

Archbishop Stephen Langton – Charter Framer and Chapter Divider

Archbishop Stephen Langton - “a chosen vessel unto me” Acts 9:15

The Christian Institute¹ has compiled a most informative synopsis of Magna Carta². June 15th 2015 was the 800th Anniversary of Magna Carta. We should note that Archbishop Stephen Langton circa 1150-1228³ was not only the prime mover in framing Magna Carta but God used him to create the chapter divisions in the scripture that we have today. As “a chosen vessel unto me” Acts 9:15 Bro. Langton did a good job before *two* kings, as Charter Framer before an earthly king and Chapter Divider before “*the King of kings and Lord of Lords*” 1 Timothy 6:15 thereby meriting King Solomon’s commendation *and bar*⁴. See below. Note that the man may be a tyrant – no later English or British king has been named or taken the name John for the purpose of reigning – but still not a mean man, rather one with great power, even if like John he misuses it.

“Seest thou a man diligent in his business? he shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men” Proverbs 22:29.

Today’s believer should aim for the *same* diligence, as Paul exhorts.

“For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister. And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end” Hebrews 6:10-11.

A Secular Evaluation

One secular but fairly well-balanced source⁵ has this to say about Bro. Langton.

Who Divided the Bible into Chapters? by Fred Sanders, July 9th 2009

At some point late in [Langton’s] teaching career (the date usually given is 1205)...Langton had the great, simple idea of breaking the text of the Latin translation of the Bible into manageable sections about the size of long paragraphs... Langton broke the uniform text of Scripture into a series of chapters. He did this for the entire Vulgate, and his system of chapter division was immediately recognized as a great help for Bible study.

Bro. Langton completed the work of chapter divisions in 1227⁶, not long before his home call. He could testify with the Lord Jesus Christ as every believer should aim to “**I have glorified thee on the earth; I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do**” John 17:4. Fred Sanders continues.

Chapter-division was apparently the right idea at the right time, and one of the remarkable things about the Langtonian chapter divisions is how they were adopted and propagated by different scholarly communities. Jewish scholars (who had worked with other methods of division previously) soon began observing Langtonian chapter divisions, and the churches of the Christian East took the same divisions over in their biblical studies...

Since Langton established the chapter system at the very beginning of the thirteenth century, his influence also spread into all the vernacular translations of the Bible that began appearing in the next



Stephen Langton
Archbishop of Canterbury 1207-1228

centuries. In fact, the chapter system became increasingly important with the proliferation of translations, enabling scholars to move quickly and precisely between versions. And with the advent of printing, Langton's chapters became still more important...

As Mordecai wisely said to Queen Esther *“and who knoweth whether thou art come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”* Esther 4:14.

A System Superior to the Critics

While voicing some criticism of Bro. Langton's system, stemming for example from Bible rejecters like Dr A. T. Robertson, Fred Sanders nevertheless states the following.

The vast majority of Langton's chapter breaks are more organic than artificial; they are not arbitrary, but are based on good insight into the flow of the text. Above all, they are handy and universally used. Even if we were to make a list of 250 places* where the Langtonian chapters could be improved by better break points, it would be madness to try to impose a new, improved re-chaptering of Scripture on a global community of Bible readers who have used a standardized system for centuries.

*from 1189 for the total number of chapters in the Old and New Testaments

Fred Sanders concludes leave the old system in place.

Likewise, the Lord's invitation remains, even if too often turned down.

“Thus saith the LORD, Stand ye in the ways, and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way, and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls...” Jeremiah 6:16.

Facing Down the Tyrant

Fred Sanders says this about Bro. Langton, Magna Carta and facing down the tyrant John.

Langton has an important place in the history of political thought, as he was involved in negotiating the famous dispute between the despotic King John...and his aggrieved noblemen. The deal they finally brokered, securing the rights of the noblemen and limiting the powers of the King, was sealed by the drafting and signing of the Magna Carta. Between this and his biography of Richard the Lion-Hearted, Langton was not popular with King John, and even found himself under a ban from Pope Innocent III* for several years. But his office and reputation were restored late in his life.

**“that man of sin”* 2 Thessalonians 2:3⁷



Key to facing down the tyrant John was Bro. Langton's vision for the English Church though it would take centuries to fulfill it. The Christian Institute states [**Magna Carta's**] **first and last clauses guarantee the freedom of the English church.** The first one states, “we have granted to God, and by this present Charter have confirmed for us and our heirs in perpetuity, that the English Church shall be free, and shall have its rights undiminished, and its liberties unimpaired.” Amen.

Finishing the Course

In sum, though part of the Roman Church, as most folk were back then Bro. Langton could testify along with Paul and as all true believers would hope to do:

“I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” 2 Timothy 4:7-8.

References

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