

How the Bible Came to Us - #18

The King James Version

1. As we have already noted, the first 80 years after Tyndale published the first printed English translation of the New Testament in 1525, there was almost a free-for-all in English translations. Tyndale himself made several revisions before he was strangled and burned at the stake in Belgium on October 6, 1536. He may have burned as a heretic partly because of some of the inflammatory notes in his margins such as, "The Pope's bull slayeth more than Aaron's calf!" The next year Henry VIII allowed the English Bible to be distributed in England itself.
2. Tyndale had translated the New Testament, the Pentateuch, Jonah, and some believe he translated Job through 2 Chronicles as well. By 1535, Miles Coverdale printed a complete Bible based on Tyndale's work, plus other translations: 1) the Zurich Bible (1529) of Zwingli and Leo Juda, 2) Luther's German, 3) the Vulgate in Latin, 4) the Latin text of Pagninus (1528), and 5) probably Tyndale's Pentateuch. His Bible is sometimes popularly known as the Treacle Bible because in Jeremiah 8:22 he translated, "There is not more treacle in Gilead." Despite the tremendous opposition that Tyndale had faced, that translation was "Set forth with the king's most gracious license."
3. In 1537, John Rogers published his Bible under the pseudonym, "Thomas Matthew." It was printed in Antwerp and dedicated to Henry VIII. It was largely the work of Tyndale with some additions from Coverdale. There were thousands of notes in the margin advancing Protestant theological positions!
4. John Tavener, another competent Greek scholar and a lawyer educated at both Oxford and Cambridge, produced a second version of the "Matthews" Bible which was printed in 1539 in England itself.
5. In that same year, the Great Bible was published. It is sometimes called the Cranmer Bible because it has an introduction by Thomas Cranmer. It was followed very quickly by a second edition in 1540. It is only slightly different from the Coverdale Bible. Although it claims to have been compared to the original Hebrew and Greek, it follows the Latin more closely than the original Greek and has additional verses in places like Acts 23-25. It was largely the work of William Tyndale! The Great Bible, of course, gets its name from the fact that it was very large, 9 x 15 inches. It is also famous for its artistic frontispiece which shows King Henry VIII handing down this new Bible to Cranmer and Cromwell who in turn distribute it to the people amidst cries of "God save the king!"
6. In his introduction to the Great Bible, Thomas Cranmer made two very interesting points: 1) It is very, very good for people to read and study their own Bibles; But, 2) They should not study them too much!
7. But, all this publishing produced a serious reaction. Cromwell, one of the major forces behind the political and religious reform, was beheaded. A fierce reaction set in against Lutheranism or reformation in any form. In 1543, Parliament banned all translations bearing the name of Tyndale. Furthermore, they "required that the notes in all other versions" be expunged. In another action they stated that no "laboring men or women should read to themselves or to others, publicly or privately, any part of the Bible, under pain of imprisonment." Despite having supported the Reformation in earlier years, in 1546, King Henry banned every Bible and every separate New Testament except the Great Bible. No one but those in the upper class were supposed to read the Bible for themselves. Hundreds of Bibles and New Testaments were

burned.

