

The Origins of the King James Bible

2011 marks the 400th anniversary of the translation of the Christian Bible into the English language which is known variously as the Authorized Version, the King James Version, or the King James Bible. For reasons of simplicity, I will refer to this translation as the King James Bible.

Over a period of time, though not instantly, this translation, printed in 1611, became a huge success. Today it is the all-time bestselling book in the English language, and it has been continuously in print for 400 years. It is estimated that more than 1 billion copies have been printed.

The 400th anniversary is being marked by any number of events – bible readings, exhibitions, lectures, newspaper articles, television programmes. The great and the good are taking part. Ten days ago, Lord Bragg gave his contribution on BBC2. He calls the KJB ‘the English Word of God’. With so many erudite and learned people involved, it will be difficult for a simple parish priest like me to have something new or profound to say.

Having doused expectations, let me say what I propose to do.

Next Tuesday I shall say something about the influence of the King James Bible over the last 400 years. Melvyn Bragg, in his programme, asserted that even the rise of democracy and the development of empirical science from the time of the Enlightenment onwards could be traced back to the King James Bible. I have to say that I think those claims might be overstated. The Bible may have had influence on these developments, but not one particular translation. When it comes to influence, I shall speak mainly about literary and linguistic influence, relying to some extent on this splendid book; ‘Bogat’ by David Crystal. However, the importance of the King James Bible does not rest entirely on its linguistic legacy. The translation enabled 17th-century men and women to read the Bible in their own language, it remains at the heart of the English-speaking Christian tradition, and today it continues to be celebrated as one of the great works of English literature. For many, especially those of a certain age, its significance is to do with the growth of a personal Christian faith. Anyone attending a Church of England church or a church established after the Reformation (Baptist, United Reformed, Methodist, Pentecostal) right up until the 1960s would have heard the Bible read publicly in this version. So it is the King James Bible that has been loved by generations of those who have listened to it or read it to themselves or to others; other, more accurate, translations may engage the mind, but the King James Bible is the Bible of the heart. But more of that next week.

This evening, in talking about ‘the origins of the King James Bible’, I would like to cover such topics as

- The extent of bible knowledge, bible reading and study in pre-Reformation England
- The Reformation and its effect on translations of the Bible
- And why this particular translation, involving fifty scholars working for seven years, was thought to be necessary

Some historical context, especially of 16th century England, will be necessary, and I hope this can be done without too much confusion. It may even remind you of what you once learned at school.

I apologize that the history is rather simplistic – history by names and dates has been rather out of fashion.

A fifth-century translation of the Bible in Latin, meticulously hand-copied down the centuries on vellum and parchment, was for more than 1000 years the only one in use in churches in England and Western Europe. This translation was largely the work of St. Jerome. It became known as the ‘Vulgate’ from the Latin phrase ‘editio vulgata’ or ‘popular text’. This translation was the standard text throughout the Middle Ages.

In that medieval period in England, there is evidence of parts of the Bible being translated into Anglo-Saxon, by the Venerable Bede and even by King Alfred, but this was highly unusual and also illegal. To use anything but the official Latin translation was heretical. This was, of course, a form of control used by the Church authorities both to limit individual reading and to ensure orthodoxy in interpretation.

In 1380, an Oxford scholar, John Wycliffe, defied the church by distributing hundreds of hand-written copies of his translation of the Latin Bible (the Vulgate) into English. Wycliffe died in 1384. Thirty years later, in May 1415, a Council of the Church, meeting at Constance, ordered that his English Bibles should be burned. His mortal remains were exhumed, burned, and thrown into the River Swift at Lutterworth in Leicestershire.

However, the fact that the Bible could only be legally read in Latin throughout this period did not mean that knowledge of the bible was restricted to clergy and to those with much learning and intelligence. Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, written in English in the late 14th century, are full of Biblical reference and allusion. Chaucer’s readers would have been familiar with the Biblical narrative, even if some of them could not have read it in the original.

The 15th century saw two major developments which would revolutionize biblical understanding and biblical knowledge. In the 1450s, in Mainz, Johann Gutenberg invented the moveable-type printing press. From that time on, the production of large quantities of books, including Bibles, in a short space of time, at relatively cheap cost, was a real possibility. The invention of printing as a stimulus to education and learning among lay people cannot be underestimated. Then, towards the end of the century, the study of Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, and Greek, the language of the New Testament, became part of the university syllabus throughout Europe. Students and scholars began to study these ancient languages. The first Greek grammar was published in 1476 and the first Hebrew grammar in 1503. The consequences of this were profound.

