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King James I of England (age 27)

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The History of the Authorized Version of 1611:

King James I of England

The Bible in English

Title Page, Preface, Type-style and Contents

14 Rules The Translators Were To Abide By

The Bible in English

Someone once said that literary fashions come and go: yet this book remains. Bernard Shaw at a certain time of his life wrote this of the King James Version:

"The translation was extraordinarily well done because to the translators what they were translating was not merely a curious collection of ancient books written by different authors in different stages of culture, but the word of God divinely revealed through His chosen and expressly inspired scribes. In this conviction they carried out their work with boundless reverence and care and achieved a beautifully artistic result. It did not seem possible to them that they could better the original texts; for who could improve on God's own style?...nor could they doubt that God would, as they prayed, take care that His message should not suffer corruption at their hands. In this state of exaltation they made a translation so magnificent that to this day the common human Britisher or citizen of the United States of North America accepts and worships it as a single book by a single author, the book being the Book of Books and the author being God."

"The Greatest Writing Project of History"

James I of England and VI of Scotland came to the throne in 1603 upon the death of Elizabeth. As he travelled from Scotland to London he was petitioned by various factions, Puritan and Catholic. So in January, 1604, he called a meeting at Hampton Court Palace to discuss "what was pretended to be amiss in the church." Such questions as whether wedding rings should be given and worn passed into oblivion as the plea of an eminent Puritan, Dr. John Reynolds, was made and accepted. "May your Majesty", he said, "be pleased to direct that the Bible be now translated, such versions as are extant not answering to the original." "If every man's humour might be followed", snorted the Bishop of London, "there would be no end to translating." Said the King: "I could never yet see a

Bible well translated in English, but I think that of Geneva is the worst."

So those who did and those who did not oppose the giving and wearing of wedding rings, were drawn, as Gustavus Paine says, "by a few dissident words into the greatest writing project of history".

The Translators

There were six groups of men appointed for the work of the King James' version. Three groups were composed of men whose dominant skill was Greek; the other three - Hebrew; fifty-four learned men in all. Most of them could of course converse fluently in Latin, which was the daily language of scholars, and many of them were equally proficient in Hebrew and Greek. They met at Oxford, Cambridge, and Westminster, a Hebrew and a Greek group in each place. They worked (as far as can be judged) from late 1604 to 1610. A review group worked at the Stationers' Hall in Westminster (1609). Miles Smith and Thomas Bilson worked as final editors.

Their Rules

They operated under fifteen rules, the first of which said: "The ordinary Bible read in church, commonly called the Bishops' Bible, to be followed and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit." However, the fourteenth allowed that "These translations to be used when they agree better with the text than the Bishops' Bible - Tyndale's, Matthew's, Coverdale's, the Great Bible and Geneva". Rule eight said that: "Every particular man of each company to take the same chapter or chapters, and having translated or amended them severally by himself, where he thinketh good, all to meet together to confer when they have done, and agree for their parts what shall stand."

Debt to Tyndale and others

The Bishop's Bible which was the subject of Rule one, was in turn dependent upon those versions made earlier, and close study in the years following 1611, when the King James version was first printed, has shown that sixty per cent of the New Testament is Tyndale's 1534 translation. But even Wyclif and his followers made their contribution: "Strait is the gate and narrow is the way"; "The cup of blessing which we bless." And from Tyndale came such lasting cadences as: "Ye cannot serve God and mammon"; "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow"; "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them"; "It is more blessed to give than to receive"; "Out of darkness into his marvelous light." From Coverdale we have: "Death is swallowed up in victory." From Taverner: "According to thy word"; and "He would have given thee living water."

Rhythm's Aid to the Mind

To the translators of the King James version rhythm was important, for they knew it was to be a book "appointed to be read in churches". Only memory could serve those who could not read. Rhythm was vital not merely as a source of pleasure to the ear, but as an aid to the mind. "for the ear trieth words as the mouth tasteth meats", we read in Job. So there was brought to bear linguistic skill, scholarship, a keen sense of what provided truth, expression and cadence, the word to be remembered, words that gave harmony.

Word of Dissent

But when all was done there was still opposition. A famous Hebrew scholar of the day, Dr. Hugh Broughton, was one severe critic. F.F. Bruce in "The English Bible" says: "For all his erudition, Broughton was not included among the revisers; he was not cut out for collaboration with others, and would have proved an impossible colleague. Probably he resented the fact

that he was not invited to serve, and when the new version appeared, he sent a critique of it to one of the king's attendants: "The late Bible...was sent to me to censure: which bred in me a sadness that will grieve me while I breathe, it is so ill done. Tell His Majesty that I had rather be rent in pieces with wild horses, than any such translation by my consent should be urged upon poor churches...The new edition crosseth me. I require it to be burned.""

Ronald Hill, The Bible in English: The King James Version, The Christadelphian, vol. 105, p. 113.

The Rules for Revision

The fourteen rules drawn up, apparently by James himself, for the guidance of the revisers may thus be briefly summarized:

1. The Bishops' Bible to be followed "and as little altered as the original will permit."
2. The proper names "to be retained as near as may be...as vulgarly used."
3. Old ecclesiastical words not to be changed, "as the word "Church" not to be translated "congregation"."
4. Words of varying interpretations to be rendered in accordance with patristic tradition and the analogy of faith.
5. No change to be made in the chapter divisions.
6. No notes except to explain Hebrew or Greek words."
7. Cross references to be inserted.
8. As each reviser completes the portion assigned to him, all his company should compare results and decide on the rendering to be chosen.
9. The completed work of each company to be sent to the other companies "to be considered of seriously and judiciously; for, his Majesty is very careful in this point."
10. Doubts thence arising to be settled "at the general meeting of the chief persons of each company, at the end of the work."
11. In really obscure passages the help of other learned people is to be sought.
12. The bishops are to look for men capable of assisting in the work.

