

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

The King James Version

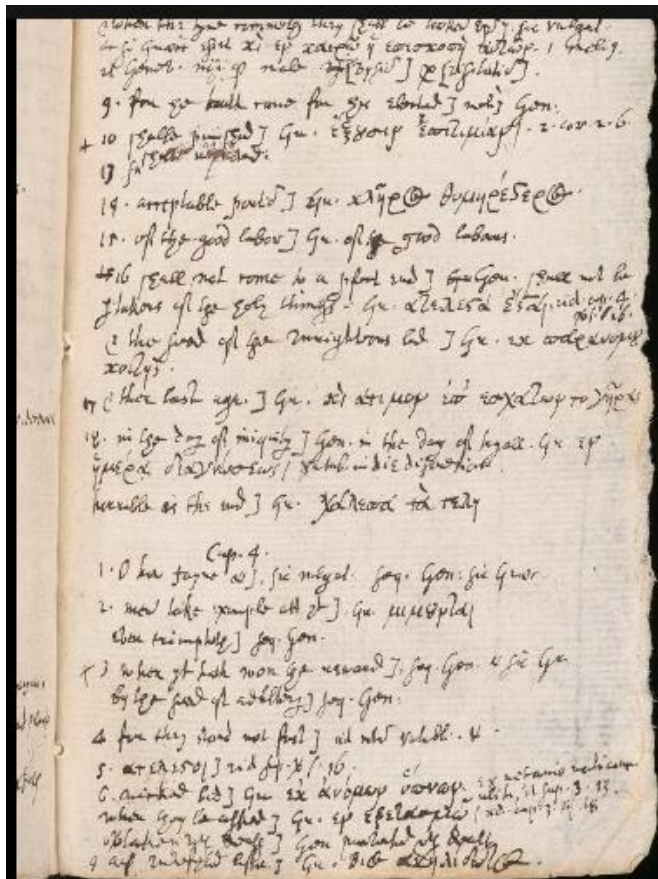
The King James Version became the dominant Bible in the English-speaking world for three centuries.¹ One of the benefits of having such a dominant version was the fact that everyone was reading the same text, whether Baptist or Presbyterian, Anglican or Lutheran. Indeed, among sincere but lesser-informed Christians, the King James Version was held in such reference as to be heralded as “the Bible,” which is to say, the only version to be used. While such a sentiment was entirely inappropriate, the King James Version was an excellent translation (albeit in 17th century English), and it deserved the high status accorded to it. Here is how it came about.

Translation and Publication

James VI, the son of Mary Queen of Scots, had for many years been the king of Scotland, but when Elizabeth I died, he became James I, the king of England as well. Only a few months into his

reign he convened a conference at Hampton Court to review religious matters, and the major suggestion of significance was that there would be a new English translation of the Bible produced by the best scholars from Oxford and Cambridge Universities, a Bible without theological annotations and suitable for use in all the English parishes. In particular, James detested the Geneva Bible’s annotations, which in addition to a pronounced Calvinist slant, also contained comments that seemed to conflict with the divine right of kings. Hence, when Dr. John Reynolds suggested a new English translation, James pounced upon it as a great opportunity.

Richard Bancroft, the Archbishop of Canterbury, organized the effort, directing the rules that guided them and creating six



Handwritten translator's notes of the Book of Wisdom by Samuel Ward (discovered in 2015 in the archives of Sidney Sussex College).

¹ For a fuller summary, see F. F. Bruce, *History of the English Bible*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University, 1978), pp. 96-112. For an extensive work dealing entirely with the history of the KJV, see A. McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001).

panels of translators (47 scholars in all), three for the Old Testament, two for the New Testament, and one for the Apocrypha.