In the 1490s another Oxford professor, and the personal physician to Kings Henry VII and VIII, a man called Thomas Linacre, decided to learn Greek. After reading the Gospels in Greek, and comparing them to the version in the Latin Vulgate, he wrote in his diary, “Either this (the original Greek) is not the Gospel. . . or we are not Christians.” Scholars like Linacre began to realize how inaccurate the Latin Vulgate was compared to the original Hebrew and Greek documents. This prompted interest in new translations from the original sources.

In 1496, John Colet, another Oxford professor and the son of the Mayor of London, started reading the New Testament in Greek and translating it into English for his students at Oxford, and later for the public when he was Dean of Saint Paul’s Cathedral in London. The people were

so hungry to hear the Word of God in a language they could understand, that many came to hear him.

Another significant figure in this period was the scholar Erasmus of Rotterdam, who in 1516, published a Greek-Latin Parallel New Testament. The Latin part was not the corrupt Vulgate, but his own fresh rendering of the text from the more accurate and reliable Greek, which he had managed to collate from a half-dozen partial old Greek New Testament manuscripts he had acquired. This milestone was the first complete non-Latin Vulgate text of the New Testament to be produced in a millennium... and the first ever to come off a printing press. The 1516 Greek-Latin New Testament of Erasmus further focused attention on just how inaccurate the Latin Vulgate was, and how important it was to go back and use the original Greek (New Testament) and original Hebrew (Old Testament) languages to maintain accuracy, and then to translate them faithfully into the living languages of the common people, whether that be English, German, or any other tongue.

But in the history of the origins of the King James Bible, the man who stands out most of all is William Tyndale. Born probably in 1490 in Gloucestershire, he studied at both Oxford and Cambridge. He was a proficient linguist, fluent in eight languages. Tyndale's lifelong conviction was that the scriptures should be available to be read and understood by all. He holds the distinction of being the first man to translate and print the New Testament in the English language. Tyndale was strongly influenced by the Lutheran Reformation, which began in Germany in 1517. This meant he had to leave England and work abroad, since Henry VIII, at least until he needed to divorce Catherine of Aragon, was a vigorous opponent of the Reformation, as the 'F.D.' on our coinage still reminds us. By 1525, Tyndale's New Testament was complete, and copies were smuggled into England. A contest ensued between those who wished to read the New Testament in their own language, which was still illegal, and the Church authorities who were determined to confiscate and destroy as many copies as possible. Tyndale himself became a fugitive, and for eleven years was a wanted man. Thomas More, whom we regard as a man of conscience for his stand against King Henry VIII, condemned Tyndale for "discharging a filthy foam of blasphemies out of his beastly brutish mouth". Eventually Tyndale was betrayed by an Englishman that he had befriended, then imprisoned for over a year before he was strangled and burned at the stake in 1536. But he was not working alone. Two of his colleagues, Miles Coverdale and John Rogers completed a translation of the Old Testament, and the first complete Bible in English was published in 1535. The contribution of Tyndale to the eventual King James Bible translation was immense. At least three quarters of the words and phrases in the KJB come from Tyndale's translation.

Tyndale's reputed last words were, *"Oh Lord, open the King of England's eyes"*. Within three years of Tyndale's execution the political situation in England had changed. Henry VIII, largely for reasons of politics and foreign policy, became more sympathetic to the Reformation in the Church, and at the same time wished to demonstrate his independence from the Church authorities in Rome. In 1539, the King permitted and funded the printing of what became known as the 'Great Bible'. This was a composite effort based on the translations of Tyndale, Coverdale and Rogers. It was called the 'Great Bible' because of its size. A copy was placed in every parish church so that congregations could now hear, for the first time, the Bible read in their native language. However, Henry VIII did not take the risk of allowing individual interpretation. Each Bible was literally chained to the pulpit or lectern, so that it could not be removed (and get into the wrong hands) and could only be read aloud and interpreted by those authorized to do so.

The next event in this complicated story was the accession of Queen Mary, after the death of Henry VIII's son, Edward VI. Mary restored England to the Church of Rome, burned the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, at the stake (anniversary on 21 March – yesterday) and had the Bibles removed from churches. During this period of persecution, many of the Reformers of the church in England went into exile, and a significant group ended up in Geneva, under the protection of the leading Reformer, John Calvin. There another translation of the Bible into English was made.

This version became known as the Geneva Bible. The New Testament was completed in 1557, and the complete Bible was first published in 1560. Once again the translators relied heavily on Tyndale – Geneva retains up to 90% of his translation. Due to the passage in Genesis describing the clothing that God fashioned for Adam and Eve upon expulsion from the Garden of Eden as "Breeches" (an antiquated form of "Britches"), some people referred to the Geneva Bible as the Breeches Bible.

