



Translating the Bible for King James

At the Hampton Court Conference in 1604 a new English version of the Bible 'to be read in churches' was conceived in response to the perceived problems of earlier translations. So began the task of about 50 of England's finest scholars.



Gordon Campbell

Gordon Campbell is Professor of Renaissance Studies at the University of Leicester. He is the author of several books including, most recently, *Bible: The Story of the King James Version, 1611–2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), on which some of the material in this article is based.

The origins of the translation that we know as the King James Version lie in the Hampton Court Conference of January 1604, when King James I assembled a group of bishops and moderate Puritans to discuss the grievances of Puritans who thought that the Church of England retained too many ceremonial vestiges of its Catholic past. The Puritans were unable to secure the reforms that they desired, but one proposal not on the agenda was to prove of historic importance. On the second day of the conference (16 January), according to William Barlow's *Sum and Substance of the Conference* (1604), John Rainolds – the president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford – proposed 'that there might be a new translation of the Bible, because those that were allowed in the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI were corrupt, and not answerable to the truth of the original'. This account is puzzling, because it refers to the Great Bible that was in use in the early sixteenth century rather than the Bishops' Bible (1568, revised 1572) which was the version used in England in 1604. Clearly something has been lost in the retelling, but whatever was said, the king was happy to take up the suggestion. Indeed, three years earlier, when, as James VI of Scotland, the king had attended the General Assembly of the Kirk at Burntisland (Fife), he had supported the idea of a new translation.

In 1604 the Bible read in churches in England was the Bishops' Bible of 1568, and the Bible read for private study was usually the Geneva Bible, which had been printed in England since 1576. The Bishops' Bible was serviceable, but its scholarship was as lax as its Latinate prose was inflated, and there were too many

literal translations that failed to communicate their meaning to the reader. Ecclesiastes 11.1, for example, which is familiar to KJV readers as 'cast your bread upon the waters', was translated by a weary bishop as 'lay thy bread upon wet faces'. The Geneva Bible had excellent scholarship, and in its Old Testament had achieved unprecedented levels of scholarly probity, but its marginal notes were regarded as anti-episcopal by the bishops and as anti-monarchical by King James.

In the months following the Hampton Court Conference, 15 rules were formulated to guide the translators. The first rule insisted that the new Bible would be a revision, not a fresh translation: 'The ordinary Bible read in the church, commonly called the Bishops' Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit.' As the revisers say in the preface to the KJV, their purpose 'was not to make a new translation ... but to make a good one better'. Another rule sought to control the ecclesiastical language of the new version: 'The old ecclesiastical words [are] to be kept, viz. the word "church" not to be translated "congregation" etc.' The implementation of this rule was to be a persistent source of Puritan objections to the KJV, as Puritans, appropriating Tyndale's argument, preferred 'congregation' to 'church', 'wash' to 'baptise', 'elder' or 'senior' to 'bishop' and 'minister' to 'priest'.

The reservations that the king and his bishops had about marginal notes were embodied in an interdiction: 'No marginal notes at all [are] to be affixed, but only for the explanation of the Hebrew or Greek words which cannot, without some

circumlocution, so briefly and fitly be expressed in the text.' This rule presented a problem for the translators, because they wanted their translation of the Old Testament to embody Christian understandings of the text, and this aim had been most successfully achieved through the marginal notes of the Geneva Bible. In the event, the translators found other ways of achieving this objective. There is no marginal note on 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son' (Isa 7.14), but the chapter summary announces 'Christ promised', and there is a cross-reference to the nativity accounts in the Gospels. Similarly, there are no marginal notes to guide the reader towards a Christian reading of the Song of Solomon, but the first chapter summary begins 'the Church's love unto Christ', and the apocalyptic reading of the book is sustained throughout these headings.

The process of translation and revision was to be undertaken by six companies, two in each of Westminster, Oxford and Cambridge. The reason for

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the choice of Westminster (as opposed to London, from which it was then separate) was that Westminster Abbey was a royal peculiar, and so exempt from any jurisdiction other than that of the monarch. The Oxford and Cambridge companies were to be chaired by the regius professors of Greek and Hebrew; what these four men had in common was not only scholarly competence, but also a debt to the crown: they had all been given their jobs by royal decree.

