

Sunday, February 28, 2021— Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 138 The Bishops' Bible: Understanding the Elizabethan Context

Introduction

- Last week in Lesson 137 we began our discussion of the Bishops' Bible by establishing that the 1602 edition of this text served as the base text for the Authorized Version of 1611. This is evidenced most strongly by the existence of a bound copy of a 1602 Bishops' Bible in the Bodleian Library possessing the handwritten notes of the translators in the margins. Known as Bod 1602, this document, along with MS 98 in Lambeth Palace, serves as strong primary evidence of the process used by the King James translators between 1604 and 1611.
- This evidence was almost wholly unknown to the founders of the American King James Only movement in the 1950s and '60s. Ignorance of this evidence caused prominent King James advocates such as Dr. Peter S. Ruckman, among others, to claim that the King James translators ignored the Bishops' Bible and thereby did not adhere to Rule 1.
- The evidence furnished via Bod 1602 and MS 98 makes it clear that such speculations on the part of Ruckman are ahistorical and completely false.
- In this Lesson we want to understand the factors that gave rise to the decision to translate the Bishops' Bible. Why did the Bishops of the Church of England see fit to produce yet another English version when the Geneva Bible was so popular among English speaking people?

The Religious Context of Elizabethan England

- Recall from previous Lessons that Queen Elizabeth ascended the English throne in 1558 following the death of her half-sister Mary I in November 1558. Mary's death signaled that it was safe for English exiles to return home from the places of continental refuge. Recall that a group stayed behind in Geneva, Switzerland to finish the complete Geneva Bible that was published in 1560.
- Also, remember that the 1560 Geneva Bible included an epistle dedicatory to Queen Elizabeth in its prefatory material that was quite forward in tone and tenor. The following from Gerald Hammond's *The Making of the English Bible* was quoted in Lesson 133 when discussing the matter.
 - “The preliminary matter to the first edition begins with an epistle to Elizabeth. Queen for little more than a year, she is treated to an exhortation from her ‘humble subjects of the English church at Geneva’ as to how she should rebuild her country. Building is a metaphor which runs throughout, and a parallel is plainly drawn between Elizabeth’s task in building the English Church and the building of the temple by Zerubbabel, when he was not only ‘sore molested with foreign adversaries . . . but also at home with domestical enemies, as false prophets, crafty worldlings, faint hearted soldiers, and

oppressors of their brethren'. The chief foundation for her building is to be this Bible, 'the holy Scriptures faithfully and plainly translated according to the languages wherein they were first written by the Holy Ghost'.

Compared with the flattering dedications to Henry VIII by Coverdale and to James I in the Authorized Version, this epistle is a forthright document. It tells Elizabeth to wipe out opposition immediately and without compromise—just as any building needs to be based on the rasing down of what stood before—regardless of the promptings of 'worldly policy or natural fear'. If she fails to act quickly then she might well suffer the fate which those ideal biblical kings Jehoshaphat, Josiah, and Hezekiah contrived to avoid, that is the 'wrath of the Lord' falling upon them 'for the neglecting thereof'. And Elizabeth is finally reminded that she owes her survival this far to 'God's wonderful mercies toward you at all seasons, who hath pulled you out of the mouth of the lions', with the added comment that men have great hopes of her because 'from your youth you have been brought up in the holy Scriptures'. (Hammond, 90)

- Let me be clear, Queen Elizabeth never adopted policies that sought to deprive Englishmen of the English Bible. That said, the religious/political climate in Elizabethan England was far from clear cut. Understanding this historical context is necessary for understanding the factors that gave rise to the Bishops' Bible.
- Blackford Condit, author of *The History of the English Bible* has an excellent section discussing this historical context.
 - "The reign of Queen Elizabeth was a transition period. In ecclesiastical affairs nothing was settled. The short reign of Edward VI gave an impetus to Protestant principles which bade fair to decide the question of supremacy between the Old and New learning. A serious check, however, was given to this progress by the short but fierce reign of Queen Mary. But now the friends of the Reformation look upon the accession of Elizabeth with joy and heartfelt relief. Protestantism, just returned from exile, is stronger in its convictions and broader in its designs. Abroad it came in contact with men and ideas, and by such contact gained in self-respect; while at home it had been tried in the fire and thereby purified and made stronger."

