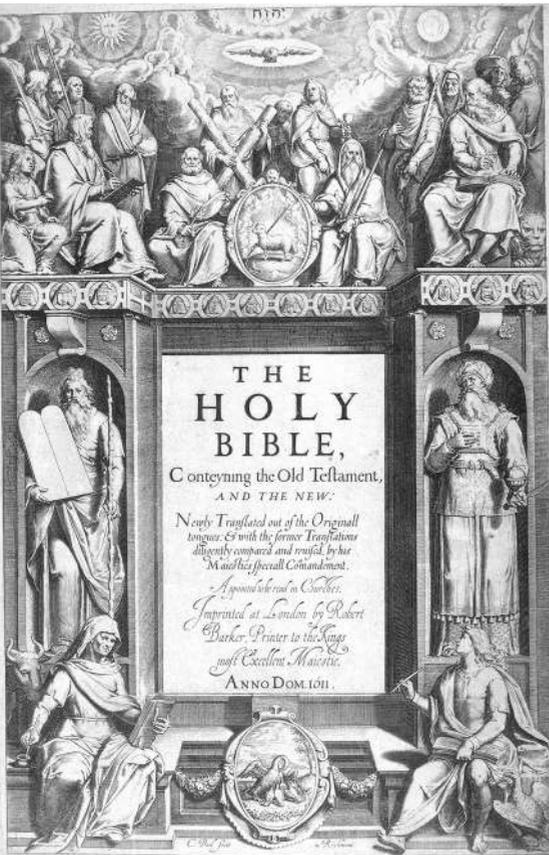


Ecclesiastical History

THE KING JAMES BIBLE 1611

The 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible was marked this year by a series of lectures delivered in Chichester Cathedral by prestigious scholars and speakers that included Melvyn Bragg. These lectures were much enjoyed. What were the circumstances by which the publication came about and why is it that this publication continues to inspire its readers today?

Essentially, James commissioned a new Bible that would be a rallying point for a unified Protestant England over and against the Roman Catholicism of the European mainland. At the same time, pursuant to his divine right as King, he wanted a translation that would reinforce his image as the political and spiritual leader of his people and that would also



The title page of the first edition of the King James Bible, 1611

emulate the pride in national identity that had blossomed under Elizabeth I. Thus, much depended on the translation. To this end, the king authorised Richard Bancroft, Bishop of London, to draw up a list of rules that were expressed as follows:-

1. The ordinary Bible read in the Church, commonly called the Bishop's Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the Truth of the original will permit.

2. The Names of the Prophets, and the Holy Writers, with the other Names of the Text, to be retained, as nigh as may be, accordingly as they were vulgarly used.

3. The old Ecclesiastical Words to be kept, viz. the Word Church not to be translated Congregation &c.

4. When a Word hath divers Significations, that to be kept which hath been most commonly used by the most of the Ancient Fathers, being agreeable to the Propriety of the Place, and the Analogy of the Faith.

5. The Division of the Chapters to be altered, either not at all, or as little as may be, if Necessity so require.

6. No Marginal Notes at all to be affixed, but only for the Explanation of the Hebrew or Greek Words, which cannot, without some circumlocation, so briefly and fitly be express'd in the Text.

7. Such Quotations of Places to be marginally set down as shall serve for the fit Reference of one Scripture to another.

8. 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, confer what they have done, and agree for their Parts what shall stand.
9. As any one Company hath dispatched any one Book in this Manner they shall send it to the rest, to be consider'd of seriously and judiciously, for His Majesty is very careful in this Point.
10. If any Company, upon the Review of the Book so sent, doubt or differ upon any Place, to send them word thereof; note the Place, and withal send the Reasons, to which if they consent not, the Difference to be compounded at the General Meeting, which is to be of the chief Persons of each Company, at the end of the Work.
11. When any Place of special Obscurity is doubted of, Letters to be directed, by Authority, to send to any Learned Man in the Land, for his Judgement of such a Place.
12. Letters to be sent from every Bishop to the rest of his Clergy, admonishing them to this Translation in hand; and to move and charge as many as being skilful in the Tongues; and having taken Pains in that kind, to send his particular Observations to the Company, either at Westminster, Cambridge or Oxford.
13. The Directors in each Company, to be the Deans of Westminster and Chester for that Place; and the King's Professors in the Hebrew or Greek in either University.
14. These translations to be used when they agree better with the Text than the Bishop's Bible: Tindall's, Matthews, Coverdale's, Whitechurch's, Geneva.
15. Besides the said Directors before mentioned, three or four of the most Ancient and Grave Divines, in either of the Universities, not employed in Translating, to be assigned by the Vice-Chancellor, upon Conference with the rest of the Heads, to be Overseers of the Translations as well Hebrew as Greek, for the better Observation of the 4th Rule above specified.

Clearly then, according to Bancroft's rules, the new translation should derive from previous English translations and especially that of the then current Bishop's Bible. Alterations to translations were generally made only on the basis of increased accuracy of scholarship, by which I mean through advances in philology. This practice resulted in new norms by which written and spoken English were measured. It was the acceptance of this Bible in both private and public religious discourse that shaped the language of the English people. However, the English used was not the English of the entirety of James' kingdom because, as is clear from these rules, the identity and origins of the company of translators were mostly drawn from the south east of England. It is no accident that the two literary sources most widely identified as the most significant defining influences over the English language, namely the King James Bible of 1611 and the works of William Shakespeare, remain contemporary.

The King James Bible is therefore one of the most outstanding representations of the corporate approach to cultural advancement in this country. Indeed, scholarly consensus considers that it is the best possible distillation of the wisdom, grace and beauty of existing translations, drawn from the original biblical documents in their source languages. In strict adherence to Bancroft's rules, the main objective of the translators in their endeavours was towards scholarly accuracy. What emerged was a prosaic and poetic elegance of the English language that remains a joy to the reader to this day.

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