

Bible Journal: 1611 – Translating the Authorised Version *by Mary Alexander*

The translation known as the King James Bible came about almost by chance. James I had arranged a conference at Hampton Court in 1604 between the bishops and the puritans, who rejected the system of bishops, having instead independent presbyteries or groups running each church, and found the Book of Common Prayer too Roman Catholic. Nothing much came out of the conference but one of the puritans, John Reynolds, suggested a new translation of the Bible, claiming that the earlier ones were corrupt. He had just lost the puritan cause by mentioning presbyteries, enraging James who had suffered under the Presbyterians as he grew up as king of Scotland. ‘No bishops, no king’ James thundered. He knew from experience that rejecting the church hierarchy led on to rejecting the monarchy. He had called the conference because he was very interested in theology, and he loved being a more powerful king in England than he was in Scotland. The idea of a new translation appealed to him, because if he ordered it, it would reinforce his status as head of the church, and as an educated man.

His archbishop of Canterbury, Richard Bancroft, quickly began to organise the translation, following the king’s instructions. Bancroft had rejected the idea originally. Reynolds probably objected to the Bishop’s Bible of 1568 which Puritans disliked because it was associated with the hierarchy. He probably wanted a new version of the Geneva Bible, which most people used, and was strongly Puritan in tone, with notes which were anti-royalist, but James hated it.

Six groups of eight translators were organised: two each at Westminster, Oxford and Cambridge, and the Bible was divided between them. Apart from Tyndale’s Bible all translations into English had been done by groups of scholars. Bancroft drew up 15 rules: the translation was to be based on the Bishop’s Bible, using Tyndale’s, Matthews’, Coverdale’s, the Great Bible and the Geneva Bibles if they were more accurate in a particular place. Each member of the group, or Company, was to translate his section then discuss it with the others. When a book was finished, it was to be sent to the other companies ‘to be considered of seriously and judiciously, for His Majesty is verie carefull of this poynt’. There were to be no marginal notes, unless a word was particularly obscure. The directors of each company were to meet, with other scholars, at the end to agree on the final version. This would mean that the translation was checked four times, so no errors or unwanted interpretations would survive.

Despite the rules, we have very little information about how the men actually worked. They seem to have worked alone on their first draft, then met weekly to discuss it with the rest of the company. They all had clerical appointments of some sort to finance them, and must have spent some time, at least on those. The rules also allowed scholars not in the companies to be consulted over difficult points. The translators were chosen for their skills in the various languages and in theology, so they included puritans as well as traditional churchmen. There was one layman, an outstanding scholar, Sir Henry Savile.

The First Westminster Company translated Genesis to II Kings, headed by Lancelot Andrewes, a bishop from 1605. The First Cambridge Company had I Chronicles to the Song of Songs, and the First Oxford had the rest of the Old Testament, from Isaiah to Malachi. John Reynolds was amongst this group. The Second Cambridge Company had the Apocrypha and the Second Oxford the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles and Revelation. This was directed by Thomas Ravis, born somewhere in Surrey, with George Abbot, and Sir Henry Savile, among others. The Second Westminster Company had the rest of the Epistles.

They were frighteningly learned, knowing several ancient languages each, as well as modern languages, and of course, the Bible, and they included England's first Arabic scholar. There were no instructions about the style or the language and yet they managed to produce a very fine-sounding piece of work. Although based on the Bishops' Bible, this was known to be a poor translation and very little of it was used. The majority, something like 85%, came from Tyndale's Bible of 1526. Even at the time, the language of the 1611 Bible was old-fashioned, perhaps deliberately echoing the 16th century translations and thereby proving the validity of the Elizabethan church settlement, including the Book of Common Prayer. Admitting that there was anything wrong with the national church would open up all sorts of problems. This is not to deny the great achievement of the translators. James I would have been delighted at the way his Bible has been absorbed into the English consciousness, and has lasted so long. Inevitably after 400 years there have been advances in the knowledge of the Biblical languages, and in theology, and the English language itself, so that other translations are more suitable today. Much of what we think of as 1611 is actually of the 1520s, when English was still developing a language of religion, but Tyndale and the 1611 Translators produced a Bible which could be understood by everyone.

Mary Alexander, January 2011.