

Sunday, October 4, 2020—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
 Lesson 121 The Great Bible: Assessing Its Origin, Impetus, & Production

Introduction

- The last three Lessons have been devoted to studying John Rogers and the Matthew’s Bible. In doing so, we have covered the following points:
 - The Matthew’s Bible: The Complete Work of William Tyndale (Lesson 118)
 - The Matthew’s Bible: The First Licensed English Bible (Lesson 119)
 - The Matthew’s Bible: Assessing the Scholarship of John Rogers (Lesson 120)
- Today, in Lesson 121 we want to conclude our discussion of John Rogers and begin looking at the origin and impetus for the Great Bible.

The Death of John Rogers

- In Lesson 118 we noted that John Rogers was the first person to be executed by Queen Mary (Bloody Mary) in 1555 when she assumed the English throne. Recall that Rogers had fled England for Antwerp in 1534 where he met William Tyndale. After six years in Antwerp, Rogers left Belgium for Germany where he met Philip Melancthon and served as the Pastor of a Lutheran congregation before returning to England in 1548. Recall these words from the pen of Professor David Daniell:
 - “Rogers remained in Meldorf [Germany] for four and a half years, until the spring of 1548. . . In January 1547 Edward VI came to the English throne, and Rogers set about returning home. He left Meldorf, to the evident grief of his people, probably in the spring of 1548. By August he was living in London in the house of the Reforming merchant and publisher Edward Whitchurch.” (Daniell, 191-192)
- Regarding these years, Dr. Donald L. Brake adds:
 - “Returning to England in 1548, Rogers lectured at St. Paul’s Cathedral while continuing his association with the printer, Edward Whitchurch, another exile. He was placed under house arrest for seditious preaching in 1553 and burned at the stake in 1555, the first martyr under the reign of Bloody Mary.” (Brake, 128)
- Brake goes on to give the following account of Rogers’ execution:
 - “Freed from the bonds of prison and its horrors, John Rogers was led to the stake. The bails of sticks soon to be set ablaze promised him the rewards of his faith. He had been delivered long ago from the fear of death. Confident of the promise of the Master he had served for many years, he was soon to meet his Savior. With a mocking in his voice, the sheriff bawled, “Will you recant of your abominable doctrine?”

“That which I have preached I will seal with my blood,” the worn, feeble voice replied.

“Then you are a heretic,” shouted his captors.

“That shall be known at the day of judgement,” Rogers confidently spoke by now in a voice no more than a whisper.

“Well, I will never pray for you,” the sheriff threatened.

“But I will pray for you,” came the same confident reply.

They continued their path toward the hideous goal with Rogers quietly singing the Psalms. They were soon met by his wife and eleven children. Rogers showed no sorrow but cheerfully and steadfastly walked to the stake where he was burned to death in the presence of his family and a great number of onlookers giving praises and thanks. Truly a life well lived.

It is estimated that Bloody Mary was responsible for 290 deaths during her reign. None was more impressive than how John Rogers faced his horrible death.” (Brake, 130)

- Before beginning my studies to teach these lessons, I knew very little about John Rodgers or the Matthew’s Bible. I now believe that the Matthew’s Bible is perhaps the most important and overlooked Bible in the line of progression that culminated with the King James Bible in 1611. Rogers is responsible for propagating the Tyndallian translational tradition that would give birth to William Shakespeare and the generation of the King James translators.

