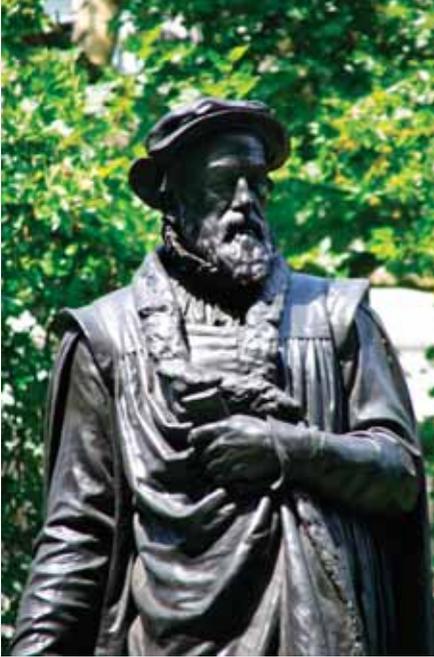


Part Five: The Bible, Appointed to be Read ...

Sixteenth Century Bibles Compete!

Since May 1884, there has been a bronze statue of Tyndale in the Victoria Gardens on the Thames Embankment in London.



A plaque at the foot of the statue plinth bears the following inscription:

William Tyndale

First Translator of the New Testament into English from the Greek.

Born A.D.1484.

Died a Martyr at Vilvorde in Belgium, A.D.1536.

*“Thy word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” – “The entrance of Thy words giveth light.”
Psalm CXIX. 105, 130.*

“And this is the record, that God has given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son” 1 John 5:11

The last words of William Tyndale were “Lord open the King of England’s eyes.” Within a year afterwards, a Bible was placed in every parish church by the king’s command.

Tyndale’s prayer was indeed answered. Before Tyndale was executed Henry VIII had declared his break with Rome (1531) and Henry became self-appointed sole protector and Supreme Head of the Church of England. In 1534 the Convocation of Canterbury had petitioned for an English translation of the Bible. It was therefore timely for a new Bible version to be produced: one which could be dedicated to the King!

Coverdale’s Bible

Miles Coverdale was invited to produce a new translation and in 1535 published the first complete printed English Bible. Coverdale was the most important successor to Tyndale, whom he had known at Cambridge University. Coverdale had been in exile in Antwerp but was later to become a protestant Bishop of Exeter.

Coverdale's Bible was, mainly, a compilation of the work of other translators which he put together according to his personal preferences. On the title page Coverdale admits to his dependence on "five sundry interpreters". The greatest of them was of course Tyndale. Tyndale had not published a complete Old Testament before his martyrdom. For this reason, Coverdale consulted Tyndale's Pentateuch and the work of Latin and German translators of the Bible. It is said that Coverdale's Bible was favoured by Queen Anne Boleyn, known for her Protestant sympathies. When she fell from favour and was executed in 1536, Coverdale's version lost its appeal to the King.

The title page shows King Henry VIII enthroned and distributing Bibles to his Bishops with the laity kneeling in attendance. There is, however, no depiction of any papal figure between the King and the name of God!

The Matthew Bible

In 1537 John Rogers combined William Tyndale's printed New Testament with Miles Coverdale's work, to create the Matthew Bible. This was the first English version to be authorised by the monarch. Little did Henry VIII realise that this Bible version contained much of Tyndale's work. John Rogers was a friend of Tyndale and used the title "Matthew's Bible" to protect his identity. The Old Testament text was sourced from Tyndale's published and unpublished Old Testament manuscripts. The remaining text was that of Coverdale's Bible.

The unpublished manuscripts had been produced while Tyndale was awaiting execution in the Castle at Vilvorde. The title page of Matthew's Bible declares that it was printed "with



the King's most gracious license". 1,500 copies were imported but this was insufficient as there were more than 8,000 parishes in England.

Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury, sent a copy of the Matthew Bible to Thomas Cromwell commending it in these words. "As for the translation, as far as I have read thereof I like it better than any other translation heretofore made".

Cromwell, a Member of Parliament and a man with business experience as a trader was now principal secretary to the King. He was in a good position to influence matters at Court. However, the Matthew Bible contained marginal notes written by Rogers which did not meet the approval of senior churchmen.

