

A Bible for ordinary people

KING JAMES VERSION TALK

I. INTRODUCTION

'Of making many books there is no end; and much study is a weariness of the flesh' wrote The Preacher in the ever engaging book of Ecclesiastes. It might well be that if he, or indeed the translators of the King James Version, saw how many books and articles had been produced in the last 15 months on their work he would reiterate those words for there have been many. We also have to add a number of television and radio programmes dedicated to the 400th anniversary of this publication. Yet perhaps this simple fact is testimony to the importance and significance of this work without reading every last word on the subject that has been spoken or written.

It is my honour to add to this number this evening with this first talk in the series of three. In this I want to explore whether or not we can call the Kings James Version a Bible for Ordinary People. This will involve us first in looking at how this translation came about and what the translators were hoping to achieve. We will then move onto some thoughts about the effect it actually had. Then finally some wider reflection on its continued impact, and on the Bible as a living book which continues to impact the lives of ordinary people.

II. HOW THE TRANSLATION CAME ABOUT.

The Epistle Dedicatory to the King James Version of the Bible is often not read, indeed in some publications is no longer included. However it makes clear that the translation came about through the desire and command of King James I;

'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.'

This makes it quite clear that the translation came about through royal command. This had taken place at the Hampton Court Conference in 1604. When James ascended to the English throne, remembering he was already James VI of Presbyterian Scotland, he was rapidly presented with a range of concerns about the life of the English Church from the Puritans in particular. They were largely concerned that the English Reformation had not gone far enough and were looking for James to support a further move in a more Protestant, and Presbyterian, direction. James however played the Conference very cleverly, not admitting the Puritans to the opening service, placing them on the back foot from the beginning. He acceded to none of their requests bar this 1, proposed by John Reynolds, in relation to a fresh Bible translation. This may well have been because of James' own knowledge and skill in biblical languages but probably also because he saw the politically unifying possibilities that it might offer. As Melvyn Bragg puts it in his 'The Book of Books', *'Out of Wolsey's most Catholic Hampton Court on the Thames came one Bible, one*

authorised version controlled by one King. One King by Divine Right. One Bible that would eliminate those radical suggestions which appeared in the margins of the Geneva Bible. One Bible that would show the world what the King and God and the heavenly and earthly kingdom were really made of. A book to re-order the world.'

III. A BRIEF HISTORY OF ENGLISH BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

There were a number of English versions available by the time of James' arrival on the throne. The whole process had begun with John Wycliffe and his followers in the 14th century (1382 NT; 1384 OT with revisions by John Purvey 1388 & 1395). The major step forward in English translations however came with William Tyndale who published his in 1526 before Henry VIII had made his break with Rome. It later cost him his life. However rapidly following on from the start of the English Reformation we have Coverdale's 1535 version which became the 'Great Bible' of 1539. The first, therefore 'authorised version. The translation of the Psalms from this version continue to be used to this day in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. In 1537 Matthews' Bible appeared, essentially the final completion of Tyndale's work done by John Rogers under the pseudonym Thomas Mathew. Then in 1560 the Geneva Bible is produced. This is affectionately known as 'The Breeches Bible' because of its translation of Genesis 3.7 'and they (Adam & Eve) made for themselves breeches'. This becomes the most popular version in England. It includes many marginal notes. These were rather more Protestant and Presbyterian than the English bishops in particular liked so under the leadership of Matthew Parker they get to work and in 1568 produced the Bishops Bible. The post Council of Trent Roman Catholic Church also entered the market. Rome decided that the battle to stop translations into mother tongues was lost so they had better ensure that any

translation was approved by them. This led to the Rheims-Douai version. The New Testament was published in 1582 and the Old Testament in 2 volumes in 1609 & 1610. With this range of English translations available at the end of Elizabeth I's reign it was the Geneva Bible that was the most widely available and read. This range however led to conversations in Elizabeth's final years about the need for a fresh translation which would bring these diverse translations together and create 1 standard English Bible. It was those conversations in effect that Reynolds brought to the table and James I took up.

