

## Tenor of Our Times

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# The Evolution of the Bible in the English Language

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# THE WORD OF THE LORD ENDURETH FOREVER: THE EVOLUTION OF THE BIBLE IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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By Austin Taylor

One of God's greatest gifts to mankind is His Word. The author of the Hebrew epistle, through divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit, declared that the Word of God is "is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart"<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps man's greatest gift to his own kind is the ability to read the Word in his own vernacular. The pioneers who fought to make Biblical translation a reality met ferocious resistance to their work; however, they managed to fulfill a prophetic prediction made by William Tyndale: ". . . a boy who drives a plough will know more of the Scriptures than [priests] do." Through the literal blood, sweat, and tears of a few brave men, the translation of the Bible into the English vernacular repositioned the individual's spiritual enlightenment over the wrongfully assumed dominance of corrupted ecclesiastical authority.

Even though Jerome's Latin Vulgate was present in England, the first instance of an attempt to Anglicize the Bible was in the 700's with Caedmon. He wrote poetry inspired by Scripture, however the only surviving piece of his work is a hymn of creation based on Genesis. In her dissertation, *Well and Truly Translated*, Lynne Long states that at the time the Scriptures were introduced in England, there was no literary tradition to translate the Word into, except poetry<sup>2</sup>. Thus, Caedmon used an "established poetic formula...as a vehicle for Bible translation"<sup>3</sup>. Caedmon's writings connected not only to the monks in the monastery,

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<sup>1</sup> Authorized King James Version, Hebrews 4:12

<sup>2</sup> Lynne Long, *Well and Truly Translated: An Exploration of the Processes at Work in Englishing the Bible from the Seventh to the Seventeenth Century* (University of Warwick, 1995), 46.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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but also to the common people, making it easier for people to become familiar with Scripture through poetry.

People, like Aldhelm the Bishop of Sherborne, began to emulate Caedmon, and English Biblical poetry soon sprang up. The Psalms were the first pieces translated from the Latin, and the Psalter was a common teaching book for training priests, in which teachers would often gloss the stanzas to aid the students.<sup>4</sup> The preservation of Caedmon's hymn is due to the Venerable Bede, who included the poem in his 731 *Historia Ecclesiastica*. A historian and clergyman, Bede is responsible for giving us the religious history of the English people, hagiographies, and numerous works on science, history, and calendar dating, specifically, the Anno Domini dating system.

While the manuscripts are no longer available, Bede is said to have diligently translated numerous New Testament passages into Anglo-Saxon.<sup>5</sup> Since the clergy knew little to no Latin, Bede also felt compelled to translate the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer into the vernacular.<sup>6</sup> Bede's follower, Cuthbert, alleged that the final hours of the life of the Venerable Bede were spent frantically trying to complete a translation of the Gospel of John to finish his translation of the Gospels into old English. However, Neil R. Lightfoot points out in his book, *How We Got the Bible*, no such compilation exists today.<sup>7</sup>

Near the end of the ninth century King Alfred the Great made another attempt to provide an English translation because of the

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<sup>4</sup> Ian Williams, "Translators and Translations of the Anglo-Saxon Bible," Encyclopedia Article, 2000, <http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~cpercy/courses/1001Williams.htm>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Clint Banz, "The Anglo-Saxon Translations of the Bible," *Calvary Baptist Theological Journal*, 1990, [https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/cbtj/06-2\\_044.pdf](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/cbtj/06-2_044.pdf), 44-50.

<sup>7</sup> Neil R. Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible* (Grand Rapids: BakerBooks, 1968), 96.

“increased status of Anglo-Saxon language and input into the vernacular literature.”<sup>8</sup> A lifelong scholar, student, and poetry enthusiast, Alfred saw to the rejuvenation of Anglo-Saxon literature. Long mentions Alfred keeping a notebook and translating anything he deemed important into the vernacular.<sup>9</sup>

Alfred the Great is most remembered for giving his people a translation of the first fifty Psalms as well as excerpts from other Biblical books like Exodus and Acts. He began translating these Psalms, which make up what later became known as the Paris Psalter, as part of his own personal devotional studies, but unfortunately, like Bede, he never finished.<sup>10</sup> Alfred also incorporated Holy Writ into legal documents, citing the Decalogue at the preface of his own edicts.<sup>11</sup> While his effort in translation is important, it is really Alfred’s goal of producing an “environment of learning” in English society which makes his contribution so important<sup>12</sup>. Through his efforts in the battlefield to protect the Anglo-Saxon heritage, his support of schools with increased learning in the vernacular, and his strong support of a learned clergy, Alfred managed to incite a pursuit of knowledge that would last centuries after his death in 901.<sup>13</sup>