The panels started with the text of the Bishop's Bible, comparing it with the available Hebrew and Greek texts. Marginal notes were confined to explanations of Greek and Hebrew words, but no theological annotations were allowed. Chapter and verse divisions were retained, plus the translators provided new chapter headings. When the six panels had completed their work, it then was reviewed by a committee of twelve scholars, two from each of the six panels. The work was published in 1611 and officially appointed to be read in all the churches in England. Commonly, the King James Version (KJV) is referred to as the "Authorized Version," though this designation is somewhat ambiguous, since there is no existing record of such an authorization or what it authorized.² Still, the KJV clearly was designated as the one to replace the Bishop's Bible in the English parish churches. In the preface, the translators were gracious and careful to give credit to the previous efforts of English Bible translators. They acknowledged that their work would not be perfect and conceded that all Bible translation is a history of revision and correction. They frankly admitted that in some cases, where words appear only a single time in the Bible, any translation of them is less than certain. This was equally true of variant readings in the original languages.

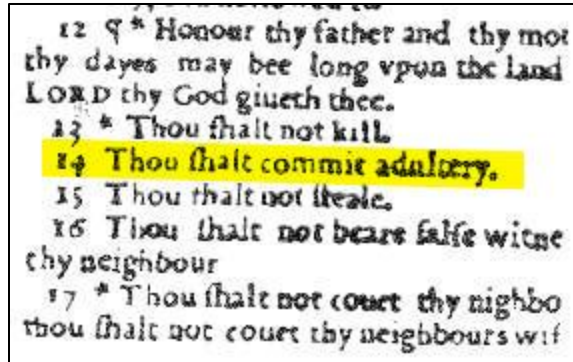


Title page of the first edition of the King James Version (1611)

In the more than four centuries since its publication, the KJV has served as the most prominent English Bible in the long history of English Bibles. It eventually established itself as the preferred version, both for the church and the individual, surpassing both the Bishop's Bible and the Geneva Bible alike. Still, the KJV was not without its critics. Just as is true for any contemporary translation, the "new boy on the block" never receives unqualified acceptance. In Scotland, the Geneva Bible held prominence for at least another half century. The Puritans in America preferred the Geneva Bible as well (and it was the version that came to America on the Mayflower). Indeed, for more than a century the KJV was criticized regularly, partly because it

² Unfortunately, the records at Whitehall from 1600-1613 were all destroyed by a fire, so if any authorization had been given, it is no longer available.

seemed too churchy. The earliest editions of the KJV had their share of misspellings and typos, though these have gradually been weeded out in subsequent editions. Probably the most notorious error was when the printer left out the word “not” in the seventh commandment in the 1631 edition. Imagine readers’ surprise when they saw the line, “Thou shalt commit adultery.” Some printers’ errors were more humorous than dangerous, such as, the 1795



edition that has Mark 7:27 saying, “Let the children first be killed,” instead of “Let the children first be filled,” or the edition that read “the dogs liked his blood” instead of “the dogs licked his blood” from 1 Kings 22:38. A real howler was the verse in Psalm 119:161 that read, “Printers (instead of “princes”) have persecuted me without a cause!” Over time, multitudinous

spelling adjustments kept the KJV up-to-date.

Like previous English Bibles, the KJV included the Apocryphal books, despite objections by the Puritans, who would have had them eliminated altogether. By 1644, the Puritans succeeded in banishing any Apocryphal readings in church services, and later, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* clearly indicated that the Apocryphal Books were not inspired and held no theological authority. By 1826 the policy was adopted by the British and Foreign Bible Society of printing the KJV without the Apocrypha, and this practice has been followed throughout the modern period.

The Legacy of the King James Version

The passion for an English Bible had produced no less than nine versions/revisions in 85 years! With the advent of the King James Version, this well of productivity began to dry up. Though private translators continued their work over the years, for nearly the next three centuries the King James Version of the Bible was standard for most Protestants.³ While the KJV was not the Bible of William Shakespeare, who used the Geneva Bible, it came to be the Bible of the common person in both England and America. Much of its language reminds one of Shakespeare, even though revisions began as early as 1616 (mostly spelling changes), just five years after its initial production. Still, a growing recognition of the excellence of the KJV, its subsequent revisions and improvements, and an English civil war after the death of James left the KJV the master in the field. Within the first half of the 19th century, the punctuation had been improved and the text arranged in paragraphs. By 1851 dates had been inserted (following Archbishop Ussher’s chronology).⁴ Another 19th century innovation included prefacing pages of a family register for births, deaths, and marriages. In 1899 a publisher began printing the words of Jesus in red letters. The KJV of the Bible remains among the great treasures of English prose.

