

Cranmer Carries on Tyndale's Work

By James Moffatt

Before the executioners throttled Tyndale to death he was able to pray aloud, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes." The prayer was answered sooner than he could have dared to expect. When the smoke ceased to rise from the pyre of the martyr on October 6, 1536, the officials of the Roman Church congratulated themselves that the heresy of Tyndale had been stamped out. The dramatic sequel was this: Within twelve months the King of England tolerated a version of the Bible, so that every church in England should possess a copy, and that another translation was at once licensed, which Archbishop Cranmer preferred, and which was substantially Tyndale's version, though this was not at first realized. More steps had to be taken before the final English version appeared in 1611. But the point is that by this time the cause of an open Bible for the people was already won; the cause for which Tyndale had labored and suffered and died. More than that, the final Authorized version which appeared, after the Roman Catholics reaction between 1553 and 1558, owed much to Tyndale's translation.

Why and how did this sudden change come about? The inquiry turns upon the part played by Thomas Cranmer, who had become Archbishop of Canterbury in 1533. So long as Archbishop Warham ruled the church little was to be hoped for. In 1530 Warham and a majority of his party had forbidden the free circulation of any vernacular version, and copies of Tyndale's New Testament were solemnly burned before Saint Paul's Cathedral by the Bishop of London. But even then two significant signs of the times were visible. One was that King Henry insisted that some translation of the Bible be prepared. If the churchmen objected to Tyndale's, let them provide a better. Henry was alive to the need and demand for a people's Bible of some kind. The other sign was this, that in 1531 unofficial negotiations had actually been opened between the court and Tyndale at Antwerp. Tyndale nobly offered to come over and surrender himself to whatever punishment the king saw fit if only a bare translation of the Bible were allowed in England, such as the Germans enjoyed in their own country. These negotiations came to nothing, but again it was important that they should even have been started. By 1531 Cardinal Wolsey had fallen from power and died. The next year Archbishop Warham had died. The scene was now set for a shift in the policy of the church and the court which had a serious and favorable bearing upon the fortunes of the English Bible.

At the time that Tyndale was murdered, both Cranmer and Cromwell had been in power for three years, the one as Archbishop of Canterbury and the other as chancellor of the exchequer. Both were personally interested in Tyndale, but neither could or would intervene. It was in the political interest of King Henry to keep on good terms with the Emperor Charles V, against whose laws Tyndale had technically erred. The craft of the papist party in England and the clergy if Louvain prevented anything being done to rescue the English scholar from the revenge of the Roman authorities. But the break with the papacy came.

In the very year of Tyndale's death the rising resentment against Rome, on political rather than on religious grounds, made itself felt. This gave a chance to those who sympathized with evangelical reform, and they took the opportunity of pressing for an English Bible. When Henry realized the need of making common cause with the Protestants of Germany against the pope and

his allies, he had convocation draw up a book of religious articles restating the Christian faith of England. Cranmer was behind this move, and it was ratified by Cromwell, who ordered the clergy to act upon the royal advice of studying and preaching the Scriptures.

Cromwell's injunctions actually contained a command that a Bible in English as well as in Latin be placed in the choir of every church, for anyone to consult. Why? Because King Henry in the Articles had declared that "all bishops and preachers ought and must constantly believe and defend all those things to be true, which be comprehended in the whole body and canon of the Bible and also in the three creeds or symbols," this is, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene, and the Athanasian. The Articles indeed represent an evangelical catholicism such as had never been dreamed of in England, and the Bible is openly recognized.

It was all very well, however, for the government and the church to draw up this project of reform, proving that the king intended to be a real defender of the faith himself, instead of leaving the interests of English religion to a foreign bishop like the Pope in Rome. But what Bible was to be laid open for men to read in church? There was none in English, none surviving from the Roman régime. Everyone knew that, and some had foreseen the need of an authorized translation. In 1534 the English bishops in convocation, under the impulse of Cranmer, had actually petitioned the king "to decree that the holy Scriptures be translated into the common English tongue by certain upright and learned men . . . And handed over to the people for their instruction." Nothing came of this; the majority of the bishops were either incompetent or unwilling. But meanwhile one translation appeared, the first printed English version of the entire Bible. This was the work of a Yorkshire student, Miles Coverdale, who had even been in close touch with Tyndale. Eventually he became Bishop of Exeter, but at present he was on the Continent. So far as Tyndale's work had gone, Coverdale practically revised it, but he drew upon other versions, especially German and Latin, fusing them into fine musical prose of his own. He dedicated the book to the king, in order to win sanction for it. But, although he had Cromwell's influence behind him, the most that he could gain was freedom for his book, which had been published abroad, to circulate within England.

