

King Henry VIII's New Bible  
by Mayra Herrera  
Honorable Mention, Dunham Bible Museum

King Henry VIII reigned over England from 1509 to 1543, during which time he made and advocated many changes in England. The most significant shift that he made however, was the split from the Catholic Church and the forming of the Church of England in which he placed himself as the head of not just the state, but the church as well. This split gave way to a landmark happening: the publishing of “The Great Bible.” “The Great Bible” became a milestone because it became the first published Bible in the English language authorized by a royal in England after the political reformation. Nonetheless, after its early years, “The Great Bible” faced many restrictions on its reading by the same King Henry.. Queen Mary, his daughter and successor after his son King Edward VII died, also made attempts to bring back Catholicism, so this Bible lost much of its importance during this time.

King Henry VIII became king in June 24, 1509 and split from the Catholic Church between 1533 and 1534 setting himself as the head of the new Church of England due to “The King’s Great Matter.”<sup>1</sup> King Henry wanted to have his marriage with Catherine of Argon annulled, however the Pope refused to do this. As a result, King Henry took the decision to begin the formation of his own church. In this new institution, King Henry placed himself as the head of his own church, and as such he could allow his own divorce.

By 1539, the King as new head of his own Church, believed he could and should publish a Bible that all English people could understand, and left “Myles Coverdale and Sir Thomas

---

<sup>1</sup> tudorhistory.org; Michael D. and Henry Palmer, *Henry VIII*, London, 1996, 50.

Cromwell to supervise its creation for use in the Church of England”.<sup>2</sup> This led to the production and distribution of a new “vulgar language” bible that came to be known as “The Great Bible”.<sup>3</sup>

Soon enough, the Bibles began to be distributed to all churches in England. This became a very different experience because the Bibles read and recited within the Catholic Church were all only published in Latin. Latin was the language of the educated. “The Great Bible” became the first Bible produced in English as authorized by a royal. The language difference in Bibles marked a definite divisive line between the newfound Anglican Church, and the mother Catholic Church. This controversial, newly created Bible came to be known as “The Great Bible” because of its great size. The Bible was not only large in all dimensions, but it is also adorned with very elaborate lettering in both the written pages and its cover. The title page actually also had a personal importance to the newfound church, as the “illustration was a key instrument in conveying a fundamental political message: that papal authority over the church in England had been replaced by Henry VIII’s Royal Supremacy”.<sup>4</sup> The Great Bible was greatly used to highlight the end of the Catholic religion in England, and the beginning of the Church of England under the authority of King Henry.

Although the Great Bible was partly used to mark the start of a new church, King Henry also allowed the publishing this Bible to allow all English citizens to have access to a Bible they could understand in their native language. King Henry strategically ordered it to be placed in all churches in England, so that anyone would be able to read it, however they were not allowed

---

<sup>2</sup> "The Great Bible or Cranmer's Bible." *Myloc.gov*. Library of Congress, n.d. Web. 28 Sept. 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Palmer, 61.

<sup>4</sup> Tatiana C. Sting. "Henry VIII's Illuminated "Great Bible"" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 59 (1996): 315.

outside the church building. In fact, some of these Great Bibles were even chained to the pulpit to prevent them from being robbed.

Although, King Henry placed great liberties on the reading of this Bible within the church building during the first years of its publication, the controversy over the common people reading the Bible pressed him to add many more restrictions to the usage of it: “By 1543 the king felt that this doctrinal trend had gone too far”.<sup>5</sup> What King Henry believed to be a great idea to establish his supreme authority, soon began to spin out his hands and backfire on him, “The English Bible had made it possible for ordinary subjects to appeal to a new authority in the resolution of religious quarrels... it proved impossible for the King’s word on Church doctrine to carry the conviction of ultimate authority”.<sup>6</sup> Due to this, the King was forced to make several restrictions on the reading of the Bible, as he “condemned unorthodox translations and... women and the lower orders were not allowed to read it at all”.<sup>7</sup> The liberty enjoyed by many commons on the reading of scripture was eliminated.

After the ascension of Mary Tudor, King Henry’s daughter with Catherine of Argon, into the throne in 1554, put all of this behind as she insisted on the Re-Catholicization of England. Although she took great measures to reinstitute Catholicism, and was somewhat successful during her lifetime, this only survived months after her death.<sup>8</sup>

Finding such a significant artifact in the Dunham Bible Museum, such as “The Great Bible,” created a great impression because of its importance in the English Reformation. It was a landmark as it became the first Bible translated in the language that a vast population knows, as

---

<sup>5</sup> John Bowle. *Henry VIII, a Biography*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1965, 259.

<sup>6</sup> Palmer, 61.

<sup>7</sup> Bowle, 260.

<sup>8</sup> Jennifer Loach. "Mary Tudor and The Re-Catholicization of England." *History Today* 44.11 (1994): 16. *World History Collection*. Web.

ordered by a monarch. Having this landmark Bible in a museum is great because we are able to appreciate the beginnings of what we know as the present Bible, and the pioneers of the Bibles we use now. If I had encountered the Great Bible in its historical setting, it would have had a deeper appreciation for it. Walking into the city where it originated, and into the churches in which it was exhibited would have allowed the viewer to go back to the past and into that time and age.

Having this “The Great Bible” in a museum really entices the viewer to learn more about its origin and background. This artifact contains great importance, as it played such a significant role right in the middle of the Reformation of England. It marked the ending of authority of the Catholic Church in England, and the beginning of the new Church under King Henry VIII.

#### Works Cited

- Bowle, John. *Henry VIII, a Biography*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1965. Print.
- Loach, Jennifer. "Mary Tudor and The Re-Catholicization of England." *History Today* 44.11 (1994): 16. *World History Collection*. Web. 4 Dec. 2012.
- Loades, D. M. *Henry VIII: Court, Church and Conflict*. Kew: National Archives, 2007. Print.
- Palmer, Michael D., and Henry. *Henry VIII*. 2nd ed. London [u.a.: Longman, 1996. Print.
- String, Tatiana C. "Henry VIII's Illuminated "Great Bible"" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 59 (1996): 315-324. Web. 29 Nov. 2012.
- "The Great Bible or Cranmer's Bible." *Myloc.gov*. Library of Congress, n.d. Web. 28 Sept. 2012.