IV. THE PURPOSES OF THE KING & THE TRANSLATORS

This history I think makes it clear that there was a clear purpose in James I command and in the work of the translators to produce a fresh agreed translation which would be accepted by all as the **standard English translation**. It was clearly hoped that this new translation would replace and do away with all the predecessors however much honour they were given by the translation team.

This is a key reason why they decided to have no marginal notes other than those related to where there was a possible different translation of a word available. The marginal notes of the Geneva Bible were the disputed and inflammatory part of that version due to their tendency towards a more Presbyterian understanding of theology, and perhaps more significantly raised questions about the nature of Government, both civil and ecclesiastical. In civil government they seriously questioned the idea of the Divine Right of Kings and in ecclesiastical government they questioned the necessity or rightfulness of episcopacy. So they potentially threatened the establishment of the Crown and Bishops.

The omission of such explanatory marginal notes therefore does make significant the choice of words used in the translation in relation to passages about kings and civil government. The choice of 'bishops' as the word to translate 'episcope' especially in Paul's letters helps maintain the existence of an Episcopal church. Then the language of the dedicatory epistle and the longer less well known Translators Preface both maintain James I very strong conviction that he was King by Divine Right.

Listen to a few words from Miles Smith's opening section of the Translator's Preface

This, and more to this purpose, His Majesty that now reigneth (and long, and long may he reign, and his offspring forever, "Himself and children, and children's always) knew full well, according to the singular wisdom given unto him by God, and the rare learning and experience that he hath attained unto

. It doth certainly belong unto Kings, yea, it doth specially belong unto them, to have care of Religion, yea, it doth specially belong unto them, to have care of Religion, yea, to know it aright, yea, to profess it zealously, yea to promote it to the uttermost of their power. This is their glory before all nations which mean well, and this will bring unto them a far most excellent weight of glory in the day of the Lord Jesus

This indicates therefore a second and third reason for the translation. The **second is that there was a political purpose** around the rule and government of the nation connected to the Divine Right of Kings. The third is that there was **an ecclesiastical purpose**. It was hoped that this 1 new agreed translation would establish clearly the Church of England as both independent from Rome

and also not Presbyterian like Geneva. Listen to words from the Dedicatory Epistle again:-

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 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.

So there was a desire to produce a translation which would be accepted and seen first as the 1 standard translation from the ancient tongues into English. Then there was a clear political and a clear ecclesiastical purpose behind this.

However if we regard it as a purely social, political or ecclesiastical act then we will be unfair and untrue to the men (and it was all men) who laboured long and hard to produce it. Their primary purpose was because of their conviction of the truth of the Scriptures, and the saving power of the gospel contained within them. Here is Bishop Miles Smith from the Translators Preface again in the section entitled 'The Praise of the Holy Scriptures':-

But now what piety without truth? what truth (what saving truth) without the word of God? What word of God (whereof we may be sure) without the Scripture? The Scriptures we are commanded to search. [John 5:39](#). [Isa 8:20](#). They are commended that searched and studied them. [Acts 8:28-29, 17:11](#). They are reprov'd that were unskilful in them, or slow to believe them. [Matt 22:29](#). [Luke 24:25](#). They can make us wise unto salvation. [2 Tim 3:15](#). If we be ignorant, they will instruct us; if out of the way, they will bring us home; if out of order, they will reform us; if in heaviness, comfort us; if dull, quicken us; if cold, inflame us. (Tolle, lege; Tolle, lege, Take up and read, take up and read the Scriptures [S. August. confess. lib 8 cap 12], (for unto them was the direction) it was said unto S. Augustine by a supernatural voice. "Whatsoever is in the Scriptures, believe me," saith the same S. Augustine, "is high and divine; there is verily truth, and a doctrine most fit for the refreshing of men's minds, and truly so tempered, that everyone may draw from thence that which is sufficient for him, if he come to draw with a devout and pious mind, as true Religion requireth." [S. August. de utilit. credendi cap. 6] Thus S. Augustine. and S. Jerome: "Ama scripturas, et amabit te sapientia etc." [S. Jerome. ad Demetriad] Love the Scriptures, and wisdom will love thee. And S. Cyril against Julian; "Even boys that are bred up in the Scriptures, become most religious, etc." [S. Cyril. 7 contra Iulianum] But what mention we three or four uses of the Scripture, whereas whatsoever is to be believed or practiced, or hoped for, is contained in them? or three or four sentences of the Fathers, since whosoever is worthy the name of a Father, from Christ's time downward, hath likewise written not only of the riches, but also of the perfection of the Scripture? "I adore the fulness of the

