

The King James Version - history and current use

As you are well aware this is the four hundredth anniversary of the publication of the Bible known as The Authorised or King James version. The event has been marked not only by Christians but also by others who have an interest in the history of the English language and of English speaking peoples, as all are agreed that the impact of this particular version of the Bible in those areas is very great indeed. And so there have been several programmes on the BBC (on Radio 4 and BBC 2 and 4), several special editions of the AV and a plethora of books from various authors including Lord Melvyn Bragg, David Crystal and others.

What I want to do today is simply to remind ourselves of the genesis of this particular Bible version, say a little bit about its subsequent history, look at where it stands today in the minds of various people and finish with ten possible myths.

At the outset I ought to say something about myself briefly so that you know where I am coming from. When I became a Christian in 1972 there was pretty much only one Bible. It was almost always black and it was the AV. However, I was aware of other translations. At Sunday School sometimes we would read in a circle and somebody would have a different translation. At home we had a green Bible – the New World Translation of the Watchtower Society! I soon learned what to think of that. When I began at Secondary School we were all given purple Bibles – the RSV. I was also warned off that. In other circles everyone seemed to have a Living Bible or a Good News, but I was warned that these were paraphrases. Elementary studies in Greek made me aware that the AV was not perfect but I was assured by my minister that it was the one to hold on to, and that is what I did until I was about 20 and I bought my first NIV, as a supplementary Bible. I found it so much easier to understand that I never went back to the AV. I think I am reasonably sympathetic to those who would see that move as regrettable but maybe I am not as sympathetic as I think I am!

Before the AV

When coming to a study of the history of the KJV it is important to remember that it did not fall from the sky ready formed but was the result in part of at least two centuries of previous work on translating the Bible into English. The important predecessors are perhaps known to you. There are six or seven of them.

- *Tyndale's New Testament, 1526.* First and most important is the New Testament of the father of the English Bible William Tyndale (1494-1536).
- *Coverdale's Bible, 1535.* Tyndale did not complete his work on the Old Testament. However, in 1535 a complete English Bible was published by Miles Coverdale (1488-1569) who translated using Latin and German sources only. Coverdale's Psalm versions have survived in the Prayer Book and rival the popularity of those found in the KJV.
- *The Matthew Bible, 1537.* Shortly after Coverdale came the Matthew Bible (Thomas Matthew was a pseudonym for its assembler John Rogers, born around 1500 and martyred in 1555). This Bible was mostly Tyndale's (anonymous) work, supplemented where necessary by Coverdale's (ie Ezra-Malachi and the Apocrypha).
- *The Great (Whitchurch) Bible, 1539.* Printing began in Paris but was completed in London, the first Bible to be published in England. Coverdale supervised the work. It is chiefly a revision of the Matthew Bible in light of Munster's Hebrew Testament and the fifth edition of Erasmus's New Testament (both 1535). Coverdale retained his own version of the Psalms.
- *The Geneva (Breeches) Bible, 1560 (NT 1557).* Following Mary's accession (1553) many Protestants fled the country, some to Calvin's Geneva, where the English were pastored by William Whittingham (1524-1557). There he translated the New Testament (leaning on the Great Bible and Tyndale). A complete Bible appeared in 1560. The Old Testament was a collaboration between Whittingham, Knox, Coverdale and two others. The first Bible to include verse numbers, unlike previous Bibles, it was intended chiefly for private study. For this reason it contained maps, tables and marginal notes or comments, some of which

offended King James and others. (In 1579 a “King James version” appeared in Scotland but James was only 13 at the time so had little say in the matter no doubt). This is why the KJV had none until the appearance centuries later of the first Scofield Bible (1909). Early on the two Bibles were sometimes distinguished as with notes (Geneva) and without (AV). Someone did produce a version of the AV with Geneva notes in 1672. Very popular, there were 70 editions of the Geneva Bible by 1644. Over the years two versions of the text and notes of Revelation grew up. The Puritan Bible, its cheapness and size drew many other readers. In 1616 printing it in England was outlawed and that, along with the increasing saleability of the AV, contributed to its demise.

