

Why believe the Bible?

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Setting the stage

Government agents had been on his trail for years, but he had always managed to evade them, slipping from one address to another under cover of darkness and with the help of sympathetic friends; but the net was closing in ...

Motivated by a hefty expense allowance from which he probably hoped to pocket a tidy balance as a reward, a special agent enrolled in a local university, wormed his way into all the right circles and eventually got on friendly terms with his target. Claiming one day that he had lost his purse, he persuaded his victim to buy him lunch in the local town—and even to lend him some money—but as they arrived at a pre-arranged eating place he gave an agreed signal to two waiting officers and his companion was arrested and flung into the state prison.

Eighteen months later, wasted and weakened by his confinement in a dark, foul-smelling cell infested with rats and other vermin, the prisoner was brought to trial. With everything already cut and dried before the court assembled, the sentence was a foregone conclusion. Two months

later he was led out to the southern gate of the town, where a large pillar of wood in the form of a cross had been erected in an open space. A heavy chain hung from the top and a hemp noose was threaded through a hole in the upright. In front of a fascinated crowd that included a posse of local dignitaries, the prisoner's feet were tied to the upright, the iron chain clamped to his neck and the noose placed at his throat.

Piles of brushwood and logs were heaped around him, and then the executioner stepped forward. One brutal jerk on the noose and the prisoner's strangled body hung on the cross. One of the dignitaries lit the tinder, then sat back with the others to watch their victim burn. When they had seen enough an officer was ordered to cut the body down and let it fall into the blazing fire. The show was over, and the spectators left to get on with the rest of their day.

This happened early one morning in October 1536 (nobody is sure of the exact day) in the grounds of Vilvorde Castle, six miles north of Brussels. The victim's name was William Tyndale—but what was his crime? Treason? Threatening national security? Plotting to overthrow the government? Terrorism? Serial murder? None of the above! Officially, the long list of charges was said to amount to an indictment for heresy but, stripped of sophistry, the crowning 'crime' for which Tyndale was forced into exile and eventually hounded to death was this: *he*

translated a book from Hebrew and Greek into English. Nor was it a book promoting anarchy, occultism, sedition, violence, or anything else likely to have an adverse effect on people's lives. Instead, it commended stable government, justice, peace, integrity and all the virtues one would wish to find in society. The book concerned was the Bible.

Tyndale's story is terrible but in no way unique and it is safe to say that no other book in history has been so hated, vilified and attacked. In the fourth century the Roman emperors Diocletian and Julian ordered their soldiers to destroy every copy they could find. In 1382 the first ever English translation faced vicious opposition and reading it was prohibited by law. When the first copies of Tyndale's work were smuggled back into England they were destroyed as 'pernicious merchandise'. In country after country it has been burned and banned and its translators persecuted, tortured and murdered. In recent times Marxist regimes, which at one stage dominated well over one-third of the world's population, mounted massive attacks on the Bible, destroying millions of copies in every nation they governed. Even in today's so-called tolerant age, the Bible remains a target of hatred and abuse. In some countries it is a criminal offence to sell or distribute it. Step off a plane with a Bible under your arm in these places and you would be in prison before you could reach Immigration.