

# Translating the King James Bible

**King James approved the terms of reference which Richard Bancroft, Archbishop of Canterbury drafted for the translators.**

They were given fifteen rules of translation which were strictly followed. Bancroft's Rule No.3, like the church authorities of Tyndale's day, suppressed the correctly translated word "congregation" from the Greek word "ecclesia" and ruled that the word "Church" was to be used to ensure the continued authority of the Church.

Two rules are of particular interest because they show that the translators were required to translate the text as literally as possible:

- ① *The ordinary Bible read in the church, commonly called the Bishop's Bible, to be followed, and altered as little as the truth of the original will permit.*
- ⑮ *These translations to be used when they agree better with the text than the Bishop's Bible: Tyndale's, Matthew's, Coverdale's, Whitchurch's, Geneva.*

(The Great Bible became known as the Whitchurch's Bible after one of the two printers Edward Whitchurch whose name sometimes appears on the title page.)

## No Marginal Notes!

Chapter headings were to be retained  
⑤ and marginal notes were to be

excluded. The only permitted marginal references were those which explained the meaning of a Hebrew or Greek word ⑥. Cross references to other parts of Scripture were also permitted ⑦.



*The Geneva Bible was full of footnotes, many of which were critical of kings and priests.*

The remaining terms of reference set out the rules for adjudicating in the event of translating rare Hebrew or Greek words and for peer review of the work. The King was clear that marginal notes were not permitted in this new version. The protestant Geneva Bible was popular in England and gave cause for concern to both the King and the Bishops. For example, the Geneva Bible reads:

*Psalm 105:15 "Touche not mine anointed,<sup>h</sup> and doe my<sup>i</sup> Prophets no harme."*

The Geneva marginal notes for this verse are:

- h Those whom I have sanctified to be my people.*
- i Meaning, the old fathers, to whom God shewed himself plainly, and who set forth his word.*

The Geneva Bible argues that the “anointed” were God’s people and therefore that this was not a reference to the King. The Geneva Bible is packed with marginal notes including several that challenge the authority of the King to do as he chooses with his subjects.

## The Work Begins

By the end of July 1604 six companies of translators set to work. King James had directed that the whole Bible be divided into five sections plus a group to translate the Apocryphal books.

### ❖ Two groups at Westminster

*Genesis to Second Book of Kings  
New Testament letters*

### ❖ Two groups at Oxford

*Isaiah to Malachi  
Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts  
& Revelation*

### ❖ Two groups at Cambridge

*First Book of Chronicles to Song  
of Solomon*

### ❖ The Apocryphal Books

The translation work took about seven years to complete with groups finishing their sections at various times between 1608 and 1610. In 1610 the representatives of each translation group met in Stationers’ Hall, London each day for nine months to check and cross-check each others’ work and for the translation to be read aloud.



As the title page of the King James Bible states, it was, “Appointed to be read in the Churches”. The reading aloud at Stationer’s Hall was to allow changes where considered necessary to ensure that the translation could be readily understood by the hearers as well as those who read it.

## Public Reading

The process by which God has revealed His Word to us is clearly shown by Moses and the biblical precedent for the public reading of God’s Word was also set by Moses:

### ❖ Moses

*Moses wrote all the words of the Lord. And he rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel. (Exodus 24:4).*

Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient." (Exodus 24:7)

We have a responsibility to read the Word of God carefully and to ensure we understand what God requires of us. When the children of Israel listened to God's Word, it demanded a response, so they said they wanted to serve him.

### ❖ **Nehemiah**

Nehemiah also recognised the importance of the public reading with understanding of God's Word:

*Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up ... and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law; and the people stood in their place. So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading (Nehemiah 8:5,7-8).*

When the people heard the Word of God being read they wept because they realised that they had neglected God's way and now wanted to turn to Him.

### **The Completed Work**

When the revisers had completed their work the scripts were passed to Thomas Bilson, Bishop of Winchester, and Miles Smith an Oxford graduate. It was Smith who wrote on behalf of the translators the preface for the King James Bible, 'The Translators to the Reader'. Finally, the completed work was sent to Richard Bancroft who apparently made fourteen changes before his death on 2nd

November 1610. The details of these changes are not known. In order to remain faithful to the authority of the original text the King James Bible has been subject to more rigorous checks than any other translation of the Bible.

### **Tyndale's Contribution**

The King James Bible draws extensively on the work of William Tyndale. He translated the whole of the New Testament, the first five books of the Bible called The Pentateuch, the Book of Jonah and Joshua to 2 Chronicles.

Over 80% of the King James New Testament is directly attributed to him and 75% of the Old Testament books that he translated. It has been estimated that the King James translators incorporated nearly 90% of Tyndale's work verbatim in the King James Bible. The fifty-four Bible translators, even with the benefit of eighty-five years of advances in biblical scholarship since Tyndale's time, agreed with most of his work.



Tyndale's translation of John, Chapter One.  
"All things were made by it" (God's Word).

Tyndale's work was also one of the key source documents for Coverdale's and Matthew's Bibles, The Great Bible and Geneva Bible. Bancroft's rule No.1 required that the Bishop's Bible was to be followed by the translators and deviations permitted only where the original text required. The brief for the Bishops Bible was the Great Bible.

The Great Bible closely resembles Coverdale's Bible which was a revision of Matthew's Bible which was largely Tyndale's work. Therefore over the years from Tyndale to 1611 the translators have perpetuated the language and quality of Tyndale's translation work.

## **Translators Translating**

The translators were required to produce a literal word-for-word translation. The benefit of this detailed process of translation is that it has given us an English Bible which we can study through the use of Bible Concordances which enable us to drill down and discover the Hebrew or Greek words behind our English text. More on this subject is planned, God willing, for a future article.

The translators appear to have worked in a general systematic way to ensure that when a particular word occurs in the Hebrew or Greek texts, the same or similar English word is used each time. Each original word was translated into the closest equivalent English word. The translators tried to find an English word for every word in the original text. When additional words were needed to make sense in English they were added in italics as was done in the 1560 Geneva Bible. Wherever possible the word order of the original texts was also followed.

These features of the King James

Bible have all contributed to its important role in preserving, for the last 400 years, the accuracy of God's plan of salvation for mankind.

## **Biblical Precision**

God expresses His Word in a precise and ordered way for a reason. For example, Hebrews chapter 4 tells us of an incident recorded in Genesis chapter 14. Abraham met the King of Salem (that is Jerusalem), on his return from a battle to rescue his nephew Lot from his captors.

*For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all, first being translated "king of righteousness," and then also king of Salem, meaning "king of peace" (Hebrews 7:1-2).*

Why we might ask, are we expected to understand that the King of Salem (Jerusalem) was first King of righteousness and then King of peace? The Apostle James gives us an answer.

*But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy (James 3:17).*

God has decreed that we must try in our lives to do things His way. First, to strive for purity in our lives, or right ways in all that we say and do. This must come first, only then will God bless us with true peace.

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*Next: The Impact and Message of the King James Version*