Alfred’s renaissance in religious education sparked reform all over England throughout the 1000s, and the precipice came in the form of Aelfric of Eynsham. A prolific writer, Aelfric composed Latin homilies and short hagiographies called saints’ lives in addition to

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<sup>8</sup> Long, 49.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>10</sup> Banz, “Anglo-Saxon Translations”, 47

<sup>11</sup> Williams, “Translators and Translations.”

<sup>12</sup> Banz, “Anglo-Saxon Translators”, 48.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

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translating parts of the Bible and other works into English and Latin.<sup>14</sup> Tristan Major notes in his article “Rebuilding the Tower of Babel: Aelfric and Translations,” the ironic reluctance of Aelfric to translate out of the Latin, yet he continued to translate, indicating some sort of internal moral dilemma on whether to translate or not.<sup>15</sup> Aelfric’s numerous translations of Old Testament texts were not only notable for their penmanship and precision, but also because of his motivation and determination to do so, despite his feelings that he should not.

Major points out Aelfric’s fascination with the Tower of Babel and the diaspora following the confounding of language. The idea, not original to Aelfric, was that due to the language barrier, various religions and interpretations sprang up because there was no united understanding through a common tongue. This influenced Aelfric’s concern for his people since they obviously were far removed from the time and culture of Babel.<sup>16</sup> It was out of a fear of losing innocent souls due to ignorance of Latin that motivated Aelfric to create a feasible translation to understand the true meaning of the text-while still avoiding the misinterpretation of Scripture or a departure into heresy by creating some twisted version of the faith. Long also adds the dangers of biblical naivete to Aelfric’s list of apprehensions to translation:

A combination of exegetical writing and translation experience gave him an awareness of the possible dangers of direct translation,

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<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Wilcox, “A Reluctant Translator in Anglo-Saxon England: Ælfric and Maccabees”, *Medieval Association of the Midwest* (January 1993), kb.osu.edu/dspace/handle/1811/71211.1.

<sup>15</sup> Tristan Major, "Rebuilding the Tower of Babel: Ælfric and Bible Translation", *Florilegium* 23, no. 2 (2006), [https://www.academia.edu/446967/Rebuilding\\_the\\_Tower\\_of\\_Babel\\_Ælfric\\_and\\_Bible\\_Translation](https://www.academia.edu/446967/Rebuilding_the_Tower_of_Babel_Ælfric_and_Bible_Translation),48-49.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

particularly of the Old Testament, in a situation where the readers did not have the historical or theological perspective of the difference between the Old Law and the New.<sup>17</sup>

Even though his conscience at times felt like objecting to the work he was doing, it was out of sincere care and concern for the souls of his fellow Englishmen that pushed him to continue. It is important to note that Aelfric's reluctance to translate is not based upon the convictions of the Catholics that would follow him in later centuries (translation would undermine Church authority), but rather the weight of responsibility in determining the reader's interpretation through translating (the audience's ability to comprehend the text correctly or incorrectly, leading to the ultimate condition of their souls).<sup>18</sup> Lightfoot sheds some light into the period after Aelfric, beginning with the Norman conquest of 1066:

The...conquest brought about many changes in England. Chief among these was a modification of the language, now known as Middle English. It was not until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries before parts of the Bible were put in English, and here the names ... William of Shoreham and Richard Rolle stand out. It was their work on the Psalms in the first half of the fourteenth century that planted the seed of a struggle which was to last for two centuries in putting the Bible in the hands of the common people.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Long, 81.

<sup>18</sup> Wilcox, "Aelfric and Maccabees", 11.

<sup>19</sup> Lightfoot, 97.

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The Catholic Church, as it grew as an ecclesiastical and political institution, began to narrow its thinking on the permission to translate and distribute copies of the Bible to laity. Out of fear of being “found out” on the numerous instances of corruption within the Church, the ability to own, read, and study the Bible was reserved only for the educated clergy, who knew Latin.

