

Sunday, November 8, 2020—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 124 The English Bible 1539-1557

Introduction

- Last week in Lesson 123 we concluded our three-part study of the Great Bible. All told, we considered the following information regarding the Great Bible:
 - Origin, Impetus, & Production ([Lesson 121](#))
 - Title Page & Text ([Lesson 122](#))
 - Editions & the Taverner Bible ([Lesson 123](#))
- After the Great Bible, the English-speaking world would wait twenty years before the publication of a new English translation. The Geneva New Testament was published in Geneva Switzerland in 1557 by English exiles of the reign of Bloody Mary. In 1560 the complete Geneva Bible was published. Like the Matthew's and Great Bibles before it, the Geneva Bible continued in the line and tradition of William Tyndale.
- This morning we want to consider the history of the English Bible between the publication of the Great Bible in 1539 and the Geneva New Testament in 1557.

The English Bible 1539-1557

- Between the publication of the Great and Taverner's Bibles in 1539 and the Geneva New Testament in 1557, the fortunes of the English Bible vacillated between periods of regression, resurgence and regression. During this span of time, no new translations of the Bible into English were conducted. Professor Daniell states the following regarding this point:
 - “After the publication of the Great Bible in 1539 and his minor revisions, and the new translation by Taverner also in 1539, there were many editions and reprintings of the English Bibles, especially Tyndale. There was, however, no new work on translation of the Bible into English for eighteen years, until 1557, when a New English New Testament was published in Geneva, with fresh, though light, annotation.” (Daniell, 221)
- Henry VIII did not die until 1547, eight years after the publication of the Great Bible in 1539. Henry was succeeded by his only son Edward VI at the ripe old age of nine years old. Edward ruled for only six years and died at the age of fifteen. Edward's passing ushered in the reign of Mary I, otherwise known as Bloody Mary. During this tumultuous period between 1539 and 1557 England saw three different monarchs rule the country, each of whom had widely different views regarding the English Bible. Consequently, it seems best to consider the fortunes of the English Bible during these years by looking at the policy each monarch took toward the Bible. As a result, we will consider the following three time periods:
 - The Latter Reign of Henry VIII (1539-1547)

- The Reign of Edward VI (1547-1553)
- The Reign of Bloody Mary (1553-1558)

The Latter Reign of Henry VIII (1539-1547)

- Before his death, even while endeavoring to reach his goal of placing a Bible in every parish church, Cromwell's reforms of 1536 were being undone by the more conservative and Romish bishops.
 - "Even while the greater monasteries were being dissolved, and the Great Bible was being placed in every parish church, what could be seen as the first official undoing of reform came in 1539. Cromwell's more reforming Ten Articles of 1536 had been followed by the more reactionary *Bishops Book* of 1537, printed in great numbers, also called *The Institution of a Christian Man*, expounding, as well as the 'the seven sacraments,' the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the Ave Maria, the conservative doctrines of justification and Purgatory and the importance of the pope. The passing by Parliament in 1539 of the Act of Six Articles, however, supported by Henry VIII, was a more weighty counter-move back to Rome. On the continent of Europe at this time the foundation of the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits), dedicated to supporting the pope against heresy, indicated a general direction within the Catholic Church. The Six Articles enforced—on pain of death—transubstantiation, communion in one kind, clerical celibacy, monastic vows, private masses and aural confession. A victory for the reactionary bishops and lords, the intention was to begin a suppression of the reforms that had been introduced." (Daniell, 226-227)
- The Act of Six Articles was a clear attempt on the part of reactionary bishops to place England back on a more Catholic footing. The Act was in force for the final eight years of King Henry's life between 1539 and 1547. While only six people were martyred under the Six Articles during this eight-year period, they dealt a blow to the Protestant movement on the continent, according to Dr. Daniell:
 - "... the Six Articles caused only six martyrdoms—six too many in a civilized world, but few compared with the almost three hundred in the five years under Mary. The Act of Six Articles was, however, among other things, a blow to the German Lutherans, who had increasingly looked to Henry to lead a united Protestant Europe. Archbishop Cranmer, with Cuthbert Tunstall and other bishops, had entertained three German delegates at Lambeth Palace for a year. They had found agreement in doctrine, but the Lutherans stood firm against continued 'abuses' of practice. The Six Articles sealed the separation." (Daniell, 227)
- While the Act of Six Articles reversed the reforming course charted by Cromwell during his time in office, it did not strike directly against the English Bible. That came in 1543 with the passage of *The King's Book: or, A Necessary Doctrine and Erudition of Any Christian Man, 1543*. Supported by Parliament this action called for:

