

[William Tyndale: A Biography](#)

by David Daniell

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David Daniell gives a most valuable treatment of William Tyndale (1494-1536), “*the first person to translate the Bible into English from its original Greek and Hebrew and the first to print the Bible in English.*”

Daniell provides a unique perspective on Tyndale, combining expertise in the history of the English Bible with an intimate familiarity with the development and usage of early English (Daniell's Ph.D. is in Shakespeare, whom he has written and taught on for many years). Having authored modern-spelling versions of *Tyndale's New Testament* and *Tyndale's Old Testament*, his familiarity with the details of Tyndale's translation techniques provide valuable insight into the work of this underappreciated contributor to the English Reformation and modern English Bible.

*Daniell discusses Tyndale's achievement as biblical translator and expositor, analyses his writing, examines his stylistic influence on writers from Shakespeare to those of the twentieth century, and explores the reasons why he has not been more highly regarded.*

Like other biographies of Tyndale, Daniell provides detailed information--where it is available--concerning Tyndale's origin, his schooling, and the dates and events which comprise the history of his life. *Unlike* most other treatments of Tyndale, Daniell is positioned to delve into the details of Tyndale's translational work itself.

Perhaps the most valuable contribution of this biography of Tyndale is the evidence it provides regarding Tyndale's capabilities as an exegete and translator--his craftsmanlike usage of both Hebrew and Greek at a time where in-depth knowledge of the original languages was hard to come by, especially in England.

Daniell notes how Tyndale is often relegated as being secondary in importance to other more visible personalities on the stage at the time of the English Reformation:

*Tyndale is today only known in some powerful intellectual circles as an annoyance to the blessed Saint Thomas [More], clinging like a burr to the great man's coat, as if Tyndale's life were meaningless without More. Tyndale is indeed, sometimes cited first of all as 'opponent of Sir Thomas More', with the fact that he gave us our English Bible mentioned among the also-rans, as being of little account. That is absurd.*

Daniell's treatment of Tyndale does away with this inverted priority and establishes Tyndale as a talented craftsman, both theologically and philologically, among those whom God used to bring forth the Reformation. His contribution to the Reformation in England could hardly be overstated.

Throughout Daniell's treatment of Tyndale, one sees a man who is dedicated to producing the Scriptures in the native tongue of his own land while consistently underestimating the

negative reaction his work would engender:

*It is possible for the late twentieth-century reader [of the first page of Tyndale's New Testament] to see it as unexceptional, even mild, and even rather over-obvious, and begin to patronise Tyndale. Yet the page, printed in English in 1525, contained high explosive. Inside the reasonableness of tone, stating the need for a New Testament in English as, to borrow a phrase, a truth universally acknowledged; a truth so obvious that it would be superfluous to explain, and only those who were blind or malicious or mad could deny it, as it would be mad to say that the Bible in English would cause evil, darkness and lying--inside that mildness was found an attack so dangerous that it could only be countered by the most vicious burnings, of books and men and women. These first sentences of Tyndale have a calm that suggests that Tyndale himself does not understand yet that his work, and he himself, will be answered with hatred and burning.*

Daniell spends considerable time examining the textual work of Tyndale in light of the sources available to him at the time: the *Vulgate*, the *Septuagint*, Luther's works, Erasmus' New Testament, and others. He makes a convincing case that Tyndale was not overly dependent upon these other works, but like any good translator, made use of them where and when it made good sense. He pays particular attention to various lines of evidence which show that Tyndale was not slavishly dependent upon Luther:

*The question must now be put: how much of all of that Hebrew-into-English in Genesis is Tyndale's own work? Is it not, as has so often been said, cribbed from Luther? The answer, for example, in that passage from Genesis 42, is absolutely not.*

On other occasions:

*Tyndale sometimes follows Luther closely in grammar and vocabulary. That is not surprising given the limited nature of the Hebrew grammars and lexicons available. The brief comparisons here, however, have shown Tyndale independent in passages in Genesis, and a strong case begins to emerge for detaching Tyndale from Luther even more firmly as translator of Hebrew.*

As an authority on Shakespeare and the usage of early English, Daniell provides great service in an analysis of Tyndale's translational style. Daniell believes that Tyndale's translation work wed a careful knowledge of the original languages together with a overriding desire to render the result in an English which was understandable.. He gives copious examples throughout the work which bring this point home. Thus, Tyndale's translation method could be said to stand somewhere between *formal equivalence* (a close adherence to the words of the original) and *dynamic equivalence* (taking some liberty with the words in order to better convey the sense of what is being said). With few exceptions, Daniell favors Tyndale over the work of alternative translators.

As Tyndale continued his translation work in the Hebrew of the Old Testament--which was to be interrupted by his untimely martyrdom, his visibility of the Hebrew idiom and thought behind the Greek of the New Testament improved. This contributed to changes in his revision of the New Testament published in 1534.

Daniell is no unattached scholar examining the history of Tyndale's time at-a-distance. He correctly understands the importance of Tyndale in the events of his day and the enduring value of his work both as evidenced in the reality of Protestantism in our day and the heritage of the English Bible. The many hours that Daniell has spent in the presence of Tyndale through his works is evident in his reaction to Tyndale's untimely death:

*We have, at this point to utter a cry of grief. It was a scholar of this towering stature, leading all Europe in his knowledge of Greek, matched now by an equal command of Hebrew, uniquely gifted in tuning the sounds of the English language, who had achieved so much but who still had some of his greatest work to do, who was, soon after this, by a vicious, paltry and mean villain tricked to death. It is as if Shakespeare had been murdered by a real-life jealous Iago half-way through his life, and the great tragedies had never been written. Had Tyndale gone on to the poetic books and prophecies of the Old Testament, we should not only have had them in English far surpassing Coverdale's: we would surely also have had even finer tuning of the New Testament, so much of which is directly entwined with those very poems and prophecies. Tyndale's 1534 New Testament is a triumph; but another New Testament, after another eight years or so, would surely have followed. As Tyndale constantly notes, the work of translation never ends.&quot;</i>*

Daniell's biography of Tyndale may be unique in the balance which is given to both the historical setting of Tyndale's life and the philological work of the man in translation. Considering the countless hours which Tyndale must have spent and the priority of his translation work in his own mind, this approach to understanding Tyndale provides great balance. The result is an enduring thankfulness for the sacrifices and dedication of this English Reformer who paid the ultimate price so that we might have the Bible in our vernacular: English. We highly recommend this book which will appeal to those with an interest in the events of the Reformation, the history of the English Bible, or an interest in Bible translation in general.

Reviewed by Tony Garland, [www.SpiritAndTruth.org](http://www.SpiritAndTruth.org).