

## Reformation History

### 4. The English Bibles

By the mid 1530s efforts were underway, led by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, to petition King Henry VIII for an English translation of the Bible from Greek and Hebrew. The first printing of a complete English Bible came shortly thereafter in 1535 and was the work of Miles Coverdale, who used the New Testament and partial Old Testament translations of William Tyndale. For the remaining parts of the Old Testament he made use of Luther's Bible. The result was a mess, largely owing to Coverdale's lack of knowledge of Greek or Hebrew, which left him dependent on these vernacular translations. Nevertheless, Coverdale's Bible was intended for use in the study of the Word of God by providing chapter summaries, cross-references, and some annotations. Coverdale followed Luther and put the Apocrypha between the Old and New Testaments. Two years later in 1537 the so-called Matthew Bible appeared. It was named for one "Thomas Matthew" who was in fact an alias for the Protestant John Rogers, who assembled the Bible from the work of Tyndale and Coverdale. The use of Tyndale, a condemned heretic, was highly dangerous in Henry's England. In addition, the Bible was clearly Protestant in character. For those reasons 1500 copies were printed abroad in Antwerp, which was insufficient to satisfy the growing demand in England for a vernacular Bible for the parish churches.

Although in the following years numerous figures undertook translations of parts of scripture, the next major moment in the development of the English story was the Great Bible that appeared between 1539 and 1541. Once again, the work was by Miles Coverdale, who revised the Matthew Bible that was based on Tyndale. That meant that

the Pentateuch, Joshua to 2 Chronicles, and Jonah were all from the Hebrew, while the New Testament (being the work of William Tyndale) was from the Greek. Coverdale's major contribution was the fine work he did on the poetic books, such as the Psalter, which he put into beautiful English. Thomas Cranmer provided a preface for the Great Bible, arguing for the necessity of the people having scripture in their language. In the last years of Henry's reign, however, conservative forces moved against the Bible in English and printings were halted until his son Edward VI ascended the throne. In 1547 it was decreed that every parish should have a Bible in English and New Testaments were printed in all sizes in an attempt to address the need. Most people would still have only encountered the Bible in parish churches and few would have owned one.

With Edward's premature death and the succession of his Catholic sister Mary the printing of the Bible in English came to an end in the kingdom. Among Protestant exiles, however, considerable work was done in preparing translations, above all in John Calvin's Geneva. The first came in 1557 and was the work of William Whittingham. This was the origin of the most important English-language translation of the next century, the Geneva Bible. The translation was largely based on Tyndale and the Great Bible. The first full edition of the Geneva Bible appeared in 1560 and was the work of a committee of men.

Over the next eighty years, the Geneva Bible, which was the Bible of the Elizabethan Age and of Shakespeare, went through 140 editions. It was inexpensive, carefully put together, and relatively easy to read. It was full of woodcuts, maps, extensive annotations, and interpretive guides. It was the first Bible in English to have versification. It was also the first English Bible after Tyndale to be fully based on the

Hebrew and Greek. The translation of the Old Testament, drawing on the latest scholarship of the day, stayed close to the original Hebrew, even when that made for slightly awkward English.

While the Old Testament remained largely unchanged, the Geneva New Testament went through two serious revisions. The first came in 1576 and followed the Latin translation of the Greek produced by Calvin's colleague Theodore Beza. The second came in 1599 when a new set of annotations on the Book of Revelation were incorporated into the text. The Geneva Bible was particularly popular in Scotland, where it was not replaced by the King James until around 1630.

Elizabeth I repeated the injunction that every parish should have a large (folio) copy of the Bible in English. At first, this demand was met by the Great Bible produced under her father. Soon, however, the scholarly limitations of that Bible became clear, particularly in comparison with the Geneva and its foundation on the original languages. The result was a new English translation that became known as the Bishops' Bible, because most of the translators were bishops. The Bishops' Bible became the official translation of the church in England, but for the people the Geneva was greatly preferred. This created a problem. Two major versions of the Bible in England was an unsatisfactory situation and calls emerged for a new translation.

In the face of calls from both Puritans and High Churchmen in England for a new Bible the young King James VI/I called a conference at Hampton Court. One of the most controversial aspects of the Geneva Bible was its annotations, which were decidedly Calvinist in theological orientation. Many in the Church of England, including the king,

were unhappy with these annotations and wanted a Bible that was free of them. James declared that a new translation should be prepared.

Careful plans were laid out for the work. Six committees were formed to work on different parts of the Bible. These committees were located at Oxford, Cambridge, and Westminster in London. When translations were ready they were to be sent to other committees to be vetted. Forty-seven translators were selected. Although the members worked from original languages, the Bishops' Bible, as the Bible of the Church, formed the foundation for the revisions. Many of those revisions came from the Geneva, which was deemed more accurate in terms of language.

The result appeared in 1611. The King James Bible had over 8,000 notes in the margins, but almost none doctrinal in nature as the Geneva had been. It followed the versification of the Geneva and the text was divided into paragraphs. Great attention was given to the precision of the text. Miles Smith provided a long preface that offered a defense of the methods used, but his text is rarely printed in modern editions of the Bible. The Bible was widely printed in a variety of forms, with the first American printing coming in 1777.

Although the King James acquired a remarkable status in the English world in later years, when it first appeared in 1611 it had almost no impact. The Geneva Bible, which was familiar to all the people retained the loyalty of Englishmen and women. Geneva's extensive notes, which provided detailed explanations of Christian doctrine, were favored over the King James, which only provided notes to understand particular words or phrases. It was not until the suppression of the Geneva Bible in the 1640s that the King James came to dominate. Over the next century, however, many different

versions of the Bible appeared; and there was wide variation in wording and spelling, causing considerable scandal. The fate of the King James was similar to that of the Vulgate in the Middle Ages, where centuries of scribal transmission had introduced a large number of errors and variations. Thomas Blayney produced what became known as the 1769 Oxford edition of the King James, which has remained the form that is printed to this day.

*Questions for discussion:*

Why has the King James version retained such a high status down to the present?

How important is official sanction in the creation and dissemination of a Bible translation?

Why was it so important that the King James not include any doctrinal commentary?

*Further Reading:*

David Norton, *The King James Bible: A Short History from Tyndale to Today*.

(Cambridge & New York, 2011).