

NOTE AND DOCUMENT

## *On the Vulgate of Thomas Bilney*

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*Arguably the most interesting source for the religious views of the early English evangelical Thomas Bilney (1495–1531) are the annotations in his copy of the Vulgate. Unfortunately, scholars have accessed these annotations almost exclusively through the error-riddled and selective summary provided in 1940 by J. Y. Batley. This study corrects Batley's most significant errors and provides transcriptions and translations of the most interesting annotations that he omitted. These include discussions of clerical celibacy, whether God is the author of evil, which biblical texts are authentically canonical and the nature of the law, justification and salvation.*

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**A**mong the most interesting and least used resources in the study of Thomas Bilney's theology are the annotations in his Vulgate, kept today in the Parker Library at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, shelf mark EP.W.11. Bilney was among the very earliest English evangelicals, described by John Foxe as 'the first framer of [Cambridge] Vniuersitie in the knowledge of Christ', and the converter of (among others) Hugh Latimer and Robert Barnes.<sup>1</sup> However, Bilney left behind no treatises, only court testimony, five letters and sermons described by other sources. His private notes on Scripture are therefore of immense value to our understanding of this crucial figure in the origins of English evangelicalism. Unfortunately, most discussions of Bilney omit this source altogether, and those which do reference it have thus far exclusively done so *via* the work of J. Y. Batley, who in 1940 published a short essay containing what he regarded as the most important of the *adversaria* in

<sup>1</sup> J. Foxe, *The unabridged acts and monuments online* (1583 edition), Sheffield 2011, 1035, available online at <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/foxe/>.

Bilney's Bible.<sup>2</sup> Notable scholarship on Bilney reliant on this work includes John Davis's 1981 article 'The trials of Thomas Bylney and the English Reformation', Greg Walker's 1989 article 'Saint or schemer? The 1527 heresy trial of Thomas Bilney reconsidered' and Korey Maas's 2004 article 'Thomas Bilney "simple good soul"?'<sup>3</sup> Indeed, nearly all available research focused specifically on Bilney makes use of Batley's pioneering work. Unfortunately, that work is riddled with errors, and it is the first purpose of the present study to warn future scholars against continued reliance on this more than eighty-year-old essay. The age is significant; writing in the late 1930s, for Batley the mystery was not how so cataclysmic a shift as the Reformation occurred, but instead how so obviously superstitious, slothful and sclerotic an institution as the Roman Church (a term he used confidently) could ever have claimed adherents among intelligent Christians. Hence, such universally Christian affirmations as that made by Bilney in a note by Deuteronomy x (not, as Batley writes, Deut. ix), 'Sic Christus filius dei ... caro factus humiliavit semetipsum formam servi accipiens factus est obediens usquam ad mortem, mortem autem crucis pro peccatis nostris', i.e. 'So Christ the son of god ... humbled himself when he became flesh, taking the form of a servant he became obedient unto death, the death of a cross for our sins', are interpreted as evidence of emergent 'Protestant[ism]'. Bilney's note is a paraphrase of Philippians ii.6–8 which virtually any Christian could have written, yet Batley not only omits any mention of the Pauline near-quotation, but also interprets it as sure evidence of Bilney's 'Protestant' understanding of justification by 'free grace'.<sup>4</sup> Clearly, such a reading is no longer adequate. Reappraising the text, one finds a far more complex picture of Bilney's thought. We see a man with interesting and conflicting statements on the nature of the law, justification and faith, who was actively engaged in questioning whether Mary remained always a virgin, whether God was the author of evil, whether priests can marry and what books comprise the true Scripture: all issues glossed over entirely in existing considerations of this source.

The first issue to address, however, is the text itself, which is entitled *Biblia cum concordantijs veteris et novi testamenti et sacrorum canonum* and was printed in Lyon in 1520 by Jean Marion for Anton Koberger in Nuremberg. The first page of the text contains the note: 'Mr Willon

<sup>2</sup> J. Y. Batley, *On a reformer's Latin Bible: being an essay on the adversaria in the Vulgate of Thomas Bilney*, Cambridge 1940.

<sup>3</sup> John Davis, 'The trials of Thomas Bylney and the English Reformation', *HJ* xxiv (1981), 775–90; Greg Walker, 'Saint or schemer? The 1527 heresy trial of Thomas Bilney reconsidered', this *JOURNAL* xl (1989), 219–38; Korey Maas, 'Thomas Bilney: "simple good soul"?', *Tyndale Society Journal* xxvii (2004), 8–20.

