Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 35 · Number 4 · October 2011

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by

Paternoster:
thinking faith

WEA
World Evangelical Alliance
Theological Commission

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

ERT (2011) 35:4, 292-305

The King James Bible: A Reflection on 400 Years of its History

Brian Talbot

KEYWORDS: *Puritans, Geneva Bible, Bishop's Bible, Revised Version, translation, nationalism, revision*

AS A YOUNG PERSON growing up in a rural, culturally conservative Baptist church in the North of England, in the 1970s, it was clear that the King James Version (KJV) was the predominant Bible version in use in the churches which I may have attended at that time. Other versions were around and used in Christian homes, yet in those various Free churches of different traditions the vast majority of ministers and lay-preachers would have conducted Sunday worship services with and preached from the Authorised Version.

There had been in the theologically broader church scene a warmer welcome for various new versions during the previous century, for example, for the Revised Version (1885); the American Standard Version (1901) and the Revised Standard Version (1946). However, it was the arrival of the New International Version (NIV) of the Bible in 1978 that finally led to the decline in the usage of the most famous Bible version produced in the English language. Yet 400 years later, in 2011, the King James Version is still the second-best selling English language Bible behind the NIV.[1]

I Commissioning

The King James Version was commissioned in 1604 at the Hampton Court Conference, a gathering called by the new monarch of the United Kingdom with a view to easing tensions that had existed in the Elizabethan Church of England. The new king, James I of England and James VI of Scotland, accepted a proposal for the commis-

1 Information gained from the Christian Booksellers Association website, www.edstetzer.com/2011/02/bibletranslations.html, accessed on 19 April 2011.

***Rev. Brian Talbot**, B.A. (Hons), B.D., Ph.D., is the minister of Broughty Ferry Baptist Church, Dundee, Scotland, where he has served since 2007. He is a member of the Commission on Baptist Heritage and Identity of the Baptist World Alliance and a Fellow of the Centre for Baptist History and Heritage at Regent's Park College, Oxford. He has published papers on a variety of historical subjects, including* Search for a Common Identity: The Origins of the Baptist Union of Scotland 1800-1870 *(Paternoster, 2003), 'Rousing the Attention of Christians': Scottish Baptists and the Baptist Missionary Society prior to the Twentieth Century', in J.H.Y. Briggs & A.R. Cross (eds),* Baptists and the World: Renewing the Vision *(Oxford: Centre for Baptist History and Heritage, 2011).*

sioning of a new Bible translation put to him by the leading Puritan scholar at the conference, Dr John Reynolds (1549-1607), President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford.[2]

Why did Reynolds call for a new Bible translation when the Geneva Bible was so popular amongst devout Protestant Christians? It is likely that he wished to see a replacement for the version that was most common in parish churches in England, the Bishops' Bible. Archbishop Matthew Parker (1504-75) had asked the previous monarch, Elizabeth I, to authorise this Bible alone for reading in church since 'in certain places be publicaly used some translations which have not been laboured in your Realm, having inspersed divers prejudicial notes'. He wanted 'to draw to one uniformity'. This version was not a work of particularly high merit, though this was unlikely to have been the reason why the Queen declined his request, but its significance in this context is that James required it to serve as the basis of the 1611 revision of the English Bible.[3]

Parker, together with Edmund Grindal (1519-83), Bishop of London, made a concerted effort to restrict the supply of Geneva Bibles in order to encourage usage of the Bishops' Bible. However, 'his [Parker's] lack of confidence [in it] sealed the fate of the Bishops' Bible'.[4] It is probable therefore, that Reynolds wanted a version of the Bible that would gain general acceptance throughout the land, something that did not happen with the previous Bishops' Bible. It would have greatly surprised him how long it would take before the King James Version became accepted as the 'Authorised Version' in the United Kingdom.

The Geneva Bible was the most popular English language version in the years leading up to 1611. Between 1560 and 1611 there were sixty-four separate editions of the Geneva Bible or New Testament produced.[5] By way of contrast with the Bishops' Bible, between 1583 and 1603 only seven editions of the Bishops' Bible were produced compared to fifty-one of the Geneva edition.[6] The fundamental motivation for the production of the Geneva Bible was to make the Bible accessible and intelligible to a lay readership. In addition, it contained marginal notes that proved both immensely popular and helpful to its Protestant readership during the great religious controversies of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. It is generally

2 William Barlow, 'The Summe and Substance of the Conference Which It Pleased His Excellent Majestie to have with the Lords, Bishops and Other of His Clergie at Hampton Court, 14 January 1603' [1604]. See also 'To the Reader', the Preface to the first edition of 1611, *The Holy Bible 1611 Edition* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), vii. Details of the exchange are given in D. Daniell, *The Bible in English* (London: Yale University Press, 2003), 432-436.