Scripture," saith Tertullian against Hermogenes. [Tertul. advers. Hermo.] And again, to Apelles an heretic of the like stamp, he saith; "I do not admit that which thou bringest in (or concludest) of thine own (head or store, de tuo) without Scripture." [Tertul. de carne Christi.] So Saint Justin Martyr before him; "We must know by all means," saith he, "that it is not lawful (or possible) to learn (anything) of God or of right piety, save only out of the Prophets, who teach us by divine inspiration." So Saint Basil after Tertullian, "It is a manifest falling way from the Faith, and a fault of presumption, either to reject any of those things that are written, or to bring in (upon the head of them) any of those things that are not written. We omit to cite to the same effect, S. Cyril B. of Jerusalem in his 4::Cataches., Saint Jerome against Helvidius, Saint Augustine in his 3::book against the letters of Petilian, and in very many other places of his works. Also we forebear to descend to later Fathers, because we will not weary the reader.) The Scriptures then being acknowledged to be so full and so perfect, how can we excuse ourselves of negligence, if we do not study them, of curiosity, if we be not content with them? Men talk much of [an olive bow wrapped about with wood, whereupon did hang figs, and bread, honey in a pot, and oil], how many sweet and goodly things it had hanging on it; of the Philosopher's stone, that it turned copper into gold; of Cornucopia, that it had all things necessary for food in it, of Panaces the herb, that it was good for diseases, of Catholicon the drug, that it is instead of all purges; of Vulcan's armor, that it was an armor of proof against all thrusts, and all blows, etc. Well, that which they falsely or vainly attributed to these things for bodily god, we may justly and with full measure ascribe unto the Scripture, for spiritual. It is not only an armor, but also a whole armory of weapons, both offensive and defensive; whereby we may save ourselves and put the enemy to flight. It is not an herb, but a tree, or rather a whole paradise of trees of life, which bring forth fruit every month, and the fruit thereof is for meat, and the leaves for medicine. It is not a pot of Manna, or a cruse of oil, which were for memory only, or for a meal's meat or two, but as it were a shower of heavenly bread sufficient for a whole host, be it never so great; and as it were a whole cellar full of oil vessels; whereby all our necessities may be provided for, and our debts discharged. In a word, it is a Panary of wholesome food, against fenowed traditions; a Physician's shop (Saint Basil called it) [S. Basil in Psal. primum.] of preservatives against poisoned heresies; a

Pandect of profitable laws, against rebellious spirits; a treasury of most costly jewels, against beggarly rudiments; finally a fountain of most pure water springing up unto everlasting life. And what marvel? The original thereof being from heaven, not from earth; the author being God, not man; the inditer, the holy spirit, not the wit of the Apostles or Prophets; the Penmen such as were sanctified from the womb, and endued with a principal portion of God's spirit; the matter, verity, piety, purity, uprightness; the form, God's word, God's testimony, God's oracles, the word of truth, the word of salvation, etc.; the effects, light of understanding, stableness of persuasion, repentance from dead works, newness of life, holiness, peace, joy in the holy Ghost; lastly, the end and reward of the study thereof, fellowship with the Saints, participation of the heavenly nature, fruition of an inheritance immortal, undefiled, and that never shall fade away: Happy is the man that delighted in the Scripture, and thrice happy that meditateth in it day and night.

The prime conviction and purpose of all the translators was not an ecclesiastical, social or political one it was one of the truth and saving power of the Scriptures as the Word of God written.