At first the reformers were over confident in respect to the friendship of Elizabeth [The Epistle Dedicatory in the 1560 Geneva Bible is a clear example, in my opinion, of their over confidence.]. They attempted radical changes, such as "to set up King Edward's Service, to pull down Images, and to affront the Priests." But in this they met with an effectual check from the queen, who, though slow in developing her policy, soon made it evident that not even the English Church, much less the Genevan Party, had anything to expect from her by way of partial favors. Passing between the extremes of Edward and Mary, she followed the ecclesiastical policy of her royal father, thinking by a middle course to reconcile opposing parties. She insisted, however, that there should be no persecution for opinion's sake, that the consciences of all should be respected. The two

great ideals of Queen Elizabeth were, order in the State and uniformity in the Church. And the latter, contrary to her boasted respect for the individual's conscience, was to be enforced for the sake of the former. During the reign of Henry VIII, the Church was made the child of the State, and political considerations ruled in ecclesiastical affairs. So under Queen Elizabeth, though she refused spiritual supremacy in form and title, yet held bishops and deans subject to her royal will. She berated them to their faces, and in writing to them threatened to unfrock them if they did not comply with her requests. Dead to religious convictions, serious controversies in religion had no interest to her.

The Reformation in England might have been thorough and evangelical had it not been for Queen Elizabeth. There was, on the part of the leaders of the evangelical party, the requisite spirituality, learning, and ability to have accomplished a grand work, especially since the people, weary of the Marian persecution, were so well prepared for it. But Elizabeth ignored the power of the Gospel, and gave a decided distaste to the Puritan simplicity, determined to hold to a part at least of the pomp and magnificence of the Romish Church. Her opinion was that images were not contrary to the word of God, and that the use of them in the churches "might be a means to stir up Devotion, and that at least, it would draw all people to frequent them more; for the great measure of her Councils was, to unite the whole Nation unto one way of Religion." And for the sake of established order, she determined upon a compromise in things indifferent, to which both Papists and Protestants must submit. Elizabeth held to the vain hope that the time would come when Catholic and Anglican "could come together on some moderate common ground." But this forced unity only begot diversity, and this constrained order only brought forth discord. So that from the beginning the establishment of Elizabeth pleased neither parties. "To the ultra Protestants it was no better than Romanism; to the Catholics or partial Catholics it was in schism from the Communion of Christendom; while the great middle party, the common sense of the country of whom Elizabeth was the representative, were uneasy and dissatisfied.

Ecclesial partyism was rife in the time of Elizabeth. The Catholics, though under ban, experienced a secret but powerful revival. Priests disguised in "serving-men's apparel" swarmed in the North. And in other parts of England, though not permitted to preach, they administered mass in private chapels and reopened the iniquities of "the spiritual courts." They maintained "the Pope's authority," and revived the ancient usages of "commuting penances for money, compounding for moral enormities, and grinding the widow and the orphan by their fees and extortions." While popery, thus revived, maintained its unity, Protestantism was divided, and yet strong notwithstanding its divisions. Non-conformists grew vigorous by conflict. The Puritan was a sturdy defender of his bold and radical principles; and had it not been for his deep convictions and fierce energy, the English Church party would have been swallowed up by Catholic fanaticism. In the meantime Presbyterians became a distinct party, setting up a new ecclesiastical polity with its corresponding discipline. They became, as it were, a wheel within a wheel; all of which gave no little offense to the State establishment." (Condit, 266-269)

- Dr. Donald L. Brake author of *A Visual History of the English Bible* also does an excellent job summarizing the historical content that gave rise to the Bishops' Bible.
 - “Queen Elizabeth’s ascension to the throne of England in 1558 brought reform in the church. Only five of the bishops appointed by King Edward VI survived Mary’s bloody reign of terror. Queen Mary’s appointments reflected her own survival instincts as much as her spiritual desire. Thanks to Mary, the Bible had been banned for five years. With Elizabeth on the throne, men and women everywhere could start reading the Bible again. A Bible in the British Museum records Queen Elizabeth’s words, written in her own hand:

August, I walk many times into the pleasant fields of Holy Scripture where I pluck up the goodesome herbs of sentences pruning: eat them by reading: chaw them by musing: and lay them up at length in the seat of memory by gathering them together: that so having tasted their sweetness I may the less perceive the bitterness of this miserable life.

