

A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE KING JAMES BIBLE

The story of the version of 1611 up to its fourth centenary in 2011 is a fascinating narrative of faith and the enduring power of God's eternal word.

First a word about terminology: Most English readers know the version of 1611 as "The King James Version" or "The Authorized Version." The original title page uses neither title. It is "The Holy Bible, / Conteyning the Old Testament, / and the New." Four lines later we read "Appointed to be read in Churches." The last line has the date "Anno Dom. 1611."

King James reigned over England, and because he sanctioned and supported this revision of the English translations, it is natural to associate this Bible with him. Just be aware that James did not translate or edit any of its contents. However, the royal family of England has perpetual Crown Copyright of the version of 1611 and still receives royalties within the British Commonwealth.

Most of the English Bibles of the sixteenth century were printed under royal license, starting with Coverdale's second edition and Matthew's first edition in 1537. Although no documentation exists for formal authorization or licensing in the case of the version of 1611, the well-documented involvement of King James himself makes this a moot point. As F. F. Bruce comments:

If it be asked by what body its authorization was effected, the answer is best given in the words of Lord Chancellor Selborne, in the correspondence columns of *The Times* for June 3, 1881: "nothing is more probable than that this may have been done by Order in Council. If so, the authentic record of that order may be lost because all the Council books and registers from the year 1600 to 1613 inclusive were destroyed by a fire at Whitehall on the 12th of January, 1618 (O.S.)."

Maintaining and Publishing the Version of 1611 up to 2011

The version of 1611 (hereafter the KJV) is the standard by which all other English Bible translations are measured. However, until the advent of modern photo-mechanical printing processes and digital data archiving, no two printings of the KJV were precisely the same. English spelling was fluid in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and even a pronoun as simple as the masculine singular could be spelled "he," "hee," or "hie." Printers, often scholars in their own right, saw no problem in changing spelling and punctuation as they typeset their editions. This practice of intentional changes, as well as the introduction of unintentional errors, led to significant official revisions in the last three centuries. As Alfred W. Pollard notes in his "Bibliographical Introduction" to the KJV:

It must be remembered that no copy of the version of 1611 had been 'sealed' as a standard, as was done in the case of the Prayer-book, and these attempts to increase consistency and to remove errors were wholly laudable.²

F. H. A. Scrivener lists several important editions of the KJV he used in developing *The Cambridge Paragraph Bible* of 1873,³ including "two considerable efforts to

¹ Quoted in F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English* (New York: Oxford University Press, 3rd edition: 1978), pages 99–100.

² *The Holy Bible: 1611 Edition* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2010), page 53.

³ *The Cambridge Paragraph Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 1873), pages xi–xxiv.

improve and correct our ordinary editions of Holy Scripture, made in 1762 by Dr Paris . . . , and by Dr Blayney, whose labours were published in 1769.⁴ Paris's edition was published by Cambridge University (as was Scrivener's), while Blayney's edition was published by Oxford.

Scrivener's collation of the variations in KJV editions that preceded him fill thirty-seven pages of Appendices. But his seven years of focused research and careful documentation did not settle the text of the KJV once and for all. David Norton, editor of *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible*, believes Scrivener unnecessarily revised the text (beyond correcting printers' errors) and unhelpfully reverted to archaic spellings and wording.⁵ After collating three 1857 Bibles issued separately by the British and Foreign Bible Society, Cambridge and Oxford, Norton concludes that by the nineteenth century, the KJV was essentially standardized to Blayney's edition.⁶

At the beginning of the twentieth century Oxford University Press issued a significant new edition of the KJV. The *Scofield Reference Bible* first appeared in 1909, with a second edition in 1917. This edition, and many other study Bibles produced in the twentieth century, helped perpetuate the KJV as the standard English Bible throughout that century.