<sup>4</sup> Batley, *On a reformer's Latin Bible*, 37–8.

quonda[m] socius huius collegij dedit hunc libru[m] collegio corporis [christ]i in interiori bibliotheca seruanda. 1588. Fuit aliquando liber Bilnei martyris et ab illo script[a]e sunt que[m] in eo habent[ur] not[a]e', i.e. 'Mr Willon, formerly a member of this college, gave this book to corpus christi college to be kept in the inner library. 1588. It was once the book of Bilney the martyr and there are writings known to be by him.' Comparison with Bilney's letters (also in the Parker Library, ms 340) confirms the annotations to be in his hand. Since the book was only printed in 1520, the annotations cannot have been written earlier than that (perhaps Bilney acquired the book on the occasion of his BCnL in 1521) and naturally they cannot postdate Bilney's death in 1531. The Old Testament is heavily annotated, but there are just two notes in the entire New Testament, both simply marking at the top of the relevant pages where Paul's letters to the Philippians and the Thessalonians begin. This is unsurprising, since Bilney himself tells us in the first of his 1527 letters to Cuthbert Tunstall how influenced he was by Erasmus' *Novum instrumentum* of 1516, so this was presumably the New Testament he used during this period.<sup>5</sup>

We can now move on to the notes within this text, starting with those erroneously recorded by Batley. While a systematic cataloguing would be tedious, it is sufficient to note that he routinely assigns *marginalia* to the incorrect page or even incorrect biblical book of Bilney's Bible; his transcriptions are often not only erroneous but bizarre (he transcribed what I am almost certain is meant to be 'co[n]fitebimini' as 'sempiternum', in a note by Ezekiel xx); and there is at least one full sentence annotation noted by Batley which I have been unable to locate anywhere.<sup>6</sup> Clearly, this is a work to be used only with the utmost caution.

Most of Batley's errors are fortunately trivial, but a few are not. By Ezek. xx, Bilney wrote 'Contra praetextentes consuetudinem', which Batley translates as 'Against those who assign custom as a pretext' and interprets as signifying an opposition to tradition as a source of religious authority.<sup>7</sup> However, this would be better rendered as 'Against pretending tradition', that is, creating new traditions from whole cloth (indeed the word 'praetextentes' has its origin in weaving). This suggests that that Bilney was not opposed to tradition *per se* (this is, after all, the man who wrote that we should pray the Little Office of the Blessed Virgin Mary since 'thowe thes words be not wrytyn in the scriptur ... yeet these words must nedsbe axceptable unto ower sayyor chryst for they be the words of hes spouse') but

<sup>5</sup> Foxe, *The unabridged acts and monuments online* (1563 edition), 520.

<sup>6</sup> Batley, *On a reformer's Latin Bible*, 47.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* 35.

rather to false, pretended traditions which were human inventions rather than the authentic commandments of God.<sup>8</sup>

Another notable error occurs in relation to Job xlii. Batley puts Bilney's annotation as 'Hic Eliphaz qui in capitulo quinto dixit "Ad quem sanctorum convertere?"', a line which Batley describes as 'a Note disparaging Invocation of Saints' and translates as 'Here is Eliiphaz who in the fifth chapter said "To which of the saints will you turn?"'<sup>9</sup> Yet Bilney actually wrote 'Hic Eliphaz qui ca. 5 dixit ad aliquem sanctorum convertere.' Batley has added the question mark, not present in Eliphaz's statement in chapter v ('voca ergo si est qui tibi respondeat et ad aliquem sanctorum convertere'; 'Call now, if there be any that will answer thee, and turn to some of the saints'), and turned this into a sarcastic remark.<sup>10</sup> The translation ought to be 'Here [is] Eliphaz who in the fifth chapter said turn to some of the saints', a far less pointed annotation.

In the book of Isaiah, Batley wrongly places Bilney's note 'Magis legi quam miraculis fidendum' ('One ought to trust the law more than wonders'), by Isa. viii. In fact, it is by the start of Isa. x. This is meaningful, since Isa. x is about divine wrath, which chapter viii is not. Bilney's note is specifically right next to verse 3: 'Quid facietis in die visitationis et calamitatis de longe venientis ad cuius fugietis auxilium et ubi derelinquetis gloriam vestram', i.e. 'What will you do in the day of visitation, and of the calamity which cometh from afar? to whom will ye flee for help? and where will ye leave your glory?' Thus, Bilney's comment about trusting in the law relates explicitly to divine judgement and ultimately salvation, hinting that at the time he wrote it, Bilney remained far from fully accepting the sharp Lutheran dichotomy between law and Gospel.

Even more interesting are the annotations which Batley leaves out altogether. By Genesis xiii, Bilney wrote: 'Judei quomodo libet cognatos fratres appellant' ('The Jews freely call [all their] relatives brothers'), and a little further on: 'Ecce phrasi scripturae cognati fratres apella[n]tur ne[m]pe Abraha[m] filiu[m] fratris loth fratrem appellat' ('See how the language of scripture calls relatives brothers, for indeed Abraham calls the son of his brother, Lot, his brother'). Here we see clear evidence of Bilney's acceptance of the evidence typically adduced to massage the passages in Mark vi and Matthew xiii which speak of Jesus' siblings so that they do not conflict with the perpetual virginity of Mary. However, during his 1527 heresy trial, Bilney testified that it was at least possible to deny that Mary remained always a virgin.<sup>11</sup> This may suggest that these

<sup>8</sup> Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 340, p. 588. The exact line on which Bilney seems to be commenting is Ezekiel xx.18.