- *The Bishops Bible, 1568*. The Bishops did not like the anti-episcopal notes in Geneva and they soon produced a revision of the Great Bible to rival it. Known for its dignity rather than its clarity, 20 editions appeared by 1602.
- *Douai-Rheims, 1610 (NT 1582)*. This Roman Catholic translation from Latin may not seem worth mentioning but the New Testament is said to have had an influence on the KJV translators who needed to take note of it.

By 1611 three of these versions were still in print – Geneva for the Puritans, the unadorned Bishops Bible for Anglicans and the Doauai-Rheims for Romanists.

How the AV was proposed

The story of the commissioning of the Authorised Version, as it is often called, is fairly well known. The tension that existed between the various parties under Elizabeth I came to a head with the arrival of a new monarch following Elizabeth's death in 1603. Scotland's James I was an unknown quantity in England and the Puritans, like others, were hopeful that he would prove sympathetic to their cause. As soon as he came into England they handed him their millenary petition, seeking his favour. This led to the setting up of the famous conference in Hampton Court Palace, January 14-18 1604. Participants were chiefly bishops and deans of the established church but four moderate Puritans were also invited – John Rainolds (1549-1607, President of Corpus Christi, Oxford), Laurence Chaderton (c1536-1640, Master of the very Puritan Emmanuel, Cambridge), John Knewstubb (144-1524, a Suffolk rector and Cambridge fellow) and Thomas Sparke (1548-1616, a Lincolnshire minister). One modern writer speaks of them as being a second division team chosen by James to face his league champions!

The conference was not really intended to discuss Bible translations but on the second day of discussion Rainolds (according to Barlow's official account) “moved his majesty that there might be a new translation of the Bible, because those which were allowed in the reign of king Henry the Eighth and Edward the Sixth were corrupt and not answerable to the truth of the original.” This was a widely accepted view. Back in Elizabeth's reign Hugh Broughton (1549-1612), who had publicly tangled with Rainolds and later a fierce critic of the AV, had petitioned the Queen about a new translation. It may have been that Rainolds was hoping that the Geneva Bible would be authorised. What happened, it seems, is that James seized on the suggestion and urged his bishops to it. David Norton points out that at a General Assembly of the Church of Scotland two years before James, who had a thorough knowledge of the Bible and was conversant with the ancient tongues, had urged a new translation and a new psalter and had even set about producing his own metrical psalms. James no doubt liked the idea of a new Bible that could supplant the Geneva and be connected with his own name, as it still is. The idea of a Bible to unite the warring factions was also attractive. It is his promotion of the idea that led to his being referred to, in the dedication to the translation, using almost divine terms, as “the principal mover and author of the work”.

How the AV was planned

Previous translations had mostly been done by individuals but this one was to be done by a group of about fifty men. Originally 54 were commissioned but most lists include only 47. Probably the figure 54 includes revisers brought in at a later stage. Several died before the project was completed

(Lively, Hutchinson, Dakins, Rainolds, Ravis, Aglionby). These were not replaced, it seems.

There is some lack of clarity over this. For example, lists of translators for the first Oxford company (Isa-Mal) always have the same seven names (Harding, Rainolds, Holland, Kilby, Smith, Brett, Fairclough). However, in a petition signed in 1606 by 14 bishops, two known translators, William Thorne, Regius Professor of Hebrew at Oxford, is said to be “now likewise very necessarily employed in the translation of that part of the Old Testament which is remitted to that university.” he was probably one of the seven overseers appointed for further revision.

The teams worked chiefly in six committees or companies of about 7-10 - two in Westminster (Gen-2 Kings/NT Epistles), two in Cambridge (1 Chron-Canticles/Apocrypha) and two in Oxford (Isa-Malachi/Gospels, Acts, Revelation). These men are sometimes written of as great and holy men, which many of them were. In 1858 Alexander McClure wrote that “the translators enjoyed the highest degree of that special guidance which is ever granted to God's true servants in exigencies of deep concernment to his kingdom”. It is important to remember that they were chosen, however, chiefly for their scholarly ability not for their piety as such. The translators were not paid but all had positions in the church that paid them well enough.

With his advisers James drew up a list of guidelines for them.

1. The Bishops Bible to be followed where possible. Hence in the preface they say that their intention was “not to make a new translation ... but to make a good one better”. This was often done but by no means always.

