch, but the year is specially memorable for the publication of the revision of the New Testament, which was printed at Antwerp by Martin Emperour. This was the revised text which formed the basis of all the subsequent revisions down to and including the Revision of 1881.

In 1535 another revision appeared, "yet once agayne corrected by Willyam Tindale," which is considered to be the last edition to be revised by the translator himself, and forms the basis of the "Thomas Matthew Bible" of 1537.

With the publication of the 1534 Testament Tindale's hopes began to rise after long years of toil and danger. The sky was brightening. For eight years it had been a crime to purchase, sell, or read a copy of the New Testament in the native tongue. Now the persecution had died down and men might even dare to possess the English Bible, and to read it. In some respects England was now a safer place than the Low Countries, where the Inquisition was armed with unrestricted authority to seize all suspected persons, and try, torture, confiscate, and execute without any right of appeal, because Lutheranism had continued to make such rapid strides.

Hitherto Tindale had led a charmed life, but a subtle plot was hatched which could scarcely fail of success. Whilst resident in Antwerp he was the guest of an influential citizen who was able
to shield his visitor from harm so long as he remained inside the house. But in May, 1535, plans were laid to decoy him away from his refuge, when he was seized and hurried away to Vilvorde, a castle some eighteen miles from Antwerp, which was the principal state prison, where he was to spend the last sixteen months of his life.

The trial on the charge of heresy occupied some five or six months, which was accounted for by the customary slow process of written attack and defence. Notwithstanding all the efforts of his friends in England and the Low Countries to procure for him protection he was condemned to death. The verdict had been foreseen. Tindale was in the hands of his unrelenting enemies, and for him there was only one pathway of escape. Sentence of death was passed on him on the 12th of August, 1536. A respite of two months was granted during which Tindale struggled bravely to finish his great work.

In a letter discovered a few years ago, written during his imprisonment to the Governor of the fortress of Vilvorde, Tindale, in touching language, begs for warmer clothing, and that he might be allowed the use of his Hebrew books, Bible, grammar and dictionary.

There is good reason for believing that he left behind him in manuscript a translation of the Books of the Old Testament from Joshua to 2 Chronicles, and that this part of his work was included in the "Thomas Matthew Bible" of 1537, the name "Matthew" probably hiding the identity of Tindale's friend, John Rogers, to whom the manuscripts were entrusted.

On Friday the 6th of October, 1536, Tindale was led forth from his cell, where he had spent so many months, to the place of execution. Being led to the stake, which, as if in derision, was fashioned like a cross, Tindale requested a few moments for private prayer. The request was granted, and in this last act we have fresh proof of the nobility and unselfishness of his character. Death had no terrors for him; he thought not of his own suffering, he was but going home. His warfare accomplished, his labours completed, he but awaited his rest like a brave soldier of Christ.

Raising his eyes to heaven he prayed with all the fervour he
could command: "Lord, open the King of England's eyes," a prayer that was nearer to its answer than the heroic martyr deemed. The faggots were then piled around him, and at a given signal he was first strangled, in accordance with the law, which condemned only Anabaptists to be burned alive, and his body was burned. His unrelenting enemies had succeeded in cutting short his life, but his work was beyond their power. Like the seed of the parable, it has grown into the mightiest of trees. There is scarcely a corner of the globe into which English energy has not penetrated, and wherever the English language is heard there the words in which Tindale gave the Bible to his countrymen are repeated with heart-felt reverence as the holiest and yet the most familiar of words. These words are the first that the opening intellect and faith of the child receives from the lips of its mother, they are the last that tremble upon the lips of the dying man, as he commends his soul to God.

No voice of scandal has ever been raised against William Tindale. There are no black spots in his life, which it has been necessary for his biographers to whitewash. Truth alone can bear the test of time, and the more the life of Tindale is examined the more he is found to be deserving of the love and veneration of his countrymen.