

Introduction to the Textual History of the King James Bible

Introduction

In 1611 the King James Version of the Bible was first printed and made available by Robert Barker, the King's Printer. This was the culmination of a translation committee which first began in 1604. 2011 is the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible, the single most printed and widely distributed book in the world and in the English language.

Background

From the time of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation there were various initiatives to produce the Bible in the vernacular languages of the different people groups in Europe. The most notable was the German translation by Martin Luther (1534). While initially opposed to the Reformation, Henry VIII, the King of England, began to slowly break with the Catholic Church and in 1534 declared himself to be the supreme head of the Church in England¹. Slowly in his reign, the Church *in* England would become the Church *of* England.

To advance his nationalistic vision of an English Church he was promoted the Bible being translated into English. He would authorize the completion of an English version of the Bible (*The Great Bible*) and when that project took longer than his patience would allow for, he permitted the use of another English version that was already available (*The Matthews Bible*).

Prior to this there had been efforts to translate the Bible into the English language. The most notable had been John Wycliffe (produced ca 1382–95). Wycliffe's work is notable, but really does not impact the subsequent translations into English leading up to the production of the *King James Bible*. The single most important individual in the work of creating a Bible in the English language was William Tyndale.

¹ Henry's break with Rome is often, rather simplistically, viewed as an issue of his multiple marriages and the Pope's refusal to annul his marriage with Catherine of Aragon. Henry viewed the authority Rome was enjoying in the temporal affairs in England to be intolerable and England was in a position of only having a single cardinal who was not, at that time, allowed to become pope. Interestingly enough, his argument was similar to the American Colonies position some 200 years later of "no taxation without representation." Henry's reformation was a political and nationalistic one and only slowly were there actual ecclesiastical and theological alterations. "The Reformation was rather a final assertion by the State of its authority over the Church in England. The breach with the Roman Church, the repudiation of papal influence in English ecclesiastical affairs, was not a spontaneous clerical movement; it was the effect of the subjection of the Church to the national temporal power. The Church in England had hitherto been a semi-independent part of the political community. It was semi-national, semi-universal; it owed one sort of fealty to the universal Pope, and another to the national King. The rising spirit of nationality could brook no divided allegiance; and the universal gave way to the national idea. There was to be no *imperium in imperio*, but 'one body politic'" (A. F. Pollard, *Henry VIII*. [Project Gutenberg eBook], 234).

From 1523 to 1611 no fewer than eight different English versions of the Bible would be produced (seven Protestant and One Catholic), culminating in the production of the *King James Bible*. After 1611, it would be nearly 250 years before another significant English version would be produced. While this can be attributed both to the changed political and ecclesiastical situation in England; it was also because of the quality of the final product of the *King James Bible*. It would become the Bible of the English-speaking world (The British Empire and the emerging United States) and the Bible of the evangelical and missionary movements that would stretch from 1648 to 1929.

I. English Translations Prior to the King James

- A. *The Tyndale Bible* (ca 1523). The work of William Tyndale (1494–1536). Tyndale produced an English version which, for the first time, translated from the Hebrew and Greek texts, although he also made use of the Latin Vulgate. It was widely opposed by the church and by Henry VIII.² Tyndale made some notable changes at variance with traditional church teaching. Four words in particular in the New Testament translation were noted:
- a. *Church* to “congregation.”
 - b. *Priest* to “elder” (although in the first edition he used the word “senior”).
 - c. *Do Penance* to “repent.” (this was the most controversial change).
 - d. *Charity* to “love.”

Tyndale was persecuted and was forced to move from place to place to avoid arrest. Tyndale had also written, “The Practyse of Prelates” (1538) which was pointed in its attack on Henry’s divorces. Henry VIII sent agents to locate him and arrest him. He was finally captured in Antwerp in 1535 and executed by strangulation and burning at the stake. His famous dying expression was “Lord, open the eyes of the King of England.” Henry VIII was actually infuriated by Tyndale’s execution, as he had specifically given instructions that he was to be arrested and brought to him personally.

