Reformation and Domination:
Political Aspirations Achieved Through The Great Bible

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During the reign of King Henry VIII, England experienced a sudden change in the realm of religion. Initially, King Henry prided himself as the “Defender of Faith,” a title given to him by Pope Clement VII due to Henry’s condemnation of Martin Luther. However, after the Pope rejected his request for an annulment from his wife, Katherine of Aragon, King Henry broke away from the Catholic Church and established himself as the head of the Church of England.

Gerald Bray notes that “within months of the final break with Rome in 1534...the province of Canterbury had petitioned the king to order ‘that the Holy Scripture should be translated into the vulgar English tongue by certain good and learned men.’” Before King Henry VIII could respond to this call, two separately translated versions of the Latin Bible emerged, one from Miles Coverdale and one from John Rogers. Both versions received royal permission to be sold and read in England; this, however, caused division among the readership. When the case was brought to Thomas Cromwell, Henry’s secretary, he did not prefer one over the other, but had a different solution: to produce a better English Bible. In 1538, Miles Coverdale was given the responsibility of revising John Roger's Matthew's Bible and producing a better English

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1 Michael O’Connor, “Print, Reformation, Translation,” lecture, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, October 17, 2012.
5 Derek Wilson, “Let it Go Out Among Our People,” in The People's Bible The Remarkable History of the King James Version, foreword by Diarmaid MacCulloch (Oxford: Lion Hudson plc, 2010), 52-54.
6 Wilson, “Let it Go Out Among Our People,” 54.
7 Ibid, 54-55.
translation of the Bible. This process culminated in the creation of the *Great Bible,* and by 1539 this newly produced English Bible was in the churches of England. David Daniell argues that the *Great Bible* has three main characteristics: (1) it was the first to be authorized, (2) it brought scripture to the people, and (3) the English experienced this Bible “with the greatness of Tyndale.” Though it is true that the *Great Bible* had a huge impact on the religious aspect of the Church of England, it could also be argued that the *Great Bible* is an artefact of political strategy employed by King Henry VIII in the hope of establishing his definitive power over the Church of England. The creation of the *Great Bible* provided Henry with the ability to control, and his control was exhibited in different ways, as will be demonstrated in this article.

**Description of the Great Bible**

The *Great Bible* is aptly named, as it is the largest English Bible produced, with “pages [that measure] fifteen by ten inches.” Thomas Cromwell desired “the setting up of ‘the holy bible of the largest volume’;” however, it is not the only Bible with great size, as that remained the pattern for authorized English translations of the Bible during the Tudor reign. Authorized

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8 Ibid, 55.
9 Ibid, 55.
Bibles during this time, also known as Lectern Bibles,\textsuperscript{15} tended to be so large because they were intended to be read by the clergy in the church.\textsuperscript{16}

The Great Bible includes a frontispiece which depicts King Henry VIII presenting Thomas Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell with the English Bible, who then give it to the clergy members and elites.\textsuperscript{17} Depicted on the bottom of the frontispiece are peasants praising King Henry VIII for providing them with Scripture in the vernacular,\textsuperscript{18} while on the very top, God is overseeing this process.\textsuperscript{19} Depending on which edition one examines, Thomas Cromwell's coat of arms may or may not be included in the frontispiece, as he was executed in 1540 for instructing Hans Holbein to distort the portrait of the Lutheran princess, Anne of Cleves, to make her attractive.\textsuperscript{20} Furthermore, unlike the other Bibles which emerged, the Great Bible does not consist of much commentary; it only has notes which provide extra definitions for words.\textsuperscript{21}

\textbf{Standardization of the English Bible}

Henry VIII's idea to commission the creation of one English Bible can be seen as a political strategy to exercise authority; while it pleased the people,\textsuperscript{22} the Great Bible also required consent from the king, which he gave in 1538.\textsuperscript{23} Lori Anne Ferrell describes the Great Bible as

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\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{20} Alister McGrath, “The Great Tumult: The Reformation,” in In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture (New York: Random House Inc., 2001), 64.
\textsuperscript{22} Wilson, “Let it Go Out Among Our People,” 54-55.
\textsuperscript{23} Bray, “Translating the Bible,” 9.
\end{flushright}
“the first Bible to announce on its title page the fact of its publication by monarchical authority.”

