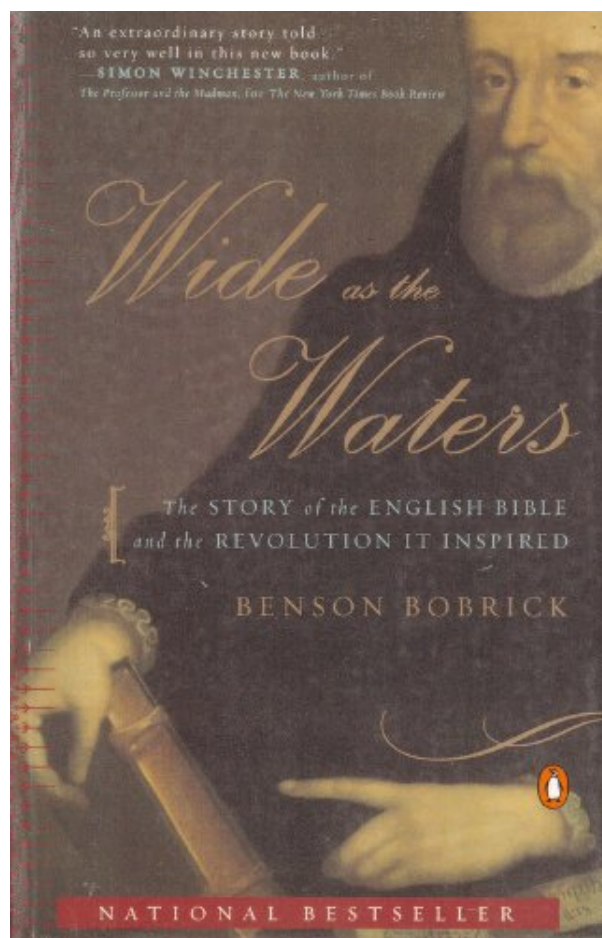
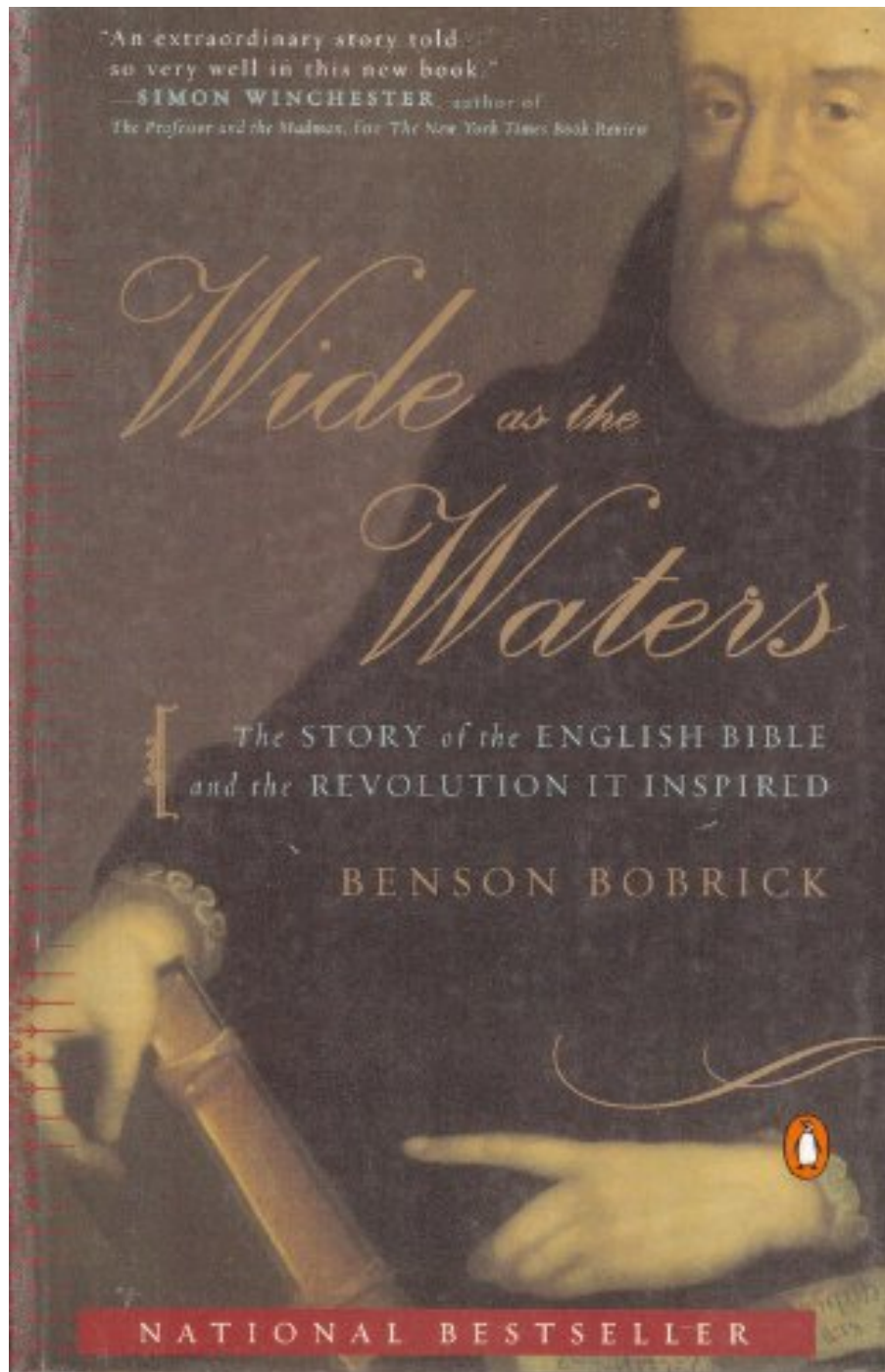