- B. *Coverdale Bible* (1535). Produced by Myles Coverdale (1488–1569). This was largely Tyndale’s work (the NT and the Pentateuch and possible Jonah) with Coverdale completing the Old Testament not done by Tyndale. However, Coverdale did not have facility in Hebrew and the remainder of the OT was largely from Luther’s German Bible, Zwingli’s Swiss Bible, and the Vulgate. It is notable because it was the first complete Bible in English.

² Henry VIII was also a significant scholar in his own right, in 1521 he wrote, *Assertio Septem Sacramentorum* (*A Defense of the Seven Sacraments*) in response to the Lutheran Reformation. It was a significant work and, in many respects, superior to any defense the Roman hierarchy had produced. In response, Pope Leo X award Henry with the title, “Defender of the Faith” which the British Monarchs retain to this day.

- C. *Matthew's Bible* (1537). Actually completed by John Rodgers³ (1500–55) who used the pseudonym of Thomas Matthews to hide his identity. This version was a revision of Tyndale and an updating of the portions of the Old Testament that Coverdale had done, this time using Hebrew sources. This Bible was the first “approved” Bible, having secured the blessing of Henry VIII who desired an English Bible for his “reformation” and was annoyed by the slow process of the completion of the *Great Bible*.
- D. *The Great Bible* (1539). This is the first “authorized” version of the Bible in English. Also completed by Myles Coverdale, this Bible was called “Great” because of its size. It was also known as the “Whitchurch Bible” after the first publisher, the “Chained Bible” because of its being attached to the stands in the churches, and the “Cromwell Bible” after Thomas Cromwell (1485–1550)⁴, who oversaw the work at the direction of the king.
- a. Although authorized by the Henry VIII, he soon began to put restrictions on its use and possession. He was irritated that phrases in the Bible were being used in “popular” songs of the day.
 - b. By the end of his reign he had decree that the Bible could only be read in church, owned by upper class families, and all marginal notations were blacked out. Shortly before his death he also outlawed the use of any Bible except the Great Bible, which led to many of the copies pf the previous versions being destroyed.
- E. *The Geneva Bible* (1560). This was the most significant English Bible and would remain the Bible of choice for English Protestants for the next 100 years. Compiled by William Whittingham (1524–79), who was John Calvin’s brother-in-law. There are several notable features of this version:
- a. It was so superior to the *Great Bible* in terms of English usage that it was said to “have driven the *Great Bible* from the field by the sheer force of its brilliance.”
 - b. It was the first English Bible to use the modern chapter and verse divisions.
 - c. It contained notations, not only on difficult words and phrases, but interpretations (strongly Calvinistic). It was the first “study Bible.”

³ Rodgers was the first Protestant martyr (1555) under the persecutions of Queen Mary (1515–58) and Cardinal Reginald Pole (1500–58) who were attempting to re-establish the Catholic Church in England after the death of Edward VI. Interestingly, both died within hours of each other on Nov 17, 1558.

⁴ Who should not be confused with Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) later Lord Protector of the short lived English Republic. Oliver Cromwell was distantly related, through Thomas Cromwell’s sister.

- d. The *Geneva Bible* was the first Bible to come to the American Colonies with the Mayflower in 1620 and remained in wide use until the advent of the *King James Bible*.
- F. *The Bishop's Bible* (1568, with a significant revision in 1572). When Queen Elizabeth I (1553–1603) came to the throne after the death of Mary, the Catholic resurgence was ended. The Queen brought her father's Church of England back into prominence, but it was a "high church" or Anglican in nature. She was not sympathetic to the Calvinists and along with her bishops despised both John Calvin and particularly, John Knox, both of whom were instrumental in the production of the *Geneva Bible*. However, the bishops were all aware that the *Great Bible* was significantly flawed and inferior to the *Geneva's English*. This led to the production of *The Bishop's Bible* under the direction of Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker (1504–75). This Bible was notable for several reasons:
- a. It was a significant improvement over the Great Bible and was the second "Authorized Bible" in English.
 - b. Although quoted by William Shakespeare (1564–1616), it is not the only English version that he quotes in his works, as some references suggest, he actually more often quotes the *Geneva Bible*.
 - c. One of the main drawbacks of this version was the poor quality of the Old Testament work, which was little more than a rough translation of the Vulgate. Daniell stated, "The Hebrew work in the Bishop's Bible of 1582 was a botch, and was understood to be so."⁵
 - d. *The Bishop's Bible* was designated to serve as the official "starting point" for the *King James Bible*. 40 copies of the 1572 edition were prepared especially for the use of the King James Committee. Only one of those copies is known to still exist and is housed in the Bodleian Library at Oxford.
- G. *The King James Bible* or *Authorized Version* (1611). Although the Bishop's Bible was to be the starting point for this new version, *The Bishop's Bible* "was, and is, not loved. Where it reprints Geneva it is acceptable, but most of the original work is incompetent, both in its scholarship and its verbosity."⁶ The King James Bible project was approved by James I (1566–1625) at the Hampton Court Conference (1604).

