

# The Story of the King James Bible – A Useful Summary



The translation of the Bible into the English language has a history of religious and political tensions, persecution and public executions. Church leaders and State rulers were so threatened by the thought of common people having Scripture in their own tongue, that they actively suppressed early translations. Edicts stated that the translation of Scripture into vernacular language was heresy and treason – punishable by death! Yet God raised up men who would lay down their lives to make His Word accessible for English speakers not only of their time, but ours also.

## Wycliffe

It was in the 14<sup>th</sup> century that John Wycliffe and a group of his followers translated the Bible into English. Wycliffe was in fact a Roman Catholic priest who read the Bible in Latin and translated it from the Latin Vulgate. He was a controversial figure, rejecting the authority of the Church and tradition for the authority of Scripture, and claiming that each person should be able to read and study God's Word in their own language.

This thinking and teaching threatened the authority of the church and state and earned Wycliffe five edicts for his arrest. However, Wycliffe saw the completion of the first English Bible translation around 1384, the year of his death. This was around 60 years before the invention of the printing press, so it is incredible that despite having to be copied by hand, thousands of copies were circulated.

## Tyndale

In 1408 the authorities, in an effort to suppress the spread of the Wycliffe Bible, passed a law forbidding the use of any Bible in English, so 130 years passed without progress. However, the world was changing. Gutenberg invented the printing press, printing the first full-length book: the Latin Vulgate Bible. Greek began to be studied in Europe, meaning scholars could study the Greek New Testament, rather than the Latin Vulgate. Then came the Reformation, challenging tradition and authority and encouraging people to search Scripture and know God personally.

Into this stepped William Tyndale with the firm belief that people had a right to know what was promised to them in God's Word. The English of Wycliffe had greatly changed, so people rarely heard Scripture in anything other than Latin liturgies. As the Bible translation edict was still in play, Tyndale went to Germany where he learned Hebrew, and translated much of the Bible into English. He never saw his work completed as he was arrested and condemned as a heretic. He was publically strangled and his body was burned at the stake. Legend says that his last words were, 'Lord, open the King of England's eyes!' Tyndale's was the first English New Testament to be translated from the original Greek and it came to have a heavy influence on the King James Version of 1611.

## Coverdale to King James

Myles Coverdale was Tyndale's assistant who revised his work and completed the Old Testament; hence his became the first complete Bible printed in English. Then came '**Matthew's Bible**' – a combination of Coverdale's Old Testament and Tyndale's New Testament translations, with the addition of copious, controversial marginal notes.

In 1538 King Henry VIII ordered that an English Bible be placed in every church. 'Matthew's Bible' was the edition of choice (purely because it was larger) but the leading clergy became increasingly uncomfortable with the Protestant bias in the notes and eventually a large version of Coverdale's Bible was printed and became known as the 'Great Bible', simply for its size!

Along with the new Catholic Queen - 'Mary Tudor' - in 1553 came a severe persecution upon Protestants and a great burning of Bibles. Hence, many Protestant scholars fled to Geneva, where they translated the Bible into English using, for the first time, entirely Hebrew and Greek sources. This '**Geneva Bible**' was also the first Bible with verse divisions, and it was the Bible that Shakespeare would have used!

When Elizabeth came to reign, she brought Protestantism and began a reign of persecution upon Catholic scholars, who in turn fled to Europe where the **Rheims-Douai** English language Catholic Bible was translated from the Latin Vulgate.

So in many ways, the development of the Bible in the English language was swayed by the whim of the monarchy and the strength of the ties between Church and State. Indeed it was a King who commissioned what still remains to be the best known English Bible of all time. It cannot be denied however, that God's plan prevailed despite the power struggles, mistrust and divisions that surrounded the translation of His Word into English.

### **King James Version**

Religious controversy was rife within the Church of England when King James came to power in 1603 and he soon summoned a conference that was held in January 1604 in Hampton Court Palace to air these differences. It was during this conference that the Puritan Leader, Dr John Reynolds, proposed the creation of a new translation of Scripture in English that would be authorised by the King himself. King James approved the idea, having taken great exception to the notation in the commonly used Geneva Bible, and in the hope that one widely accepted English Bible would be a unifying factor for a Protestant England. The King himself took a leading role in planning the translation— assembling a team and dividing the work – but he was not involved in any of the translation, although it bears his name. It was actually a team of 47 leading scholars divided into six Companies, who would translate the Bible. There were three Companies appointed to the Old Testament, two to the New Testament and one Company responsible for the Apocryphal books which were still included as part of the canon of Scripture.

The translators built on the work of previous scholars, most closely to the Geneva Bible and Tyndale's New Testament than any others. In fact historians argue that as much as 84% of the King James New Testament is purely 'lifted' from Tyndale. This use of existing Bible texts greatly speeded up the translation process. So it was in 1611 that the first edition of the King James Bible was published, even though revision work continued and a second edition followed quickly. The early editions were sold either loose-leaf or bound – the latter costing twelve shillings per copy (an enormous amount in those times). In the first three years of its publication, the King James Bible underwent 14 minor revisions due to frequent mistakes in translation, revision and printing work. Early versions were riddled with printer's errors; some editions were even named after particular errors. The last major revision took place in 1769, leaving the version that we read today almost unchanged. Benjamin Blayney's 1769 text had 24,000 differences from the 1611 text but it firmly established the KJV text which has been the basis for most printings ever since.

The future of the KJV was not assured when it was first published as existing English translations had their supporters, but a significant step was taken when Robert Barker, the king's printer, eventually stopped printing the Bishops' Bible. The KJV struggled to establish itself in Scotland (the Geneva Bible was particularly favoured there), but once it appeared as the Bible text in the Church of England Prayer Book of 1662, it grew in importance within England and consolidated its position.

It wasn't until 1782-83 that King James Bibles began to be printed without the Apocryphal books, at first in small quantities by Puritans and British Missionary Societies. The British and Foreign Bible Society took the decision to print their Bibles without the Apocryphal books in 1826 and this was a major stimulus to the growing trend. It is now usual that Bibles produced for Protestant readers do not contain the Apocrypha, while it is included for Roman Catholic readers. The distinction is made as the Apocryphal books are not contained in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and appear only in the later Greek and Latin versions.

Hence, the King James Bible became a Bible of preference, particularly within Protestant Christianity, first across the British Isles and then spreading as English-speaking Christians travelled the world through trade, colonisation and mission. Since then, it has been published in hundreds of formats and is still a firm favourite for many Christians throughout the world.

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