The Great Bible: Assessing Its Origin, Impetus, & Production

- Brake describes the situation as it pertains to the English Bible as 1537 gave way to 1538:
 - “By the end of 1537, England had two authorized Bibles [Matthew’s was “licensed” whereas the Great Bible was “authorized.]. King Henry VIII and Vicar-General Cromwell encouraged the reading of the Bible. Some preferred the Matthew’s Bible while others read the cheaper quarto edition of Coverdale. As is often the case, there were those who felt the reading of the Bible should be from one approved standard Bible. The notes of the Matthew’s Bible offended many. A Bible, some insisted, should be placed in every church where it could be chained and proclaimed to the people without the confusion of misleading notes.” (Brake, 130-131)
- This is interesting to consider, given the current situation with the English Bible. In the 21st century, when translations abound, they are applauded for the cultural relevance and ease of reading. It was not so in the late 1530s when the English speaking world was first granted the opportunity to read the Bible without penalty following the King’s licensing of the Matthew’s Bible. At that time, people were calling for a standard text that everyone could read that would facilitate common understanding. As we will see later in this class, the same situation existed in the early 17th century when the King James Bible was translated.

- In the late 1530s it was Cromwell who stepped forward to argue for one standard text.
 - “Cromwell stepped forward to support a standardized text that would be more acceptable to the bishops and clergy. They were also concerned about a variety of translations and accompanying notes that could be confusing or misleading. Cromwell chose Miles Coverdale, a proven friend of the court, to undertake the new translation.” (Brake, 131)
- Regarding these actions on the part of Cromwell, Dr. David Daniell states the following in his book *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*:
 - “Cromwell solved the problem [of the objectionable marginal notes] by initiating with Cranmer’s encouragement, a revision of ‘Matthew’s Bible.’ It was to be a very large and unmissable folio in every church, prominent and easy to read either alone or to a crowd. Grafton and Whitchurch were to publish it. The printing was to be done on the presses of Francois Regnault in Paris, superior to any in England. . . The revision of the text would be minimal, but most of the marginal notes would be removed—partly because they do not belong in a volume intended to be read aloud in church, and not only during services: but partly also because Cromwell, to succeed, needed to keep hostility low. Conservative bishops were perpetually suspicious of reformers’ annotations, though easy investigation shows that almost all of them are simple exposition or explanation.” (Daniell, 200)
- As mentioned above by Dr. Brake, the task of revising the Matthew’s Bible fell to Miles Coverdale.
 - “The revising was to be done by Miles Coverdale. This was an inspired choice. True, he lacked Hebrew and Greek: but two-thirds of ‘Matthew’s’ was Tyndale, who was reliable. Coverdale was obviously a good Latinist. Tweaking the Bible, especially the non-Tyndale half of the Old Testament, back towards a ‘Latin original’ would calm the most reactionary critics, those who still maintained that Hebrew and Greek were subversive interlopers. Moreover, Coverdale’s skill with English spoken rhythms would ensure that the Bible in English sounded well in stone churches.” (Daniell, 200)
- The bulk of the work to produce the Great Bible was conducted in Paris as it was believed that French paper and printing techniques were superior to anything England had to offer. Once again, Dr. Daniell offers the most thorough treatment of the subject matter:
 - “Coverdale went to Paris. Work began. In May 1538 printing was started. Coverdale and the English overseers at the press reported that they were pleased with progress. On 23 June, they sent Cromwell some finished sheets, with an explanation of the principles of translation and editing being used. Richard Grafton, who was there, then complained to Cromwell of the inhibiting and hostile interference of the English ambassador to France. This was the Bishop of Winchester, Stephen Gardiner, no less, a man always hostile to reform as it showed itself in the English Bible. Grafton also reported that costs were outrunning provision. Cromwell sent 600 marks of his own. He convinced the king that he should recall Gardiner. Bonner was nominated Bishop of London and the new ambassador. He was encouraging, and kept Cromwell informed of the good progress of

the great project. On 12 September 1538, Grafton and Coverdale wrote to Cromwell that the work would soon be finished. The English community in Paris under Coverdale was showing solidarity. Cromwell issued his famous Second Injunctions, requiring that ‘a Bible of the largest volume’ in English be set up in every parish by Christmas 1538. So confident was Cromwell that in his manuscript draft he altered Christmas to All Saints’ Day (30 November) bringing forward the requirement by a month.