- “. . . ‘the advancement of true religion and the abolishment of the contrary,’ making it a crime for any unlicensed person to read or expound the Bible publicly to others, and to limit the upper classes, by law, even to private reading of the Bible. It postscripted ‘the crafty, false and untrue translations of Tyndale,’ and required that the notes in all copies should be removed or obliterated.” (Daniell, 227)
- Later, in the same chapter, Professor Daniell states the following about this 1543 act of Parliament:
 - “In 1543, Parliament passed an Act ‘for the advancement of true religion and the abolishment of the contrary,’ which banned ‘the crafty, false, and untrue translation of Tyndale.’ Following the *King’s Book* it required the obliteration of notes, now by law. The Act made it a crime for any unlicensed person to read or expound the Bible publicly to others, forbidding even the private reading of the Bible by the lower classes. In 1546, Henry issued a proclamation that ‘no man or woman, of what estate, condition or degree, was . . . to receive, have, take, or keep, Tyndale’s or Coverdale’s New Testament.’ In London large quantities of Tyndale’s and Coverdale’s New, and Old, Testament were collected and burned at St. Paul’s Cross, under the initiative of Edmund Bonner, Bishop of London. This ban, when ‘the Great Bible maintained its prominent position in every parish church in the Land’ was, in the words of F.F. Bruce, ‘a monumental piece of absurdity.’” (Daniell, 228-229)
- In summation, while the English Bible had been placed in every parish church via Henry VIII’s authorization of the Great Bible, the King still subsequently took steps to infringe upon the people’s right to read and preach the word of God. This included, but was not limited to, the destruction of untold numbers of Tyndale Bibles as well as marring copies of the Matthew’s Bible containing the notes of William Tyndale.

The Reign of Edward VI (1547-1553)

- As stated earlier, Henry VIII was succeeded by his nine-year-old son Edward VI. As we will observe shortly, the English Bible fared much better under the reign of Edward. Under Edward’s reign Parliament repealed The Act of Six Articles.
 - “King Henry died in January 1547. The Six Articles were repealed by an early Parliament in the reign of his successor, the nine-year-old Edward VI. By 1549, the reformed Church settlement had established an English liturgy in the first Book of Common Prayer. In theological confession and in church polity, England was well on the way to the Elizabethan settlement. The availability of English Bibles multiplied remarkably.” (Daniell, 229)
- A few pages later, at the end of Chapter 14, Dr. Daniell presents the following chronicling the fate of the English Bible under the reign of Edward VI:
 - “In the twenty-one years between Tyndale’s first Testament in 1526 and Edward’s accession in January 1547, there had been sixty-four editions (that is, different editions, not counting fresh printings) of a whole English Bible or New Testament. (In the same

period there had been no English printings of the Latin Bible, though there had been twenty-two across Europe.) As a figure for English Bibles printed, mostly in England, over two decades it is impressive, particularly considering the periods of renewed repression later under Henry VIII. To put it in economic terms, it speaks of the confidence of printers in a large buying public. Figures for print-runs are not now obtainable; for Bibles, an average of two thousand each would probably be acceptable, even modest, giving a rough total of about a hundred and twenty thousand volumes bought. To put it in religious terms, it represents a fair proportion of a population of two and a half million reading the Word of God, and uncountably more hearing it read.

After Edward's succession, merely in his short six-year reign, however, from 1547 to 1553, the number of English editions of the whole Bible or New Testaments printed was forty. That is an average of between six and seven a year. Again, these figures take no account of straight reprints: they are all identifiably different editions. (In this time, again, there were no Latin Bibles printed in England: there were four abroad.) This great explosion in the production of English Bibles in the six years under Edward has not been prominent in the writing of Early Modern History. It has, indeed, been quite removed from the picture.

Seventeen of the forty are of Tyndale's New Testament, always in pocket, or, at most, quarto size. Two of those are diglots, with Tyndale's English alongside Erasmus's Latin, volumes sometimes said to have been for the use of priests. Nine are of the whole Great Bible, showing a remarkable demand considering its size and cost. Four are versions of Matthew's Bible, two are of Coverdale's, five are part-versions of Taverner's . . . One new edition of 1549 was Coverdale's revision of Tyndale's New Testament, the slight changes carefully marked. Two are Great Bible New Testaments printed with Erasmus paraphrases.

One of the Edwardian editions of Psalms marks, probably in 1549, the first appearance of a little book which, with larger contents, was to have colossal influence on British and American religious life, matched only by the New Testament. Modestly entitled '*Certain Psalms, chosen out of the Psalter...*' by Thomas Sternhold, this book is the first, with nineteen Psalms, of what was to become the phenomenal 'Sternhold and Hopkins,' all the Psalms arranged metrically for congregations singing. The neglect of the metrical Psalms and their three hundred years of being an essential part of English and Scottish life is one of the surprises of the writing of national history.