Advances in computer technology coincided with the explosion of new Bible translations in the 1960s and 1970s. Public ventures, like Project Gutenberg, and private publishers began creating digital books to archive electronically. As exciting as this concept was—and is—one of its main problems is the lack of standardization. Publishers digitized whatever they felt was their standard edition, and individuals typed up a book or chapter from whatever edition they had on hand to contribute to publicly-shared databases. If Norton is correct in his assessment that the Blayney edition of the KJV was the de facto standard of the mid-nineteenth century, by the mid-twentieth century these various popular and proprietary efforts had (re) introduced many variants into the text. Of the several electronic texts this writer has compared book-by-book, no two are the same. Add to this the introduction of self-pronouncing spellings, new in-text headings, red letter text for the words of Jesus, and reference systems, and it would seem that there are as many as KJV texts as there are publishers. Again, these differences are mostly in details of spelling, punctuation, italics, formatting and footnotes (when included); differences in wording are rare.

In 1994 Cambridge University Press wanted to establish "a respectable, defensible and (reasonably) consistent text we can use for all our AV [Authorized Version] editions,"⁷ and so commissioned David Norton to prepare what became *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible*. Norton established guidelines "to remove all unnecessary appearance of oddness in the Bible's English without changing the English itself."⁸ As with previous deliberate editions, many of these changes involved spelling and punctuation and would only be noticed by comparing the text to other editions. More noticeable at first glance are the changes in presentation, specifically paragraphing, poetry and other special textual formats not used in the edition of 1611. Most radical is the rejection of italics, a typesetting convention used since the 1560 Geneva Bible to note words supplied in translation and followed to this day in such versions as the New American Standard and the New King James Version. At the time this essay was written, only the original 2005 printing of *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible* had been issued. It is too early to say if this will influence the standardization of the KJV as it enters its fifth century.

⁴ Ibid., page xx.

⁵ A *Textual History of the King James Bible* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), pages 122–125.

⁶ Ibid., page 126.

⁷ Ibid., page 132.

⁸ Ibid., page 148.

Some Major Editions of the English Bible: 1881 to 2011

Among the reasons for scholars to propose a new translation of the Bible, two stand out: changes in the common language and advances in biblical scholarship. Although the common English of the late nineteenth century was hardly the language of the English Bible translations of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the KJV had established and maintained the vocabulary and idiom of the English-speaking church. But there had been major advances in biblical scholarship in the nearly three centuries since the KJV had first been published.

So in 1870 when Dr. Wilberforce, Bishop of Winchester, proposed an official revision of the KJV, the proposal was adopted by both Houses of Convocation of the Province of Canterbury and work on the revision began. The New Testament of the Revised Version was published in 1881, the Old Testament in 1884 and the Apocrypha in 1895, jointly by the University presses of Oxford and Cambridge. A parallel committee in the United States produced the American Standard Version, published in 1901 without the Apocrypha.

The Revised Version maintained much of the language of the KJV, with its archaic pronouns and verbal inflections. It was also a verse-formatted Bible, but did set Job, Psalms and Proverbs, Wisdom and Sirach, and other passages of poetry in poetic line structure. Most radical was the adoption of Westcott and Hort's *Greek New Testament* in place of the Erasmian text of the sixteenth century that had formed the basis of all English translations leading up to the KJV. Because Westcott and Hort's work was based on much older Greek manuscripts than those available to Erasmus, there were thousands of differences. Some were as simple as reading "Christ Jesus" instead of "Jesus Christ" in 2 Corinthians 1:1, but others were as noticeable as omitting "the Three Witnesses" passage in 1 John 5:7-8. Many saw this as an attempt to remove orthodox theological content from the New Testament and condemned the new version. This type of criticism remains to this day and has been leveled against all translations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, the majority of biblical scholars and the rest of the church have come to agree with the general opinion that the older Greek manuscripts are closer in time *and* content to the original New Testament and that no major doctrine of the church is lost due to variations between these manuscripts and those available to the KJV translators.

The Revised Version was met with great enthusiasm, but its often woodenly literal renderings did not commend it to the general reader. It did not displace the KJV as the preferred Bible of the English-speaking Church, but it did open the doors for the flood of new Bible translations in the twentieth century. Only a few can be mentioned.

The New Testament of the Revised Standard Version (RSV) appeared in 1946, the Old Testament in 1952 and the Apocrypha in 1956. A second edition of the New Testament was published in 1971 and an expanded, eighteen-book Apocrypha in 1977. The RSV used a more contemporary English than did the Revised Version, but it did retain archaic English when addressing God in prayer or praise.

