

# The Dr. Gene Scott Bible Collection

## STATION 18: THE "GREAT" BIBLE



*Click on the image  
above to see an  
enlarged view!*

The "high water mark" of Henry VIII's reign, as far as the English Bible is concerned, was his express approval of the "Great" Bible of **1539** and his declaration appointing it to be set up for public use and read in all churches. But with the same pen he used to sign that declaration, he also could sign the death warrant for a "heretic" who denied transubstantiation. By the May 1538 "Act of Six Articles," many newly-emerged Protestant practices were outlawed. Cromwell was beheaded for heresy in July 1539; Dr. Barnes and other martyrs soon followed. In 1543, Henry prohibited owning or reading any translation of Tyndale's, and required obliterating any notes or preambles in subsequent versions. From October 1st of that year, anyone caught reading any English Bible openly without express dispensation was subject to a month's imprisonment (with certain noble and royal officers excepted). Furthermore, as if to offset this prohibition, it was ordered that every prelate read one chapter (and only one chapter) of the Bible to his congregation each Sunday or holy day, commencing with the New Testament; this would mean that the entire Word would reach the people but once or twice per generation.

The "Great" Bible, the last "new" English Bible of Henry's reign, followed the path blazed by Wycliffe and Tyndale. Coverdale was its appointed editor, and it was decided to print the Bible

in Paris, because of the superior workmanship there. Henry had applied for permission to the French court for its printing, which was granted and printing began, but the Papist inquisitor-general intervened, and seized a quantity of finished pages on December 17, 1538. Coverdale and Grafton (the English printer) quickly gathered up four "vats" of finished sheets, and (in a move reminiscent of Tyndale's flight from Cologne to Worms) escaped to London, together with presses, type and workmen. The first edition of this "Great" Bible (called thus because of its standard, large folio, size) was published in 1539; the King's decree which enjoined that no other translation be used or published henceforth except as licensed by Archbishop Cranmer (for a period of five years) was issued in November 1539.

A second edition was published in April 1540; it contained, for the first time, Cranmer's prologue, and is thus sometimes called "Cranmer's Bible." Further editions followed in July and November 1540 and in May, November and December 1541 (and it continued in print through 1569). Bibliographically, each of these editions is distinct. The first two (1539 and April 1540) vary from each other in the translation, though Coverdale edited both. The subsequent editions follow the text of the April 1540 edition with very little deviation.

Textually, the "Great" Bible is a direct successor to Matthew's Bible, though much of the exact wording was revised by Coverdale with the use of Erasmus' Latin and Greek New Testaments and Muenster's new edition of the Latin Old Testament. The "Great" Bible was still a patchwork of revision, still far from being a direct translation from the Latin and Greek, relying too heavily on the Latin Vulgate in places. For all this, the "Great" Bible was still the version that, however reluctantly, the King and his Bishops had set out for the instruction of the common people, and it was heavily used by shepherds, merchants and laborers alike (provided they had the gift of literacy).

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## "Great" Bibles shown at Station 18:

- **Folio Edition - 1553 - *"The Byble in English, that is to say, the contente of all the holy scripture, bothe of the old and new Testament, accordyng to the translation that is appointed to be read in Churches."***

Printed in London by "Edwarde Whytchurche." Large "Black Letter" type, folio edition with woodcut blocks decorating the title pages. This is a particularly scarce book, as

Queen Mary had most copies of it burned. (Herbert #102)

- **The FOURTH Folio Edition, 1541** - Though printed in London by "Edwarde Whitechurch" in November 1540 per the colophon, published only in 1541. Large "Black Letter" text, in columns of 65 lines (previous editions had 62). The edition claims to have been **"oversene and perused"** by Bishops Tunstall and Heath (in accordance with the proclamation of 1538), though the text lacks any evidence of careful revision, and more closely resembles the 1539 First Edition than those of April or July 1540. As the Third Edition (July 1540) was printed in the month Cromwell was executed, this Fourth Edition was the first in which his "Arms" were cut out of the block used to print the title page (attributed to Holbein). The Prologue was written by Cranmer (the third edition to contain it). In May 1541, a Royal Proclamation ordered every vicar to comply with the instructions, issued under Cromwell, to have a copy of the Great Bible for public use before Ash Wednesday, 1541. (Herbert #60)
- **1553 - "The Byble in Englyshe according to the translation of the Great Byble"** - Quarto edition, printed by R. Graffton, London. "Black Letter" text in double columns, in unusual "wiry" type, with references or daily lessons in the margins, and appropriate months in the headlines. This example has the Old Testament and Apocrypha ("Hagiographa") only. Several headlines have the chapter name neatly corrected in contemporary manuscript. (Herbert #103)
- "Book of Job" and "Apocrypha" from the Sixth (Last) Folio Edition, **1566** - Printed by C. Hamillon of Rouen (France) in "Black Letter" type, with 58 lines per column. Title pages for each section differ markedly from the previous folio editions. Colophon at the end of "Job" gives the year and **"At the cost and Charges of Rychard Carmarden,"** who evidently subsidized its publication. (Herbert #119)

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**Also shown at this**

**Station:**

## **The Martyrdom of Archbishop Cranmer from FOX'S "MARTYRS"**

Woodcut from the three-volume 7th edition. Cranmer had taken Sir Thomas More's place as Archbishop of Canterbury; he continued in office until he was burned to death under Queen Mary. The woodcut shows Cranmer extending his right hand into the flames, saying, **"Burn this hand first,**

*for it's the one that  
signed the  
recantation."*

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## STATION LOCATION MAP

Below is a floor plan map of the Cathedral in 3 sections, one for each level. The first section is the Lower Level, the second is the Foyer Level, and the third is the Mezzanine Level. This station is located in the East Octagon on the Foyer Level at the red #18.



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