8. However, translators were just getting warmed up! The Geneva Bible appeared in 1560 (the New Testament came out in 1557) translated by William Wickingham, an excellent scholar and brother-in-law of John Calvin. That New Testament was the most accurate that had yet appeared and also the most completely annotated. The full Bible is commonly known as the “Breeches Bible” because it states that Adam and Eve sewed for themselves “breeches.” It was the first English Bible to include both numbered chapters and verses. It had an introduction by John Calvin. The Geneva Bible became enormously popular and went through 140 printings before 1640. It was used by James I who authorized the translation of the King James Version and by the Puritans, John Bunyan, and William Shakespeare.
9. The quality of the Geneva Bible, used popularly by the English people, “outshone” the Great Bible which was the translation commonly used in church. To try to correct this imbalance, in 1568, Elizabeth I authorized the production of the Bishop’s Bible. It was intentionally meant to correct some of the inflammatory annotations in the Geneva Bible. It went through 20 different editions before 1606.
10. All of these previous versions were basically Protestant in orientation. But the Roman Catholics were not to be outdone. Gregory Martin and Richard Bristow, Roman Catholic scholars in exile in Rheims, France, produced a Catholic New Testament translation in 1582. They translated from the Vulgate since that was the official version of the Catholic Church, but they took into consideration the Greek as they did so. Almost 30 years later, in 1610, other Catholic scholars completed the Old Testament in the city of Douay. Thus, by 1610, the Catholics had a complete Catholic translation with Catholic notes which came to be known as the Rheims-Douay or the Douay-Rheims Bible.
11. But all of these translations left relatively illiterate people wondering what the Word of God really said! Just as Pope Damasus I asked Jerome to produce the Latin Vulgate to try to standardize the text used by churches, so James I called a committee to a Hampton Court conference in 1604 and asked them to carefully set out guidelines for producing a new “authorized” version. The conference very carefully went through the issues that had been raised by previous translators and came up with a new set of guidelines or principles for translation, making it a very conservative version. Before beginning their work, they agreed that the New Testament should be translated from the *Textus Receptus* (more about that later) and the Old Testament from the Masoretic text. Fifty-four scholars from Oxford, Cambridge, and Westminster helped make up six different teams. Each team was assigned certain sections of the Scriptures to translate.
12. It is useful to note the principles that the King James Version Committee set forth for themselves:
 - 1) The committee was to follow, as far as possible, the commonly recognized Bishop’s Bible used by most Englishmen in church.
 - 2) The names used in Scripture were to be the names which had become commonly accepted by the English people.
 - 3) The traditional ecclesiastical terms such as “church” and “priest” were to be used rather than the Protestant preferences “congregation” and “elder,” etc.
 - 4) When a word was encountered which had various meanings, as far as possible, they were to use the meaning most commonly used by previous English translators. And,

- 5) There were to be no changes made in chapters or verses. As far as possible, everything was to be kept the way it had been before. Intentionally, it was a very conservative translation. No marginal notes were allowed. Only occasionally were notes included to suggest alternative translations or explanatory words from the original Hebrew and Greek.
13. By 1609, a review panel of three scholars went over the preliminary work of the six different teams. While it was the original plan that this new version would be a revision of the Bishops Bible, in fact, 80% to 90% of the New Testament was from Tyndale.
14. Words that were implied but not actually stated in the original languages were put in, printed in italics or brackets. There were no notes, there was no commentary, and there were only minimal explanatory additions. It was printed by Robert Barker in the year 1611. Over the next couple hundred years, it went through five different editions with the 1769 version done by Benjamin Blayney being the most commonly cited in our day.
15. So who authorized this version? As far as we can determine, it was never authorized by any ecclesiastical group. It was authorized only by King James I and produced by a committee of scholars. Largely following the example of Tyndale, it was a combination of simplicity, grace, and power which made it almost immediately popular.
16. However, we must not forget that for a considerable period of time after the King James Version was first published, many people preferred the Geneva Bible. Perhaps the most important fact about the King James Version is that for one reason or another, it eventually eliminated the competition and became “the official Bible” of the English-speaking world.
17. As wonderful as the King James Version was and is, it has certain faults:
- 1) The original language material from which it was translated is quite late, being mostly manuscripts from the 10th century to the 14th century and not earlier.
 - 2) A great deal more has been learned about Hebrew and Greek from archaeology and from the study of ancient manuscripts subsequent to the printing of the King James Version.
 - 3) But, perhaps more important than either of those points, the English language has grown and changed considerably since the King James Version was first produced. Updated versions have been produced including the one familiar to us done by Blayney in 1769. Today we have the *New King James Version (NKJV)* which is another attempt to bring the English and the grammar of the King James Version up to date.
18. Despite the fact that the King James Version was intended to be equally useful for all religious persuasions, the Rheims-Douay or Douay-Rheims Bible continued to be used by Roman Catholics. It was revised by Bishop Richard Challoner of London and Archbishop Troy of Dublin in the 18th century between 1749 in 1752. It was a very thorough revision of the Douay-Rheims. It was eventually revised again around 1941. It is now known as the Confraternity or Christian Doctrine Version.

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