

The King James Bible

The political background

When Elizabeth I died in 1603, King James VI of Scotland became King James I of England. James hated the Geneva Bible, the most popular Bible of the time in English. What he really hated was the notes. These notes made comments on the text and some were far too radical for James. They stated that it was right to disobey the King when the King was unjust. The notes also used the word 'tyrant' 400 times which showed what the authors thought of certain rulers.



King James I of England/VI of Scotland by Paulus van Somer

England at the time was divided over various religious issues, only one of which being the Bible. In 1604 James called a conference to settle religious issues. At the conference the Puritan, John Reynolds, suggested a new translation. James jumped at the suggestion; a translation would take a long time so he could put off taking sides and making decisions.

In 1605 Guy Fawkes and his Catholic co-conspirators plotted to blow up Parliament. Although the majority of English Catholics denounced the plot, for a short while people came together against the threat. A new Bible was seen as something around which English people could unite; it was part of creating the English unity and identity.

The translation

James got together some of the best scholars of the day who were experts in Hebrew and Greek – the original languages of the Bible. Some translation rules were laid down. Here are a few of them:

1. No notes, unless it is to explain some Greek or Hebrew
2. If something is not clear the best scholars are to be consulted
3. Draw on the best translations of the past and the Bishops' Bible where possible
4. Use previous translations where they agree with the manuscripts in the original languages (Greek and Hebrew)

King James' translators were conscious of being part of a long line of translators. They saw themselves as making what was good, better, by drawing on the Hebrew and Greek texts. The greatest debt was owed to William Tyndale. It is estimated that the King James New Testament reflects about 84% of Tyndale's New Testament. The Old Testament reflects about 75% of the parts of the Old Testament that Tyndale translated.

The translators also drew on the Bishops' Bible, the Geneva Bible and the Great Bible of 1539. Because the translators were instructed to draw on the Bishops' Bible which drew on Tyndale's work, the King James Bible appeared to be old fashioned. It reflects some of the language of Tyndale's time (1520s-30s) not the everyday speech of 1611. For example, in the early 17th century people were ceasing to use 'Thee' and 'Thou' but because it occurs in the King James Bible this language continued to be used in churches.

The translation was a team effort and about 50 translators were involved. They divided the Bible into six sections and then divided the translators into six teams. Each team worked separately on their section of the Bible. All the sections then went to editors for checking and revising. After that the Archbishop of Canterbury (Richard Bancroft) made final checks and revisions.



Richard Bancroft

How they went about it

The translators of King James' Bible wanted each word of the original translated into the nearest English equivalent. They followed the word order of the original wherever possible but not a slavish word for word translation. An exact word for word translation does not always make sense, since Hebrew word order is different to English, as the example shows:

Psalm 46:1-3 (Young's Literal Translation)
 God to us [is] a refuge and strength, a help in
 adversities found most surely.
 Therefore we fear not in the changing of
 earth, And in the slipping of mountains into
 the heart of the seas.
 Roar troubled are its waters, mountains they
 shake in its pride.

The King James Bible stays close to the original but puts it in a form that makes sense in English:

Psalm 46:1-3 (King James Bible)

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Therefore will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea;

Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof.



Caxton showing the First Specimen of His Printing to King Edward IV at the Almonry, Westminster. By Daniel Maclise

The translators also felt free to use a variety of English words to translate the same Greek or Hebrew word in order to avoid repetition, for the sound of the text mattered to them. Part of the translation process was to listen to their work being spoken out loud, to make sure it read well. This was the age of Shakespeare and language at the time was very rich. Accuracy mattered to the translators, but they were not rigid in translating as long as the meaning was not impaired.

Off to the printers

When the translation teams had finished, a title page was added, a preface was written and the Bible was dedicated to James 1. By 1611 the Bible was ready to be printed, but King James would not pay for the printing. The King's printer, Robert Barker, had to pay for it himself. Robert Barker put in £3,500 – a fortune in those days – but it was not enough and others had to share in the venture. The pressure was on to cut costs! Composing the type

was a long job, it had to be done letter by letter and only two pages could be printed at a time. An old fashioned black letter (Gothic) type was used rather than new Roman type. As each page came off the press a 'reading boy' would read that page and someone else would check it. Some mistakes crept in at this stage that had to be corrected later. When all the pages were printed they were bound into a book, though some were kept as loose sheets as some people preferred this cheaper version.

How did people feel about the King James Bible?

In 1611 people did not rush out and buy the new Bible. The news at the time was so bad that the publication of the King James Bible did not grab the headlines. People criticised it for the printer's mistakes and many people carried on using the Geneva Bible.

The language of the new Bible, the type, the price and the fact that the King had commissioned it meant that some people, particularly Puritans, preferred the Geneva Bible. It was not until the Geneva Bible ceased to be printed in 1644 that the King James Bible began to gain ground. After the failure of the Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell, Charles II (the grandson of King James) was restored to the throne in 1660. With him, the fortunes of the King James Bible were restored. In short, it was the Bible of the winning side.

By the end of the 18th century, people hailed the King James Bible as a literary and theological masterpiece. There were a few who disagreed; they found the language of the King James Bible too earthy. They felt that words such as 'piss' were not suitable for families or reading in church. One critic offered to rewrite the offending verses. These verbal fig leaves were declined and the King James Bible remained as the chief version of the Bible until the mid 20th century.

Into the Empire

The Puritans had originally taken the Geneva Bible to America in the early 17th century. Later that was replaced by the King James Bible, which is still the preferred Bible in many parts of America. As the British Empire expanded, the King James Bible spread across the world, influencing the way people thought and wrote in English. The Bible was seen as both a tool of

colonisation and a tool for liberation. The Bible was often misused to support British rule and unequal societies, but it was also used to break free not only of British rule but of tyranny in general. The speeches of Martin Luther King resonate with the language of the Bible. The liberation theology of Latin America and Africa put the Bible into the hands of ordinary people and inspired them to challenge evils in society. The fear felt by those in power in the 16th and 17th centuries was confirmed. The Bible can be a dangerous book.

Today

There have been many versions of the Bible since 1611 but the King James Bible is the most widely-published text in English.

Resources for teacher information

Dr B Stanley, *The Bible and the Flag* (Apollos)

A McGrath, *In the Beginning: The story of the King James Bible* (Hodder and Stoughton)

www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/kingjames.html Information about how the King James Bible came about

www.bible-researcher.com/kjvhist.html History of the King James Version