

THE KING JAMES BIBLE – CONTEXT AND HISTORY

Let me begin in a very different place from the King James Bible and take you to Ethiopia. In 1974 I led an Oxford University Expedition to that remarkable and ancient Christian country, exploring the highlands of north-east Tigre for ancient rock-hewn and built churches, and recording some of their treasures. In six weeks of a fascinating and eventful expedition not one church we visited had a Bible. That seems very shocking and scandalous to most contemporary Christians, but there is a very simple reason. The ancient church of Ethiopia, at least at that time, still had a manuscript culture. The churches would have the Gospels, Paulos (St Paul), Dawid (the Psalms), and some other books of the Bible, service books incorporating parts of the Bible, and lives of various saints – including in one place The life of St Michael the Archangel – though how one writes the life of an archangel I do not know. The simple reason for churches not having Bibles is that a manuscript bible is simply too vast, too large, and too expensive. When I became Bishop of Basingstoke in Winchester Diocese the Cathedral possessed the Winchester Bible – even this great mediaeval manuscript was not a complete Bible, and it was in several large folio volumes. At the end of my time in Ethiopia a member of our expedition, the University doctor, who was something of a polymath, wanted a copy of the Book of Enoch – a book which is in the Ethiopian Bible, but in the Bible of no other church. He asked Abuna Yohannes, the Archbishop of Tigre, who summoned a monk and gave him the order. The monk bought six goatskins and walked for two days to a monastery in Tembien where they made good vellum. Having got the vellum he brought it back, took down a 17th century manuscript of the Book of Enoch (perhaps the same date as the King James Bible translation), and copied out the text. He then went to the market again, bought another goatskin, had it treated so as to provide the binding for the book, and then the bound book was despatched to Oxford. It was ordered in September and arrived in February, giving you some idea of the time-frame of copying a book about two-thirds the length of the prophet Isaiah.

Such manuscript books were the way in which the Christian Bible was passed on for the greater part of Christian history – almost 1500 years – and it is important to remember this, for it highlights the significance of what made the King James Version possible – the invention of printing – and the ability to produce many copies of the same text.

Travelling last month on holiday in Myanmar (Burma) I came to the former British hill-station of Ka-Law. There was a small Anglican church there – little more than a tin-tabernacle, but a delightful Burmese lady opened it up for me to see. What I had never expected, and was astonished to find, was a large folio version of the King James' Bible, replete with large folding pictures of the Garden of Eden, and of Solomon's Temple. It was printed in 1659, just before the restoration of King Charles II, and was presented to this church by a British soldier in thanksgiving for his safety during the Japanese occupation. On a blank page was written – 'This is the most precious book in Ka-Law, keep it safely.'

In keeping this 400th anniversary of the King James Bible we commemorate a book which has had an enduring and powerful influence on the English Church. In England it has been commonly known as the Authorized Version, rather than the King James Bible, a title more commonly used in America. Yet this translation of the Scriptures was never formally authorized. As the article on the Authorized Version in the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* succinctly puts it: 'on the title page are the words "Appointed to be read in Churches", but it has never otherwise been

officially “authorized”. When I spoke about this in Copenhagen, Professor Charles Locke, the Professor of English at Copenhagen University, reminded me that a mutual friend and learned palaeographer, Professor Malcolm Parkes, author of the history of punctuation, *What's the point?*, suggested that the ‘appointed’ might really mean ‘pointed’ or ‘punctuated’ to be read aloud in churches. I think this is really quite plausible, which gives yet another take on the King James’ Bible as having an official stamp of commendation.

The new translation of the Bible, which originated from the Hampton Court Conference of 1604, and was completed between 1607 and 1611, was not an entirely new translation. It built on earlier translations, most notably the Bishops’ Bible. This had been compiled at the direction of Queen Elizabeth I’s Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker. As Master of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, Parker had assiduously collected many manuscripts from the dissolved monasteries, including the Canterbury Gospels, thought to have been brought to England by St Augustine in 597 – a manuscript Bible on which the Archbishop of Canterbury still takes his oath of office at his enthronement, and which was most recently brought to Westminster Abbey for veneration by Pope Benedict XVI and the Archbishop at the ecumenical service during the Pope’s visit last September.

