

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

Other Intermediate Translations

Tyndale's Immediate Heritage

The work of William Tyndale seemed to open the door to English Bible translation. Though Tyndale's untimely arrest prevented him from completing his translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew, Miles Coverdale, a graduate of Cambridge University who had assisted Tyndale in Europe, now took up the torch. Coverdale was not the scholar in Greek and Hebrew that Tyndale had been; however, he was conversant with German and Latin and so supplemented the work of Tyndale by working from some five Old Testament texts, including Tyndale's incomplete translation of the Old Testament, the Latin Vulgate, and Luther's German translation. He revised Tyndale's New Testament, and the whole, both Old and New Testaments, was published by 1535, while Tyndale was still in prison.

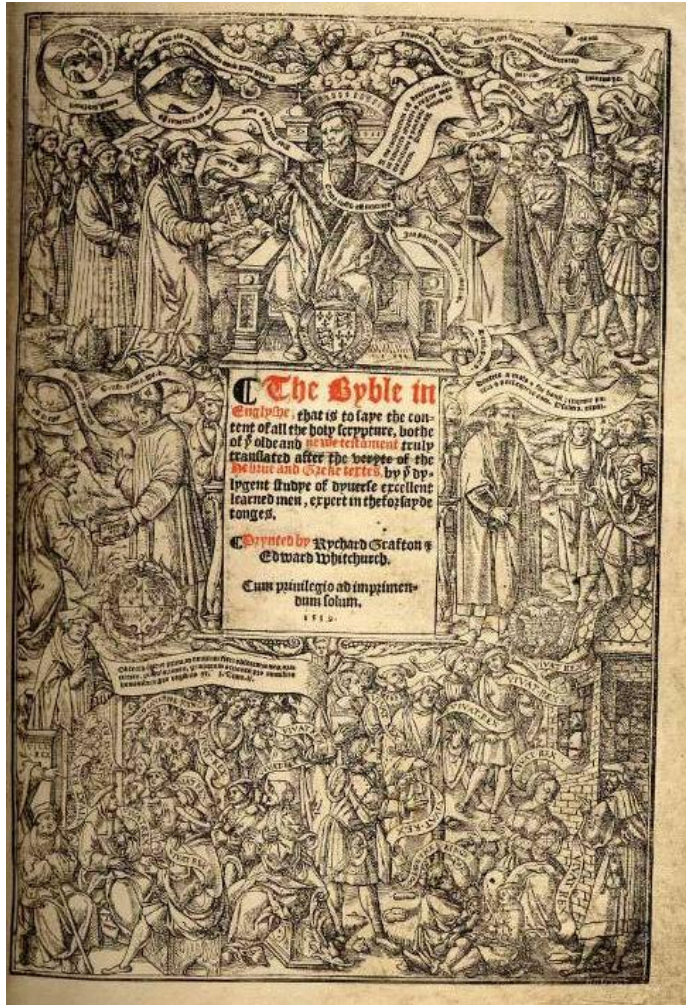
THE PSALMS IN ANGLICAN TRADITION

The Psalter in Anglican Tradition in the Book of Common Prayer from the 1928 version and earlier is essentially the work of Miles Coverdale, Tyndale's companion and fellow-translator. This is why the close observer will notice differences from the King James Version renderings, which came nearly a century later.

John Rogers, also an associate of Tyndale's and writing under the pen-name of Thomas Matthew, produced an English translation in 1537, the year after Tyndale's martyrdom. This Bible was essentially the work of Tyndale, and Rogers published it under a pseudonym, since it was still too early to concede publicly that it was mostly the work of the hunted heretic. In addition, this Bible had the advantage of receiving a royal license, which now was also granted to Coverdale's second edition. Now, there were two English Bible's in circulation, both by formal permission of the king of England! It was poetic justice, of course, that both the Coverdale and Matthew translations largely included the work of Tyndale. At the end of Malachi, the initials W.T. appeared in Matthew's Bible, and those "in the know" would immediately have recognized this as an overture to William Tyndale. In both these Bibles, the Apocrypha was printed as an appendix to the Old Testament.