Using the same, still probably over-modest figure of an average print-run of two thousand yields a total printed, in Edward's reign, of some eighty thousand English Bibles, all in six years. About half were complete Bibles; just under half were fresh editions of Tyndale's New Testaments. The growth of the Bible in English, in Britain and especially, later, in America was rooted in the reign of the young 'Josiah'—as was the people's singing of the Psalms in English, a religious experience that reforming Josiah himself would have recognized." (Daniell, 245-246)

- In the last paragraph of the above quote, Professor Daniell compares Edward's relationship to the English Bible with that of King Josiah's rediscovery of the Hebrew scriptures in the Old

Testament. In fact, Dr. Daniell devotes much of Chapter 14 to establishing a comparison between Josiah and Edward. The discussion is interesting but long. Therefore, time and space will only allow me to quote the most pertinent and salient portions of the discussion.

- “Josiah pleased the Lord. The boy-king Edward was seen as the boy-king Josiah. This was not empty flattery to the nine-year-old son of Henry VIII on the throne. Edward, like Josiah, had a burning and growing zeal for the Lord, and was influenced by one powerful, and, to him, God-given circumstance. Twentieth-century concentration of the political cat’s cradle made by the eminences around him must not be allowed to obscure his genuine piety. His identification with Josiah, however, is rooted in more than simple parallels in age and reforming devotion to the Lord. The key to it is the restoration of an old book, originally given by God, but long buried out of sight [See II Kings 22 & 23 to read the story of Josiah]. . .

Josiah swept away centuries of religious corruption, above all, the adulteration of the worship of the Lord by sacrifices to Canaanite gods at all the ‘high places.’ These corruptions, even in Jerusalem itself, are confirmed in the words of the greatest of the Hebrew writing prophets, the contemporary Jeremiah...

Though it was not immediately visible, Josiah’s achievement was a turning point in Israel’s history, something entirely driven by the recovery of purer Scriptures, which he and his fellow reformers then gave to the nation as the written law book on which was based a new religious system. Both the book and the system went with the nation into exile. There, in new purity, the book and practice generate the basis of the future Hebrew religion, including the new presentation of all the written Scriptures.

The attraction of identifying King Edward with King Josiah is now clearer. Destruction—of the intrusive, imported, foreign-based religion—was only part of the program. More important was the future founding of national worship and life on a book, a divine revelation newly available. Understanding his motivation for the now widely shared English Bible makes a difference to our understanding of King Edward.” (Daniell, 238-240)

- What an amazing tale of the difference that a reforming King can have upon the soul of a nation. What if we judged our current political situation based upon which policies would allow God’s word and the ministry of reconciliation to continue in the least intrusive manner?

The Reign of Bloody Mary (1553-1558)

- Dying before his time at the age of fifteen, Edward VI was succeeded by his half-sister Mary I. Mary, a staunch Roman Catholic sought to restore Roman Catholicism as the religion of England. Therefore, as one might expect, the English Bible and English Bible believers did not fare well under her reign.
 - “No Bibles were printed in England between 1553 and 1558, in the reign of Queen Mary. Cardinal Pole, brought in from Rome as Archbishop of Canterbury, advised the queen that the law of *De heretic comburendo* [of burning a heretic] should be revived. In those

five years about 300 men and women were burned alive. The first was Tyndale's friend and maker of the Matthew's Bible, John Rogers, who suffered at Smithfield on 4 February 1555. . . .

The cull included Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley, of Balliol College, Oxford, and on the same spot the deposed Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer.

About eight hundred men and women fled into exile in Germany and Switzerland, a migration significantly including Bible scholars. Forcing a national return to Roman Catholicism, and pope's authority, under a childless queen, was bound to be difficult. Pole, who had not lived in England for 34 years, could not begin to understand the national mood. Though there was a understandable drift to conform, the burnings reinforced hostility, as making martyrs always does. The Cardinal saw through Roman eyes, which did not mean that he brushed aside the vernacular Bible: an early program of his had included a new English translation of the New Testament. . . . By 1553, England had at last caught up with most other European countries: the printed Bible in the vernacular had solidly arrived. Moreover, in the islands, now ahead of most other countries, English Bibles had been royally sanctioned. That does not mean that from mid-century the country was painted a uniform color. Evidence can be found of parishes refusing to buy the Great Bible, or complaints from the pulpits, familiar down the centuries, that 'young people these days' did not know their Bibles." (Daniell, 263-264)

The Bible's Impact on the English Language

- By the middle of the sixteenth century the fortunes of English as a language had been reversed. Tyndale's influence on the language had taken English from a backwoods podunk language of an island nation on the back of Europe and transformed it into a force to be reckoned with.
 - "The English language, when Tyndale began to write, was a poor thing, spoken only by a few in an island off the shelf of Europe, a language unknown in Europe. Now [2003], at the start of the second millennium, when English is spoken by almost two billion people, it is hard to think that in 1500 it was as irrelevant to life in Europe as today Scots Gaelic is to the city of London. . . . The idea of any great work in English would have seemed incomprehensible, and of an epic in English madness. By the last decades of the century, not only had the classical epics, Virgil, and Ovid, and later even Homer, begun to appear in English, but only fifty years after Tyndale the first epic in modern English began to be published, Spenser's Faerie Queene. The idea of the whole Word of God printed in English seemed, as well as dangerous, ridiculous, but soon after the mid-century the whole Bible in English was in many, probably most, households, and read and heard and learned by heart, known in detail even by those who could not read.