The seventeenth century was a more learned age than our own, but even by the standards of the period, the translators were exceedingly learned. The meetings took place in Latin, which was the language of scholarship as well as the teaching language of the universities. The translators all had good Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac; many also had Samaritan, Ethiopic, Arabic and rabbinical Hebrew. There was also competence in modern languages, though these were learned as dead languages to be read rather than spoken. Lancelot Andrewes, perhaps the most gifted linguist amongst the translators, was said by a contemporary to have the entire range of ancient biblical languages plus 'modern tongues to the number of fifteen'. We may, in our monoglot culture, think of competence in ancient languages as a rare accomplishment, but the translators took another view. In the epistle of the translators to the reader, which is (alas) no longer printed in most editions of the KJV, the translators declare 'that the Syrian translation of the New Testament is in most learned men's libraries ... and the Psalter in Arabic is with many'. I am not wholly convinced that this is still the case.

The work of translation was divided amongst the six companies. Three were assigned to portions of the Old Testament, two to the New Testament and one to the Apocrypha. The inclusion of the Apocrypha was contentious, because Puritans disliked the Apocryphal books being treated as if they were Scripture. Those who were uncompromisingly opposed to the inclusion of the Apocrypha were excluded from the project; the most important objector was the Hebraist Hugh Broughton, who fulminated against the KJV when it was published. Those who were willing to keep their objections to themselves were allowed to participate. The clearest example in this latter group was John Rainolds, who had proposed the new translation. In the 1580s Rainolds had given a series of 250 lectures refuting the attempt of the Jesuit Robert Bellarmine to make the Apocrypha part of the Old Testament canon. He was therefore unhappy that the KJV was to include the Apocrypha, but achieved posthumous revenge when his lecture series was published (in Latin) in two vast volumes in 1611, the year in which the KJV was published. I wonder if anyone has ever read them. In the event, the Apocrypha were destined to remain in most Bibles until 1826, when the British and Foreign Bible Society took the momentous decision to stop including the Apocrypha in its Bibles. The story of how this happened is not well understood (at least by me), and would make an excellent subject for an article in *The Bible in Transmission*.

When the six companies had finished their work, a 'general meeting' (as it is called in the rules) was convened daily over a period of nine months in 1610 in the Stationers' Hall in London. There is conflicting evidence of the size of this revision committee, which probably consisted of 12 members (two from each company), but may have had only six members (two from each of Westminster, Oxford and Cambridge), or some other number dictated by practicalities. The evidence for the procedures followed in the general meeting was described by the lawyer John Selden: 'That part of the Bible was given to him who was most excellent in such a tongue (as the Apocrypha to Andrew Downes), and then they met together; and one read the translation, the rest holding in their hands some Bible of the learned tongues or French, Spanish, Italian etc.; if they found any fault they spoke, if not he read on.'

It would be hard to imagine a more rigorous procedure. The rules had specified five English versions which could be used in the preparation of the new Bible (Tyndale, Thomas Matthew, Coverdale, the Great Bible, the Geneva Bible), and the whole range of texts in ancient languages was consulted, but the practice of using Bibles in other modern languages introduced a new level of scholarly rigour. The three vernacular Bibles mentioned were Protestant translations into French (the Olivétan Bible), Italian (the Diodati Bible) and Spanish (the Reina-Valera Bible), all of which are still in use. The 'etc.' includes Luther's Bible in

German and two new Latin versions (one Catholic, one Protestant), and may have included the recent Danish translation. The rules seem to imply that the Douai-Reims New Testament should not be used, but, as the notes of one of the revisers make clear, it was also taken into account.

