

Sunday, October 25, 2020—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 122 The Great Bible: Title Page & Text

Introduction

- In [Lesson 121](#), the last Lesson in this series of studies, we began looking at the Great Bible. In doing so, we considered the following points.
 - The Death of John Rodgers
 - The Great Bible: Assessing Its Origin, Impetus, & Production
 - The Great Bible: What's in a Name?
- Today, we want to continue our study of the Great Bible by looking at the following points:
 - The Title Page
 - The Text
 - Editions

The Title Page

- One cannot understand the historical significance of the Great Bible without understanding the elaborate artwork on the title page. Regarding this important matter Dr. David Daniell states the following in *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*:
 - “The full, crowded, title-page, from the school of [Hans] Holbein, is famous. At the top, forced to crouch under the top border by the bulk of King Henry VIII, is a head-and-shoulders God, blessing the moment in history. Through complex rolling scrolls from his mouth, he quotes from his own Word in Isaiah 55:11 and Acts 13:22; that is, in the Great Bible:

[Like as rain and snow] . . . so the word also that out of my mouth cometh shall not turn again void, but shall accomplish my will, and prosper in the thing whereto I sent it.

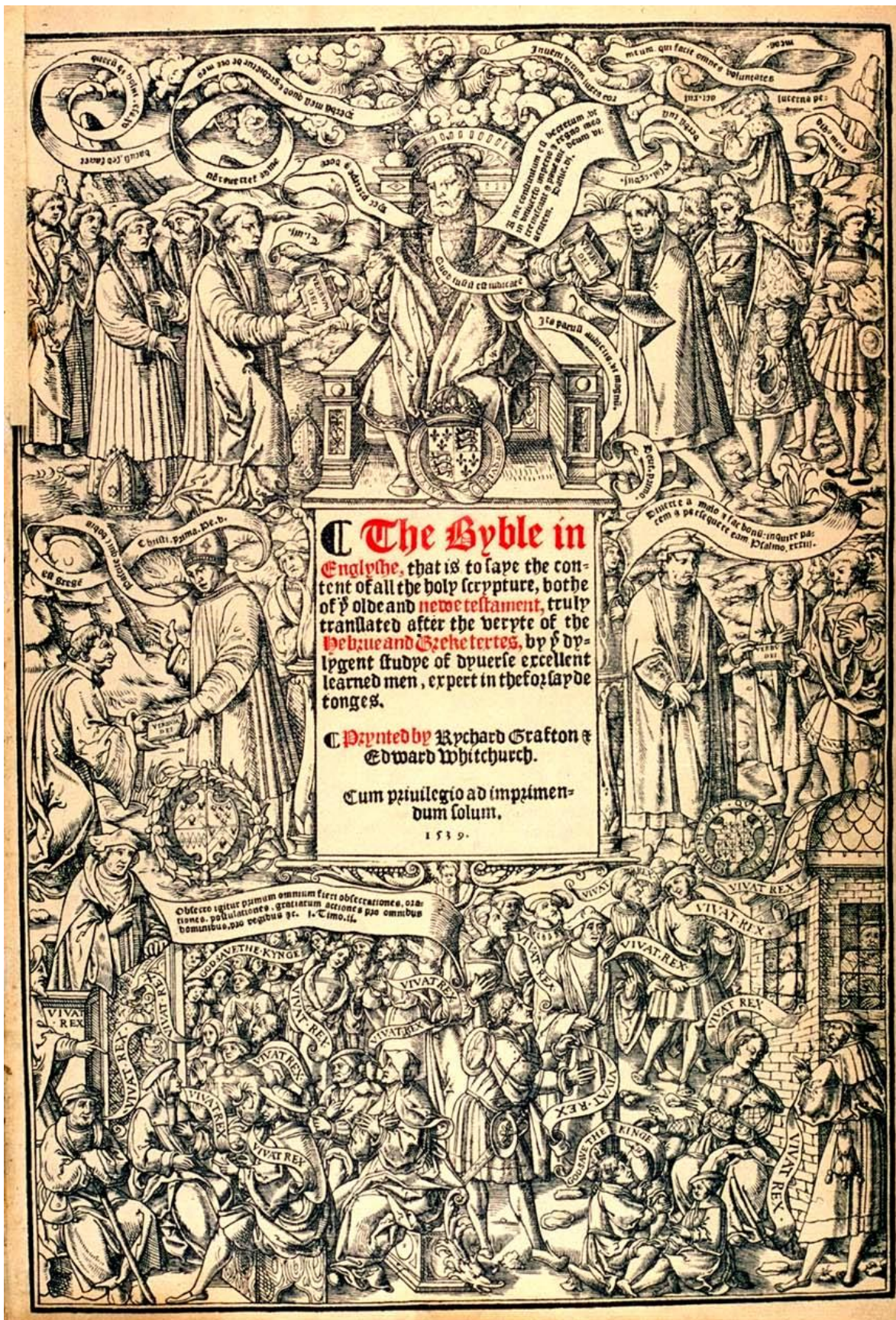
And, from Acts, using Paul's first recorded sermon at Antioch where he explained that Jesus is the Christ, God declares that King Henry, like David the son of Jesse, as king, he was found 'a man after mine own heart, which shall fulfill my will.'