The Bishops’ Bible was itself a revision of the Great Bible which was ordered to be set up in every parish church by an edict of 1539 issued by Henry VIII’s Vicar General and Vice-Gerent in Spirituals, Thomas Cromwell, who had overseen the visitation and then dissolution of the monasteries. Cromwell ordered that ‘a Bible of the largest volume in English’ should be distributed to every parish church in England by Christmas 1538 – though in the event the Great Bible was not published until November of the following year. The Great Bible was the work of Miles Coverdale (1488-1569) who in 1535 had produced on the Continent the first complete English Bible, a translation made from the Latin Vulgate, William Tyndale’s Pentateuch and New Testament and other sources, a Bible that was probably printed at Zurich, but instead of reproducing his own translation, produced a version of what we know as the Mathews Bible. This was published by John Rogers, chaplain to the English Merchants at Antwerp, where he met William Tyndale who was to meet a martyr’s death by burning at Vilvorde, and was a compilation of Tyndale’s translation of the Pentateuch and New Testament, together with Tyndale’s unpublished translations of the Old Testament books from Joshua to 2 Chronicles, with the rest of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha taken from Coverdale’s version. This was published as Matthew’s Bible at Antwerp in 1537 (Rogers published under the pseudonym, Thomas Matthew). When Archbishop Cranmer was sent a copy of this Bible he commented that ‘as for the translation, so far as I have read thereof I like it better than any other translation heretofore made.’ We should also note the Geneva Bible, intended more for private study than public reading in Church, which was published in more than seventy editions between 1560 and 1640. As Gordon Campbell notes, ‘it became the Bible of the puritan faction in England and in the puritan diaspora on the Continent and in America. Its readership, however, extended well beyond the puritan party, because it was cheap and easily available. Despite its anti-episcopacy, its readers included ceremonialists such as Lancelot Andrewes, Richard Hooker, John Whitgift and William Laud; such readers continued to read it, or at least to consult it, long after the King James version had been published.’ With its Calvinist roots and anti-episcopal notes it became the first translation of the English Bible to be published in Scotland (in 1579). The dedication to King James VI read: *this holy booke of God callit the Bible, newly imprentit, was*

brocht before us be the prenter thereof...and desyrit to be dedicate to zour Hienes with a convenient preface in our common Scottis language.

Such was the background to the revised translation that became the King James Bible of 1611. As Gordon Campbell again notes: 'the Bishop's Bible is more notable for its dignity and aspirations to majesty than for its clarity. The plain English of Tyndale and Coverdale, elevated slightly to reflect the standing of the Bible as a holy book, has been edged aside in favour of Latinate rotundity. Its scholarship is, alas, as lax as its prose is inflated...Because it was authorized, it became the Bible that was read in churches; at home, however, readers preferred the good demotic English of the Geneva Bible.'

William Tyndale, along with Miles Coverdale, stands at the fountain head of English translations and it is worth listening to what Tyndale has to say about the Scriptures:

The Old Testament is a book, wherein is written the law of God, and the deeds of them which fulfil them and of them also which fulfil them not.

The New Testament is a book, wherein are contained the promises of God; and the deeds of them which believe them or believe them not.

Evangelion (what we call the gospel) is a Greek word; and signifieth good, merry, glad and joyful tidings, that maketh a man's heart glad, and maketh him sing, dance, and leap for joy; as when David had killed Goliath the giant, came glad tidings unto the Jews, that their fearful and cruel enemy was slain, and they delivered out of all danger; for gladness whereof, they sung, danced, and were joyful. In like manner is the Evangelion of God (which we call gospel and the New Testament) joyful tidings, and, as some say, a good hearing published by the apostles throughout all the world, of Christ the right David: how that he hath fought with sin, with death, and the devil, and overcome them: whereby all men were in bondage to sin, wounded with death, overcome of the devil, are, without their own merits, or deservings, loosed, justified, restored to life and saved, brought to liberty and reconciled unto the favour of God, an set at one with him again: which tidings, as many as believe laud, praise, and thank God; are glad, sing and dance for joy.

Miles Coverdale, whose translation of the psalms remains the familiar Anglican version, because it is his translation, not that of the King James Bible, which is incorporated in the Book of Common prayer, writes of the prayerful use of the scripture. It is not 'the noise of our lips, but the fervent desire of the mind, that God alloweth. Which fervent prayer, with like study or meditation of the holy scripture, is able as well to put aback the great violence of our enemies, as to make easy our grievous adversity.' 'As considering the interpreters of the holy scripture, we ought not to choose them that teach to brawl and contend, but as go farther from the letter; whose godliness and holy life is known, whose learning is more plenteous, and whose exposition is most agreeable to God's word.'

The background of biblical translation that lies behind the remarkable endeavour springing from the Hampton Court Conference of 1694 which led to the production of the King James Bible is a reminder that the King James Bible was not initially the iconic translation that it later became – certainly not possessing the status accorded it in the contemporary Bible Believers Church Directory:

We believe the King James' 'Authorized Version' Bible to be the perfect and infallible word of God. We believe the Bible was inspired in its origination and then divinely preserved throughout its various generations and languages until

it reached us in its final form. By this we mean that the Authorized Version preserves the very words of God in the form in which He wished them to be represented in the universal language of these last days: English.

