

The Open Bible in England

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Among the many anniversaries celebrated in 1988 was one of special significance to all who love the English Bible—the four hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the royal injunction requiring the setting up in every parish church in England of ‘one book of the whole Bible of the largest volume in English’, in a place where parishioners might ‘most commodiously resort to the same and read it’. This injunction was published on 5th September 1538; its publication was the climax of a process which had been going on for about four years.

When William Tyndale, as John Foxe tells us, uttered his dying prayer at the stake at Vilvorde on 6 October 1536, ‘Lord, open the king of England’s eyes’, he could not have known that his prayer was already beginning to be fulfilled. Twelve months earlier, a complete English Bible had been printed on the Continent (probably at Cologne, the setting of the first and abortive attempt to print Tyndale’s New Testament ten years before). This English Bible, the work of Tyndale’s associate Miles Coverdale, was largely dependent on Tyndale’s translation of the New Testament, the Pentateuch and Jonah; it was quickly imported into England, where it was equipped with a dedication to Henry VIII (apparently printed at Southwark), and no obstacle was placed in its way.

Thomas Cromwell, the king’s secretary, took an interest in Coverdale’s Bible, and it was he probably who drew the king’s attention to it. The king, if he followed his usual practice, submitted it to advisers and, after hearing their reports, made his own mind up. They had various criticisms to offer, but none of substance. ‘Are there any heresies maintained thereby?’ the king asked. When he was assured that there were none, he replied, ‘Then in God’s name let it go abroad among our people.’ This account, given by William Fulke in his *Defence of the Translations of the Holy Scriptures into the English Tongue* (1583), has often been thought to relate to the Great Bible of 1539, but J.F. Mozley has argued convincingly that it relates to Coverdale’s Bible of 1535. The Constitutions of Oxford, which since 1408 had impeded the circulation of the Bible in England, were now in this respect a dead letter.

In 1537 another of Tyndale’s associates, John Rogers (later to become the first of the Marian martyrs), produced another edition of the English Bible, under the pen-name Thomas Matthew. This edition, which incorporated not only Tyndale’s Pentateuch, Jonah and New Testament but also his unpublished translation of the Old Testament books from Joshua to 2 Chronicles, bore on its title-page the words ‘Set forth with the king’s most gracious licence.’ Permission for the circulation of Coverdale’s first edition had been given by word of mouth only. A few years previously Archbishop Cranmer had begun to superintend the production of an English Bible, to be undertaken by various bishops, but by 1537 it became clear to him, as he said, that this work would not be finished until ‘a day after Domesday’. He decided that ‘Matthew’s Bible’ would serve instead, and asked Thomas Cromwell to use his influence with the king to grant the royal licence for its circulation. The royal licence was granted; not only so, but the next printing of Coverdale’s Bible also bore the words ‘Set forth with the king’s most gracious licence’ on its title-page. This impression of Coverdale’s Bible was the first edition of the whole English Bible to be printed in England.

Not only so: while Tyndale was still alive Thomas Cromwell had prepared the text of a royal injunction on religious matters, which in its first form included a direction for the setting up of 'a book of the whole Bible, both in Latin and also in English', in every parish church. Three copies of this first draft, printed by the king's printer in July 1536, survive. But this particular direction was dropped from the second draft, the text which was actually published. It may be that it was dropped because it was too reminiscent of the policy and practice of Anne Boleyn, who had placed a copy of Coverdale's Bible on a desk in the public area of her apartments, where it could be consulted by all and sundry. Anne had been executed in May 1536, and the disfavour in which her memory was held caused Cromwell to have second thoughts. If the original draft had gone forward, Coverdale's Bible would certainly have been the 'book of the whole Bible . . . in English' set up for public reading; there was no other at that time.

But the idea was in the air: since the English Bible was in circulation by the king's express permission, there was no reason why a bishop (for example) might not issue a direction for the public setting up of a Bible, or at least a New Testament, in the churches of his diocese. Latimer did so in his diocese of Worcester in 1537; his example was followed in the same year or in early 1538 by the bishops of Coventry and Salisbury and by the archbishop of York. The atmosphere was propitious for the royal injunction of September 1538, which made the English Bible accessible throughout the whole kingdom.

But which edition of the English Bible was used for this purpose? Preparations had already been set afoot for the production of the Great Bible. This new version, edited by Coverdale, had been sent to Paris for printing about May 1538, but the work of printing was held up by the action of the French inquisitor-general. After much diplomatic activity permission was given to have the type, paper and printers transported to England, so that the work might be continued there. It was eventually published in London in April 1539.

The injunction of September 1538, however, specified 'the feast of All Saints next coming' (1 November 1538) as the date by which the Bible should be set up in every parish church. At that time the 'book of the whole Bible of the largest volume in English' was Matthew's Bible, a folio. Either that, or the folio edition of Coverdale printed in 1537, was available to meet the terms of the injunction, and there is evidence that one or the other of these was being used for public reading in churches before the Great Bible became available for the purpose. In the same month as witnessed the appearance of the Great Bible it was necessary for a royal proclamation to be made forbidding the unofficial reading aloud of the Bible in church while divine service was going on: evidently this undesirable practice was already current, since the injunction of the previous September had not expressly prohibited it.

When the Great Bible was published, it was plainly the edition which the injunction had in view. Not only does the title-page of the second edition make this explicit with the statement, 'This is the Bible appointed to the use of the churches'; the title-page of the first edition exhibits the famous woodcut in which King Henry from his throne delivers the Word of God with his right hand to Cranmer and with his left to Cromwell, who in their turn deliver it to the clergy and laity respectively. The unfettered circulation of Scripture is shown thus to be royal policy, carried out with the express approval of the Almighty, who is seen proclaiming 'I have found a man after my own heart, who shall perform all my desire' (Acts 13:22).

The reactionary trend of Henry's last seven years was hostile to the spirit of the injunction of 1538, but the injunction itself was not revoked, and it was repromulgated in the first year of

Edward VI's reign. Even under his sister Mary the injunction was not revoked, although compliance with it was not actively encouraged, and Bibles that were dilapidated or removed from churches were not replaced. When Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558 the twenty-years-old injunction was again repromulgated, but in many churches the Great Bible was still available and serviceable. Where it had to be replaced, the edition of 1553 was still in print (it had not been a best-seller during Mary's reign), and it was not necessary to print a new folio until 1562. Since then the Bible has continued to be readily accessible to the English-speaking peoples in their own tongue; it only remains for them, in the words of the injunction of 1538, to 'resort to the same and read it'.

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