Church division and controversies were sure to resurface. Early in Elizabeth's reign, the Act of Uniformity was relaxed. As time passed, confusion surfaced, and Elizabeth charged Archbishop Parker with reestablishing the authority of the Act. He drew up a list to regulate the services and the prayer time of the church, and to govern clerical dress. Rebellion surfaced as nonconformists took a stand and the division between the Church of England and the Puritans widened. While the controversy centered around church practice, the division spilled over into a fight over which translation was to survive. Elizabeth's desire to maintain a strong hold on her sovereignty forced her to seek the support of Protestants. Her support of the Protestant Bible gained Elizabeth widespread approval. Although not giving official sanction, she apparently was willing to be hailed as a patron of the Bible.

. . . Archbishop [Matthew] Parker initially supported the reading of the Geneva Bible but later, as he became more anti-Calvinistic, he began to support a new translation. He saw the success of the Geneva Bible as an attack against the authority of the bishops. All religious authorities universally condemned Tyndale's version. Since Coverdale's translation and the Great Bible were not translated from the original languages, they were considered inferior. . .

The widespread popularity accorded the Geneva Bible after 1560 did not include the majority of the clergy in the Church of England. Although they recognized the superiority of the translation, the Calvinistic notes were offensive. Recognizing the inadequacies of the Great Bible, someone suggested an official translation be undertaken that could complete the task previously given to Coverdale.” (Brake, 161-164)

- After a discussion of the “morals and manners” of the Elizabethan Age characterized by “the extremes of a refined barbarism, and an overwrought civilization” Condit states the following about the English Bible during this time frame. (Condit, 270-272)
 - “The progress of this and of other moral reforms during the time of Elizabeth, are traceable directly to the influence of the English Bible. Since 1526 the New Testament has been scattered broadcast among the people. And since 1535 and 1537, there has been no lack of the Holy Scriptures in the mother tongue. To the praise of Queen Elizabeth be it said, that during her reign the people were free to print, circulate and read the Bible as their conscience dictated. There was an edition of Cranmer’s Bible, 1540, published during this reign, but the Genevan Bible was in the greatest demand. Numerous editions of the New Testament of the Genevan version, also of Tyndale’s translation, were printed and put into circulation. In all of this the people were satisfied, but the bishops were ill at ease. Very soon after the accession of Elizabeth they set themselves about the publishing a new version of the Bible. The result of this undertaking was the Bishops’ Bible of 1568.” (Condit, 272)
- Therein lies the political and religious impetus for the Bishops’ Bible. Gerald Hammond, author of *The Making of the English Bible*, states the following regarding the matter:
 - “The Great Bible had got its name because of its size; a magnificent volume, in Gothic print, clearly beyond the financial reach of any ordinary man, or even any body of men, and made to be chained in the churches. The Geneva Bible was the opposite: portable and packed with information, made to be acquired by the individual, and to read at home. Parker’s letter reveals, however, that even the churches were beginning to go over to the Geneva Bible, and the Bishops’ Bible had been produced to block that movement. It was to be, essentially, a public version, better produced than the Geneva Bible, but nothing like so costly or forbidding as the Great Bible. And, insofar as we can make such deduction from the publication records of the next forty years, that seems to be what happened. There was one Bible for the church, another for home. The first had no contentious notes and no public support, its editions coming few and far between; the second was constantly reprinted and held the public affection.” (Hammond, 139)

Conclusion

- In the next Lesson we will discuss Archbishop Matthew Parker and the decision to translate the Bishops’ Bible.

Works Cited

- Brake, Donald L. *A Visual History of the English Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008.
- Condit, Blackford. *The History of the English Bible: Extending from Earliest Saxon Translations to the Present Anglo-American Revision*. New York & Chicago: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1882.
- Hammond, Gerald. *The Making of the English Bible*. New York, NY: Philosophical Library, 1983.