3 S.L. Greenslade (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the Bible in The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 159-161.

4 A.W. Pollard, *Records of the English Bible* (London: Henry Frowde, 1911), 40.

5 Daniell, *Bible in English*, 369.

6 A. McGrath, *In The Beginning. The Story of the King James Bible* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001), 128-129.

agreed that this Bible version was the best English language version of that day.[7] As a result, when the King James Bible appeared in print sometime between March 1611 and February 1612 very few British Christians would have been aware of its arrival.

The launch of the new Bible version took place without any fanfare. In fact, even the Stationer's Company that printed it did not record the actual date of first publication. For them it was simply a revision of the Bishops' Bible, the Anglican church's official Bible.[8] The earliest description of this version was given in February 1612 where it was described as: 'a great Bible of the new translation'.[9] The origins of this translation (KJV) of the Scriptures were, therefore, much more humble than would have been expected by its later devotees.

II Dominance

In the light of its low-key launch it is no surprise that this Bible version struggled to claim support from the vast majority of Protestant churchgoers in the United Kingdom. In fact, the very first time it was included in a formal list of English-language Bible versions was as late as 1645, where it was referred to as 'the last translation procured by King James' or 'the new translation', and uniquely, 'the reformed and revised edition of the Bible'.[10] Throughout the first half of the seventeenth century the Geneva Bible was the version of choice not only of the Puritans in England, but also their counterparts in America and on the European mainland.

The spiritual ancestors of those Christians who in a later era would refer to themselves as Evangelicals, would almost unanimously have chosen the Geneva Bible as their preferred English-language translation. This version became enormously popular, with more than seventy editions published between 1560 and 1640. In England alone more than half a million copies of the Geneva Bible were sold. It was crucial for its availability that it was printed in the country between 1576 and 1640. The Geneva Bible was also the first English-language Bible published in Scotland, in 1579. However, although the Bible was in English, the dedication of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland was in the Scots language.[11] Thus this was the Bible of choice of the most evangelical Protestants. No wonder the KJV struggled to make an impact in such an unsympathetic spiritual environment.

Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, appointed King Edward VII Professorship of English Literature at Cambridge in 1912,

7 For example, McGrath, *In The Beginning*, 118-119; Greenslade, *History of the Bible*,159; D. Wilson, *The People's Bible* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2010), 68; F.F. Bruce, *The English Bible* (London: Methuen, 1963), 90-92.

8 D. Norton, *The King James Bible A Short History from Tyndale to Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 133.

9 Pollard, *Records of the English Bible*, 66.

10 Preface, possibly by Downame, to *Annotations upon all the Books of the Old and New Testament*, fols. B3^{r}-B4$^{r.}$ cited by Norton, *King James Bible*, 134.

11 G. Campbell, *Bible: The Story of the King James Version 1611-2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 26-27.

made the following comments there about the KJV in a lecture during the First World War. He asked his audience to assent with him 'that the Authorized Version of the Holy Bible is, as a literary achievement, one of the greatest in our language; nay with the possible exception of the complete works of Shakespeare, the very greatest'. He was confident of agreement—'you will certainly not deny this' for he was enunciating a generally held belief.[12] Yet a representative eighteenth century scholar, Matthew Pilkington, an Anglican clergyman who had risen to be prebendary of Lichfield, made plain his distaste for the KJV, as late as 1759, when he drew attention to 'the uncouth and obsolete words and expressions' it contained.[13]

However, there were additional reasons for the unattractiveness of this new Bible, in comparison with the much loved Geneva version. William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1633-1645, was a militant Arminian who loathed the Calvinistic theology of the study notes of the Geneva Bible. Laud drew attention to the primary reasons, he believed, which were behind the popularity of this version that was imported from the printing presses of Amsterdam. He wrote: 'For the books which came thence were better print, better bound, better paper, and for all the charges of bringing, sold better cheap. And would any man buy a worse Bible dearer, that might have a better more cheap?'[14] Laud, for these reasons, banned the printing of the Geneva Bible in England by the King's Printer, Robert Barker; he had a monopoly on Bible production and had invested substantially in the KJV and needed it to become a commercial success. Without the legal restrictions imposed on the printing and importation of the Geneva Bible, it is likely that the KJV would have had very little commercial success.