<sup>9</sup> Batley, *On a reformer's Latin Bible*, 43.

<sup>10</sup> All English biblical quotations are from the Douay-Rheims Bible.

<sup>11</sup> Foxe, *The unabridged acts and monuments online* (1563 edition), 517.

annotations predate that trial, or simply that this was a question Bilney was actively weighing up, perhaps under the influence of Erasmus who in book 1 of *Hyperaspistes* challenged Luther to explain why he believed in the perpetual virginity of Mary, since it is asserted nowhere in Scripture.<sup>12</sup>

By Exodus iii, in which God instructs Moses to journey three days into the wilderness, Bilney wrote: ‘vide orige q[uo]m[o]d[o] sit ire viam trium dierum’ (‘Look in Origen how he is to go [on] the three-day journey’). This gives us a hint of Bilney’s willingness (not uncommon but by no means universal among early evangelicals) to use patristic commentary to illuminate Scripture, and more specifically of what patristic sources he was reading. In Origen’s Homilies on Exodus, he offered a Christological interpretation of these three days: ‘the first day is the passion of the Savior for us. The second is the day on which he descended into hell. The third day is the day of resurrection’.<sup>13</sup> Bilney also references Origen’s interpretation of this journey by Exod. v and viii, though the last time he does not use Origen’s name. In addition to strongly suggesting that he was reading Origen at the time he wrote them, these comments also highlight the unsurprising but none the less important fact that Bilney’s interpretation of the Old Testament was extremely Christocentric. These may both reflect Erasmus’ well-known influence on Bilney, as the Dutch reformer was ‘almost obsessively attached’ to Origen, despite his alleged heresy, and similarly emphasised the centrality of Christ in all scriptural interpretation.<sup>14</sup>

Another hint at the way in which Bilney read Scripture can be found in the note he wrote by an introductory essay explaining the Quadriga, the four senses in which a passage of Scripture could be understood. Bilney’s sardonic comment, ‘Jherusalem quot modis accipitur’ – ‘In how many ways Jerusalem is taken’ (in other words, in how many ways a reference to that famously symbolic city could be interpreted), suggests at least a degree of scepticism towards the dominant scriptural hermeneutic of his day.

By Leviticus xi, Bilney wrote ‘co[n]tra opera electicia’ (‘against chosen work’), reflecting a consistent theme in his writings, which is the specific denunciation of elect works or traditions, rather than the denunciation of works or traditions categorically. This can be seen particularly strongly in the context of Lev. xi, which enumerates the dietary restrictions the Israelites are to keep, and is therefore emphatically pro-law and pro-custom, so long as these are laws assigned by God, rather than those

<sup>12</sup> D. Erasmus, *Collected works of Erasmus*, lxxvi, ed. C. Trinkhaus, trans. C. Miller, Toronto 1998, 258.

<sup>13</sup> Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. R. E. Heine, Washington, DC 1982, 278.

<sup>14</sup> A. G. Dickens and W. R. D. Jones, *Erasmus the reformer*, London 1994, 52.

made up by men. In the same vein, by the end of Ezek. ix Bilney wrote: ‘Signo thau signati liberantur/hoc accepteru[n]t signaculum qui legis p[re]cepta impleverunt’ (‘Those which I mark “thau” are set free/they who have fulfilled the precepts of the law have accepted this mark’). This is particularly notable since the text itself (in which God declares that all those not marked with ‘thau’ will be horribly killed) makes no mention of the law or its fulfillment; this was a gloss Bilney added himself. This seems at odds with the Lutheran soteriology often ascribed to Bilney, since it suggests that fulfilling the precepts of the law is not only possible, but necessary if one is to be saved.<sup>15</sup> Bilney did not write of those who have accepted Christ’s fulfillment of the law on their behalf, but those who have fulfilled it themselves.

Several of Bilney’s annotations concern the priesthood. By Lev. xxi he wrote ‘sacerdos virgine[m] de populo suo ducet uxore[m]’ (‘a priest may take as a wife a virgin from his own people’). This note does not enable us to say with certainty that Bilney disapproved of mandatory clerical celibacy; it is, after all, simply a reflection of the plain sense of the text. None the less, it gives a tantalising hint at Bilney’s view on a controversial subject which is referenced nowhere else in his extant writings. Similarly, by Ezra vii Bilney commented ‘Sacerdotes immunes a vectigalib[us]’ (‘Priests [are] exempt from taxes’). Again this is simply a repetition of what the text clearly states, but the fact that Bilney chose to highlight this statement indicates the sort of question that he was thinking about in the mid-1520s as he wrote these annotations.