14. Other translations to be used - Tyndale, Matthew, Coverdale, Great, Geneva. You may notice that nothing was said about what text to translate from. English style rarely seems to have been a chief concern. Accuracy was the thing.

2. Proper names to retain their English style. This was often not done and there is no consistency.

3. “Old Ecclesiastical Words to be kept, viz the Word Church not to be translated Congregation &c”

4. Where a word can be translated more than one way, the word “most commonly used by the most of the Ancient Fathers” to be used.

5. No changes in chapter divisions if possible.

6. No marginal notes except for alternative readings. There were eventually 6,637 of these.

7. Where Scripture refers to other parts of Scripture a reference to be given in the margin.

8. Individuals to translate their allotted portion first then finalise it with others in their company.

9. The other companies then to weigh up what each company produced.

10. A final select arbitrating company also envisaged.

11. Help to be sought wherever it could be found on difficult passages.

12. All bishops and other scholars to be encouraged to contribute.

13. Directors of each Company to be the Deans of Westminster and Chester and the King's Professors in Hebrew or Greek in either University.

15. (Added later) Besides the stated Directors, three or four “of the most Ancient and Grave Divines, in either of the Universities, not employed in Translating” to be assigned to be “Overseers of the Translations”. Four of these names are known. A further committee of two (Miles Smith 1554-1624, who wrote the preface, and Thomas Bilson 1547-1616, who may have written the sycophantic dedication) also acted as revisers, with Richard Bancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury (1544-1610) having the final say.

It was also intended from the beginning that words necessary only to make sense of the passage but not in the text should be put in a different typeface, as they still are). Arguments were to be placed before each book and headings to each chapter. A map was also to be included.

Robert Barker (d 1645), the royal printer, supplied the translators with 40 unbound copies of the 1602 Bishops Bible, which could be annotated. The Bodleian library has a collection of these sheets, which have subsequently been bound together, that process frustratingly hiding some of the notes made.

There is evidence, then, that, as the translators declare in the preface, they worked very thoroughly. It “hath cost the workmen, as light as it seemeth, the pains of twice seven times seventy two days and more” they say “... neither did we disdain to revise that which we had done, and to bring back

to the anvil that which we had hammered ...”.

How the AV was produced

It has been suggested that King James lost interest in the project as the years went by but it is more likely that he was occupied with other matters. When it finally did appear some years later, in 1611, there was something of a rush to get it out and there seems to have been little fanfare.

Barker bore the cost of the printing (and subsequently suffered for it, dying in debtors prison). In 1611 he produced two folio editions of the Bible. These two were famously known as the “He” and “She” Bibles. This refers to Ruth 3:15 where the Hebrew has *He* though the context demands *She* (as in the Bishops Bible and subsequent KJVs). Also in Lev 1:6 the *He Bible* has “*flay* the burnt offering” and the *She Bible* “*slay* the burnt offering”. There also seems to have been some problem with the marginalia. Otherwise printing errors seem to have been quite low - around the 350 mark.

These early Bibles were in old fashioned black letter with the headers, chapter summaries and supplied words in Roman type. Initially they were unbound; binding was a separate task. There were 74 introductory pages, consisting of

- A title page
- A dedicatory epistle to King James
- A preface from the translators
- A Calendar
- An Almanac
- A table for the calculation of Easter
- A table and calendar setting out the order of psalms and lessons to be said at morning and evening prayers throughout the year
- A list of books of the Testaments and the Apocrypha
- The Royal coat of arms and a Latin statement that the book was printed ‘by authority of the King’
- Genealogies
- A table of the place names in Canaan
- A map of Canaan

How the AV was perceived in the earliest years

The book that was eventually produced was, and was intended to be staid, even majestic in style. When Luther had translated the Bible long before he had wanted it to read as though “it had been written only yesterday” but things had now moved on and something more respectable and safe was sought, even to the point of using language that, even at the time, seemed slightly archaic. One wit called it the first effort at “mock tudor”. They wanted something that was not only clear but that sounded good on the ear. It was also intended to be a unifier, which, perhaps surprisingly, it turned out to be.