However, there were two other reasons for the promotion of the KJV at the expense of the more popular version. The first of these related to the proclamation of 1541 specifying a need for Bibles 'of the largest and greatest volume' for use in parish churches.[15] There were only three Bibles printed successively with the required specifications, the Great Bible, the Bishop's Bible and the KJV. Between 1612 and 1641 only the KJV was available to meet this requirement. It was referred to as 'a Bible of the latest edition', 'the last translation', or 'a Bible of the largest volume'. It is interesting that in

12 Sir A. Quiller-Couch, *On the Art of Reading* (Cambridge; Cambridge university Press, 1920), 155; quoted by D. Norton, *A History of the English Bible as Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 89.

13 M. Pilkington, *Remarks upon Several Passages of Scripture* (1759), 114; quoted by Norton, *History of the English Bible*, 230.

14 W. Laud, *Works*, Vol. IV, 263; quoted by Norton, *History of the English Bible*, 91. Puritan and London bookseller, Michael Sparke, who imported Bibles from Continental Europe, in defiance of the Government restrictions on this trade, strongly opposed the practice of printing monopolies and from the opposite theological point of view to Laud mentioned the same reasons as the Archbishop for the popularity of the Geneva Bible (*Scintilla*, 1641; reprinted in A.S. Herbert, *Historical Catalogue of Printed Editions of the English Bible, 1525-1961* (London: The British and Foreign Bible Society, 1968), 183-187).

15 Pollard, *Records of the English Bible*, 23.

the first half of the seventeenth century people were having some difficulty distinguishing between the KJV and the Geneva Bible in terms of the translation of the text, but by contrast found it relatively easy to distinguish the KJV as an artifact.[16]

The second of these was the continuing objection by the Royalists to the study notes and theological comments on the text of the Geneva Bible. William Laud, after making reference to James I's criticism of the notes, stated that this issue was just as pressing in the 1640s. He observed 'that now of late these notes were more commonly used to ill purposes than formerly and that that was the cause why the High Commission was more careful and strict against them than before'.[17] In the light of the execution of Charles I a few years later in 1649, the political concerns of Laud and his colleagues appeared to be well grounded. However, William Prynne, a Puritan with more evangelical and Low Church sympathies, while accepting that the annotations were a cause of conflict, suggested that the real issue was a fear on the part of Laud and his supporters that these comments on the biblical text 'should over-much instruct the people in the knowledge of the Scriptures'.[18]

By the mid-seventeenth century there had been no significant debate over the alleged superiority or inferiority of the KJV as a Bible translation. Differences of opinion concerned the study notes accompanying the biblical text of the Geneva Bible. The more fervent and Bible-centred Protestant Christians retained their affection for the older version at home, but it was the KJV that regular worshippers heard read, Sunday by Sunday, in the local parish church. This version was now accepted and respected, and crucially, after three decades of usage, was one with which British Christians were increasingly familiar.

III Consolidation

The KJV consolidated its position as the predominant Bible version both in the home and the church in the second half of the seventeenth century. This process took place as a result of two events. The first was the lack of availability of Geneva Bibles. After 1644 this version was neither printed in the United Kingdom nor imported from the Netherlands.[19] The second and equally important fact was the absence of requests for its recall, even after the departure of Laud and the execution of Charles I in 1649, together with the establishment of the Commonwealth in the early 1650s. It is significant that the eight editions of the Bible with the Geneva notes, printed between 1642 and 1715, all contained the KJV text.[20]

In this era, more than half a century

16 Norton, *History of the English Bible*, 92.

17 Laud, *Works*, Vol IV, 262; quoted by Norton, *History of the English Bible*, 92.

18 W. Prynne, *Canterbury's Doom* (London, 1646), 181; quoted by Norton, *History of the English Bible,* 92.

19 Campbell, *Bible: The Story of the King James Version*, 125.

20 H. Hamlin, 'Bunyan's biblical progress', in H. Hamblin & N.W. Jones (eds), *The King James Bible after 400 Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 214.

after the KJV had first appeared, the public perception of its main rival had changed in England. No longer was the Geneva Bible automatically the people's version, it was now seen more as one associated with the Puritans and with an anti-Royalist agenda.[21] In the seventeenth century although they were very familiar with the Geneva Bible and used it extensively, even radicals associated with the Dissenting tradition and Oliver Cromwell's regime had adopted the KJV as their primary Bible version. Two examples will illustrate this point.

