

The Bible Ark Bible Study Program

Introduction – A Very Short History the King James Bible

Precursors that Set the Stage for the King James Bible

According to Alister McGrath, there were five key factors that shaped the English world and brought about the manifestation of the King James Bible. The emergence of new technologies of momentous historical significance, the rise of English as a National Language, the Reformation of the church, the Geneva Bible, and the accession of King James.

There are certainly a greater number of important technologies that were developed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries than we could hope to hash out in a study such as this; however, there are three technological developments that were extremely important in their connection to England's rise to power. In the words of Sir Frances Bacon, the importance of these technologies can be understood.

“It is well to observe the force and virtue and consequence of inventions, and these are nowhere to be seen nowhere more conspicuously than in those three which were unknown to the ancients, and of which the origins, though recent, are obscure and inglorious: namely, printing, gunpowder, and the magnet. For these three have changed the whole face and state of things throughout the world.”

With the magnet, mariners were able navigate the Globe, even in bad weather; gunpowder was a key development that led to England's rise in power over their rivals; and it goes without saying that the printing press was a profound impact to everything and everyone on the planet, and when William Caxton brought the technology back to England in 1496, it afforded his homeland a distinct advantage in the world for a time.

These technologies were instrumental in firing the social revolution of the newly emerging middle class in much of Europe and England, of course. With the swelling middle class and constituent of merchants, literacy and the need for books rose dramatically, and Gutenberg was there to provide the ultimate solution.

As I stated in yesterday's study, there were several versions of English Bibles that were produced prior to the King James Bible. The first printed English Bible was the Tyndale New Testament in 1525, but it was not printed in England for a few different reasons. The most significant reason is that Tyndale was essentially breaking the law in printing his Bible. The printing of his Bible was contrary to decrees of the Roman Church, which at that time, was the ruling religious force in England. Therefore, Tyndale printed his Bible in Cologne, Germany where his printing operation was raided by authorities, after which he fled to the Lutheran community of Worms, Germany and continued printing his Bible in 1526. Eventually, he was betrayed to authorities of the Holy Roman Empire and was burned at the stake on counts of heresy in 1536.

According to Wikipedia citations his final words had the ultimate affect that he was aiming for:

“His final words, spoken "at the stake with a fervent zeal, and a loud voice", were reported as "Lord! Open the King of England's eyes."” ... “Within four years, four English translations of the

Bible were published in England at the king's behest,[b] including Henry's official Great Bible. All were based on Tyndale's work."

Interestingly, this kind of craziness went on for another 75 years, until the King James Bible was authorized as the standard Bible in England. It is a long convoluted story, and, of course, it is all intricately woven in with the Reformation of the church. Unfortunately, it is not a story that I could adequately relay to you in the time that we have today. It would be like trying to describe one of Kasparov's greatest chess matches, without having time to explain why he and his opponent made the moves that they made.

I have another excerpt that I would like to read to you from another book on the subject of the making of the King James Bible. This excerpt comes from a book titled, "God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible." The book was written by Adam Nicolson, a renowned and decorated English author that specializes in English literature and is a graduate of Magdalene College, Cambridge. God's Secretaries was published in 2003 by Harper Collins. This excerpt comes from the introduction of his book:

"Of course, the King James Bible did not spring from the soil of Jacobean England as quietly and miraculously as a lily. There were arguments and struggles, exclusions and competitiveness. It is the product of its time and bears the marks of its making. It is a deeply political book. The period was held in the grip of an immense struggle: between demands for freedom of the individual conscience and the need for order and an imposed inheritance; between monarchy and democracy; between extremism and toleration. Early Jacobean England is suffused with this drama of authority and legitimacy and of the place of the state within that relationship. 'The reformers,' it has often been said, 'dethroned the Pope and enthroned the Bible.' That might have been the case in parts of Protestant Europe, but in England the process was longer, slower, less one-directional and more complex. The authority of the English, Protestant monarch, as head of the Church of England, had taken on wholesale many of the powers which had previously belonged to the pope. The condition of England was defined by those ambiguities. In the years that the translation was being prepared, [the play writes of] *Othello*, *Volpone*, *King Lear* and *The Tempest* – all centred on the ambivalences of power, the rights of the individual will, the claims of authority and the question of liberty of conscience – were written and staged for the first time. The questions that would erupt in the Civil war three decades later were already circling around each other here."