⁵ David Daniell. *The Bible in English* (New Haven Yale University Press, 2003), 435.

⁶ David Daniell. *Tyndale's New Testament* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), xii. A parallel to this project can be made to the Constitutional Convention in the United States in 1787, which was originally designed to revise the Articles of the Confederation, but in reality ended up creating an entirely new constitution.

- a. The Hampton Court Conference was in response to the Puritan ministers petition (*The Millenary Petition*) to the King James I (who had previously been James VI, King of the Scots) to make Presbyterianism the official practice of the Church of England (along with several other requests).
- b. While some of the Puritans raised were settled in their favor, clear the most significant outcome obtained was the production of a new English translation of the Bible. This Bible was to be produced by the members of the Church of England and it was to be done by a committee (originally 54, but in the end 40) and overseen by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Richard Bancroft (1544–1610). The translators were to be clergy, but mainly scholars who did not hold high ecclesiastical office, but who, because of their work were to be highly considered when vacancies occurred.
- c. There were six committees:
 - *First Westminster Company* (translating from Genesis to 2 Kings): Lancelot Andrewes, John Overall, Hadrian à Saravia, Richard Clarke, John Layfield, Robert Tighe, Francis Burleigh, Geoffrey King, Richard Thomson, William Bedwell.
 - *First Cambridge Company* (translated from 1 Chronicles to the Song of Solomon): Edward Lively, John Richardson, Lawrence Chaderton, Francis Dillingham, Roger Andrewes, Thomas Harrison, Robert Spaulding, Andrew Bing.
 - *First Oxford Company* (translated from Isaiah to Malachi): John Harding, John Rainolds (or Reynolds), Thomas Holland, Richard Kilby, Miles Smith, Richard Brett, Daniel Fairclough, William Thorne.
 - *Second Oxford Company* (translated the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles, and the Book of Revelation): Thomas Ravis, George Abbot, Richard Eedes, Giles Tomson, Sir Henry Savile, John Peryn, Ralph Ravens, John Harmar, John Aglionby, Leonard Hutten.
 - *Second Westminster Company* (translated the Epistles): William Barlow, John Spenser, Roger Fenton, Ralph Hutchinson, William Dakins, Michael Rabbet, Thomas Sanderson (who probably had already become Archdeacon of Rochester).
 - *Second Cambridge Company* (translated the Apocrypha): John Duport, William Branthwaite, Jeremiah Radcliffe, Samuel Ward, Andrew Downes, John Bois, Robert Ward, Thomas Bilson, Richard Bancroft.