This was indeed something. But still there was no authorized Bible such as the royal plan demanded. What Tyndale had written was certainly circulating now, under the thin guise of Coverdale; yet the English church required a better edition of the Scriptures, for Coverdale's Bible was not wholly accurate, and he himself recognized frankly that it was not a final translation.

Soon a second contribution appeared, which was really a revised edition of Coverdale and Tyndale, though for political reasons their names were suppressed. This was the so-called "Matthew's Bible." Like Coverdale's version, it was printed abroad and dedicated to the king by the editor, a young colleague of Tyndale, but it had better fortune than its predecessor enjoyed. By this time Cranmer had lost hope of the bishops translating the Bible themselves. He felt the urgent need of a good version, backed by royal favor, and when he read this one he was so delighted that he pressed Cromwell to obtain the king's consent. Let this book of Scriptures be licensed, so that anyone may be free to buy and read it, "until such time as that we bishops shall set forth a better translation, which I think," he adds wittily, "will not be till a day after doomsday."

The result was that by the autumn of 1537 “Matthew's Bible” was formally approved by his majesty. Cranmer and Cromwell had succeeded in their effort to lodge the English Bible in the English church.

So far as Cromwell and King Henry were concerned the motive was not a pure love of the word. These statesmen realized that the reading of the Bible was one effective means of discrediting the papist claims of Rome, and it is not unfair to argue that this consideration was uppermost in their minds. But Cranmer had a nobler aim in the business. Other bishops might doubt the wisdom of letting the common people read the Bible, but Cranmer believed honestly in educating all members of the church by means of a version of the Bible in their own tongue. There is no doubt in the mind of historians than Cranmer roused the authorities to realize the need of the Bible in English Christianity, now that it was being freed from the papacy. But let us admit that although the civil authorities conceived the need and the usefulness of the Bible less deeply than Cranmer did, and undertook the policy for reasons which were less religious than his, they were able to carry the project through as no churchmen could have done.

Cranmer had still more to do for the cause of the Bible among his own countrymen. We do not know whether the authorities realized what they had done in licensing Coverdale's edition. If they did, how did they feel when a book was now patronized which practically reproduced the very version of Tyndale at which they had launched their anathemas? It must have been an awkward situation. However, even apart from this there were reasons why neither the Matthew's Bible nor Coverdale's edition could be accepted as final. The latter contained controversial notes and prefaces, for one thing. The former had other weaknesses that made it not only unsatisfactory in itself but of less value than the Coverdale Bible as a basis for further editions. A revision of the Coverdale edition was therefore demanded and carried out almost at once. Cromwell pressed for this, and the revision was intrusted to Coverdale himself. It was printed in Paris, as the press there was better than in England. The Romanists in France did their best to prevent the export of the sheets, but the English were too clever for them, and by 1539-1540 the newly revised Bible was issued in England. It was called either “Cromwell's Bible or the “Great Bible.”

Almost before this Bible could be launched in England a shift of politics led to the fall and execution of Cromwell, and Cranmer had to complete the measures taken for the publication of the Great Bible. So it is sometimes called “Cranmer's Bible,” although the only part Cranmer took in the venture was to contribute a prologue or preface to the second edition. In this prologue he makes a statement about earlier English translations, that is, earlier than Tyndale's. But before leaving the Great Bible let us recall that, although it was wisely stripped of notes, it was introduced by a significant picture, which the great painter Holbein, then patronized by Cromwell and King Henry, is supposed to have drawn. At the top of the woodcut Christ is represented in heaven, saying, “I have found a man after my own heart, which shall fulfill all my will.” (Acts 13:22); this is addressed to King Henry, who kneels on the ground and replies, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet.” In the middle section, King Henry, seated on his throne, hands the word of God to Cranmer and the clergy on the one side and to Cromwell and the laity on the other. At the foot of the frontispiece Cranmer hands the Bible to the clergy, with the words, “Feed the flock of God,” while in handing the Bible to the laity Cromwell bids them, “depart from evil.”

Such as the temper in which the Great Bible was published and circulated freely to all who would read it. It was to be a people's Bible, taught by the clergy, read and understood by the laity, and taken as a moral guide for life by all, in public and in private lives. To all intents and purposes the hopes of Tyndale were fulfilled by this official enterprise four or five years after he had suffered cruelly for its principle.

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