The early comments of Hugh Broughton, not chosen as a translator, are fairly well known. “The late Bible” he says “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 burnt.” No doubt a certain amount of sour grapes entered in here. Hebrew scholar John Selden (1584-1654) was approving but pointed out that “the Bible is translated into English words rather than English phrases. The Hebraisms are kept and the phrase of that language is kept. As for example, “he uncovered her shame,” which is well enough so long as scholars have to do with it, but when it comes among the common people, Lord what gear they make of it.”

Some Puritans also questioned the lack of precision and no doubt people noticed things like the famous use of the word *charity* in 1 Corinthians 13 and the translation in Romans 14 “Him that is weak in faith receive but not to doubtful disputations” (Tyndale has “not in disputing and troubling his conscience”).

Criticism would have come as no surprise to the translators who say in their preface “whosoever attempteth anything for the public (especially if it pertain to Religion, and to the opening and clearing of the word of God) the same setteth himself upon a stage to be gloated upon by every evil eye, yea, he casteth himself headlong upon pikes, to be gored by every sharp tongue. For he that meddleth with men’s Religion in any part, meddleth with their custom, nay, with their freehold; and though they find no content in that which they have, yet they cannot abide to hear of altering.”

Though there were few major objections there was no great rush to adopt the AV either. The Geneva remained the most popular version for a generation to come.

How the AV was perceived from the 1620s to the 1880s

The AV really became popular only after those early years had passed. Even Milton in his *Paradise Lost* of 1667 and Bunyan in his *Pilgrim's Progress* of 1678 were still using the Geneva version alongside the AV. As early as 1645 John Lightfoot (1602-1675) was calling for a revision and, according to David Norton, twice in the 1650s (1652 or 53 and 1657) official attempts (one under the Baptist Henry Jessey) were made to bring about revision, but these came to nothing.

It took some time for all the churches in the land to replace their lectern Bibles with the AV and the Geneva Bible continued to be popular even after it was banned by Archbishop Laud in the 1630s. However, by the time of the civil wars in the 1640s the AV was beginning to become the standard Bible for more and more people, whichever side of the divide they were on.

From as early as 1656 it began to be used as an educational tool as well as an aid to devotion and that has had a big impact. For generations the first book people read was the AV. The literati were not convinced at first but eventually came to appreciate its merits so that it came to be known as “the noblest monument of English prose”.

The text of the AV itself was not completely settled, as is well known, until 1769. David Norton has interestingly stated (110) that there is no clear evidence that the final manuscript of the AV “was used from after the first edition was printed: it may have been referred to but subsequent editions were made, with an increasing degree of randomness, from earlier editions, not from the manuscript.”

There were four major revisions of the text – in 1629 by Samuel Ward and John Bois; in 1638 by the Cambridge University Press; in 1762 by Dr Thomas Paris of Trinity College, Cambridge and in 1769 by Dr Benjamin Blayney.

It is said that some 24,000 changes were made altogether down the years but this would include the Apocrypha and changes in the marginal notes too. Although most of these were to do with updating spellings, correcting printing errors, replacing obsolete words and such like there is evidence to say that some changes were a little more significant than that. F H A Scrivener's volume, *The Authorized Edition of the English Bible (1611): Its Subsequent Reprints and Modern Representatives* documents hundreds of textual revisions of the original 1611 version. In an appendix he reveals that a number of the revisions were *corrections of translation errors*. Even D A Waite admits “136 substantial changes that were different words ... 136 changes of substance”

The AV eventually became so popular that although people were aware of deficiencies in it (there were some 30 alternative translations of the Bible or the New Testament by 1800, including Wesley's revision “for plain, unlettered men who understand only their Mother tongue”) nothing could dislodge it from its supreme position in America and throughout the British Empire.

Its growing popularity in the 19th Century can be gauged from the quotations that are often cited of the approval of Thomas Macaulay (1800-1859), John Ruskin (1819-1900), Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) and even Darwin's Bulldog Thomas Huxley (1825-1859). It should be noted that when these quotations are produced the writers are really talking about the Bible rather than the AV as such, although there is no doubt that it is this version that they are familiar with. I think a better literary commendation of the AV is that of William Blake (1757-1827) who when he began learning Hebrew said “astonishing indeed is the English translation, it is almost word for word” and nothing short of inspired!