Then things began to go seriously wrong. In Paris one of the English team was accused of heresy. Bonner reported that some of the English bishops were working with the French court to halt the printing. In London the king altered the terms of the royal warrant, unfavorably. The cause of what was obviously a harmonized attack on the English printing is not known. Coverdale wrote from Paris on 13 December 1538 that some of the 2,500 finished copies had been confiscated by the Inquisition. The work was stopped. What had been printed was seized for burning. Grafton reported

Not only the same bible being XXVC in number were seized and made confiscate, but also the printer, merchants and correctors with great jeopardy of their lives escaped.

Grafton and Whitchurch, with the other members of the English team, fled to London. There seems to have been direct pressure on the French Inquisitor General from the Vatican, whence came on 24 December 1538 a papal Instruction that Bibles corruptly translated into English were either to be burned or prevented from being printed. The politics were intricate. The cause might not have been purely a conservative attempt in Catholic Europe to halt reform, nor even a desire by some English bishops to thwart Cromwell.” (Daniell, 200-201)

- Immediately on learning of the seizure of the Bibles in Paris as well as the flight of the English team, Cromwell met with the French ambassador in London, Castillon.
 - “He [Cromwell] briefed the ambassador on the Bible project, mentioning his own investment of 600 marks in the undertaking while broadly hinting that immediate delivery of the sheets might ease the way toward a settlement of other matters then at issue between England and France.
 - Castillon reported to the Constable of France—who, according to the Imperial Ambassador at the English court, Chapuys, had been the mover of the seizure of the Bible printing in the first place. Cromwell meanwhile, in a letter from Bonner dated 1 January, heard that Francis I had promised to return the books. In February Bonner received from the Constable his reluctant willingness to overlook the heresy and the bureaucratic errors—‘the royal license had been given on the wrong form’—and be rid of the type, printers and even the paper, so that the book could be completed in England. This willingness did not extend to what had been printed. Grafton and Whitchurch returned to Paris, to look for the printed sheets. Foxe tells a story that a corrupt French official had sold everything seized, four vats full of unbound printed sheets, for his own profit. The buyer was a Paris haberdasher, who wanted them ‘to lap hats in.’ Grafton and Whitchurch found the Inquisition had burned some of the bound copies, and not all

the unbound. They returned to England with unused paper, the type, the salvaged unbound Bible, and the French craftsmen. Those rescued sheets were of the Old Testament as far as Job (just over halfway through), and the New Testament as far as I Peter (nine-tenths complete.). Early in April 1539, fresh printing began in Grey Friars in London, then in Cromwell's hands. Three thousand copies of the Great Bible were ready, mixing Paris and London printings, by the end of April, as stated at the end of the bound copies." (Daniell, 202-203)

- Dr. Daniell reports that while 3,000 copies were finished by the end of April 1539, none were sold until November:
 - "... Cromwell's hold on power was becoming slippery, but the delay seems more to have been because he was negotiating for the almost 2,500 sets of unbound copies still in the hands of the Inquisitor General. . . The exact details are not fully known, but Grafton went again to Paris early in November 1539, and the strong likelihood is that he came back 'with the balance of the Paris printing.' Cromwell could not meet the demand created by the injunctions until he had the Paris copies in his control, nor could he risk repetition of the failure to supply the parishes in 1536. With the copies shipped from France, on top of the first Grey Friars printing, a second printing of three thousand copies in March or April 1540, the great Injunctions were filled." (Daniell, 203)
- Shortly after fulfilling his purpose of furnishing every parish church in England with a copy of the Bible in the vernacular tongue, Cromwell's political enemies moved against him to have him executed.
 - "Cromwell raised to the peerage, as Earl of Essex. Yet even as he succeeded, his permanent enemies, the Duke of Norfolk and Stephen Gardiner, Bishop of Winchester, were moving against him in Parliament, the consideration of the Act for Uniformity in Opinion, the Six Articles. Only weeks after his Bible began to be set up in parishes, on 10 June 1540, the new Earl of Essex was arrested at the Council Table on charges of heresy and treason. The articles of his accusation were dominated by items charging him with introducing and maintaining dangerous heresies, including Lutheran and Anabaptist doctrines. The embarrassing failure of all that was left of his attempt to secure imperial or French allies against the papal bull of Henry's excommunication, in the king's disastrous marriage to Anne of Cleves six months before, 6 January 1540, had not helped—and now in the royal eye was Catherine Howard, niece of the Duke of Norfolk... He was executed, without trial, on 28 July." (Daniell, 203-204)