The consultation of a variety of translations was in part a way of clarifying meaning, but it also exposed issues of textual authority. The second epistle to Timothy 3.16 is a good example. In the Wyclif version it is rendered, 'All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and profitable to doctrine, to reprove, to correction, to instruction which is in righteousness.' Tyndale, on the other hand, writes, 'For all scripture gave by inspiration of God is profitable to teach, to improve, to amend, and to instruct in righteousness.' There is a significant difference, in that Wyclif's version asserts that all Scripture is inspired, whereas Tyndale's is open to the interpretation that only some Scripture is inspired. The difference is apparent in many other translations. Coverdale is identical to Tyndale, and similar versions can be found in Spanish and German Bibles; the Wyclif reading, however, is echoed in the Geneva Bible, the Bishops' Bible and in the Italian and French versions. The difference relates to the choice of Greek text, which in some traditions (and in Erasmus's edition) includes the word 'and' and in others does not. If 'and' is part of the text, the sentence breaks into two parts, the first part of which must mean that all Scripture is inspired. If 'and' is not included, the structure of the sentence shifts, and it need not mean that all Scripture is inspired. The rigorous process whereby the revisers consulted alternative translations forced them to confront difficult issues of textual authority, some of which had important theological implications. Was that word 'and' inspired or not?

The work of revision did not end with the general meeting, for the work of the revisers was in turn reviewed by Miles Smith and Thomas Bilson. Smith was a classical scholar of whom it was said that Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac and Arabic were as familiar to him as his own mother tongue; it was he who wrote the majestic preface on behalf of the translators. Thomas Bilson, the Bishop of Winchester, was described by a contemporary as 'one of the profoundest scholars England had produced'; the dedication to King James in the KJV is anonymous, but may be the work of Bilson. Finally, the completed revision was sent to Archbishop Bancroft, who made fourteen alterations; it is not now known what they were, but one might speculate that the changes were designed to buttress episcopacy.

One of the paradoxes of the KJV is that these immensely learned translators strove to produce a translation that could be understood by anyone. As Smith explained in his preface, 'We desire that the Scripture may speak like itself, as in the language of Canaan, that it may be understood even of the very vulgar.' The phrase recalls Tyndale's aspiration to speak to the 'boy that driveth the plough', and it explains

the choice of vocabulary used by the translators. The Douai-Reims Bible had favoured a Latinate vocabulary, not for the defamatory reason suggested by Smith ('that it may be kept from being understood'), but rather because its translators aspired to be faithful to the Vulgate. In Leviticus 8.7, for example, the priestly garment is said in Douai-Rheims to be a 'tunic' because the Latin is 'tunica', whereas the KJV follows the Bishops' Bible in calling it a 'robe'; the word 'tunic' was too classical to be in common use, whereas 'robe' was understood by everyone. Similarly, the KJV translators also had a distinct preference for monosyllables: the Bishops' Bible reads, 'God is my shepherd, therefore I can lack nothing' (Ps 23.1), but in the KJV two of the three polysyllables are eliminated: 'The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.'

In the seventeenth 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

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churches) in mind. The most important consequence of this aspiration is that the translation, though laid out in prose, often has the pulse of poetry. Adam, blaming Eve for the fall, says, 'she gave me of the tree, and I did eat' (Gen 3.12), a perfect iambic pentameter line (and one which Milton incorporated intact into *Paradise Lost*). In the next verse, God says to Eve 'what is this that thou hast done?' (Gen 3.13), a perfect iambic tetrameter line. The seventeen words that I have quoted are all monosyllables cast in prose, but their regular rhythm makes them easy to read aloud.

The second reason for the pulse of the translation concerns private reading. Twenty-first century readers tend to read the Bible for devotional purposes, or simply to study the text. In the seventeenth century, reading took a different form, because the primary purpose of private reading was memorisation, and that process was facilitated by the underlying poetic rhythm of the translation: then as now, it was easier to memorise poetry than prose.

The practice of memorising, when considered alongside the fact that the Bible was much more often heard than read, points to a characteristic of the religious culture of the period that sharply differentiates it from our own. For us, the Bible is a book, one that is read and studied and then returned to the shelf. In the seventeenth century the Bible entered through the ear rather than the eye, and the purpose of both listening and reading privately was to memorise. The Bible was therefore not a book, but an inner resource, one that could be drawn upon to fortify the believer throughout the day.