In 1881 the Revised Version appeared. It had been mooted back in 1870 by Samuel Wilberforce (1805-1873) and was executed on similar lines to the KJV. American scholars were originally involved and in 1898 they produced the American Revised Version. The RV was “to introduce as few alterations as possible into the text of the Authorised Version consistently with faithfulness”. A modern writer suggests that while the RV may have been more accurate, it “lacked the rhythm of the original” and is “the literary equivalent of a pseudo-Gothic cathedral”. Never popular, it was not able to dislodge the AV from its pre-eminence. Something similar could be said for the RSV (1952).

How the AV is perceived today

In the 19th and 20th centuries there were scores and scores of translations, some of which have become very popular. Some can be quite passionate about their own preferred version. Meanwhile, the AV continues to be read by large numbers of people, especially in the USA. In his book *The King James Only Controversy* James White helpfully suggests that we can divide what has been called by some the King James Only movement into some five main types.

KJV First

First, there are those who simply say they prefer the KJV. This group does not necessarily believe that the KJV is the only acceptable version. They simply prefer the KJV over other translations because their church uses it, because they have always used it or because they simply like its style. Some perhaps would want to go further and say that overall the AV is the best. Joel Beeke is one who advocates its use for practical reasons. He gives 13 practical arguments. Let me pick out some of them.

1. It is the standard text of the English Bible. Choose the known over against the unknown, he says. The AV is uniquely well established in the market-place and the literature of Christian scholarship. It will continue to be produced in many editions for years to come.
3. It uses a more faithful translation method, that is verbal equivalence ('word for word') rather than dynamic equivalence ('meaning for meaning') as in the NIV.
4. It is a more honest translation. Italics identify every word or phrase not in the original.
5. It uses the more precise Thee and Thou.
6. It is the best liturgical text. It excels as a version to be used in public worship.
7. It is in the best format for preaching – laid out in verses rather than paragraphs
8. It is the most beautiful translation
9. It is an ecumenical text for Reformed Christians. No other version has been used so widely among evangelical Christians
10. It is a practical choice. It is available in many editions; with a full range of helps and reference materials, not to mention computer software.
11. It 'sounds' like the Bible. The translators sought a reverend hearing, and to suggest the timeless and eternal character of God's Word. It is timeless and other worldly.

Textual Argument

Like Beeke many argue from a textual point of view. They argue that the AV's textual base is the most accurate. These conclude that the KJV is based on better manuscripts. Such people would accept a modern version based on the same manuscripts as the KJV. White claims Zane C Hodges is a good example of this group. However, Hodges would consider that the Majority Text "corrects" the Received Text as seen eg, in the Majority Text textual apparatus of the NKJV. The TBS would probably fit here. It says that it "does not believe the Authorised Version to be a perfect translation, only that it is the best available translation in the English language", and that it "believes this text is superior to the texts used by the United Bible Societies and other Bible publishers, which texts have as their basis a relatively few seriously defective manuscripts from the 4th century and which have been compiled using 20th century rationalistic principles of scholarship."

Received Text only

This is the view that sees the traditional Hebrew and Greek texts as being supernaturally preserved. Again although the AV is believed to be a translation exemplar, it is believed that other translations based on these texts have the potential to be equally good. Donald Waite would fall into this category.

Inspired

These people believe that the AV itself was divinely inspired. They see the translation to be preserved by God and as accurate as the original Greek and Hebrew manuscripts found in its

underlying texts. Sometimes this group will even exclude other language versions based on the same manuscripts, claiming the KJV to be the only Bible.

New Revelation

These people would go even further and say that the AV is a “new revelation” or an “advanced revelation” from God. It can and should be the standard from which all other translations originate. Adherents to this belief may also believe that the original-language Hebrew and Greek can be corrected by the KJV. This view is often called “Ruckmanism” after Peter Ruckman, a staunch advocate of this view. These latter two views have also been referred to as “double inspiration”.

These types are not all mutually exclusive, nor is this a comprehensive summary of those who prefer the KJV. Douglas Wilson, for example, argues that the AV is superior because of its manuscript tradition, its translational philosophy (with updates to the language being regularly necessary), and its ecclesiastical authority, having been created by the church and authorised for use in the church. The logistics of the KJV's wide availability and public domain status also come into play, on top of or apart from any theological preference.