The Great Bible: What's In a Name?

- The Great Bible gets its name from its size as it was produced to fulfill Cromwell's injunction which reads:
 - "A proclamation, ordered by the King's majesty, with the advice of his honorable council for the Bible of the largest and greatest volume, to be had in every church." (Brake, 137)

- Regarding the size of the Great Bible Professor Daniell states:
 - “The popular name for this volume, the Great Bible, is perhaps justified by the page size of 337 by 235 mm (roughly 14 by 9 inches). Coverdale’s 1535 Bible measures 278 by 186 mm (roughly 11 by 7 inches), but ‘Matthew’s’ 1537 Bible is 302 by 215 mm (roughly 12 by 9 inches). By comparing with some nineteenth-century Bibles, the book though large, is not huge. Cromwell had ordered the setting up of “the holy bible of the largest volume,” which certainly identifies it; the popular name may have come from this.” (Daniell, 204)
- In addition to its physical size, Dr. Daniell identifies three other ways in which this volume was “Great.”
 - “The Bible’s distinction is three-fold. First, it was the only Bible ever to be ‘authorized’ in Britain. (The Bible that from the late eighteenth century until recently was universally known as the ‘Authorized Version,’ that of 1611, now more frequently known by its American name, the ‘King James Version,’ was never authorized. Passionate believers in its royal authority are soothed by the unlikely suggestion that a document of authorization has been lost.) Second, only thirteen years after Tyndale’s first and smuggled-in 1526 English New Testament, it brought the English Bible to the people in a massive way. In most of the parishes, its arrival, and contents, must have been surprising. Third, though Coverdale’s revision was generally in a more Latin direction, the parishioners’ encounter with the Bible was still with the greatness of Tyndale.” (Daniell, 204-205)
- Brake records the following about the impact that the Great Bible had upon the common Englishman:
 - “How did the common person react to an authorized Bible available to all? Bishop Edmund Bonner set about to place the Great Bible in every church in England. In the famous Saint Paul’s Cathedral in London, Bonner, at his own expense, chained six beautiful Great Bibles to six pulpits. The Bibles were to be read in orderly fashion, “without disputations.” Instead, however, people gathered around the Bible and began to act disorderly, reading with irreverence and arguing its meaning. In order to prevent parishioners from reading the Bible during the services and to maintain order, Bonner placed on the front of each pulpit the infamous “Admonitions.” The “Admonitions” set certain rules for the use of the Bible. For instance, the Bible was to be read quietly, humbly, and charitably, without disturbance to others during services, and not drawing crowds to listen to the exposition of the text. A people who had been deprived the freedom to read the Scriptures finally had a Bible to read, and they had difficulty in doing so in an orderly fashion.

The Bible in the English vernacular, now “approved to be read,” created a lasting thirst for Englishmen of all classes. Everyone was caught up in this new delight. They either read it themselves or had it read to them. Many began the process of learning to read just for the enjoyment of reading the Bible. It is impossible to imagine the first reading of the Scriptures and the impression it made upon their hearts. Some supported the “old school” that argued if the common folk started reading the Bible on their own, it would

lead inevitably to religious anarchy. The younger ones, no doubt, were burning with a zeal for spiritual freedom.” (Brake, 140)

Works Cited

Brake, Donald L. *A Visual History of the English Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008.

Daniell, David. *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003.