John Milton (1608-1674), the great scholar and writer of such well-known works as *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*, vehemently opposed the established church and supported the execution of Charles I, yet his personal Bible was a 1612 edition of the KJV printed by Robert Barker. It is this version of the Bible that predominates in biblical citations in his literary endeavours.[22] John Bunyan (1628-1688) was brought up in very humble circumstances, yet this Baptist preacher became the author of numerous works, including the best-selling religious book (apart from the Bible) in the English-speaking world, *Pilgrim's Progress*. His biblical citations are almost certainly either from the Geneva or KJV Bibles. Yet it is clear that the Bible he knew best was the KJV; the vast majority of biblical quotations in *Pilgrim's Progress* or in his spiritual autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* come either from the KJV or from language shared by these two versions.

It is probable that Milton and Bunyan were the first two major English Dissenting writers who were predominantly influenced by the KJV.[23] The Bible version so closely associated with the monarchy and the established church had become the favoured version of radicals and dissenters by the second half of the seventeenth century.

IV Revision

In the eighteenth century, as in the previous one, variant texts of the KJV had circulated with unacceptable levels of printers' errors. Nonconformists, in particular, had drawn attention to them. William Kilburne had assembled a formidable list of typographical errors in his *Dangerous Errors in Several Late printed Bibles*, as early as 1660.[24] He was, though, only one of many writers to draw attention to this problem. Baptist minister Henry Jessey (1601-63), who was known as a 'living concordance' of the original languages of the Bible, spoke for many Protestant Churchmen of his day when he stated that it is: 'our duty to endeavour to have the whole Bible rendered as exactly agreeing with the original as

21 J. N. King & A.T. Pratt, 'The materiality of English printed Bibles', in Hamblin & Jones, *King James Bible after 400 Years*, 88. See the discussion of some of the Geneva notes on this topic in McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 141-148.

22 J.P. Rosenblatt, 'Milton, anxiety, and the King James Bible', in Hamlin & Jones, *King James Bible after 400 Years*, 181-201.

23 Hamlin, 'Bunyan's biblical progress', 202-218.

24 Campbell, *Bible: The Story of the King James Version*, 127-128.

we can attain'.[25]

Yet there was a lack of political will to embrace the necessary wholesale revision of the KJV text in circulation at that time. John Wesley (1703-91), the leading Methodist minister, revised the New Testament text of the KJV in 1755 and made as many as twelve thousand modifications of it.[26] Philip Doddridge (1702-1751), the well known biblical expositor and Congregational minister, also drew attention to the need for the revision of the KJV text in the preface to volume one of his popular works, *The Family Expositor* (1739). In its six substantial volumes, published over a period of seventeen years, the Northampton minister proposed a significant number of revisions to the KJV text.[27]

Progress on this subject was most closely associated with the work of two scholars F.S. Parris, Fellow of Sidney College, Cambridge, and Benjamin Blayney, Fellow of Hertford College, Oxford, who produced revised texts for their respective university presses, two of the three permitted Bible publishers, in 1743 and 1769. Blayney's edition, that incorporated Parris's modifications, soon became the universally accepted text of the KJV that has hardly altered since that time. This version differed from the 1611 text in no fewer than 24,000 places. However, many of the changes were simply the correction of accumulated printers' errors, though others were more substantial changes. What is remarkable is that these alterations were accepted by the Christian public without significant criticism. This signalled that the KJV had not yet become a sacrosanct cultural icon, a status that would be bestowed by some Christians at a later date.[28]

However, the publication of Blayney's modified text in 1769 was the event that stilled the many critical voices raised against the language and accuracy of the KJV.[29] In addition, a number of other factors began to emerge that enhanced the status of this biblical text. First of all, beginning around 1780, the classical taste that had dismissed the writings of the seventeenth century as unsophisticated began to take a delight in past works for their own sake. An unknown writer to *The Critical Review*, in January 1787, while still suggesting that the KJV did not achieve the highest literary standards, nevertheless, argued that:

> The defect in idiom we cannot allow to be a fault; it raised the language above common use and has almost sanctified it; nor would we lose the noble simplicity, the energetic bravery, for all the idiomatic

25 E. Whiston, *The Life and Death of Mr Henry Jessey* (London, 1671), 45-47; quoted by Norton, *History of the English Bible*, 98-99.

26 Daniell, *Bible in English*, 536.

27 I. Rivers, 'Philip Doddridge's New Testament', in Hamlin & Jones, *King James Bible after 400 Years*,124-145.

28 Campbell, *Bible: The Story of the King James Version*, 132-142. D.W. Bebbington, 'The King James Bible in Britain from the Late Eighteenth Century', 1. I am grateful to Professor Bebbington for allowing me to read a copy of this as yet unpublished paper, prepared for 'The King James Bible and the World It Made, 1611-2011' Conference at Baylor University, Texas, 7-9 April, 2011.