The Church only seems to be interested in your money and your confession... If you even dared to speak to the local priest about finding God’s will in the Bible, you would be rebuffed for asking such a question! Besides that, he simply would not know the answer. He only read the Bible in Latin, and only those portions that were important for the liturgy. He had never read the whole Bible himself—ever. And besides, his Latin skills were not very good—just enough to mutter a few prayers in church from memory.<sup>20</sup>

The Church then sought out to crush any attempts made by dissenters who had realized the error within the cathedrals by ultimately charging one’s life in return for an illegal copy of the Bible.<sup>21</sup> Bible translation would now have to be done underground, and under very cautious pretenses.

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<sup>20</sup> Daniel Wallace, “From Wycliffe to James: The Period of Challenge”, Bible.org. <https://bible.org/seriespage/1-wycliffe-king-james-period-challenge>.

<sup>21</sup> Long, 140.

A man more than willing to take his chances was John Wycliffe. He held the position that no matter of who they are, all common people have value.<sup>22</sup> Lightfoot quotes Wycliffe as saying, “No man was so rude a scholar but that he might learn the words of the Gospel according to his simplicity.”<sup>23</sup> Contrary to the beliefs of the Church, Long says that Wycliffe “promoted the Scriptures as a more secure authority than that of the Church and rejected the idea of the Bible's exclusivity.”<sup>24</sup> It was this conviction that made Wycliffe begin the massive task of giving the world the first complete translation of the Bible into English in 1382. This work was a rendering of the Vulgate into English, not the original Greek and Hebrew. Long stresses that Wycliffe’s intention on producing an English translation was not necessarily to equip all of England with a copy of Scripture, but rather to reposition his idea of the individual’s right to let Divine Scripture be his guide, as superior to the edicts of man or an ecclesiastic body. Long likens this to the relationship of first century readers and the connection made through the common language of koine Greek.<sup>25</sup>

FF Bruce contends that the translation of the text out of the Vulgate made for a more awkward read, saying that the result was “not characteristically English.” Due to the more advanced grammar and syntax in Latin than in English—and being a translation of a translation—Wycliffe’s text was accurate, yet unusually wordy.<sup>26</sup> The common acceptance, even before Wycliffe’s time, was that the only proper way to translate was literal, given that Bible is the Law of God.

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<sup>22</sup> Lightfoot, 97.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Long, 141.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>26</sup> F.F. Bruce, “John Wycliffe and the English Bible,” *Churchman* 98, no. 4 (1984),  
[http://archive.churchsociety.org/churchman/documents/Cman\\_098\\_4\\_Bruce.pdf](http://archive.churchsociety.org/churchman/documents/Cman_098_4_Bruce.pdf)



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Purvey later leaned towards an idiomatic rendering rather than the rigid literal translation during his revision.<sup>27</sup>

Wycliffe's complete rejection of Catholic dogma made life hard. He was fired from his teaching position at Oxford. Had it not been for his loyal followers, the Lollards, who were against the clerical system, he very well could have ended up being burned at the stake for his radical beliefs. Wycliffe managed to live a long life amidst the persecution, and eventually died of natural causes. His followers, however, faced a different fate: many were executed at the stake, often with their teacher's translation in hand.<sup>28</sup> Years following his death, on top of the execution of his followers, Wycliffe's body was to be exhumed and pronounced heretical, burned in a ritual bonfire and his ashes were spread over wide areas.<sup>29</sup> Wycliffe's efforts in providing an English Bible would go unmatched for roughly another 150 years.

Wyclif, by means of something as simple as a translation, challenged the authority and hypocrisy of the ecclesiastical system of his day in terms which could not be ignored, misrepresented, or manipulated by those in a position of power. Small wonder that the idea of translation caused such a storm and became such a controversial issue.<sup>30</sup>

The "intertestamental" years between the two largest contributors of the English Bible (Wycliffe and Tyndale) remains almost completely silent as far as additions on the translation front. Within the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Wallace, "From Wycliffe to James".