The Revised Version and Revised Standard Version were "official" translations sponsored by or endorsed by many church bodies. So was the New English Bible of 1961 and 1970, which was briefly popular, but is no longer in print. Its successor, the Revised English Bible of 1989, did not capture popular attention. Also published in 1989 was the well-publicized revision of the RSV, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). The NRSV has been widely accepted in scholarly circles and has replaced the RSV in many of the denominations for which that earlier edition had become standard.

In addition to these official, ecumenical translations, other English translations were sponsored by Bible societies or publishing houses. The New American Standard, sponsored by the Lockman Foundation, was translated by conservative

Protestants to provide an alternative to the RSV. The New Testament first appeared in 1963 and the Old Testament in 1971. An updated edition, that did not use archaic English to address God, was published in 1995.

The American Bible Society published an easy-reading translation New Testament in 1966 under the title *Good News for Modern Man*. The Old Testament was completed in 1976 and the Apocrypha in 1979. Also called Today's English Version, a second edition was published in 1992.

The International Bible Society (originally the New York Bible Society), in response to committees from the Christian Reformed Church and the National Association of Evangelicals in 1965, undertook a new English translation in 1967. The New Testament of the New International Version (NIV) was published in 1973 and the Old Testament in 1978. Revised editions of the NIV appeared in 1983 and 2011.

Thomas Nelson Publishers sponsored an update of the KJV into twentieth-century English. The New Testament of this New King James Version (NKJV) was published in 1979 and the Old in 1982. Unlike the KJV of 1611, there was no Apocrypha. Those who most value the KJV did not see the NKJV as a desirable replacement.

The twentieth century also saw many private translations by individuals. The Living Bible, paraphrased by Kenneth Taylor, was certainly the most successful private version of the English Bible ever produced, published in sections between 1962 and 1971. The first edition of the New Living Translation was released in 1996 and immediately replaced the Living Bible as a bestseller. A second, significantly updated edition appeared in 2004. The New Testament of Eugene Petersen's *The Message* was first published in 1993 and the full Bible in 2002. It remains a popular paraphrase or free translation.

There were significant Catholic translations in the twentieth century: The Jerusalem Bible of 1966; its revision, The New Jerusalem Bible of 1973; and The New American Bible of 1970, with revised New Testament in 1986 and Psalms in 1991 (a revised Old Testament was published in 2011). Of course, these fine Roman Catholic translations did nothing to displace the KJV in Protestant churches.

How did this explosion of new translations affect the KJV? For many readers, the new translations were at first used alongside the KJV. But as their popularity grew, sales of the KJV began to decline in the 1980s. By 1986, the NIV had surpassed the KJV in new Bible sales and remained the best selling English translation, followed by the KJV, with the Living Bible (succeeded in 1996 by the New Living Translation) and the NKJV. By the end of the century, these four translations accounted for as much as 85% of new Bible sales in the United States.

In the first years of the twenty-first century, four major versions and revisions have risen as the ones to watch. The Holman Christian Standard Version, sponsored by the Southern Baptist Convention, was published in 2000 and 2004. The English Standard Version (ESV), a revision of the RSV sponsored by Crossway Publishers was released in 2001, with updates in 2007 and 2010. The Apocrypha of the ESV was published by Oxford in 2008. *The Message* was published as a whole Bible in 2002. None of these new versions has cracked the top four, though *The Message* and the ESV have seen the greatest commercial success. The KJV remains the second best-selling English translation to the NIV.

Despite the passage of time, the rise of dozens of versions and hundreds of unique editions, the version of 1611 remains the most influential English Bible ever. For countless readers it continues to be *the* Bible at the dawning of its fourth century of publication.

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EPISTLE DEDICATORY

TO THE MOST HIGH AND MIGHTY PRINCE JAMES

BY THE GRACE OF GOD
KING OF GREAT BRITAIN, FRANCE, AND IRELAND
DEFENDER OF THE FAITH, &c.