The Great Bible

With two English Bible's now circulating with legal permission, those published by Coverdale and Matthews, there was now no reason that individual parishes could not have their own English editions of the Bible. To this end, Coverdale was commissioned to revise the Matthew's Bible, and its printing began in 1538. By 1539, there was such a fever of interest in reading the English Bible (parish Bibles were chained to a desk near the front of individual churches) that the king found it necessary to issue a proclamation that people could not simply walk up and read aloud during the services, thus disrupting the liturgy! By 1540, a second edition was published containing a subscript on the title page, "This is the Byble apoynted to the use of the churches." Several subsequent editions followed. It should be remembered, of course, that most common people would have been unable to afford a copy of the Bible for private use. The Bible in their local parish church was readily available, however.



The Great Bible 1539 Edition, authorized to be distributed to all parish churches in England for public reading

When Mary was succeeded by Elizabeth, the atmosphere changed again, and she reissued her father's order that every parish church should have its own copy of the English Bible.

The Geneva Bible

In 1560, a new effort was made by Englishmen who had escaped to the continent during Mary's so-called "bloody reign." In John Calvin's Geneva additional translation efforts were ongoing, and now a new English Bible

In spite of the fact that the majority of the Great Bible ultimately must be credited to William Tyndale, Tyndale's own reputation as a heretic did not diminish. In 1546 Henry VIII ordered that all copies of Tyndale's (and Coverdale's) New Testament be gathered and burned, and huge quantities were destroyed at St. Paul's Cross in London. The great irony, of course, was the fact that Tyndale's work lived on in the editions of the Great Bible in virtually every parish church in the whole of England!

Several other translations were attempted over the next couple of decades. Some, like the Bishop Becke's Bible, were published with annotations—and the fact that the annotations were set in the same typeface as the text itself created not a little confusion.¹ When Mary ascended to the throne in 1553, her return to a more stringent catholicity meant imminent danger to English Bible translators. John Rogers and Thomas Cranmer were both executed, while others escaped to the continent. Many Bibles were burned at Mary's orders.

COMPARING TRANSLATIONS

Coverdale's

Then stepte there
forth from
amonge the
Philistynes a
stoute bolde
man, named
Goliath.

1 Sa. 17:4

Matthew's

And then came a
man, and stode
in the myddes
out of the tents
of the
Philistines,
named Goliath.

1 Sa. 17:4

The Great Bible

And there came a
man betwene
them both out of
the tentes of the
Philistines
named Goliath.

1 Sa. 17:4

¹ For instance, in Becke's Bible the annotation for 1 Pe. 3:7 reads: "He dwelleth with his wife according to knowledge, that taketh her as a necessary helper, and not as a bonde servante, or a bonde slave. And yf she be not obedient and healpful to hym, endeavoureth to beate the feare of God into her heade, that thereby she maye be compelled to learne her dutie, and to do it."

The Bishops' Bible

The popularity of the Geneva Bible, and indeed, its superior translation quality to the Great Bible, meant that the days of the Great Bible were at an end. However, the Church of England would hardly want to make the Geneva Bible the one to be issued to parish churches, especially since it was so heavily slanted toward Calvinism along with some rather negative comments about the absolute authority of kings. Hence, in 1561 English bishops who were qualified along with various other scholars began a revision of the Great Bible by checking it against the original Greek and Hebrew texts. This so-called “Bishops’ Bible” was completed in 1568. They were instructed to

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add no “bitter or controversial” annotations. The Bishops’ Bible gradually replaced the Great Bible in the parish churches.

Unfortunately, the scholarship behind the Bishops’ Bible was not as good as the scholarship behind the Geneva Bible. While the Calvinist annotations might have been objectionable to some, the excellence of translation certainly was not. The upshot was that when Elizabeth died and the crown passed to James in 1603, the time was ripe for yet another step forward in English Bible Translation. This would result in the best translation of all, the King James Version.

Douay-Reims Bible

In the late 16th century, the Roman Catholic Church also began producing an English version, the New Testament published in Reims, France in 1582 and the Old Testament published in 1609-1610 at the University of Douai. Similar to Wyclif’s Version, this one was translated from Jerome’s Latin Vulgate, not the original Greek and Hebrew texts, so it was a translation of a translation. With extensive marginal notes, it sought to uphold Roman Catholic tradition in the face of the Protestant Reformation, which had thus far dominated academic debate regarding the translation of the Bible.