<sup>29</sup> Earl Brown, "A Short History of Our English Bible," *WRS Journal* 10, no. 2 (August 2003), [wrs.edu/Materials\\_for\\_Web\\_Site/Journals/10-2\\_Aug-2003/Brown - Short History English Bible.pdf](http://wrs.edu/Materials_for_Web_Site/Journals/10-2_Aug-2003/Brown_-_Short_History_English_Bible.pdf),

course of those 150 or so years, however, many important events took place that primed not only Tyndale's motives for a people's text, but also an audience who would devour it. The Great Papal Schism in 1378 left parishioners puzzled over who the exact representative of the Christ was on earth, with three men at once claiming Divine Succession.<sup>30</sup>

Caxton and Gutenberg's presses sparked demand for early printed editions of the Vulgate and other non-English editions in the 1470s and 80s.<sup>31</sup> The first printed edition of the New Testament in its native tongue of Greek was published by Erasmus of Rotterdam in 1516, and a year later, Martin Luther nailed his grievances to the Wittenberg Church's door, sparking the Protestant Reformation, along with the monk's own translation of Scripture in the Germanic vernacular in 1523.<sup>32</sup>

William Tyndale's fascination with Lutheran theology and Luther's translation served as a catalyst for his undertaking of what would become the first real translation of the Hebrew and Greek into English.<sup>33</sup> In a now famous meeting between a priest and Tyndale upon his accusations of spreading Luther's heresy, Tyndale was told "'We had better be without God's laws than the Pope's.'" Tyndale responded: "I defy the Pope, and all his laws; and if God spares my life, ere many years, I will cause the boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scriptures than thou dost!" And that he did. In fact, Tyndale spent time in Worms after fleeing Cologne with fragments of Scripture, where he would finish his translation of the New Testament in 1526.<sup>34</sup> Copies were immediately sent to England, and the public came out in droves to purchase them. However, not everyone thought highly of Tyndale's work; Catholic sympathizers openly condemned Tyndale's Bible, and often confiscated and destroyed the copies distributed. Outspoken critics

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<sup>30</sup> Long, 143.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 198-99.

<sup>32</sup> Wallace, "From Wycliffe to James".

<sup>33</sup> Long, 249.

<sup>34</sup> Lightfoot, 98.

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such as Thomas More accused the work of heresy in doctrine, mistakes in translation, and manipulation of the text.<sup>35</sup> These criticisms, however, did not stop Tyndale from trying to get his people access to the Words of Life.

Tyndale, who was working to finish the Old Testament translation, was apprehended by Church authorities, and found guilty of heresy in 1556. The penalty was to be burned at the stake.<sup>36</sup> As the flames consumed Tyndale, his dying words are reported as being “LORD, open the eyes of the King of England!”<sup>37</sup> Little did Tyndale know that God would indeed open the eyes of the King, during the Reign of James I.

Many editions of the Bible came after Tyndale’s. Miles Coverdale and Matthew used Tyndale’s work as a basis for their respective translations, and the Coverdale Bible managed to circulate around England without any objections from the Church or State.<sup>38</sup>

The Great Bible was published in 1539 and received a blessing from Henry VIII. It is the first “authorized” (not by God, but by the ruling authorities) Bible. This was also done by Miles Coverdale. It was very large and very heavy, hence the nickname “Great.” This Bible was in such high demand that the clergy had to chain it to the pulpit to ensure that it would be there for use in the next service. People were so desperate to read the Word, that they stole copies of the Great Bible. This later led to its colloquial name: “The Chained Bible.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Long, 251.

<sup>36</sup> Clyde Weber Votaw, "Martyrs for the English Bible," *The Biblical World* 52, no. 3,  
doi:[www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/3135994?ref=search-gateway:88ce53dfc5965708b10cd1bac05f12a8](https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/3135994?ref=search-gateway:88ce53dfc5965708b10cd1bac05f12a8)

<sup>37</sup> Lightfoot, 98.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>39</sup> Wayne Fancher, “Translations of the Bible”, Airport Loop church of Christ,  
[churchatairportloop.com/media/uploads/sermons/2016/03/121315am\\_Translations\\_of\\_the\\_BibleWayne\\_Fanche\\_r.mp3](http://churchatairportloop.com/media/uploads/sermons/2016/03/121315am_Translations_of_the_BibleWayne_Fanche_r.mp3).

Perhaps the most popular translation after the Tyndale era was the Geneva Bible, published in 1560 by William Whittingham, brother-in-law to John Calvin.<sup>40</sup> Long states it was widely received because “the good scholarship contained in the text and partly because of the practical convenience of the way in which it was presented.”<sup>41</sup> The production of this Bible mimicked the earlier days of secretive translation in the days of Luther and Tyndale, and the agenda to spread Protestant theology around. Mary I was a staunch Catholic who began reigning in England.<sup>42</sup> Under her auspices, the effects of the Protestant Reformation were reversed, and as she sought to return to what she believed to be authoritative religion, she “burned books ... as well as Protestants.”<sup>43</sup> Despite her efforts to squash the vernacular trend among her subjects, she simply could not do it. Long describes the popularity of the Geneva Bible:

... The ordinary people... were now used to having access to books in the vernacular: the psalter, the official prayer book... the Geneva New Testament was easy to read and carry and the text was divided into manageable units for easy reference.<sup>44</sup>

This Bible became the most widely used translation of its time, and it is the Bible of Shakespeare and the version brought to America by the Puritans and pilgrims.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Long, 42.