The Geneva Bible was the first Bible to add numbered verses to the chapters, so that referencing specific passages would be easier. But the main difference between the Geneva Bible and its predecessors was that every chapter was also accompanied by extensive marginal notes and references. It was not only a Bible, it was also a commentary and an interpretation. Where the Bible is quoted in the plays of Shakespeare, it is from the Geneva Bible. The Geneva Bible became the Bible of choice for over 100 years of English speaking Christians. Between 1560 and 1644 at least 144 editions of this Bible were published. The Geneva in fact, remained more popular than the King James Bible until many years after its original publication in 1611. The Geneva Bible holds the honour of being the first Bible taken to America, and the Bible of the Puritans and the Pilgrim Fathers.

With the death of Mary, and the accession of Elizabeth, the Reformers could safely return to England from Geneva and elsewhere. Elizabeth reluctantly tolerated the printing and distribution of Geneva version Bibles in England, but was not at all keen on the marginal notes. Another version, one with a less inflammatory tone was desired, and in 1568, a revision of the Great Bible known as the Bishop's Bible was introduced. Despite 19 editions being printed between 1568 and 1606, this Bible, never gained much of a foothold of popularity among the people. The Geneva may have simply been too much to compete with. These things rested, slightly uncomfortably, until the death of Elizabeth in 1603, and the accession of James VI of Scotland and I of England.

James knew he had inherited a divided Church, and in January 1604, he summoned the Church leaders to Hampton Court Palace to discuss the concerns of the Anglican and Puritan factions, or as he put it "for the reformation of some things amiss in ecclesiastical matters". Both sides had been petitioning him (the Puritans had presented him with a petition signed by 1,000 people, known as the Millenary Petition, setting out their demands) since he set foot in England and he had to find a way to reconcile the tensions. By choosing Hampton Court as the venue for this important meeting, James was making a strong statement about the power and magnificence of the monarchy. The rooms were large with elaborate plaster ceilings painted in pale blue and gold. James sat on a velvet-covered chair at one end of the room in front of a splendid embroidered hanging of the royal coat of arms. As it was January and very cold, there were huge fires burning in the Renaissance fireplaces and braziers in every room. There would have been little question as to who was in control.

In terms of the parties present, the bishops of the Anglican Church, led by Richard Bancroft and Lancelot Andrewes (not yet Bishop of Winchester) wanted an end to the challenges to their authority by the Puritans and to prove to the King that his power depended on them retaining their positions.

The Puritans, whose leader was John Reynolds, Master of Corpus Christ College, Cambridge, wanted to “clean up” the practices and structure of the Anglican Church, which they saw as straying dangerously close to Roman Catholicism. They wanted to be able to opt out of certain ceremonies and rituals which they claimed were not written as the word of God in the Bible and to reform the hierarchies and structures which put the bishops in charge. The Puritans were pleased that James had agreed to consider their demands, something that Queen Elizabeth before him had always refused to do.

It was not on the original agenda of the Conference, but the most significant outcome of the three day meeting was the decision to commission another translation of the Bible into English. Six committees of scholars were set up to do the work, in London and Oxford and Cambridge – 54 people in all. Over the next five years or so, the work was done. It was meant to be "translation to end all translations". The scholars took into account virtually every recent version; all those previously mentioned, including Tyndale and the Geneva Bible. They even consulted what was called the Rheims New Testament, an official new translation of the Roman Catholic Church. From 1605 to 1606 the scholars engaged in private research. From 1607 to 1609 the work was assembled. In 1610 the work went to press, and in 1611 the first copies were printed, first of all for churches, and then for individual and private use. It was an unbelievable work of scholarship and of organization that could probably never be repeated.

What was distinctive about the King James Bible? Some clues can be found in the Translators' Preface, which is still worth reading:

‘And now at last, by the mercy of God, and the continuance of our labours, it being brought unto such a conclusion, as that we have great hopes that the Church of England shall reap good fruit thereby, we hold it our duty to offer it to Your Majesty, not only as to our King and Sovereign, but as to the principal mover and author of the Work; humbly craving of your most Sacred Majesty, that, since things of this quality have ever been subject to the censures of ill-meaning and discontented persons, it may receive approbation and patronage from so learned and judicious a Prince as Your Highness is; whose allowance and acceptance of our labours shall more honour and encourage us than all the calumniations and hard interpretations of other men shall dismay us. So that if, on the one side, we shall be traduced by Popish persons at home or abroad, who therefore will malign us, because we are poor instruments to make God's hold truth to be yet more and more known unto the people, whom they desire still to keep in ignorance and darkness; or if, on the other side, we shall be maligned by self-conceited brethren, who run their own ways, and give liking unto nothing but what is framed by themselves, and hammered on their anvil, we may rest secure, supported within by the truth and innocency of a good conscience, having walked the ways of simplicity and integrity as before the Lord, and sustained without by the powerful protection of Your Majesty's grace and favour, which will ever give countenance to honest and Christian endeavors against bitter censures and uncharitable imputations.’