- d. There were 15 specific rules made by the King and his Archbishop for the translators:
- The ordinary Bible read in the Church, commonly called the Bishops Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the Truth of the original will permit.
 - The names of the Prophets, and the Holy Writers, with the other Names of the Text, to be retained, as nigh as may be, accordingly as they were vulgarly used.
 - The Old Ecclesiastical Words to be kept, viz. the Word Church not to be translated Congregation &c.
 - When a Word hath divers Significations, that to be kept which hath been most commonly used by the most of the Ancient Fathers, being agreeable to the Propriety of the Place, and the Analogy of the Faith.
 - The Division of the Chapters to be altered, either not at all, or as little as may be, if Necessity so require.
 - No Marginal Notes at all to be affixed, but only for the explanation of the Hebrew or Greek Words, which cannot without some circumlocution, so briefly and fitly be expressed in the Text.
 - Such Quotations of Places to be marginally set down as shall serve for the fit Reference of one Scripture to another.
 - Every particular Man of each Company, to take the same Chapter or Chapters, and having translated or amended them severally by himself, where he thinketh good, all to meet together, confer what they have done, and agree for their Parts what shall stand.
 - As any one Company hath dispatched any one Book in this Manner they shall send it to the rest, to be considered of seriously and judiciously, for His Majesty is very careful in this Point.
 - If any Company, upon the Review of the Book so sent, doubt or differ upon any Place, to send them Word thereof; note the Place, and withal send the Reasons, to which if they consent not, the Difference to be compounded at the general Meeting, which is to be of the chief Persons of each Company, at the end of the Work.

- When any Place of special Obscurity is doubted of, Letters to be directed by Authority, to send to any Learned Man in the Land, for his Judgement of such a Place.
 - Letters to be sent from every Bishop to the rest of his Clergy, admonishing them of this Translation in hand; and to move and charge as many skilful in the Tongues; and having taken pains in that kind, to send his particular Observations to the Company, either at Westminster, Cambridge, or Oxford.
 - The Directors in each Company, to be the Deans of Westminster, and Chester for that Place; and the King's Professors in the Hebrew or Greek in either University.
 - These translations to be used when they agree better with the Text than the Bishops Bible: Tyndale's, Matthew's, Coverdale's, Whitchurch's⁷, Geneva.
 - Besides the said Directors before mentioned, three or four of the most Ancient and Grave Divines, in either of the Universities, not employed in Translating, to be assigned by the vice-Chancellor, upon Conference with the rest of the Heads, to be Overseers of the Translations as well Hebrew as Greek, for the better observation of the 4th Rule above specified.⁸
- e. The final product would be recognized as one of the finest achievements in the English language. The fascinating feature, among many, is that the *King James Bible* is 90% identical to the work of William Tyndale.⁹
- f. While it would take about 50 years for it to gain supremacy in English (the *Geneva Bible* was still preferred by many of the Puritan party). The last edition of the *Geneva Bible* was produced in 1644. One interesting note is that an edition of the *King James Bible* with the Geneva notes was first produced in 1679 (through 1715). But this edition was never particularly popular.
- g. The *King James Bible* would go through several revisions, the last one being 1769. It would remain essentially the exclusive English Bible until the late 1800's and the dominant English version until the 1950's.
- h. While the *King James Bible* is in the public domain in the United States (and most of the world), In Great Britain, the Crown perpetually retains

⁷ Whitchurch's is *The Great Bible* of 1539.

⁸ The 15th rule was added slightly after the work had begun and, interestingly enough is often ignored by proponents of the so-called "King James Only" position.

⁹ Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 448.

the exclusive rights to the Bible and grants permission to publish under the *Letters Patent*.

- H. *The Douay-Rheims Version* (1609–10): This English version was produced at the University of Douay (Douai) in France, by English Catholic scholars who were not welcome not safe in England. This version is often ignored in the listing of English Bibles of the era because it was both Catholic and largely a translation of the Vulgate and not from the Hebrew and Greek. However, the translators did make use of the available English versions, especially that of Myles Coverdale and, interestingly enough, the Geneva. It contains marginal notations that are as partisan as the Geneva, from a Catholic position. There was a significant revision completed in 1750 by Bishop Richard Challoner (1691–1781). While it retains the original name, it is also occasionally referred to as the *Challoner Bible*. This version was also long lasting. It would remain the standard English language Bible for Catholics until 1941.