V. WAS IT FOR THE ORDINARY PEOPLE?

So if the primary purpose was to produce a translation that was accurate to the original Hebrew & Greek tongues communicating the good news of salvation was the translation of 1611 like Tyndale's vision of accessibility for the ploughboy?

Well let us first seek an answer through looking at the process adopted by the translators.

It was a process clearly valued by others. This is best scene I suggest by the presentation made at the Synod of Dort in 1618. This led to a very useful summary of the process used:-

Firstly, in the distribution of the work he willed this plan to be observed: the whole text of the Bible was distributed into six sections, and to the translation of each section there were nominated seven or eight men of distinction, skilled in languages.

Two sections were assigned to certain London theologians; the four remaining sections were equally divided among the theologians of the two Universities.

After each section had finished its task twelve delegates, chosen from them all, met together and reviewed and revised the whole work.

Lastly, the very Reverend the Bishop of Winchester, Bilson, together with Dr. Smith, now Bishop of Gloucester, a distinguished man, who had been deeply occupied in the whole work from the beginning, after all things had been maturely weighed and examined, put the finishing touch to this version.

The rules laid down for the translators were of this kind:

In the first place caution was given that an entirely new version was not to be furnished, but an old version, long received by the Church, to be purged from all blemishes and faults; to this end there was to be no departure from the ancient translation, unless the truth of the original text or emphasis demanded.

Secondly, no notes were to be placed in the margin, but only parallel passages to be noted.

Thirdly, where a Hebrew or Greek word admits two meanings of a suitable kind, the one was to be expressed in the text, the other in the margin. The same to be done where a different reading was found in good copies.

Fourthly, the more difficult Hebraisms and Græcisms were consigned to the margin.

Fifthly, in the translation of Tobit and Judith, when any great discrepancy is found between the Greek text and the old vulgate Latin they followed the Greek text by preference.

Sixthly, that words which it was anywhere necessary to insert into the text to complete the meaning were to be distinguished by another type, small roman.

Now given this process the final version that emerged did in fact contain around 80% of Tyndale's original work. Archbishop Rowan William's has also noted that whilst the theologians involved were great linguists and theologians there were no great literary figures involved in the process. Additionally Archbishop Rowan has noted that the translators chose to both use and attempted to reflect the Hebraisms of the original. Then we have to add that the translation was clearly designed to be read aloud, and therefore 'heard' rather than read privately as has become the modern custom. All these factors put together made the translation already slightly 'archaic' in its use of language (notably already thee, thou, thine etc was generally being replaced by you, yours etc by 1611). It also meant that the translation was more poetic from the outset than the language of the ordinary person.

So the very things which have become highly valued in the King James Version, its poetry and rhythms, its turns of phrase may have distanced it from the ordinary person in its earliest years. This is certainly borne out by the continued preference amongst many for the Geneva Bible in the years that immediately followed the KJV's first publication.

However we must also note that the KJV did include new introductions to each book of the Bible, and new chapter headings, to help the reader set some context for their understanding. It also included a very full biblical genealogy,

as accurate a map of the Holy Land and environs as was available and included the complete apocrypha.

(c.f. Synod of Dort:- Seventhly, that new arguments should be prefixed to every book, and new headings to every chapter.

Lastly, that a very perfect Genealogy and map of the Holy Land should be joined to the work.)

VI. SO DID IT SUCCEED?

Well first let us be straight it was never actually the ‘authorised’ version although it was clearly published with the royal imprimatur, and indeed remained in royal copyright. However it did not meet with initial public acclaim or massive success. The Geneva Bible continued to be widely used in the first years following the publication of the King James Version. However it was not until the 1630s that the KJV became the more universally accepted version, and this partly by making publishing both the Bishops and Geneva versions very difficult. Arguably the greatest stride forward however came with the decision that the 1662 Prayer Book would use the KJV for its epistles and gospels. In this way it fully became part of the life of the church in its liturgy.