The fact that the Great Bible included the statement of authority indirectly provided King Henry VIII with power, for he had to be the one to approve it. Furthermore, F.F. Bruce explains that “the ban of the Bibles of Tyndale and Coverdale was a monumental piece of absurdity, when all the time the Great Bible maintained its prominent position in every parish church in the land.” In this quote, Bruce demonstrates that, through the Great Bible, King Henry VIII was successful in exercising his authority as the head of the English Church. By proclaiming the Great Bible as the only version allowed to be read or used by the people, Henry VIII continued to gain autonomy from the pope and legitimized his own authority. Therefore, it could be interpreted that the Great Bible, the only one he authorized, was the only bible authoritative enough by King Henry VIII's standards. Since it was he who determined the criteria regarding the authoritativeness of the Bible, Henry VIII not only legitimized his role as the head of the Church of England, but also used the Great Bible to spread the type of message that he desired to spread. As a result, the Great Bible represents an artefact of King Henry VIII's political strategy. When the clergy read from his authorized Bible it served as a constant reminder to the congregation that it was King Henry VIII who had provided them with Scripture in the vernacular. The congregation, therefore, owed their allegiance to him and not to the Pope.

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26 Bruce, “The Great Bible,” 79.
27 Ibid, 79.
28 Ibid, 79.
29 Ibid, 79.
30 Ibid, 79.
31 Ibid, 79.
Ferrell notes, “The first authorized Bible in English...was designed as a vehicle to proclaim the king's authority over his Church.”

**Frontispiece**

The frontispiece of the *Great Bible* demonstrates, among other things, the idea that the Bible served as a constant reminder of King Henry VIII’s authority. Henry VIII is depicted as the one who provides the people with Scripture in the vernacular. Lori Anne Ferrell sees this imagery as a “portrait of power.” David Daniell instead sees “King Henry as David...bringing a new start to national life, giving ‘everyone’ the Word of God, establishing England as the sanctuary of Zion in its freedom from the pope and the absolute accessibility of the *Verbum Dei* to everyone.” Furthermore, the common people are seen to be proclaiming “*Vivat Rex,*” a depiction of happiness that could be interpreted as the people rejoicing for having finally received the much desired vernacular Bible, which the Catholic Church did not provide. This demonstrates King Henry VIII’s political strategy to exercise authority: since he was seen as a provider for the people, Henry was assured that the people would not challenge his authority. This analysis is linked to another interpretation of the Latin phrase, “*Vivat Rex,*” which is that it served as a warning to those who were against King Henry VIII. Since the frontispiece depicts the people supporting him, it reads as a warning to the clergy and bishops who wished to defy

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34 Ferrell, “The Politics of Translation,” 76.
36 Translation: “love live the king.”
him.\textsuperscript{40} Moreover, the depiction of God overseeing this process further legitimizes the authority of Henry VIII as it evokes “the idea that Jesus has blessed the king and his actions, which here take pride of place.”\textsuperscript{41} The depiction of God within this event could be interpreted as a sign of divine support: God had chosen Henry VIII to be the leader of His Church and was, therefore, agreeing to the separation from the Papal control through the act of providing the people with the Scripture in the vernacular.\textsuperscript{42} This, in turn, provided King Henry VIII with further authority as it was God who had granted it to him, making it unquestionable.\textsuperscript{43} Therefore, the Great Bible could be seen as an artefact of the political strategy of King Henry VIII as its frontispiece demonstrated to the people that King Henry VIII had a God-given right to be the head of the Church.\textsuperscript{44}

**Use of Latin**

David Daniell notes two places where Latin does not appear on the frontispiece. “Surprisingly, for the title-page of a book announcing itself as strongly in the central panel as ‘The Bible in English’, God speaks these extracts in Latin. Indeed, all but two of the many scrolled utterances from all kinds of people in the design are in Latin.”\textsuperscript{45} Daniell provides two interpretations of the use of Latin.\textsuperscript{46} The first interpretation is that it was a way to not alarm the population; the Church of England was not breaking entirely away from the established, traditional Catholic Church, which used Latin as their ecclesiastical language.\textsuperscript{47} The second