Archbishop Rowan Williams writes as follows about the impact of bibles on English Reformation devotion, and the place of the King James Bible.

The availability of English Bibles must equally be noted as a crucial factor in reformed English devotion: appeal to scriptural example becomes wider in reference than in the Middle Ages, and the images and idioms of scripture penetrate devotional writing and, of course, preaching.... But we should beware of ascribing to people of this era the uncritical reverence for authorized translations that made the 1611 King James Bible something of a fetish for English speaking Protestants of the nineteenth century and later. Several translations were current, and preachers might offer their own version of a text – as Andrewes regularly does. If you add to this consideration the question of how many homes, even literate ones, actually possessed a Bible before 1650, you may hesitate to overrate the influence of any one biblical version on the English soul, But there can be no doubt that the quantity of reference and use in church did indeed establish a kind of biblical literacy as the basis for the devotion of most. And it is worth noticing in passing that in Wales, where one ‘standard’ translation was dominant from its publication in 1588, the impact of the biblical text on the stabilizing of the language itself was far greater than in England.

Part of the impact of the Bible in the life of the English Church was that it was publicly read. John Donne, poet and Dean of St Paul’s, has some powerful words on this:

One opinion makes not catholic doctrine, one man makes not a Church. For this knowledge of God the Church is our academy: there we must be bred and there we may be bred all our lives and yet learn nothing..... The most powerful means is the Scripture, but the Scripture in the Church. Not that we are discouraged from reading the Scripture at home: God forbid we should think any Christian family to be out of the Church. At home the Holy Ghost is with thee in the reading of the Scriptures, but there he is with thee as a remembrance (‘The Holy Ghost shall bring to your remembrance whatsoever I have said unto you.’ Says our Saviour (John 14.26). Here in the Church he is with thee as a Doctor teach thee. First learn at Church and then meditate at home. Receive the seed by hearing the Scriptures interpreted here and water it by returning to those places at home. When Christ bids you ‘Search the Scriptures’ (John 5.39), he means you should go to them, who have a warrant to search, a warrant in their calling. To know which are Scriptures, to know what the Holy Ghost says in the Scriptures, apply thyself to the Church. Not that the Church is a judge above the Scriptures (for the power and commission which the Church hath, it hath from the Scriptures), but the Church is a judge above thee, which are the Scriptures, and what is the sense of the Holy Ghost in them.

When the translators began their task of revising the Bishop’s Bible, one of the things that they were committed to was ‘that the old ecclesiastical words’ were ‘to be kept, viz the word ‘church’ [was] not to be translated ‘congregation’ etc. (Puritans

preferred 'congregation' to 'church'), 'wash' to 'baptize', 'elder' or 'senior' to 'bishop'. The King James was to be a 'church' translation, so that 'when a word hath divers significations, that to be kept which hath been most commonly used by most of the ancient fathers, being agreeable to the propriety of the place and the analogy of the faith.' This is of a piece with Donne's stress on the importance of the Church and tradition for the interpretation of Scripture.

Although there were some concerns about the King James version, after the restoration of Charles II in 1660 there were few who pressed for a new revision until towards the end of the eighteenth century, when in the years that followed critical study of the scripture, and the awareness of new manuscripts, led eventually to the Revised Version NT 1881; OT 1885). Yet, just as the translators of the King James Bible had revised the earlier translation of the Bishop's Bible, so the revisers worked with a rule that they should 'introduce as few alterations as possible into the text of the Authorized Version consistently with faithfulness.' They also endeavoured to use the same English word or phrase for the same Hebrew or Greek. Whilst this enabled the English reader to be alert to the original it in many places had a pedantic influence on the translation, and the Revised Version never really replaced the Authorized Version in popularity. The version that did gain in popularity was the Revised Standard Version. Of this the entry on it in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* comments:

This was a revision of the *American Standard Version*, intended to stand 'in the Tyndale-King James tradition'.... The revisers took account of current scholarship and changes in language to produce a rendering more accurate than the *American Standard Version* and free from archaisms thought to be misleading, unintelligible, or unnecessary, but preserving a dignity suitable for public worship.

Changes in language and culture have in more recent times led to new biblical translations, but the celebration of this 400th anniversary of the King James Bible enables us to recall not just the meticulous and scholarly work of translating carried out four centuries ago, but also the words and passages that have become the living educts of the imagination in the life of the English Church.

+Geoffrey Rowell 2011