29 Campbell, *Bible: The Story of the King James Version*, 146.

> elegance which a polished age can bestow…Our attachment to this venerable relic has involuntarily made our language warm.[30]

V Renewed Prominence

Critical accuracy in the text now combined with changing cultural tastes that placed greater value on the 'relics' of the past, led to the KJV being viewed with greater favour in the wider social context of that day. It was not only secular and literary figures that were placing greater value on the KJV. Vicesimus Knox, the Anglican headmaster of Tonbridge School in Kent, argued with respect to the KJV, that 'its antiquity is a greater source of strength than any correction of its inaccuracies would be' and that 'the present translation ought to be retained in our churches for its intrinsic beauty and excellence'.[31]

This new mode of thinking and use of early seventeenth-century language was adopted by some evangelical Christian ministers, for example, Edward Irving, the most popular London clergyman in the 1820s. He deliberately adopted the linguistic forms found in the KJV.[32] In such a social context as this, modernisation of the language of the KJV was out of the question.

A second reason for the enhanced respect for the KJV was its growing association with national pride and identity. The French Revolution of 1789 had shaken the confidence of the British establishment with very real fears that the upheaval across the English Channel might erupt 'in England's green and pleasant land'. Some of the more radical Evangelicals such as Scottish landowner Robert Haldane welcomed these changes, in the hope that the toppling of Roman Catholic governments in Europe might lead to greater freedom to preach the gospel in those lands, though he needed to assure anxious colleagues that he was not wishing to promote a revolution at home.[33]

Political concerns had escalated further with the rising threat from Napoleon Bonaparte in still Catholic France. Militant Protestantism was the natural way to assert a distinctive religious and political identity.[34] France through ignorance of the Scriptures, it was assumed, had not adopted the Protestant faith. By contrast, the King James Bible came to be viewed as a symbol of national identity. It was distinctly Protestant. Roman Catholics would not accept it and preferred their own Douai-Rheims editions. When Bible verses were reproduced in educational literature in Catholic Ireland, they gave passages in both the Douai-Rheims and the KJV.[35]

However, more enlightened Evangelical Protestants, such as Scottish

30 *The Critical Review*, 63 (1787), 40, quoted by Norton, *History of the English Bible*, 241.

31 Vicesimus Knox, *Essays, Moral and Literary* (1778), 266-267; quoted by Norton, *History of the English Bible*, 243.

32 E. Irving, *Babylon and Infidelity Foredoomed of God*, 2 vols (Glasgow: for Chalmers and Collins, 1826), 1, 308, quoted by Bebbington, 'King James Bible', 3.

33 R. Haldane, *Address to the Public concerning political Opinions* (Edinburgh, 1800).

34 Bebbington, 'King James Bible', 4.

35 A.S. Herbert, *Historical Catalogue of Printed Editions of the English Bible, 1525-1961* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1968), 346.

Baptist Christopher Anderson, recognised that the Catholic Irish primarily had legitimately objected to the use of Protestant catechisms in their schools. When a further step was taken, the production of the Bible in their native Irish language, there was a much greater degree of openness to work with the Protestant teachers and preachers. Anderson saw it as a scandal that the Bible had not been provided for the Irish in their own language.[36] The KJV's identification with a sense of British identity had hindered its acceptance amongst the Irish Catholics. By contrast, it had the opposite effect on the majority of Protestant Christians in mainland Britain.

VI British and Foreign Bible Society

A third reason was the formation of the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) in 1804. The growth of Evangelicalism in the early nineteenth century led to a large increase in the production of Bibles for personal use, at a price ordinary people could increasingly afford. English Congregationalist John Campbell, in 1844-45, recorded a list of some of the necessities of life required in the 1840s: 'light postage, quick transit, cheap Bibles, and cheap Periodicals, for the millions of England'.[37] Numerous societies were established to promote particular Christian causes.

The BFBS believed that no barrier of language, cost or supply should hinder access to the means of salvation to potential readers. Over a period of around sixty years it transformed the contemporary printing and binding trades, becoming a Victorian institution in its own right. The initial motivation for the formation of the society was to overcome the scarcity of Welsh-language Bibles in Wales.[38] However, this challenge soon pointed to the even greater need for Bibles in other parts of the world.[39] This vision for exporting copies of the Scriptures led to a renewed enthusiasm amongst middle-class Christians for distributing KJV Bibles and New Testaments at home amongst the largely unreached poorer neighbourhoods of various towns and cities. Members of BFBS auxiliaries were entitled to obtain a number of copies of Bibles at the cost price, greatly increasing access amongst the population to the Bible.[40]

The BFBS was by far the largest pan-evangelical organisation in the UK at that time. As early as 1824 there were no fewer than 859 BFBS auxiliaries, together with 500 Ladies' organisations promoting its work; in 1832 it had more than 100,000 sub-

36 For example, C. Anderson, *The Native Irish and Their Descendants* (London: William Pickering, 3rd ed. 1846), 68.

37 A. Peel, *These Hundred Years. A History of the Congregational Union of England and Wales 1831-1931* (London: Congregational union of England and Wales, 1931), 135-139.