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid, 78.
\textsuperscript{41} Ferrell, “The Politics of Translation,” 76.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid, 76.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid, 76.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, 76.
\textsuperscript{45} Daniell, “The Great Bible, 1539,” 205.
\textsuperscript{46} Daniell, “The Great Bible, 1539,” 205-207.
\textsuperscript{47} Daniell, “The Great Bible, 1539,” 205.
interpretation is that these phrases “exist... [to] praise the king in Latin.” Daniell explains that the juxtaposition of the open pulpit and the prison scene demonstrate the idea that if one did not praise the king in Latin, the prison was where one would end up. Therefore, the Latin served as a reminder to the common people to praise the king in that language. However, while the use of Latin further demonstrates that the Bible was used to propagate the authority of the King, Latin was, and still is, the ecclesiastical language employed by the Roman Catholic Church. By using the language that the masses and clergy recognized as authoritative, King Henry VIII was demonstrating that his authorized English Bible was also just as authoritative as the Vulgate. This interpretation is also connected to the usage of Latin to proclaim “Vivat Rex” could be seen as a warning to the clergy, who knew Latin, that the people were supportive of King Henry’s Bible. Ferrell discusses the issue of loyalty found among the clergy, as they, “began their careers as Roman Catholic priests loyal to the papacy...” The usage of Latin was making the point, in the language that the clergy were familiar with, that Henry was now in charge of the Church, “The first authorized Bible in English, then, in a neat twist on Wycliffe's and Tyndale's fundamental notion of biblical authority over the Church's, was designed as a vehicle to proclaim the king’s authority over his Church.” Hence, this further demonstrates that the Great Bible could be seen as an artefact for the political strategy employed by King Henry VIII, as it promulgated the authority of the King over the Church.

49 Ibid, 207.
50 Ibid, 207.
51 Ibid, 207.
53 Ibid 78.
54 Ibid, 78.
55 Ibid, 78.
It can be seen that the *Great Bible* serves as an artefact of King Henry VIII’s political strategy, as he used the Bible to establish his authority over the Church of England. As Alister McGrath notes, “in the end, the English Reformation has to be recognized as an act of state;”\(^{56}\) politically, Henry had broken away from Papal control. Theologically, however, Henry remained Catholic.\(^ {57}\) McGrath notes that “when it became clear that there was serious opposition within England to his reform measure, Henry backtracked. The 1543 ‘King’s Book’ shows every evidence of Henry’s desire to avoid giving offense to Catholics.”\(^ {58}\) Through this analysis, it is clear that Henry had nothing against Catholicism and its teachings, but rather he desired power and authority, causing him to separate England from Papal control.\(^ {59}\) McGrath saw that “the Reformation of the Church was, in effect, the price paid by Henry...in order to secure and safeguard his personal authority within England.”\(^ {60}\) Moreover, Henry’s placement of the New Testament books (or Apocrypha) further suggests that the Reformation in England, and consequently the *Great Bible*, were all part of his political, rather than theological, strategy.\(^ {61}\) The *Great Bible* did not adopt the Lutheran style of placing the Apocrypha at the end, but rather opted for Erasmus’ formatting.\(^ {62}\) Therefore, it can be seen that politics rather than theology was at the root of King Henry VIII’s reformation.\(^ {63}\) Though the *Great Bible* might have been used as an instrument of Crown control and political authority, it had a lasting theological legacy as it passed on its title as “the authorized version” to subsequent bibles.

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\(^ {57}\) Ibid, 65.
\(^ {58}\) McGrath, “The Great Tumult: The Reformation,” 64.
\(^ {59}\) Ibid, 64.
\(^ {60}\) McGrath, 65.
\(^ {62}\) Ibid, 63.
Bibliography:


O’Connor, Michael. “Print, Reformation, Translation.” Lecture, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, October 17, 2012.