By the (non-scriptural) introduction to 1 Kings, next to a reference to 1 Maccabees, Bilney wrote: ‘qui libri veteris testame[n]ti int[er] apocrippa sunt numere[n]di’ (‘which book of the old testament is to be counted among the apocrypha’). Once again, though this is not a particularly surprising view for an early evangelical (or indeed, any humanist) to hold, this is the sole place in any extant document in which Bilney comments on whether any contested book ought to be included in Scripture. Notably Bilney added not one note to 1 or 2 Maccabees in his Vulgate, though he was happy to comment on Tobit, Judith, Baruch, Sirach and Wisdom.

Bilney also scrawled two notes concerning the extremely controversial question of whether God can be regarded as the author of evil. By Isa. xlv he wrote ‘d[omin]us crea[n]s malum’ (‘the lord creating evil’), and by Amos iii, ‘no[n] est malu[m] i[n] civitate quod d[omin]us no[n]

<sup>15</sup> On the ascription of a Lutheran soteriology to Bilney see, for example, Davis, ‘The trials of Thomas Bylney’, 788–9; C. Trueman, *Luther’s legacy: salvation and English reformers, 1525–1556*, Oxford 1994, 50; Richard Rex, ‘The early impact of Reformation theology at Cambridge University, 1521–1547’, *Reformation and Renaissance Review* ii/1(1999), 38–71 at pp. 49–52; and Maas, ‘Thomas Bilney: “simple good soul”?’.

fecit' ('there is not an evil in the city which the lord has not made'). While these comments once again track closely the text itself, they suggest that Bilney may have been beginning to develop a more expansive view of divine sovereignty than was strictly orthodox.

Finally, there are several notes relating to the themes of justification, salvation and judgement. By the start of Wisdom xv, Bilney wrote 'radix i[m]mortalitatis scire iustitia[m] dei et virtutem' ('the root of immortality is to know the justice and virtue of god'). Though this note is tantalising, as it is an extremely close paraphrase of the text we must be careful about drawing any firm conclusions from it. More interesting is the note by the end of Jeremiah xv, in which Bilney wrote 'de hoc solo fide mia nobis co[n]stat q[uod] donu[m] co[n]tine[n]tu[r] a deo receperat' ('from this only my faith stands firm because a gift received from god is sustained in us'). This seems strongly to suggest that faith is a gift of God which we receive passively and not something earned.

Nevertheless, Bilney also seems to have maintained a traditional picture of purging sin through good works. By Daniel iv he noted that 'peccata elimosinis redimu[n]tur' ('sins [are] atoned for by alms'). Those whose sins were not atoned for needed to be careful. By the end of Proverbs xi Bilney wrote 'fructus impii ad pectatum' ('the fruits of the impious at the reaping'), and by the terrifying warning at the tail end of Wis. iv he noted 'de morte impior[um]' ('concerning the death of the wicked'), and similarly by the end of Isa. I 'pena peccatorum' ('the punishment of sinners').

Taken as a whole, what emerges from these annotations is a picture of Thomas Bilney's theology as composite and exploratory; reformist, but Erasmian reformist as much as Lutheran. The continued reliance of scholars on J. Y. Batley's summary of these annotations has obscured this picture; for reasons both of his emphatically outdated presuppositions and his plain academic sloppiness, such reliance can only continue with the greatest caution. Looking beyond Batley to the notes themselves we see a man wrestling with the question of Mary's perpetual virginity, seeming to defend both the possibility and the soteriological necessity of keeping the law and maintaining belief that good works can atone for sin. Rather than opposing the notion of saving works *per se*, Bilney's critique appears focused on the displacement of God's authentic law by pretended human customs. Equally, we see a developing notion of saving faith as an unearned gift from God. Taken together, these suggest that Bilney had been materially influenced by Luther when he wrote these comments but had not adopted his soteriological programme wholesale. Bilney's annotations also indicate reformist views omitted from existing scholarship, including at least potential support for clerical marriage, a relegation of 1 Maccabees to the Apocrypha and multiple suggestions that God may be the author of evil. At the same time, Bilney's strongly Christocentric scriptural

hermeneutic and repeated references to Origen also further confirm the well-known importance of Erasmus to his emerging theology. In addition to further elucidating the theology of a fascinating but enigmatic figure at the heart of the English Reformation, the annotations in Thomas Bilney's Bible illustrate the complex and plural nature of early English evangelicalism and highlight the extent to which 'conversion' was frequently more a process of gradual evolution and exploration than a decisive moment of transformation, and they deserve renewed scholarly focus.