The Great Bible

So on 3 September 1538 Henry VIII commissioned another new version of

the Bible. The royal injunction required that, “*ye shall provide...one book of the whole Bible of the largest volume in English...set up in some convenient place...your parishioners may commodiously resort to the same and read it...*”

Miles Coverdale was tasked to do this work. What he did was to revise the Matthew Bible and remove the marginal notes. It became known as “*The Great Bible*” since it was to be a “*Bible of the largest volume in English*”. Its dimensions were approximately, 15 inches x 9 inches (337mm x 235mm). In November 1539 the Great Bible was published, coming off the presses of Richard Grafton and Edward Whitchurch. This is why it is sometimes known as Whitchurch’s Bible. The title page shows a large Henry VIII distributing Bibles to both clergy and laity alike.

The Geneva Bible

In 1553, Catholic Queen Mary came to the throne. She banned the printing of English Bibles and forbade their use in churches. Protestants fled abroad to escape from fiery persecution.

Many gathered in Geneva and it was there that the refugees produced the Geneva Bible of 1560. The Geneva Bible adopted a system of chapter divisions into verses (which were first introduced in 1448) and numbered verses (these were developed in 1551).

Chapter Divisions

In the original texts there were no chapter or verse divisions. Numbered chapters and verses are invaluable for refer-

ence and Bible study but we need to remember that they come from unbroken manuscript text and they are not always quite right. For example, the last verse of Acts 21:40 requires that we read on across the chapter division:

So when he had given him permission, Paul stood on the stairs and motioned with his hand to the people. And when there was a great silence, he spoke to them in the Hebrew language, saying, (Acts 21:40).

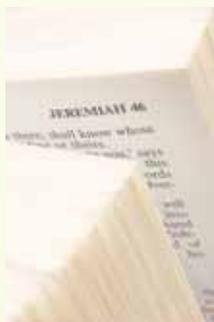
This verse obviously has to be read in conjunction with Acts 22:1 in order to make sense of what follows. Another example of the importance of not reading selected Scriptures in isolation is found in Hebrews chapter 12, verse 1 of which begins:

Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us (Hebrews 12:1).

What do we know about this “cloud of witnesses”? Nothing, unless we read the previous chapter, where they are listed for us. These are faithful men and women called out by God across the generations who died in faith and will be in God’s Kingdom when it is set up on earth.

Reading in Context

It’s important to read the passage or setting of any one verse. For example, if you just read this verse in isolation you would think that God has NOT revealed important information about the future:



“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him” (1 Corinthians 2:9).

But the next verse says:

But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:10).

God’s Spirit has caused many prophecies to be written about God’s Kingdom on earth (for example, Psalm 72; Isaiah 35 and Revelation 21). So we are, in fact, very well informed about God’s gracious plans for the restoration and recovery of the earth, and can be part of it, if we want to be.

Proper Bible reading matters if we are to understand God’s message. Read just one verse of John’s gospel, and you would get quite a wrong impression, for Jesus once said:

“In my Father’s house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2).

That sounds as if Jesus was promising believers that they would live with him in heaven, but the very next verse explains:

*“And if I go and prepare a place for you, **I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also**” (John 14:3).*

Read the two verses together and you will see that Jesus is telling us that after his departure to heaven, to prepare things, he will return to earth – where God’s kingdom is to be established.

Bishop’s Bible

On the accession of the protestant



Queen Elizabeth I in 1558, the right of the public to read the Bible was restored. However, the popularity of the Geneva Bible continued as it was regarded as a good translation, better than The Great Bible.

The Geneva Bible was very popular among Protestants, because it contained marginal notes, maps and tables and was intended for private study. It remained in

print with 70 editions over a period of 80 years, until 1640. The 1560 Edition was even dedicated to Queen Elizabeth I. But it was the marginal notes that later gave King James I cause for concern so that he forbade the inclusion of such notes in the King James Bible.

What the Anglican Bishops now decided to do was to revise the Great Bible. This revised version, published in 1568, became known as the Bishops Bible due to the large number of Bishops on the revision committee. It was placed in cathedrals in England and was purchased by many parish churches; but the Geneva Bible continued to be used in the home.

Tyndale’s dying prayer had been answered: God had opened the eyes of the King of England.

Now that these Bibles had been sanctioned, or at least tolerated by the State and the established church, everything was in place for a new version of the English Bible: one that was to endure for the next 400 years.

Peter Moore

Next: Commissioning the King James Bible