*The Translators of the Bible wish Grace, Mercy, and Peace,
through JESUS CHRIST our Lord.*

Great and manifold were the blessings, most dread Sovereign, which Almighty God, the Father of all mercies, bestowed upon us the people of *England*, when first he sent Your Majesty's Royal Person to rule and reign over us. For whereas it was the expectation of many, who wished not well unto our *Sion*, that upon the setting of that bright *Occidental Star*, Queen *Elizabeth* of most happy memory, some thick and palpable clouds of darkness would so have overshadowed this Land, that men should have been in doubt which way they were to walk; and that it should hardly be known, who was to direct the unsettled State; the appearance of Your Majesty, as of the *Sun* in his strength, instantly dispelled those supposed and surmised mists, and gave unto all that were well affected exceeding cause of comfort; especially when we beheld the Government established in Your Highness, and Your hopeful Seed, by an undoubted Title, and this also accompanied with peace and tranquility at home and abroad.

But among all our joys, there was no one that more filled our hearts, than the blessed continuance of the preaching of God's sacred Word among us; which is that inestimable treasure, which excelleth all the riches of the earth; because the fruit thereof extendeth itself, not only to the time spent in this transitory world, but directeth and disposeth men unto that eternal happiness which is above in heaven.

Then not to suffer this to fall to the ground, but rather to take it up, and to continue it in that state, wherein the famous Predecessor of Your Highness did leave it: nay, to go forward with the confidence and resolution of a Man in maintaining the truth of Christ, and propagating it far and near, is that which hath so bound and firmly knit the hearts of all Your Majesty's loyal and religious people unto You, that Your very name is precious among them: their eye doth behold You with comfort, and they bless You in their hearts, as that sanctified Person who, under God, is the immediate Author of their true happiness. And this their contentment doth not diminish or decay, but every day increaseth and taketh strength, when they observe, that the zeal of Your Majesty toward the house of God doth not slack or go backward, but is more and more kindled, manifesting itself abroad in the farthest parts of *Christendom*, by writing in defence of the Truth, (which hath given such a blow unto that man of sin, as will not be healed,) and every day at home, by religious and learned discourse, by frequenting the house of God, by hearing the Word preached, by cherishing the Teachers thereof; by caring for the Church, as a most tender and loving nursing Father.

There are infinite arguments of this right Christian and religious affection in Your Majesty; but none is more forcible to declare it to others than the vehement and perpetuated desire of accomplishing and publishing of this work, which now

with all humility we present unto Your Majesty. For when Your Highness had once out of deep judgment apprehended how convenient it was, that out of the Original Sacred Tongues, together with comparing of the labours, both in our own, and other foreign Languages, of many worthy men who went before us, there should be one more exact Translation of the holy Scriptures into the *English Tongue*; Your Majesty did never desist to urge and to excite those to whom it was commended, that the work might be hastened, and that the business might be expedited in so decent a manner, as a matter of such importance might justly require.

And now at last, by the mercy of God, and the continuance of our labours, it being brought unto such a conclusion, as that we have great hopes that the Church of *England* shall reap good fruit thereby; we hold it our duty to offer it to Your Majesty, not only as to our King and Sovereign, but as to the principal Mover and Author of the work: humbly craving of Your most Sacred Majesty, that since things of this quality have ever been subject to the censures of illmeaning and discontented persons, it may receive approbation and patronage from so learned and judicious a Prince as Your Highness is, whose allowance and acceptance of our labours shall more honour and encourage us, than all the calumniations and hard interpretations of other men shall dismay us. So that if, on the one side, we shall be traduced by Popish Persons at home or abroad, who therefore will malign us, because we are poor instruments to make God's holy Truth to be yet more and more known unto the people, whom they desire still to keep in ignorance and darkness; or if, on the other side, we shall be maligned by self-conceited Brethren, who run their own ways, and give liking unto nothing, but what is framed by themselves, and hammered on their anvil; we may rest secure, supported within by the truth and innocency of a good conscience, having walked the ways of simplicity and integrity, as before the Lord; and sustained without by the powerful protection of Your Majesty's grace and favour, which will ever give countenance to honest and Christian endeavours against bitter censures and uncharitable imputations.

The Lord of heaven and earth bless Your Majesty with many and happy days, that, as his heavenly hand hath enriched Your Highness with many singular and extraordinary graces, so You may be the wonder of the world in this latter age for happiness and true felicity, to the honour of that great GOD, and the good of his Church, through Jesus Christ our Lord and only Saviour.