38 D.E. Jenkins, *The Life of the Rev. Thomas Charles of Bala* (3 vols; Denbigh: Llewelyn Jenkins, 1908), Vol. 2, 492-529.

39 John Leifchild, *Memoir of Joseph Hughes*, A.M. (London: Thomas Ward & Co., 1835), 192-195.

40 L. Howsam, *Cheap Bibles: Nineteenth Century Publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 35-39.

scribers.[41] In the present context it is important to note that the one English-language version it published and promoted was the KJV.

In addition to this significant step was the decision to publish the Bible without note or comment, although allowing for cross-references and alternative textual readings in the margins, as had been the practice since Benjamin Blayney's revision in 1769.[42] After various editions prior to Blaney's work, this revision of the KJV text became the agreed text accepted and increasingly valued by all English-speaking Protestant Christians.

The advent of the BFBS, in the first few decades of the nineteenth century, had in large measure ensured that a high proportion of the population of the United Kingdom who wished to own a Bible could have access to a copy of the KJV. It was not the only Bible version in print, but for the vast majority of Evangelical Christians in Britain, for all practical purposes it was viewed as the Bible.

VII 'Authorised' Version

A fourth and final reason for the high esteem in which the KJV was held was due to its gaining the title—'the Authorised Version'.[43] It is clear that this was a gradual process. It began in 1804 when the BFBS was founded. Evangelical Christians of all denominations had united to form this mission agency. However, High Church Anglicans viewed it as a sinister development. They saw it as a threat to the work of the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge, the established Anglican agency for distributing the Scriptures. This controversy had arisen at the same time as Napoleon's forces were poised to invade the country and the Establishment was alarmed at such developments.

Thomas Sykes, the High Church vicar of Guilsborough, questioned whether the purity of the society's Bible translations could be maintained when entrusted to 'sectaries'. John Owen, one of the BFBS secretaries, sought to provide reassurance, insisting that the society was restricted to producing versions 'printed by authority'. The constitution of the BFBS was hastily revised in May 1805 to read: 'The only copies in the languages of the United Kingdom to be circulated by the Society shall be the authorised version, without note or comment.'[44] This phrase, the 'authorised version', was an apologetic device for the BFBS. Its usage increased in popular conversation, and led in 1819 to its appearance in *The Times* newspaper, though still with a lower-case 'a', showing it was not yet a title.

Between the 1820s and the 1850s, there was a steady increase in the usage of this phrase in *The Times* to refer to the KJV, and in the later decade the expression was starting to be capitalised, demonstrating that it had

41 R.H. Martin, *Evangelicals United: Ecumenical Stirrings in Pre-Victorian Britain 1795-1830* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1983), 91-92.

42 Martin, *Evangelicals United*, 112.

43 I am indebted to David Bebbington for identifying the process by which the adoption of this title occurred.

44 Martin, *Evangelicals United*, p. 101.

emerged as a title.[45] The Bible text that had appeared in 1611 in such a modest way had now gained a unique status. Now the phrase 'King James Bible' was hardly ever used; it had become the Authorised Version.

VIII Tercentenary

The pinnacle of its status was reached at its tercentenary in 1911 when the prospect of the coronation of George V, put the country in a mood for celebrations. There was royal patronage for the Bible commemorations. The King sent his congratulations to the National Bible Society of Scotland; he took the Queen to a Bible exhibition at the British Museum; and he received a bound Bible from a deputation including the Archbishop of Canterbury, the president of the National Council of the Evangelical Free Churches, the speaker of the House of Commons, together with other assorted dignitaries. Bible Sunday was observed with special services in many congregations on 12 March in Scotland and 26 March in England and Wales, which culminated in a magnificent national celebration at the Albert Hall in London, on 29 March 1911. The Authorized Version, declared an editorial in *Life & Work*, the periodical of the Church of Scotland, was 'like some fine ancient Gothic cathedral in the midst of the jerry-built streets of a modern town'.[46]

It was not only denominations that praised this Bible version; many books and pamphlets were also published in its honour. William Muir echoed the sentiments held by many Evangelical Christians when he declared that the Authorized Version had 'raised the nation at one bound to the foremost among the nations of Europe, and more than aught else has kept it there ever since'.[47] No English-language Bible version prior to the KJV, nor any of the many versions produced in the last century, has or is likely to receive such an exalted status as that bestowed upon the Authorized Version.