Surprisingly, for the title-page of a book announcing itself so strongly in the central panel as 'The Bible in English,' God speaks these extracts in Latin. Indeed, all but two of the many scrolled utterances from all kinds of people in the design are in Latin. The very English Bible being handed out in his royal largesse to every rank by King Henry is the *Verbum Dei* [The word of God]. . .

King Henry hands the *Verbum Dei*, which is not very big, to Archbishop Cranmer on his right and Viceregent Cromwell on his left. Lest these two powerful men miss the point and become uppish, the largest working after the central title itself, and more of a panel than a scroll, comes from the king. He quotes to them Daniel 6:26 in Latin; the moment where Darius, the King of the Persians says, ‘my commandment is, that in all dominions of my kingdom that men fear and stand in awe of Daniel’s God;’ as an assertion of royal authority in the binding. Cranmer is personally addressed by a scroll giving I Timothy 4:11, in Latin; ‘Such things command and preach:’ the biblical context is of the maintenance of social order, and the archbishop is bidden ‘command’ before ‘preach;’ he is to have no doubt of his function in the state. Cromwell’s words are from Deuteronomy 1:16 in Latin, ‘judge righteously between every man;’ though Moses’ historic charge is admirable, in this place it is again a piece of state scaffolding.

So far so good. Cranmer and Cromwell have stood humbly beside and slightly below the king, bareheaded and receptive, their miter and cap set aside. Now, in the borders beside the central title-panel, they appear again in their full state functions, wearing their headgear of office, and this time facing outward. At their feet, in wreaths, are their respective coats of arms. Each passes a still smaller *Verbum Dei* further down the chain. Cranmer to a priest, with the command to ‘Feed ye Christ’s flock,’ I Peter 5:2; Cromwell the nobleman, ordered to ‘Eschew evil, and do good,’ Psalms 34:14. The chain of power is clear.

Below is a rabble. The dominant forces in the whole picture are, in the top third (or just over), King Henry the Eighth and, in the bottom third (or just over), a confusing mass of overdressed people. They are fairly undifferentiated except that one or two are women. None of them are doing anything except looking faintly pleased. They are certainly not reading from, or even touching, a Bible in English. *Verbum Dei* has stopped in its decent midway in the page at the priests and the nobleman. True, the priest below the archbishop is preaching to them, apparently extempore, as no Bible is visible. What he is telling them is, it is not of the saving love of God in Christ Jesus, in their own vernacular language, but the Latin of I Timothy 2:1-2, where Paul exhorts that ‘first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; for kings, and for all that are in authority. . .’ Only two figures in all the crowd are attending to him. Here is the symbol of Henry’s fear. The crush of common people may be pleased to hear of the Bible in English, but they are so uncontrollable—not even listening to the sermon—that they must absolutely not handle it. All they exist for, something they do in the woodcut with vigor, is to praise the king in Latin: all but two of the interwoven spped-scrolls from the people of England say *Vivat Rex* (the two saying *God Save the King* are possibly children). And balancing the very open pulpit on the left is a shut-in and roofed shape on the right, the prison (Newgate) to which they will go if they do not (praise the king in Latin). The people inside the barred window are silent, and the prison, unlike the pulpit, has no *Vivat Rex* on the wall. It has been said that the prison is for those who do not accept the Bible in English as well as ‘the royal supremacy it apparently speaks.’ In view of the indifference of the rabble to anything except uttering their *Vivat Rex*, one may deduce that it is the latter alone that keep them out of jail.” (Daniell, 205-207)