In the light of these differences, it is important that those who support the AV distinguish themselves from those apparent friends who are really no friends at all. It is equally important that those who are not AV advocates carefully distinguish among the pro-AV advocates.

Memorable

One matter often debated is whether the AV is easier to memorise than other versions. Many of us have an inkling that it is. There is a good argument to say it is as set out in this paragraph from Gordon Campbell's book (80)

“The balance between the public reading and private study of the Bible has shifted over the centuries with the rise in literacy. In the 17th Century the Bible was more often heard than read, and it is clear that the translators had the practice of reading aloud (in homes as well as churches) in mind. Part of the evidence for this is punctuation, which tends to be rhetorical rather than grammatical, but the clearest manifestation of the emphasis on the need to provide a text that can be read aloud is the rhythms of the KJV. The text is prose, but it often has the pulse of poetry. Adam, blaming Eve for the fall, says ‘She gave me of the tree, and I did eat’ (Genesis 3:12), a perfect iambic pentameter line (and one that Milton incorporated intact into *Paradise Lost*); in the next verse God says to Eve ‘what is this that thou hast done?’ (Genesis 3:13), a perfect iambic tetrameter line. The seventeen words I have quoted are all monosyllables cast into prose but the regular rhythm makes them easy to read aloud.” (Campbell 80)

Ten myths about the AV

In conclusion and by way of partial summary I thought we might finish with ten myths with regard to the AV. These may be contentious. We will see.

1. It is the authorised version

Documentation may have been lost, but it would seem that though the original title page usually included the phrase “appointed to be read in churches”, unlike the Great Bible, there was never any edict of convocation, act of parliament or royal decree authorising this Bible. Modern writers usually make this point. It was “never, in fact, authorised” (David Daniell). “It was not an authorized version in any meaningful sense of those words” (Derek Wilson). The first reference to Authorised Version in the OED is as late as 1824.

2. It was a brand new translation

Despite the title page's “newly translated out of the original languages” we know that the translators diligently consulted the previous versions and, as instructed, tried not to depart from the Bishops Bible any more than strictly necessary.

3. It was the Bible of the Puritans

Although there was Puritan support for the KJV, it is the earlier Geneva Bible that has the best

claim to be regarded as the Puritan Bible, that is, the one they most often used until it was outlawed.

4. It was the Bible of Shakespeare, Milton and Bunyan

More than one scholar has noted that Shakespeare's writings are saturated with Scriptural thoughts and words. He died in 1616 and so it should be no surprise that the evidence points to his having learned what he knew of the Bible from the Geneva version. Milton and Bunyan were later and do use the AV but follow the Geneva at least as often.

5. It has only begun to sound old fashioned in the last hundred years

There is evidence rather that even when it first appeared the KJV would have sounded old fashioned. They appear to have sought an elevated and slightly archaic style.

6. All the translators were godly Calvinists

The 50 or so translators were all Protestants, chosen for their scholarly ability rather than anything else. There is evidence to say that there were Arminians among them and, in at least one case, a man who had a problem with alcohol (Richard "Dutch" Thomson). This is similar, perhaps, to the way that among those involved with the NIV translation there was one who proved later to be guilty of homosexuality.

7. It has been popular ever since it was first published

Uptake of the KJV when it was first published was pretty slow and it was some years before it even began to be as popular as it has become.

8. People who use the AV are using the 1611 version

There are currently two slightly different versions of the AV commonly in print today (the Cambridge and Oxford versions). These both date back to the final revision of 1769. Between 1611 and 1769 there were as many as 24, 000 changes. Some of these were of some significance.

9. The KJV always uses word for word translation

Although the KJV translators usually aimed at a word for word rendering, they were not afraid to use a dynamic equivalent where they thought it appropriate. So for example they regularly translate Paul's "May it not be" (as in Romans 6:2) as God *forbid*.

10. There are no arguments for using the KJV today

Many people today have long abandoned the AV and can see no reason for retaining it. Joel Beeke and others, however, give several reasons for doing so. The fact it was good enough for St Paul is not one of them. We may disagree with what such people say but to say that there is no reason to carry on using the AV today is to overstate the case.