IX Need for more revision

This praise, however, was not universal. John Pye Smith, principal of the Independent's Homerton College, and probably the most scholarly Dissenter of his generation, called for a new revision of the Bible text as early as 1809. 'We do not wish to see our common version, now become venerable by age and prescription, superseded by another entirely new; every desirable purpose would be satisfactorily attained by a faithful and well-conducted revision.'[48] Thomas Curtis, a Baptist schoolmaster and publisher, wrote to Cambridge University Press in 1832 because he claimed they were 'circulating grossly inaccurate copies, if copies they may be called, of the Authorized Version'. He claimed to have identified thousands of errors, not

45 Bebbington, 'King James Bible', 6-7, gives the details of this process.

46 *Life & Work*, May 1911, 132, quoted by Bebbington, 'King James Bible', 13.

47 W. Muir, *Our Grand Old Bible* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1911), 178; quoted by Bebbington, 'King James Bible', 13.

48 *Eclectic Review*, January 1809, 31, quoted by Samuel Newth, *Lectures on Bible Revision* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1881), 101.

counting mere typographical ones.[49]

Some critics could be easily ignored but not Curtis. He organised a committee of Dissenting clergymen to assist him in pressing for reform. They produced a pamphlet in 1833, addressed to the Bishop of London, entitled *The Existing Monopoly*. They wished to break the monopoly of the three printing agencies that controlled the production of the Bible. However, Dissenters alone were not powerful enough to produce a change on this subject; but by the 1850s the momentum had shifted in the direction of a revised version.

By the time Anglican scholar J.B. Lightfoot, Hulsean Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, advocated reform, charging the translators of the KJV with 'an imperfect knowledge of Greek grammar' in 1871, it was inevitable that the reformers would win the day. Even Charles Spurgeon, the prominent Baptist preacher supported this initiative. He declared: 'I love God's Word better than I love King James' pedantic wisdom'.[50] As a result, the first official Bible translation in English since 1611 would be produced. A new era in Bible production and revision was about to commence.

The Revised Version (RV) of the New Testament appeared in 1881 with the Old Testament appearing four years later. This new version was given a cautious welcome. Joseph Agar Beet, a Wesleyan Methodist reviewer appreciated the retention of 'the archaic tone of the Authorised Version'.[51] Wesleyan Methodists at a conference in Sheffield in September 1904, adopted a resolution that stated 'that the R.V. be used in the public reading of Scripture throughout the Connexion, wherever practicable'.[52] In Australia interest in the new Bible version, if published articles on the subject are a reasonable guide, was strongest in Victoria. The Christian public in that country appeared ready to accept the new version. Queensland Baptists, for example, in published devotional articles in the early twentieth century, specifically quoted from the R.V.[53] English Particular Baptist James Stuart was pleased that the new version had retained the 'music and rhythm' of the old one.[54]

However, other voices were more critical though for different reasons; John Clifford, the leading English General Baptist of that generation, was in a minority of more radical Christians

49 Thomas Curtis to the Secretaries of the Cambridge University Press, 27 January 1832, quoted by Howsam, *Cheap Bibles*, 111-112.

50 Charles Haddon Spurgeon, preface, in Hannah C. Conant, *The English Bible: History of the Translations of the Holy Scriptures into the English Tongue with Specimens of the Old English Versions* (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue and Co., 1859, xi, quoted by Bebbington, 'King James Bible', 9.

51 Joseph Agar Beet, 'The Revised Version of the New Testament', *The Expositor*, August 1881, p. 106, quoted by Bebbington, 'King James Bible',10.

52 This information was given in *The Queensland Baptist*, October 1904, 145. I am grateful to David Parker for drawing my attention to this source.

53 This point refers to articles in *The Queensland Baptist*. David Parker provided the information on this subject.

54 James Stuart, 'The Revised Bible', *Baptist Magazine*, July 1885, 318, quoted by Bebbington, 'King James Bible', 10.

who argued that the Revised Version was 'too conservative of the Old'.[55] A stronger critique came from those who wished to retain the KJV. Prebendary H.W. Webb-Peploe, a prominent Evangelical Anglican, successfully resisted the circulation of the Revised Version by the Bible Society until 1901.[56] The KJV, though, retained the support of the vast majority of Protestant Christians in the remainder of the nineteenth century.