One of the complexities of this time period was the English Bible translation of the Geneva Bible. Let me read to you what Wikipedia has to say about the Geneva Bible. This excerpt from Wikipedia picks up after the first printings of the Tyndale Bible.

"Over the next ten years, Tyndale revised his New Testament in the light of rapidly advancing biblical scholarship, and embarked on a translation of the Old Testament. Despite some controversial translation choices, and in spite of Tyndale's execution on charges of heresy for having made the translated Bible, the merits of Tyndale's work and prose style made his translation the ultimate basis for all subsequent renditions into Early Modern English. With these translations lightly edited and adapted by Myles Coverdale, in 1539, Tyndale's New Testament and his incomplete work on the Old Testament became the basis for the Great Bible. This was the first "authorised version" issued by the Church of England during the reign of King

Henry VIII. When Mary I succeeded to the throne in 1553, she returned the Church of England to the communion of the Roman Catholic faith and many English religious reformers fled the country, some establishing an English-speaking colony at Geneva. Under the leadership of John Calvin, Geneva became the chief international centre of Reformed Protestantism and Latin biblical scholarship.

These English expatriates undertook a translation that became known as the Geneva Bible. This translation, dated to 1560, was a revision of Tyndale's Bible and the Great Bible on the basis of the original languages. Soon after Elizabeth I took the throne in 1558, the flaws of both the Great Bible and the Geneva Bible (namely, that the Geneva Bible did not "conform to the ecclesiology and reflect the episcopal structure of the Church of England and its beliefs about an ordained clergy") became painfully apparent. In 1568, the Church of England responded with the Bishops' Bible, a revision of the Great Bible in the light of the Geneva version. While officially approved, this new version failed to displace the Geneva translation as the most popular English Bible of the age—in part because the full Bible was only printed in lectern editions of prodigious size and at a cost of several pounds. Accordingly, Elizabethan lay people overwhelmingly read the Bible in the Geneva Version—small editions were available at a relatively low cost. At the same time, there was a substantial clandestine importation of the rival Douay–Rheims New Testament of 1582, undertaken by exiled Roman Catholics. This translation, though still derived from Tyndale, claimed to represent the text of the Latin Vulgate.”

These excerpts that I just read give us only a small taste of how crazy and unstable the situation was when King James took the throne of England in 1603.

The New King of England and the Geneva Bible

King James the VI of Scotland, was notified of the death of Queen Elizabeth the First of England (and hence his ascension to King James the First of throne of England) on the evening of March the 3rd, 1603. Immediately, even before he arrived in London, he had been approached by Puritan Christian leaders about the problems with the existing English translations of the Bible. For reasons that are too complicated for us to tackle here, King James was no fan of the Geneva Bible, as Alister McGrath summarizes at the end of chapter 7 of his book, “In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture.” (This is the book from which I read the excerpt in yesterday’s Bible study.) He states:

“The Geneva Bible thus undermined whatever biblical basis there might have been for the idea of ‘the divine right of kings.’ As this notion was highly significant in James’s understanding of his role in both church and state, he would have reacted with horror to any challenge to it. As a result, James now had a personal agenda – to rid England of what he regarded as the baleful influence of the Geneva Bible and its detestable marginal notes. It was, in his view, the ‘worst of all’ of the English translations.”

I should pause here to explain that the Geneva Bible was full of notes of commentary in the margins of the pages of the Bible, in a similar fashion to what Dr. Scofield reintroduced to the domain of Bible printing some three hundred years later. The effective undermining of the divine right of kings that the Geneva Bible was introducing into the English culture was not coming from the Biblical text itself; it was

stemming from the notes in the margins of the Bible. Let me now continue reading the excerpt from McGrath's book.