II. Textual Sources for the King James Bible

- A. Besides the English Bibles already mentioned the main textual sources for the King James Bible were as follows:
- a. *The Textus Receptus*: Produced by Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536) who was called, “the crowning glory of the Christian humanists.”¹⁰ He compiled a standard Greek text from about six different manuscripts which contained most of the New Testament. Notably missing were the last six verses of Revelation, which Erasmus translated from Latin back into Greek. While the work of Erasmus was the standard of the day, he mainly consulted Greek text of the Byzantine textual family and largely avoided older texts because he was afraid of what he thought was an “erratic text” in Codex 1.¹¹ The King James translators utilized the 1550 edition of *Stephanus* (Robert Estienne, 1503–59).
 - b. *The Latin Vulgate*: Original produced by Jerome (ca 347–420) by the 13th Century had become the official and “inspired” Bible of the Catholic Church and was significant in the Protestant Church as well even beyond the Reformation. Over the centuries the Vulgate went through many revisions and the King James translators were likely using Erasmus’ edition.
 - c. *Hebrew Rabbinic Bible*: Produced in 1524 by Daniel Bomberg, this is the Masoretic Text. While the King James translators would occasionally use the LXX or Vulgate for more preferable “Christian” phrasing of some OT

¹⁰ Kenneth Scott LaTourette. *History of Christianity* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1953), 661.

¹¹ Bruce Metzger. *The Text of the New Testament: It’s Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 2nd Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 102.

passages, they also were the first to consult Jewish commentators (especially David Kimhi 1160–1235) for insight into difficult Hebrew expressions.

- d. *Other sources*: While the translators do not have appeared to consulted available Greek manuscripts, they did consult the Syriac and other vernacular translations (German, Spanish, French and Italian).

III. The Impetus for New English Versions in the Victorian Era

A. By the middle of the 19th Century there was a growing consensus that the *King James Bible* was beginning to become obsolete in terms of both English usage and the scholarly apparatus. Significant new manuscript discoveries (*Codex Sinaiticus*, *Codex Vaticanus*, to name the two most notable) demonstrated that the *Textus Receptus* was problematic in places and that the English translation of the *King James Bible* was clearly problematic in sections as well.

- a. English Bible commentaries were becoming increasingly adamant in their remarks of the translation in the *King James Bible*. The movement for a revision or a new version entirely came to fruition during this time. Even a traditionalist such as Charles Spurgeon remarked, “it ought to be done, and must be done. The present version is not to be despised, but no candid person can be blind to its faults. . . I love God’s Word better than I love King James’s pedantic wisdom and foolish kingcraft.”¹²
- b. However, to his student he added a more practical admonition:

Do not needlessly amend our authorized version. It is faulty in many places, but still it is a grand work taking it all in all, and it is unwise to be making every old lady distrust the only Bible she can get at, or what is more likely, mistrust you for falling out with her cherished treasure. Correct were correction must be for truth’s sake, but never for the vainglorious display of your own critical ability.¹³

- c. This movement would see its culmination in 1870 with the release of the *Revised Version* of 1885.
- d. The *Revised Version* is the only official revised of King James Bible and was overseen by the Church of England and approved by Queen Victoria (1819–1901). Its purposes were “to adapt King James’ version to the present state of the English language without changing the idiom and vocabulary,” and “to adapt it to the present standard of Biblical scholarship.”

¹² Charles H. Spurgeon, “Preface to H. H. C. Connat’s *History of the English Bible* (New York: Sheldon, 1856), x-xi. As cited in Daniel, *The Bible in English*, 685.

¹³ Charles H. Spurgeon. *Commenting and Commentaries* (London: Passmore and Alsbaster, 1976), 31.

- e. The leading scholars on the revision committee were Brooke Foss Westcott (1825–1901), Fenton John Anthony Hort (1828–92), and J. B. Lightfoot (1828–89). The most vehement critic was John William Burgon, Dean of Chichester (1813–88). But there was also significant infighting, often led by Frederick Henry Ambrose Scrivener (1813–91), who was also a member the New Testament revision committee.
- f. While the *Revised Version* was initially a commercial success and was received both by the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Queen, it was a singular disappointment. The scholars involved were all leaders in their language fields, but not known for English prose. Spurgeon summed up the feelings about the *Revised Version* when he said it was, “strong in Greek but weak in English.”

Quick Bibliography

This small list of works is designed to open the door for additional study; it is certainly not to be considered exhaustive nor even complete.

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