The 6th annual Naseeb Shaheen Memorial Lecture will be held Thursday, October 22, 2015 in the University Center Theatre on the University of Memphis main campus. The lecture will begin at 6:00 p.m. and will be preceded by a reception at 5:30 p.m. This event is co-sponsored by the Marcus Orr Center for the Humanities. Our Lecturer will be Nicholas Watson, Henry B. and Anne M. Cabot Professor of English, Harvard University, who will speak on:

“The Word of God in the Mother Tongue,

or

Why most of what we assume about the history of Bible translation is wrong”

If you consult that oracle called the Internet about the history of English Bible translation, you will learn from fairly respectable-looking sources that there were no Bibles in English until the rise of the “morning star of the Reformation,” John Wyclif, in the late fourteenth century. Before this time, the Bible was still “trapped” in a language that few could understand, Latin, jealously guarded from the direct gaze of the laity by the church. Even after Wyclif, the English Bible was hard to find, since it had been banned by the authorities. The true story of the English Bible thus begins only with William Tyndale, who died for his evangelical faith and whose translations of much of the Old Testament and all of the New Testament were an important influence on King James I’s Authorized Version of 1611.

The historical account told in most corners of the Internet is almost exactly the one laid out by John Foxe in his Book of Martyrs, whose first version was published in 1563. It has been retold down the centuries with few major changes by people of different religious beliefs and none. It forms an important part of British national history and of the religious pre-history of the United States.

Yet there is an enormous body of vernacular writing from medieval England dedicated to the translation and exposition of the Christian Scriptures. The Scriptures were at the heart of vernacular preaching. They were fundamental to vernacular catechesis. They were a constant source of vernacular devout entertainment. We know of no full English Bibles before the late fourteenth century. But the Bible was not kept from the laity, either in practice or in theory. Vernacular Bible translation was never banned; it was basic to Christian teaching. The story of English Bible translation begins a full seven centuries before Wyclif. Most of what we assume about its history is quite wrong.

In this talk, I will discuss how the story came about and how it has influenced historical scholarship down the centuries. I will describe the slender sense in which parts of the story might be considered true. But I will focus on the many ways in which it is misleading, and why it matters that we get it right. This will involve looking not only at the history of medieval English Bible versions before and after Wyclif but also at a range of associated topics, including the use of French in medieval England, the development of the one-volume Bible in the thirteenth century, church legislation, and medieval theories of translation.

Nicholas Watson is the Henry B. and Anne M. Cabot Professor of English and Chair of Medieval Studies at Harvard University. He has degrees from Oxford, Cambridge, and the University of Toronto. He is the single or joint author of eight books, including Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority (1991), Anchoritic Spirituality: “Ancrene Wisse” and Associated Works (1991), The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280-1520 (1999), Writings of Julian of Norwich: “A Vision Showed to a Devout Woman” and “A Revelation of Love” (2006), and John of Morigny’s “Liber florum celestis doctrine” (in press). He has also published more than fifty essays and articles. At present he is completing a study entitled Vernacular Theology Before the English Reformation (vol. 1 Balaam’s Ass, vol. 2 Honey from Stones).