³ Roman Catholics, by contrast, depended upon the Douai-Rheims English version, which heavily depended upon the Latin Vulgate rather than the Greek and Hebrew texts.

⁴ Today, to use an unfortunate pun, these dates are badly outdated, and most contemporary KJV Bibles appear without them. It is rare to find someone urging that the creation of the universe began on October 23, 4004 BC or that Noah’s ark was stranded on Mt. Ararat on May 5, 1491 BC. It is even more rare to find the date of Adam’s creation, calculated by John Lightfoot, Chancellor of Cambridge University, on Friday morning at 9:00 AM.

Many well-known words and phrases in the English language derive from the KJV, not only theological phrases such as “Alpha and Omega,” “Ancient of Days,” “graven image,” “not live by bread alone,” and “seventy times seven,” but also everyday phrases that most people do not recognize as coming from the Bible, like “apple of his eye,” “a house divided,” “the quick and the dead,” “reap the whirlwind,” “scapegoat,” and “two-edged sword.” The fact that the KJV became the standard Protestant Bible meant that Bible memorization was also standardized. Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, and Pentecostals all memorized exactly the same words. English speaking Protestants the world over know the citation, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever” (Ps. 23:6). No one still memorizes this same passage from the Geneva Bible, where it says, “Doubtless kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall remain a long season in the house of the Lord,” or from the Bishop’s Bible, which reads, “Truly felicity and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of God for a long time.” At the very least and amidst many denominational divisions, a single Bible in common usage gave some sense of connectedness between diverse Protestant Christians.

Certain ideas in the translation of the KJV became standardized, even though they may have owed as much to the Anglican orientation of the translators as to the original text of Scripture. For instance, when the KJV has Paul writing, “If a man desire the office of a bishop...” it is to the point that the Greek text says nothing whatsoever about an “office” (1 Ti. 3:1). The rendering “church” in the KJV is certainly more formal than Tyndale’s “congregation,” and the Puritans were quick to criticize it. Still, though there were many critics, the KJV survived and eventually was extolled. That the KJV regularly translated the Greek word *doulos* as “servant” (rather than “slave”) provided a gentler word for American southern slave-owners in their efforts to defend the institution of slavery. Southerners continued to refer to their slaves as “servants.” Indeed, Henry Turner, a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, urged a new translation, charging that the Whites had made the Bible objectionable to Blacks.⁵

In America, Bible readings were part of standard education until relatively modern times, and the Bible used in the classroom was the KJV.⁶ Abraham Lincoln quoted it in his Second Inaugural Address: “...the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether” (Ps. 19:9b). Familiar passages from the KJV appeared in other American literary works, such as, Father Mapple’s sermon on Jonah in *Moby Dick*. *East of Eden* by John Steinbeck and *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway take their titles from the KJV (Ge. 4:16; Ecc. 1:5).⁷ When Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. quoted Isaiah 40:4-5, “Every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low...” he used the KJV. The use of such phrases depended entirely upon the fact that this translation was so widely accepted in the English-speaking world. The most recent generation, which was reared with the KJV and has now graduated to other modern versions, will likely be the last generation of its kind.

⁵ M. Knoll, “A World Without the KJV,” *Christianity Today* (May 2011), p. 34.

⁶ Roman Catholics objected, of course, and their objections even resulted in riots in Philadelphia in 1844, since their resistance to the KJV was taken to be a resistance against the Bible itself. Jews equally resented being forced to read and quote from a Protestant translation.

⁷ Hemingway did take the trouble to modernize the verb “ariseth” to “rises.”