

The King James Bible: A 400-year Old Story

May 2, 2011 marked the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible. While English translations existed before 1611, they were rare and incomplete until John Wycliffe's translation in the 1380s. From the early 1400s, the church sought to secure its own position by forbidding any but the Latin Vulgate to be published, on penalty of death. But English Bibles did appear all along. William Tyndale undertook the task of a complete translation from the original languages in 1525, promptly running afoul of the church, which branded him a heretic.

During the long reign of Elizabeth I, religious differences had been effectively suppressed. With James's ascension to the throne, the way was opened for Catholics to push for a return to the Roman church and Protestants to argue for a more complete break with the liturgies of Rome. Controversy over which version of English Scripture to use blossomed as James I took the throne. Puritans found the Bishop's Bible, authorized by Henry VIII and long in use during the Elizabethan years, completely unacceptable. They preferred the Geneva Bible, compiled by scholars who had fled to Geneva during the reign of Queen Mary (1553-58), where they learned at the feet of John Calvin and Theodore Beza. Elizabeth had allowed for the circulation of the Geneva Bible without endorsing it; it was already the preferred translation among Protestants.

The development of the King James Bible is as fascinating as a political story as it is a religious or linguistic one. James I had had enough of the Presbyterians during his reign as James VI in Scotland. The brutal politics there convinced him that radical Puritan views, well represented in the marginal notes of the Geneva Bible, threatened the monarchy. He preferred the structure of the Anglican church and believed it supported his own preference for the "divine right of kings."

In 1604, James convened the Hampton Court Conference, which decided to authorize a new translation for public worship, one that would use the best existing translations and original sources, and, even more importantly, be free of biased marginalia. Fifty-four premier scholars of the day were appointed for that work. All were clergy but one. No Catholics were among the group, but about half the group were Puritans, all moderates in their thinking. The Translators, as they were called, were divided into six companies, each assigned a portion of Scripture. They worked collaboratively within and between the companies until the translation was completed in 1611.

Many English versions have followed, but the King James has profoundly influenced English literature and language. Even many common phrases we can trace to the King James Bible—a

fly in the ointment, lamb to the slaughter, a labor of love, in the twinkling of an eye. And many more.

Newly discovered Hebrew and Greek documents have made later translations more accurate, with language more accessible to modern ears. But many would agree with H. L. Mencken's conclusion on contemporary translations. "The Authorized Version," he said, "has never yielded to any of them, for it is palpably and overwhelmingly better than they are."

Dr. Melissa Kirkpatrick

Director of Education Ministries, *Manassas Presbyterian Church*

Certified Christian Educator and Reformed Institute Company of Teachers