THE REVOLUTIONARY'S BIBLE


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The stories of the interpretation and use of the English Bible in the early modern period have still not been told by historians. As a result, Christopher Hill’s new book will have great importance as a starting point for those who wish to understand the religious, intellectual and social consequences of readings of the Bible at that time. It is therefore worth inquiring what sort of Bible Christopher Hill himself has been reading, how accurate his descriptions of the understanding and use of the Bible in seventeenth-century England are, and whether his view of change during that century can be sustained.

 Twice in this long book, Christopher Hill quotes the economic historian Jack Fisher, who, on being asked for a reading list on the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, is supposed to have told a student: ‘If you really want to understand the period, go away and read the Bible’ (pp.4, 438). The English Bible which Hill himself has been reading for many years now is the Geneva Version. The Geneva Bible first appeared in 1560, complete with notes which were intended to guide the reader’s understanding of the text. But Hill prefers it with a later set of notes, derived from Pierre l'Oiseleur de Villiers' edition (London 1574) of Theodore Beza’s Greek and Latin New Testament (Geneva 1565). These were open to readings which encouraged resistance to the magistrate, and were added to the Geneva New Testament by Laurence Tomson in 1576, and printed with the whole Bible in 1587. I suspect Hill would also like his Geneva Bible to come with the English translation of the notes on Revelation by Franciscus Junius, added to the whole Bible in 1602, but also present in eight pirated editions, dated ‘1599’, which may have been produced in the 1630s in Amsterdam, when, as Hill tells us, the printing of the Geneva Version
was prohibited in England by Archbishop Laud (pp.56-66).1 This was
the Bible produced by the English exiles in Geneva in the late 1550s,
updated with the latest Genevan orthodoxy by one of Walsingham’s
clients (Tomson), and improved by the addition of the apocalyptic
interpretation of one of the leading seers of Continental Protestantism.
It was, as Hill notices, even though he does not elucidate this complex
process of development, a book which led English eyes out into
Europe, and which encouraged English people not only to view them-
selves as a nation providentially chosen by God, but also to see their
purpose as being protectors and even saviours of all God’s people in
Europe (pp.264-97). In Hill’s words, this was the Bible of the radicals, a
term which he defends and with which he identifies (pp.ix, 196–7).
However, the English Bible in the early seventeenth century was a
complex document which made difficult and sometimes contra-
dictory claims upon its readers.

Unfortunately, Hill fails to deal adequately with the hermeneutical
problems raised by such a text, in particular with how and when the
notes were used. Hill’s confusion over such matters is plainest in his
argument that ‘you could prove anything from it’ (p.428). Although
the radicals of the 1640s and 1650s whom Hill discusses tried to alter
the criteria for understanding the Bible, in particular stressing the role
of inspiration in interpretation, theirs was a highly controversial way
of reading, which brought critical responses from those who wished to
defend less individualistic approaches. Not all of those responses were
simply apologies for the role of the Church in establishing the mean-
ing of the text, although that was also a more complex process than
Hill allows; instead, many were attempts to establish a Christian her-
meuneutic which would incorporate but also control the interpretative
power of the spirit.2 The notes and textual apparatus of the Geneva Bible

1 John David Alexander, ‘The Genevan Version of the Bible: Its Origin,
Translation, and Influence’, Oxford University D.Phil. thesis 1957; Irena Backus,
‘Laurence Tomson (1539–1608) and Elizabethan Puritanism’ in: Journal of
Ecclesiastical History, 28, 1977, pp.17–27; Maurice S. Betteridge, ‘The Bitter Notes:
The Geneva Bible and its Annotatons’ in: The Sixteenth Century Journal, 14, 1983,
pp.41–62; Cameron Alexander MacKenzie, ‘The Battle for the Bible in England,
2 Geoffrey F. Nuttall, The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience, with a new
introduction by Peter Lake, Chicago 1992, pp.20–33, and for example, Ralph
Cudworth, A Sermon Preached Before the Honourable House of Commons, At Westminster,
March 31 1647, Cambridge 1647, pp.40–1; for less sympathetic views of the impli-
cations of spiritual attempts to interpret the Bible see Thomas Hall, Vindiciae
Litterarum, The Schools Guarded, London 1654, and John William Packer, The