

Tower of Babel

Wycliffite Bible, Genesis Chap. XI.

John Wyclif was a highly educated priest who received a doctorate from Oxford in 1372. As his career advanced he grew increasingly unhappy with the ecclesiastical abuses he perceived, called for reform, and was rebuked by his superiors in 1382. About 1378 he began work on his translation of the Bible, which became, with the help of his followers after his death in 1384, the first complete Bible in English. The excerpt from the book of Genesis below gives parallel passages from two versions, one completed shortly before Wyclif's death and the other about a decade later.

early version c. 1382

later version c. 1395

1 Forsothe the erthe was of oo lip, and of the same wordis.

1 Forsothe the lond was of o langage, and of the same speche.

2 And whan men shulden go fro the est,

2 And whanne thei zeden forth fro the eest,

thei founden a feeld in the lond of Sennaer, and thei dwelleden in it.

thei fonden a feeld in the lond of Sennaar, and dwelliden ther ynne.

3 And the tother seide to his neizbore, Cometh, and make we tile stoons,

3 And oon seide to his neizbore, Come ze, and make we tiel stonys,

and sethe we hem with fier; and thei hadden tiles for stoons,

and bake we tho with fier; and thei hadden tiel for stonus,

and towz cley for syment.

and pitche for morter;

4 And thei seiden, Cometh, and make we to vs a citee and a towr,

4 and seiden, Come ze, and make we to vs a citee and tour,

whos heizt fulli ateyne vnto heuene;

whos hiznesse stretche til to heuene;

and halow we oure name, or we ben dyuydid into alle londis.

and make we solempne oure name bifor that we be departid in to alle londis.

5 The Lord forsothe descendide, that he myzte se the citee and the towre,

5 Forsothe the Lord cam down to se the citee and tour,

the which the children of Adam bildeden;
which the sones of Adam bildiden.

6 and seide, Se! the puple is oon, and oo lippe is to alle,
6 And he seide, Lo! the puple is oon, and o langage is to alle,

and this thei han bigunnen to make, ne thei wolen leue of fro her thenkyngis,
and thei han bigunne to make this, nethir thei schulen ceesse of her thouztis,

to the tyme that thei han fulfillid hem in dede;
til thei fillen tho in werk;

7 thanne come 3e, descende we, and confoude we there the tung of hem,
7 therfor come 3e, go we doun, 7 and scheende we there the tunge of hem,

that noon here the vois of his neizbore.
that ech man here not the voys of his neizbore.

8 And so the Lord deuydide hem fro that place into alle londis;
8 And so the Lord departide hem fro that place in to alle londis;

and thei sesyden to bilde the citee.
and thei cessiden to bielde a cytee.

9 And therfor was callid the name of it Babel,
9 And therfor the name therof was clepid Babel,

for there was confoundid the lippe of al the erthe;
for the langage of al erthe was confoundide there;

and fro thens the Lord disparpoilide hem vpon the face of alle regiouns.
and fro thennus the Lord scaterede hem on the face of alle cuntrees.

QUESTIONS

1. Note where the two translations differ in the basic SVO word order.
Does one look more "modern" than the other?
2. What are the imperative constructions?
3. What construction is used where we might use "Let us . . ."