In Britain, something switched the power-lines of written thought and expression from Latin, or from Latinist confusion, into clear English, understandable throughout the land. I argue here that the switch was thrown by the dominance of the English Bible, and of Tyndale's form in particular.

In William Tyndale's time England was alone in Europe in not having had for two generations a printed Bible in the vernacular. There had been such in Germany since 1466, in France since 1475, Italy in 1471, Catalan in 1478, Czech in 1475, and Spanish and Portuguese before 1500. All of those were from Latin, of course, not the original Greek and Hebrew. They were eagerly bought, as observation of the number of editions shows: but by the time of Luther's ground-breaking 1522 German New Testament from the Greek, there had been twelve separate editions of translations of the Bible into the vernacular in Germany.

Before 1526, England alone in Europe did not have printed vernacular Bibles, which is why, when Europe by 1500 had one thousand printers, most known by name, England had three—Caxton, de Worde, and Pynson. The Constitution of Oxford of 1407-9, forbidding the making or owning of an English translation of the Bible, was still in force. Enough is known, however, from references to the Wycliffe, ('Lollard'), manuscript translations, to give a glimpse of a national hunger to know what the whole Bible said, beyond the great central stories of Noah's Ark, Abraham and Isaac, the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus, and Pentecost. The great stories had been reproduced in painting, in sculpture, in stained glass, and in plays. But it is difficult to write a popular play about the Epistle to the Romans.

The whole Bible in the vernacular from the original Greek and Hebrew was in the 1520s and 1530s the root of, the heart of, the life-blood of (it is hard to find a powerful enough metaphor) the revolution in Europe, from Luther's 1517 Theses and 1522 German New Testament. The history of the Reformation in each country of northern Europe is striking but especially in England. Henry VIII divorced Catherine in 1532, and was excommunicated in 1533. Something was happening internationally, nationally, locally, to which knowledge of the whole Bible seemed central. By the 1530s, English printing was picking up a little: but for three decades printers in Antwerp had been profiting from a big English market for books of all kinds. I labor this point slightly because I want to establish the breadth and depth of the effect of Tyndale's Bible translations. The widespread hunger was not for Aeneid or the Iliad, or as it might be lives of saints, but the very Word of God.

Statistically, there is difficulty here. The birth of Anne Boleyn's daughter Elizabeth is well and widely recorded. The process of the dissolution of a monastery is known in detail. But the meeting of a handful of people in a room to read the English Bible is not recorded—indeed, could not be. Secondary evidence suggests that it was a widespread, even massive new development in the British Isles, from Henry VIII's time. It makes a hidden history of the kingdom.

Instead of hearing *Fiat lux, et lux erat*, or reading Wycliffe's 'Be made light, and made was light,' people heard and read 'Let there be light, and there was light.' As noted above, instead of hearing, far off in the church building, *Petite, et dabitur vobis; quaerite*,

et inuenietis; pulsate, at aperietur vobis, they have in their hand by the heart, “Ask, and it shall be given you: seek and ye shall find: knock, and it shall be opened unto you.” Moreover, they were given the highest standard of scholarship. Tyndale got the heart of the Hebrew language. In the story in II Kings 4, the Sunamite couple were given a son against all likelihood, promised them by the prophet Elisha. When the woman went to Elisha to tell him that the beloved and longed-for son had suddenly died, modern and ancient versions make her say something like, did I not say that thou shouldest not deceive me? But the Hebrew doesn’t quite say that. There is in the Hebrew an element of wistfulness. So Tyndale as he said, ‘did I not say, that thou shouldest not bring me in a fool’s paradise?’

Tyndale’s vivid English prose, though now so familiar, was unusual in the 1520s and 1530s... To think of the Bible as a religious book belonging only to the religious controversy of the time is unhelpful. Religion was not then a separate life to be called up, but the whole of life and death. In other words, any English style found from the Bible was going to be influential. Tyndale found, uniquely, a language register which made a ‘plain style’ for long after, more influential for all their power than Luther’s Germany or Lefevre’s for France. And even for those who were not especially Bible students, the phrases of Tyndale’s Bible entered their minds at services, Sunday after Sunday, year after year, as the lectern and pulpit now dominate all British churches.” (Daniell, 248-249)

Works Cited

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