What are the points being made here? This is as much a political as a religious statement. It honours the King himself as the inspiration behind the project, and asks that he should approve it. The translators maintain if they are to be traduced by ‘Popish persons’ and by ‘self-conceited brethren’ (Puritans are implied) theirs will have been an ‘honest and Christian endeavour’. They trod a middle path, but also did what the King wanted.

The Puritans, the pressure group who wanted less ritual and ceremonial, and who were not keen on the power and authority of bishops, were, in the end, most disappointed. The King, who had suffered forty years of Puritan influence and dour sermons in Scotland, was glad to escape their grip. Above all, James held a high view of the importance of both King and Bishop in the established order. ‘No bishop, no King’ was a popular phrase. The Puritan group had hoped that the new translation would be very similar to the Geneva Bible. In some ways it was, but in two crucial ways it was not.

There were no marginal notes, only cross-references, so there was no interpretation. The notes in the Geneva Bible were often not only anti-Catholic, but also anti-government, critical of the powers that be, individualistic. For example, the marginal note in the Geneva Bible for Exodus 1:9 indicated that the Hebrew midwives were correct in disobeying the orders of the Egyptian King to kill Hebrew children. King James took grave exception to such interpretation as an implicit threat to his authority. He called it “seditious.” He was adamant that there were to be no marginal notes.

Secondly, particular words were translated in such a way as to support the status quo. Tyndale and Geneva had ‘a multitude of heavenly soldiers’ attending our Lord’s birth. The KJB translators opted for ‘heavenly hosts’ which seemed less likely to inspire religious dissidents to take up arms in the name of God. In a similar fashion, where a Greek word could be translated either as ‘church’ or as ‘congregation’, ‘church’ was always preferred – ‘congregation’ being too democratic. Given the option of ‘wash’ or baptize’, the translators chose ‘baptize’ to stress the importance of the sacrament. Where it was a matter of who had leadership or oversight in the church, ‘bishop’ rather than ‘elder’ was the word chosen. These may seem small points, but they are very significant. The final version of the King James Bible was as much a document of state, aimed at preserving the status quo against the more radical opinions of Puritans, as it was a religious document. The monarch asserted his authority by attempting to set his seal on every Bible in the land.

However, the King James Bible did not achieve instant popularity. The Geneva Bible, though after 1611 officially frowned upon, maintained its influence through the first half of the 17th century. Between 1642 and 1660, the British Isles became engulfed in Civil War and the monarchy was overthrown. It was only at the Restoration in 1660, when Puritanism had been rejected, and unity and uniformity became government policy so that the trials of the recent past could never be repeated, that the King James Bible, in alliance with the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, came into its own.

Next Tuesday, I will try to assess the influence of the King James Bible from 1660 down to the present in the English-speaking world. I will look at its impact on language and idiom. And I will need to make some remarks about its continuing value as literature – its undoubted majesty and beauty – its musical quality - and to what extent these virtues counterbalance its shortcomings and deficiencies and inaccuracies simply because it is a translation that is now 400 years old.

There are enough good anecdotes in *Bible* to compensate for the occasional discussion of punctuation and paragraphs. In the 18th century, new editions of the King James Version were notable mostly for the errors introduced by drunken printers' employees, who were quite capable of rendering "parable of the vineyard" as "parable of the vinegar", earning one edition the sobriquet "Vinegar Bible". Other 18th-century King James detractors pointed to the already ludicrous obscurity of its language. In 1759 Matthew Pilkington published a greatest-hits of the most ridiculous bits, including the remarkable "Woe to the women that sew pillows to all armholes, and makes kerchiefs upon the head of every stature to hunt souls".

In fact, the language of the King James Version was archaic even by 17th-century standards. Its translators may have been very brilliant, but they were also conservative and slightly out of touch, and Campbell is sceptical about the notion that their translation had a long-lasting impact on the English language. It was certainly the means by which various 16th- and 17th-century expressions, such as "salt of the earth" and "at their wits' end" survived through the centuries, but Campbell's account shows that the importance of the King James Version does not rest on its linguistic legacy. It enabled 17th-century men and women to read the Bible in their own language, it remains at the heart of the English-speaking Christian tradition, and today it continues to be celebrated as one of the great works of English literature. For Gordon Campbell, though, its significance is finally more personal. "It is the King James Version that has been loved by generations of those who have listened to it or read it to themselves or to others; other translations may engage the mind, but the King James Version is the Bible of the heart."