13. The directors to be the deans of Westminster and Chester and the regius professors of Hebrew and Greek.

14. "These translations to be used when they agree better with the text than the Bishops' Bible: namely, Tindal's, Matthew's, Coverdale's, Whitchurch's, the Geneva."

Rule 2, that the proper names "be retained as near as may be...as vulgarly used," was observed in the case of the Old Testament, the extravagances of some previous translators being avoided. But in the New Testament these proper names stand in the familiar form derived from the Vulgate through the Greek; e.g., "Elias" instead of "Elijah" (Matt. 11:14 and 17:3-12); and "Jesus" instead of "Joshua" (Heb. 4:8), though Tyndale, Cranmer, Geneva, and R.V. have "Joshua."

The revisers interpreted in a wide sense rule 6, which precluded notes. In defense of their notes they say: "Though in those things that are plainely set down in the Scriptures all such matters are found that concern faith, hope and charitie, yet...it hath pleased God in his divine providence to scatter wordes and sentences of that difficultie and doubtfulnesse, not in doctrinal points that concerne salvation, (for in such it hath been vouched that the Scriptures are plaine) but in matters of lesse moment."

Though rule 8 provided for a certain amount of collaboration, yet, as Scrivener says, "Our very meagre information respecting the progress of the translators give us no great reason to believe that this wholesome desire was carried out in practice, while internal evidence points decidedly to the contrary conclusion"; the version of the Psalms is, he adds, a case in point, for it is "prosaic, and however exact and elaborate, spiritless."

Pope, Hugh. English Versions of the Bible (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, Publishers), pp. 309-325.

Title Page, Preface, Type-style and Contents

The result of the extensive labors of the revisers appeared in 1611. The title page of the new version reads as follows: The Holy Bible, Conteyning the Old Testament and the New: Newly Translated out of the Originall tongues, with the former Translations diligently compared and revised, by his Majesties speciall commandement. Appointed to be read in Churches. Imprinted at London by Robert Barker, Printer to the Kings most Excellent Majestie. Anno Dom. 1611. On either side stand Moses and Aaron; in the four corners are the Evangelists; at the top the name of God is in Hebrew letters, with the sun and moon on either side. Above is the Paschal Lamb with the apostles; below is a pelican. The New Testament is entitled: The Newe Testament of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Newly translated out of the Originall Greeke; and with the former Translations diligently compared and revised, by His Majesties speciall Commandement. Imprinted at London by Robert Barker, Printer to the Kings most Excellent Majestie. Anno Dom. 1611. cum Privilegio.

The expression "newly translated" shows that we are in the presence of a fresh version, in spite of rule 1, which demanded merely a revision of the Bishops' Bible. The version is not said to be "authorized"; yet "appointed to be read in Churches" (not on the title page of the New Testament) could be interpreted to mean that as successor to the Bishops' Bible, which was thus appointed, it might be regarded as "authorized"; moreover the Bishops' Bible was the legitimate successor of the expressly "authorized" Great Bible.

Peculiarities of the Version

Measuring 16 inches by 10« inches, the King James Bible was even larger than the Great Bible or "Bible of the largest size." It was printed in black letter, and words not standing in the original were printed in small italicised Roman type. The use of italics to indicate words not in the original was inaugurated by

Munster in his Latin version, 1534, the Geneva Bible being the first English version to employ them. These were so multiplied in later editions that a formal protest was made against them as "deteriorating the vernacular version, discovering great want of critical taste, unnecessarily exposing the sacred text to the scoffs of infidels, and throwing such stumbling blocks in the way of the unlearned, as are greatly calculated to perplex their minds, and unsettle their confidence in the text of Scripture."

Pope, Hugh. English Versions of the Bible (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, Publishers), pp. 309-325.

The Bible which was finally published by Robert Barker in 1611 - the "King James" Bible - was in every respect a worthy successor to the line of English Bibles that had begun in Coverdale's time. It was a handsome folio volume, its text printed in black-letter type, with a smaller roman type where italics are now used. The title-page is found in two styles, one an engraving, the other a woodcut, but they are identical in their wording. It is generally believed that the engraved title-page is the earlier, as it is certainly the handsomer, being very dignified. It shows Moses and Aaron standing in monumental niches, and the seated figures of the four Evangelists in the corners. The wood-cut title-page is of the same design as was also used for the New Testament, and shows the Evangelists at top and bottom, flanked on either side by the shield of the twelve tribes of Israel and the figure of the twelve apostles.

After the title-page comes the flattering dedication to the King and then the long preface to the Reader. This is followed by an almanac and various tables. In some copies there were included a genealogical chart and a map of Canaan. Before the text of the Old Testament there was a table of contents: "The names and order of all the Bookes of the Olde and New Testament, with the Number of their Chapters." The Old Testament is not divided into sections but there is a blank page before the Psalms and another before Isaiah. At the end of Malachi is a notice, "The end of the Prophets." On the following page the Apocryphal Books begin, and at the end of

them is another note, "The end of Apocrypha." the New Testament is furnished with a separate title-page, as mentioned. At the end of the volume there is a simple "Finis."

Each chapter was supplied with an "Argument" or summary of its contents at the beginning, and there was a running summary at the top of each column of the text, except in the Apocrypha. The text was divided into numbered verses, and in the prose portions (as distinct from the poetical books and the epistles) there were also paragraph signs, taken over from some of the earlier versions. Most of these features are still included in our modern editions of the King James Bible.

Butterworth, Charles C. The Literary Lineage of the King James Bible (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), pp. 207-215.