It was the KJV which John Carver, William Brewster of Scrooby and others took with them on the Mayflower in 1620. From the outset the Pilgrim Fathers life in America was rooted in the Scriptures and the KJV in particular. Its place in the life of the development of what became the United States started here.

There is no doubt that the first purpose of producing a translation that would become the standard version for the people of England was achieved; although in passing I note that the version we all now have is in fact the Oxford or Cambridge Edition of 1769 rather than a strict copy of the 1611 original.

However history makes it very clear that the political and ecclesiastical purposes were rather less successful. Christopher Hill has shown very clearly the importance of the Bible in the political upheavals of the 17th century; the English Civil War certainly suggest that James I's hopes of establishing the Divine Right of Kings was not wholly successful. The very same strife also demonstrates a distinct lack of ecclesiastical harmony rooted in this new translation. Yet both these 'failures' may indicate the success of both the first and purpose and the primary purpose of the translators. This book did find itself in the hands of ordinary people and shaped their own thinking to the extent that they would not be bound either by a particular view of kingly authority nor a particular view of ecclesiastical power. The word had been let loose, it was, as Bragg puts it, 'out of its Latin straightjacket'. It might not have been the 'success' anticipated or looked for by either James or the translation team but it was a success in transforming the lives of individuals and nations that shaped history for the centuries that would follow, as has been helpfully shown by both Melvyn Bragg and Nick Spencer in his book Freedom and Order.

VII. LESSONS FOR TODAY

So as I draw to a close I offer a few final brief reflections on lessons from the KJV process for today.

- i) First, with the vastly more ancient documents now available, there is an ongoing task of translation to be undertaken. It needs to be done with as much seriousness and humility as that of the teams that worked on the KJV.
- ii) Second, I am sure Paul Cavill will illustrate very fully the impact of the KJV on the development and shaping of English language. I think here there might be a lesson to be recalled from the KJV which is in danger

of being overlooked. I earlier noted the importance of the way that this translation sounded because it was designed to be read aloud. In an age when for many reading has become less significant and the power of the visual media, music and the internet have come to hold more sway might not those of us who still long for the message of the Bible to be heard need to recapture something of the power of aural communication. In an age when images are vital might we not need to recapture the power of the poetic, of the spoken word. When I reflect on the power of rapping to communicate in some parts of our culture might we not need to recover poetic, musical phrasing in how we communicate the word of the Lord? The KJV itself might help us here; as the writer Murray Watts has reflected, *'And what could be more evocative of our personal plight, of the condition of 'modern' Britain, than the 'spirit of heaviness'? We talk of depression and despair, we know hopelessness, but we feel in our burdened hearts that we are crushed under the huge weight of 'a spirit of heaviness'. And so the power of the deliverer to save is magnified by the poetic power of the language. Here is 'soul food' indeed: a version that should be rediscovered, like the lost coin, with tears of joy. We can turn to the modern versions for their many virtues of accuracy and clarity, but we can take refuge from their banalities in the greatest version of them all.'* (Church Times 18/2/11)

- iii) Third, the continued lesson learned from the years that followed the KJV's publication is that no one can ever confine the Bible socially, politically or ecclesiastically. People still do try to confine it to their own particular ecclesiastical or political bent. This happens across the globe, across cultures, political systems and ecclesiastical hierarchies.

In my own life time for example I have seen the attempt to sustain apartheid in South Africa on the grounds of a particular Biblical interpretation blown apart by the power of the Bible's own message inspiring people like Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela to seek freedom and see it happen. I have seen the attempt in both Soviet Russia and Maoist China to crush the church and preclude the Bible end in failure; in the case of China we now have the fastest growing church in the world and the nation that publishes more Bibles than any other on earth. You cannot contain the Bible.

- iv) And finally the lesson from the translators of 1611 themselves that the heart of the Bible's message is that of a living God who works through human history to bring about eternal salvation for all and the ultimate renewal of the whole of creation. They understood that the Bible is not primarily a history book, nor a manual for society or politics, though it has plenty to say on both; it was for them, and it is for me, the living word of God in the written words of men, and I leave Professor Thiselton to explore that theme next week.