

Writing the King James Bible

On reading *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible* (Harper Collins, New York; 2003)

It is never my custom to use words lightly. If twenty-seven years in prison have done anything to us, it was to use the silence of solitude to make us understand how precious words are and how real speech is in its impact upon the way people live or die. — Mandela, N., International AIDS Conference, Durban, July 2000.

One might argue, with some justification, that the only tract of quality that was ever written by a committee was the King James Bible, commissioned by James VI of Scotland, II of England, in 1604 and published seven years later. It behoves us to think about why this worked so well while almost everything else written by committees has, or should be, confined to the nearest waste bin. At least part of James's motivation for commissioning the Bible was to try to carve a path between the Protestant and Catholic extremes of Christianity not to challenge either but rather to reconcile them.

The project was led by Richard Bancroft and from the beginning it was 'tightly organized, tightly policed and tightly managed'. Money was in short supply and various Bishops were told that they would have to provide livings for the Translators. The Translating Committee was divided into six Companies because six is the number of the Trinity multiplied by the number of testaments. Each Company was to have eight members giving a total of forty-eight translators this being the number of Apostles multiplied by the number of Evangelists. Bancroft issued a letter of instructions to the Translators entitled 'The Rules to be Observed in Translation'. Rules 1 to 5 were concerned with ensuring continuity with the currently accepted views, the naming conventions for religious figures, the use of old or current words, and the division of Chapters into Verses. The new bible should look and feel as much as possible like the old. Rules 6 and 7 deal with marginal notes, references and quotations. Rules 8 to 11 are the key to the project.

Rule 8 says that *Every particuler man of each company to take ye same chapter or chapters, and having translated or amended them severally by himselfe where he thinks good, all to meete together, confer what they have done, and agree for their Parts what shall stand. People shall work on their own but consult regularly within each company.*

Rule 9 says that *As one company hath despatched any one book in this manner they shall send it to the rest to be considered of seriously and judiciously; for His Majestie is verie carefull of this point.* Once a company has reached consensus they will send it to the other companies for peer review.

Rule 10 says that *If any Company, upon ye review of ye books so sent, really doubt, or differ upon any place, to send them word thereof, note the place, and withal send their reasons; to which if they consent not, the difference to be compounded at ye generall meeting, which is to be of the chiefe persons of each company, at ye end of ye work.* There will be a chance to respond to reviewers and a committee will have the authority to make the final decision.

Rule 11 says that *When any place of speciall obscuritie is doubted of, letters to be directed by authority to send to any learned man in the land, for his judgment of such a place.* If agreement cannot be reached further authorities may be consulted on particular matters.

Rule 12 admonishes the clergy to provide support, Rule 13 names the directors of each company, Rule 14 names the earlier English translations that are to be consulted including Tindall's, Matthews', Coverdales', Whitchurch's and the Geneva Bibles. The Bishop's Bible is not mentioned as it was known that this was to be the ground against which all other translations were to be judged. Finally, Rule 15 concerns uniformity between translation of the Old and New Testaments. The instructions are written on two sheets of paper and a copy is held at the University Library in Cambridge.

The six Companies were the First and Second Westminster, Oxford and Cambridge Companies, each with a Director and about a dozen members with each company being held responsible for about a dozen Books. The Director of the First Westminster Committee was Lancelot Andrews who recruited interesting people to his team: John Overall, a classicist, Hadrian Saravia a general linguist, Richard Thompson, a linguist who was also known as one of the wittiest interpreters of the 'wildly obscene epigrams written by the Poet Martial in Nero's Rome', William Bedwell a mathematician and Arabist. None were leading Hebrew Scholars but all were talented men in their own fields.

So what might we learn from the writing of the most influential book ever written in English? First, plan carefully and create an appropriate structure and line of authority for the project. Second, make the instructions clear and simple. Third, employ talented people. Fourth, make sure that each person knows what he (in this case) has to do but then leave him to do it. Finally, set up an effective system of peer review so that the final product is of the highest standard, all issues and debates are resolved, but it also has a coherence and a beauty to it.

So let us end by noting what the modern world has done with King James Bible. In Luke 1:57, the moment when Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, gives birth the Bishop's Bible reads:

Elizabeths time came that she should bee delivered, and she brought forth a son.

The King James Translator on his own in his room marks the text very carefully and suggests:

Now Elizabeths time was fullfilled that she should bee delivered, and she brought forth a son.

But 'was fulfilled' is not quite right and is crossed out and replaced with 'full time came' so that it reads:

Now Elizabeths full time came that she should bee deliuered, and she brought forth a sonne.

Finally, we come, four hundred years later, to the New English Bible which says:

Now the time came for Elizabeth's child to be borne, and she gave birth to a son.

So, as the author of the book from which all of this is taken notes: 'The flattening of language is a flattening of meaning. Language which is not taut with a sense of its own significance, which is apologetic in its desire to be acceptable to a modern consciousness, language in other words which submits to its audience, rather than instructing, informing, moving, challenging and even entertaining them, is no longer a language which can carry the freight the Bible requires. It has, in short, lost all authority.'