- After Cromwell’s execution on July 28, 1539, his coat of arms was removed from the title page of the 2nd printing of the Great Bible in 1540.
 - “After Cromwell’s fall in 1540, his arms were removed from the title-page, leaving simply a circular white space—perhaps a comment from ambivalence of feeling about him.” (Daniell, 208)



The Text

- Bible collector and historian Donald L. Brake reminds us that the Great Bible was not a translation of the original languages but was rather a revision by Miles Coverdale of the 1537 Matthew’s Bible.
 - “Coverdale’s 1539 Great Bible translation was certainly not a translation from the original languages. His translation work depended heavily on Tyndale’s English translation, Sebastian Munster’s Hebrew Bible with Latin notes and text, and Erasmus’s Latin text. It is interesting that he relied more on the Matthew’s Bible (1537) than his own 1535 edition.” (Brake, 134)

- As has become customary in our studies of late, Dr. David Daniell offers the most thorough explanation in *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence*:
 - “In the text, Coverdale revised not his own 1535 Bible, but ‘Matthew’s.’ In the old Testament, he left Tyndale’s Pentateuch and historical books more or less alone. Revising his own poetic and prophetic books, he was able to make use of the most recent work of Germany’s leading Hebraist, Sebastian Munster, whose new translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Latin had been printed in 1535. It is far superior to Pagninus’s odd Latinizing, which Coverdale had originally used. The Psalms from his original 1535 version he also left more or less alone.” (Daniell, 208)

- Later in his chapter on the Great Bible he adds the following about the text of this volume in a subsection titled “Coverdale As Reviser:”
 - “Coverdale’s brief had been effectively to revise ‘Matthew’s’ so that, being more acceptable to all the bishops, it could be put in every parish church. When we compare his Great Bible with ‘Matthew’s’ where ‘Matthew’s’ is straight Tyndale, however, we find little change. The Old Testament from Genesis 1 to the end of 2 Chronicles in this Great Bible, put out as a vehicle for the power of King Henry VIII, covers by Cuthbert Tunstall himself, is just that, straight Tyndale, with very small changes. I illustrate, quite at random, from Deuteronomy 32:10. In this poem is being described God’s power in his people’s history. ‘Matthew’s’ in 1537 had ‘He found him in a desert land, in a void ground and roaring wilderness’ (the last two words making a wonderfully suggestive phrase). That is what Tyndale had in this 1530 Pentateuch. Coverdale’s own translation, in his Bible of 1535, had been ‘He found him the wilderness, even in the dry desert, where he roared.’ Revising for the Great Bible, Coverdale merely added an ‘in’ to ‘Matthew’s’: ‘He found him in a desert land, in a void ground, and in a roaring wilderness.’

Where Coverdale did not have Tyndale before him, from Ezra to Malachi and in the Apocrypha, he was a great deal less even, sometimes printing himself from 1535, sometimes changing for the better, sometimes for the worse. He left his Psalms more or less alone: there were changes, but the Prayer Book continued to use his 1535 version. In the New Testament he could rely again on Tyndale, which he did with insight and skill.” (Daniell, 218-219)

- J.I. Mombert, author of *English Versions of the Bible*, summarizes the textual situation with respect to the Great Bible as follows:
 - “. . . the text of the Great Bible of 1539, may be described with sufficient accuracy as a Revision of Matthew, this is, of Tyndale, Rogers, and Coverdale, by Coverdale himself.” (Mombert, 209)

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.

Mombert, J.I. *Hand-Book of the English Versions of the Bible*. New York: Anson D.F. Randolph & Company, 1883.