"Yet when James I came to the throne of England in 1603, the position of the Geneva Bible seemed absolutely secure. It had outsold and outperformed all its rivals. It was the version of the Bible that had been used by Shakespeare in his dramas. How could it conceivably be toppled from its place of eminence? The growing sales and influence of this Bible seemed to be beyond James's control. The future of both the English monarchy and the church could depend upon eliminating this most turbulent of Bible translations. But what could be done to topple it from its place of honor?"

The Hampton Conference and the New Translation

King James did not waste any time addressing the problem. On October the 24th, 1603 he issued a proclamation that he had made arrangements for what is now known as the Hampton Court Conference. The following year, the conference began on January the 14th, with nineteen representatives from the Church of England and only four representatives from the Puritan interests that were all appointed by the King (none were elected by the Puritan contingents).

I would love to take you through the drama of the conference proceedings, but there really was only one solution to this caldron of problems that had been seething for so long. Thus, on the second day of the conference after a long two days of debate, the idea of generating a new Bible translation was presented by John Reynolds of the Puritan representatives. King James seized on the idea and by the end of the conference it was determined that:

"A translation be made of the whole Bible, as consonant as can be to the original Hebrew and Greek; and this to be set out and printed, without any marginal notes, and only to be used in all churches of England in time of divine service."

Following the conference there was plenty of political byplay to find other ways of solving the problems discussed during the conference, but by February, it was clear to everyone involved (within and behind the council attendees) that a new translation of the Bible was the clear determination.

At this point, I would love nothing more than to get into the details of how the Bible translators were selected and to give you a little background about those individuals and the work that they carried out in the making of the King James translation; however, we would be here for another half an hour if I opened up that line of discussion. My hope and my prayer is that we can revisit some of those topics from time to time over the course of the next five years of this study. Nevertheless, I will give you a little bit of information regarding the structure and methodology of the translation effort.

The translation effort was highly structured and guided by exceptionally clear-cut rules, fifteen rules in total. The translators were not to be paid for their roles as translators. The Church was instructed to find roles in the church for each of the translators that would provide them the compensation and the latitude to perform their obligations of Bible translation. They were expected to receive no less than twenty pounds salary for their church responsibilities.

They were organized in six companies.

The First Westminster Company was assigned all the books of the Old Testament from Genesis through to Second Kings. The head of this company was Lancelot Andrews, the dean of Westminster Abbey. His company had eight members besides himself.

The First Cambridge Company was assigned all the Old Testament books from First Chronicles to the Song of Solomon. The leader of the company was Edward Lively, the Regius Professor of Hebrew at Cambridge University. There were six other members assigned to his team.

The First Oxford Company was assigned all the Old Testament books from the prophecy of Isaiah to the prophecy of Malachi. This company was led by John Harding, the president of Magdalen College, Oxford. He had six members in his company.

The Second Oxford Company was assigned the Four Gospels of the New Testament, the book of Acts, and Revelation. This leader of this company was Thomas Ravid, the dean of Christ Church, Oxford. His company had nine members apart from himself.

The Second Westminster Company was assigned all the epistles of the New Testament. The head of this company was William Barlow, the dean of Chester. His company had six members besides himself.

The Second Cambridge Company was assigned the books of the Apocrypha. The leader of the company was John Duport, the Master of Jesus College, Cambridge. There were six other members assigned to his team.

All told there were 23 translators for the Old Testament, 17 translators for the New Testament, and 7 for the Apocrypha. Therefore, there were 40 translators for the sixty-six books of Bible that most Christians regard as the inspired Word of God, or 47 translators for those that hold to the Apocrypha.

There is not a great deal that is known about the translation process. There has been plenty that has been written about it, but those writings are mostly supposition and very little documented history.

Following the first printing in 1611, the King James Bible went through many revisions, mostly to cure printing errors. However, there is nothing quite straight forward about those activities either. Regardless of the myriads of affects that the King James Bible had in the wake of its first printing, it can all be boiled down to this. The King James Bible is quite likely the single greatest influence on the English-speaking world that has come to be. God, in all His providence, has provided us a most remarkable instrument: His divine Word in the form of a literary masterpiece.

That is about all we can cover for today my friends. Tomorrow, we will take a look at the history of the Scofield Study Bible.

Dale Trussell, April 8th, 2021