WIDE AS THE WATERS: THE STORY OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE AND THE REVOLUTION IT INSPIRED BY BENSON BOBRICK



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About the Author

Benson Bobrick earned his Ph.D. from Columbia University and is the author of several books, including *Angel in the Whirlwind*, an acclaimed narrative history of the American Revolution.

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Next to the Bible itself, the English Bible was-and is-the most influential book ever published. The most famous of all English Bibles, the King James Version was the culmination of centuries of work by various translators, from John Wycliffe, the fourteenth-century initiator of English Bible translation, to the committee of scholars who collaborated on the King James translation. *Wide as the Waters* examines the life and work of Wycliffe and recounts the tribulations of his successors, including William Tyndale, who was martyred, Miles Coverdale, and others who came to bitter ends, as well as the fifty-four scholars from Oxford and Cambridge who crafted the King James Version of the Bible.

Historian Benson Bobrick traces this story through the tumultuous reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, Mary Tudor, and Elizabeth I, a time of fierce contest between Catholics and Protestants in England.

Once people were free to interpret the word of God, they began to question the authority of their inherited institutions, both religious and secular. This led to reformation within the Church, and to the rise of constitutional government in England and the end of the divine right of kings.

Wide as the Waters is a story about a crucial epoch in the development of Christianity, about the English language and society, and about a book that changed the course of history.

"Bobrick is an exceptionally able writer of popular histories. . . . This new book is by far his most ambitious. . . . He succeeds entirely in the challenge he sets himself." (Simon Winchester, author of *The Professor and the Madman*, for *The New York Times Book Review*)

"With this compelling study, Bobrick has written an intricate and delightful prelude to any effective understanding of the evolution of modern Western democracy." (Michael Pakenham, *The Baltimore Sun*)

"[*Wide as the Waters*] . . . has the satisfying concreteness of a good novel. . . . This fast-paced nonfiction narrative is so engaging that it's likely to make a believer of any reader." (Daniel Mendelsohn, *New York Magazine*)

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About the Author

Benson Bobrick earned his Ph.D. from Columbia University and is the author of several books, including *Angel in the Whirlwind*, an acclaimed narrative history of the American Revolution.

Most helpful customer reviews

12 of 12 people found the following review helpful.

more than just the story of the KJB

By Gabriel Murray

I know that more recent books have been published on the same subject, but I'm not sure if they give quite as much history on the King James Bible. "God's Secretaries" came out recently, but I believe that is focused on the writing of the KJB itself, while "Wide as the Waters" goes back to give the history of the Greek and Latin translations and, most interestingly, Wycliffe's translations and the persecutions of his followers. Just a great retelling of an interesting story.

14 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

"...and Wycliff's dust shall spread abroad, Wide as the waters be."

By WILLIAM H FULLER

"Wide as the Waters" is the third book I have read concerning the evolution of the Bible, the two others having been "God's Secretaries" by Nicolson and "In the Beginning" by McGrath. Each author takes a somewhat different approach to his subject matter, and I find the three by no means redundant. Rather, they help reenforce and clarify the historical facts that they share amongst themselves, and, to anyone interested in this topic, I recommend all three if time and motivation permit. If not, then I suggest that McGrath's "In the Beginning" may provide the single most readable and comprehensive history of the group.

Bobrick focuses his exploration on the persons whose contributions to the translation of the Bible into the vernacular have proved to be the most influential and memorable, and he presents them in chronological order: John Wycliff, William Tyndale, and Miles Coverdale, followed by one who, though not a translator himself, caused further translation to be made: King James, and concluding with the evolution of political and religious thought in England during the Commonwealth of Cromwell and the Glorious Revolution under William III.

Why is Bobrick's book (and Nicolson's and McGrath's books as well) worth the time and effort to read? I suggest that one of the most compelling reasons is that many Britons and Americans revere and "believe in" the King James Version of the Bible without having any knowledge or understanding of the cultural, social and political forces that brought it into being or of its many predecessor bibles. To quote George Bernard Shaw, cited in Bobrick, "To this day the common Britisher or citizen of the United States of North America accepts and worships it as a single book by a single author, the book being the Book of Books and the author being God." Only through the research and writings of historians such as Bobrick can we hope to counter such naivete with facts and historical truths, and is not the seeking of truth the ultimate goal of all education and self-improvement?