X New Era of Versions

In the twentieth century an increasing number of Bible translations took a share of the market for Bibles. A minority of more progressive British Christians were attracted, for example, to the translations of individual scholars such as R.F. Weymouth (1903) or James Moffatt (1913), or after the Second World War to the version produced by J.B. Philips and most recently Eugene Peterson's *The Message* (2002). However, these versions were never seriously considered for use in churches. The most significant of the numerous new translations included the Revised Standard Version, first published in the USA in 1952. It was widely accepted in the UK as well as in the USA because its language echoed the KJV and was also suitable for public reading,[57] though it received strong criticism from many conservative Evangelicals.[58] By 1990 more than fifty-five million copies of this version had been sold.[59]

The Good News Bible (1976), written in more contemporary English and a simplified vocabulary has proved particularly popular in the wider Christian community and in schools in the United Kingdom, but the New International Version (1978) is the one that has attracted the greatest support from Evangelicals,[60] and now tops the best seller list of English-language Bibles. However, especially in the USA, there has been some scholarly evangelical support, together with strong popular sales figures, for a revised KJV, *The New King James Version* (1982),[61] although some scholars have questioned whether it is accurate to call it a

55 John Clifford, *General Baptist Magazine*, June 1881, 226, quoted by Bebbington, 'King James Bible',10.

56 Frank Ballard, *Which Bible to Read—Revised or "Authorised"?* (London: H.R. Allenson, 2nd ed. 1898), vii, quoted by Bebbington, 'King James Bible', 11.

57 Daniell, *Bible in English*, 738-743.

58 A good evangelical scholarly example is American Presbyterian O.T. Allis in his *Revision or New Translation? Revised Version or Revised Bible?* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948).

59 P.J. Thuesen, *In Discordance with the Scriptures American Protestant Battles over Translating the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 152.

60 D.A. Carson makes this point in his *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 84. It has also been strongly marketed with books like K. Barker (ed.), *The Making of a Contemporary Translation* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1987), advocating its cause.

61 A.L. Farstad, *The New King James Version in the Great Tradition* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989). From the same school of thought came a critical appraisal of the NIV in E. Radmacher & Z. Hodges, *The NIV Reconsidered* (Dallas: Redencion Viva Publishing House, 1990).

further revision of the KJV, rather than a new translation.[62]

XI KJV in the 21st century

Where does this leave the KJV in the twenty-first century? It is likely that support for the 1611 version will decline gradually for the foreseeable future as there are a significant number of older churchgoers in particular who are fiercely loyal to the version with which they grew up, but the vast majority of younger people will prefer newer translations. An example of this occurred at the wedding of Prince William to Kate Middleton on Friday 29 April 2011. Despite the passionate commitment to the KJV by William's father Prince Charles, this couple chose the Bible readings from the New Revised Standard Version (1989), the most recent revision of the RSV text.[63]

If younger churchgoers increasing select more recent Bible translations, how will the KJV be viewed in the wider culture of the English-speaking world? It is most probable that it will be lauded most for its literary excellence. Ann Wroe, in a recent article waxed eloquent about the majestic sound of hearing it read in public for the first time.

> The effect was extraordinary: as if I had suddenly found, in the house of language I had loved and explored all my life, a hidden central chamber whose pillars and vaulting, rhythm and strength had given shape to everything around them. The King James now breathes venerability.[64]

Another equally commendatory article appeared in the British tabloid newspaper *Metro*, in the approach to the 400th anniversary of the publication of the KJV, by journalist Graeme Green, in which he viewed the significance of the KJV from a secular perspective. He wrote:

> The tome, which first went on sale on 2 May, 1611, took previous English language versions and created a definitive Bible that became the most influential book ever written, a cornerstone of British society, permeating everything from art and literature to politics and morality, here and around the world.[65]

Of this we can be certain, the KJV has a secure place both in British history and in the culture and religious heritage of the English-speaking world.

---

62 J.P. Lewis, *The English Bible From KJV to NIV* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 329-362.

63 *The Daily Telegraph*, Friday 29 April 2011, 1-3.

64 A. Wroe, 'In the beginning was the sound', an article in *Intelligent Life*, a quarterly periodical published by *The Economist*, 4.3 (Spring 2011), 88-93.

65 G. Green, 'The King James Bible to celebrate 400th Anniversary', *Metro*, 26 April 2011, accessed on 4 May 2011 at http://www.metro.co.uk/lifestyle/861738-the-king-james-bible-to-celebrate-400th-anniversary#ixzz1LQrjRyPO.