<sup>42</sup> Eric Norman Simons, "Mary I," Encyclopedia Britannica, [www.britannica.com/biography/Mary-I](http://www.britannica.com/biography/Mary-I).

<sup>43</sup> Wallace, "From Wycliffe to James."

<sup>44</sup> Long, 311.

<sup>45</sup> Fancher, "Translations of the Bible".

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To counter the popular Geneva Bible, the officials within the English Church began to revise the Great Bible to water down the Geneva's teachings on Protestantism, namely the doctrines of Calvinism. After completion in 1568, the result was the Bishop's Bible.<sup>46</sup> Even though it was highly lauded within the ecumenical circles, it never matched the popularity of the Geneva Bible.

By this point, the Catholic Church began to cease persecuting Bible translators and decided to take an opportunity to attempt at a Catholic-sanctioned translation as well.<sup>47</sup> The Douay-Rheims Bible was released under Catholic blessing in 1582. However, this translation had a major problem: you could not read it. The text was too "intellectual", meaning that only the translators and the highly educated could actually comprehend it.<sup>48</sup> This was a major issue in providing a feasible translation because a translation only serves its purpose when it is not only produced in the language of its audience, but also intended for everyone who speaks that language.<sup>49</sup> This was indeed the first Catholic edition of an English Bible, but it was translated out of the Latin Vulgate, rather than original languages.<sup>50</sup>

If only Tyndale knew that God would answer his prayer in the year 1611 to "open the eyes of the King of England." The Authorized Version, better known as the King James Version, sought out to do what every translation tried to accomplish: provide every single person with a translation that was suitable for all parties.<sup>51</sup> The new revision of the Bishop's Bible came under the Leadership of King James I who personally sat in meetings with his council on translating. The King and

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<sup>46</sup> Lightfoot, 100.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Long, 165.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Lightfoot, 100.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 101.

Bishop Bancroft created guidelines for the 47 scholars to follow.<sup>52</sup> Lightfoot mentions that James stressed the importance of leaving unnecessary comments and additions out of this translation to better appease a larger demographic.<sup>53</sup> Work commenced in 1607, and in 1611 the translation was finished. The Bible was dedicated to James (hence the name the “King James” Bible) and lauded for the work done in support of uniform service within the churches.

Modifications and revisions began as early as 1613, and rapidly, the KJV soon became *the* English Bible. Lightfoot lists several reasons as to why this version gained so much momentum, with the primary reasons being advances in Biblical language studies since the age of Tyndale, and the era being the height of scholarship and academic pursuance.<sup>54</sup> It is no mistake that this translation has lasted for centuries, being the last major translation of the Bible until the nineteenth century.<sup>55</sup> The King James Bible has stood the test of time, and served to be an excellent translation for its time.

The story of the English Bible is a fascinating, inspiring, and unfortunately at times agonizing account of the battle for giving the populace the Word of God. Even from the earliest traces of Biblical literature in the age of Caedmon, the Scriptures have connected with people on a personal and spiritual level. Despite the medieval Catholic Church’s wrongful denial of the laity’s ability to experience the Words of the Bible in their vernacular, Christ’s words still ring true: “Ye shall know the Truth; and the Truth shall make you free.”<sup>56</sup> It was the profound faith of men who were willing to risk and give their lives for the sake of Truth, and it is nothing short of a miracle that each person today can hold, own, privately read, and interpret the Bible—the

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<sup>52</sup> Long, 343.

<sup>53</sup> Lightfoot, 101.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 102.

<sup>55</sup> Fancher “Translations of the Bible.”

<sup>56</sup> Authorized King James Version, John 8:32

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foundation of faith and the Law upon which mankind will be judged. Perhaps, in some sort of clouded Divine Providence, the LORD secured the right when he said through Peter: *“But the word of the Lord endureth forever: and this is the word which is preached among you.”*<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> The Geneva Bible, 1 Peter 1:25.