The fascinating story of the political and linguistic history behind the English translations of the Bible, including the many burnings-at-the-stake that resulted from those translations, was not taught by my public high school or even university. I am excited and pleased that Bobrick (and Nicolson and McGrath) have now given us books with which my fellow readers and I can educate ourselves and fill in some of the many gaps in our formal learning.

8 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

Appreciating the text now so readily available.

By C. Matthew Curtin

Benson Bobrick masterfully tells the story of how the Bible became readily available in the native tongue of millions of people in the English-speaking world and how thus engaging the minds of the laity broke the stranglehold of power held by the cartel of Church and State.

Many readers of the ancient Scriptures in English will recognize the names of Wycliffe, Tyndale, Coverdale, and King James I, though comparatively few have an appreciation for the work that they, and thousands of others, have done to make the Bible available to them. Such readers would do well to give Bobrick's present work serious consideration to develop a deeper appreciation for the text that is now so easily found.

Wide as the Waters: The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution It Inspired is also valuable background to the Bible for those whose interest is in understanding the English language better, and how much of the tongue's richness in expression comes from translation of the Scriptures from Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Even as a strictly literary exercise, the Bible and comparisons among translation are well worth consideration. Indeed, if Doug Hofstadter can find so many insights from studying translations of a brief poem in his *Le Ton beau de Marot*, imagine how much mastery of one's language can be compounded from a work as comprehensive and profound as the Bible. I will go so far as to assert that no man can be called educated while ignorant of the Bible.

An important conclusion Bobrick offers readers is that translation of the Bible into English served as a foundation for the modern democracy. This is a conclusion worthy of some discussion. Supposing that any relationship between present systems of government and the Bible is limited to the Judeo-Christian belief system documented in the Bible and reflected in much of Western law would be a mistake. More central to Bobrick's point is that leaders could no longer claim Biblical support for their directives without having the ability to prove it from the Scriptures. In summary, authority reverted from men in offices back to the written word inspired of God.

As is evident from the Scriptures themselves, the inspired writings were the authority in the early days of Christianity. Luke, a believing first-century physician and close companion of Paul, wrote approvingly of those who searched the Scriptures for agreement with the word preached to them. (Acts 17:11) Nor was any particular privilege granted by virtue of office; no less a figure than the Apostle Peter was sternly and publicly reprimanded for acting contrary to Scripture. (Galatians 2:11-14) A priest or even bishop correcting the head of a Church, whether Catholic or Orthodox, in such a manner had been unthinkable for more than a thousand years by the time Wycliffe began his work.

By speaking only dead languages in their services and ensuring the inaccessibility of the Scriptures to the common people, religious leaders were able to put themselves in a position of power over others. Many people were inclined to show reverence and to work to please their Creator. Lacking the Scriptures for themselves, they became dependent upon those who claimed to represent God. Such leaders freely mixed in the world's politics, blessing, cursing, installing, and removing even kings. So it was throughout Christendom that people were led to perform every imaginable action and misdeed, supposing that they were acting as God required of them while in fact only satisfying the whims of their leaders.

In this position, the Church had become perverted, an instrument not to support the preaching of the Christ's message of hope for mankind but to enrich and empower the hierarchy at the expense of the common people. Certain men became so sure the legitimacy of their offices that they forgot its foundation, deviated from it, and became illegitimate. Little wonder, then, that "the first question ever asked by an Inquisitor of a 'heretic' was whether he knew any part of the Bible in his own tongue," as Bobrick writes at the opening of *Wide as the Waters*. And little wonder that the hierarchy for so long resisted allowing a translation of the Scriptures that would be comprehensible to the people.

Yet the translation did come, and it brought with it a clear understanding of authority, separate from power that comes from office. Bobrick skillfully makes this point. That this leads necessarily to democracy, however, is not something I'm prepared to embrace.

First of all, democracy, per se, was around long before there was an English Bible, or even Christian Scriptures ("New Testament"). The Athenians pretty well had this down a few hundred years before Christ walked the earth. (A discussion question at the end of the book raises this issue itself and looks for discussion of the validity of the conclusion in light of democracy's origin.)

Secondly (and more importantly in my opinion), the revolution in government started by the English Bible must include the American brand of the representative republic. The critical feature here is not a law of the making of the people, but a government of limited and enumerated powers, spelled out in law, available for the governed to read for themselves. The most visible difference between Christianity and the Judaism from which it sprang is a matter of law: a comprehensive and complex set of directives in the latter case versus a simple set of instructions that helped people to see Christ as a model and to demonstrate their faith through the use their own consciences in following that model. Arming the people to question those who claim to lead them, to see the standard for themselves, and to give them the room to act is the stuff of revolution. In the centuries since the Bible became available in English we have seen the fruits of that revolution-and they've been second only to the revolution in thought and behavior that Jesus Christ himself started two centuries ago.

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