Revisions and Printing of the King James Bible

As with all human activities, there were some errors and omissions when the King James (or Authorised) Bible was first printed. In the 1611 first edition there were about 350 printer's errors.

Printing Errors

There were at least two stages in the process where human error could occur in typesetting using moveable metal type. First, there were compositor's errors usually misspellings or words left out. Then there were errors missed by the proof readers. These errors could be words which were correctly spelt, but not the words originally intended (such errors occur today if we are over reliant upon computer spell checks!). The 1611 edition contained 18 errors where the letter "u" was set when "n" was required, for example, "aud" instead of "and".

Here is an example of one verse where a perfectly well-spelt word appeared, but it was the wrong word:

"The children which thou shalt haue, after thou hast lost the other, shall say againe in thine eares, The place is too straight for me: giue place to mee that I may dwell" (Isaiah 49:20, 1611 Edition).

Proof readers for the first edition failed to spot this error, but the word "straight" was corrected to "strait" in following editions. The Old Testament Hebrew word means, "a narrow or tight place". Jesus describes the path to eternal life as being the strait and narrow way (read Matthew 7:13-14).

This verse also shows that some words were spelled quite differently in 1611 from the way we spell them now, indicating that some revision would be necessary over the years, to keep pace with changes to the English language.

Nick-named Bibles

Because of certain important printing errors, some Bible Versions acquired nicknames, and here are two of them.

🕮 The 'Wicked' Bible

One edition of the King James Bible (1631) acquired the title 'Wicked Bible' because the printers omitted the word 'not' from Exodus 20:14. "You shall not commit adultery." This proved to be a costly error, for in 1632 a heavy fine was imposed on the printer of £300.00 (then a lot of money).

🕮 The 'Printers' Bible

Some of the small Bibles printed in 1612 ('octavo' book) of the King James Bible have for Psalm 119:161, *"Printers"* instead of *"Princes have persecuted me".*

Official Printers

The 1611 Bible was not just authorised for public reading in the churches. You had to be an authorised printer before you could print it, as follows:

King's Printer

From 1611 to 1629 the printing of the King James Bible was the sole

privilege of the King's Printer, Robert Barker and his partners. The first folio edition printed in 1611 was followed the same year by a second edition, which was also printed again in 1612 and 1613 with correction of some of the earlier printing errors. For example, in Acts 24:24 Drusilla wife of the Roman Governor Felix was a "Jew", which was corrected to "Jewess".

Cambridge University

Permission was granted in 1628 by King Charles I for the University to publish and print King James Bibles. They produced higher quality Bibles than were previously produced by the King's Printer. Folio editions were printed in 1629 and 1638. These editions also introduced some printing errors.

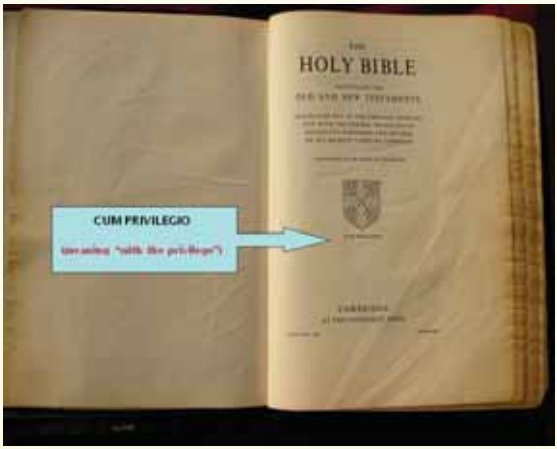
Oxford University

In 1632 Oxford University also secured the right to print Bibles. The New Testament was published in 1673 and the complete Bible in 1675. Further editions followed and by 1683, within ten years of publishing the New Testament, Oxford University Press became the largest printing house in England.

Revisions

The King James Bible was subject to several more revisions in 1629, 1638 and 1653. These revisions were mainly to correct errors or to replace missing words, wrong spelling or punctuation. Some corrections were made to rectify translation errors. In 1660, after the period of a Puritan government under Oliver Cromwell the reign of Charles II put an end to any idea of a major revision of the King James Bible.

The most significant revision of the 1611 King James Bible took place in 1769. Benjamin Blayney revised the grammar and punctuation and introduced running heads at the top of each page column, and chapter summaries were also added. Blayney's revision work is still the standard text of the King James Bible today. There were protests, led by Thomas Curtis, that with successive editions critical changes were being made to the 1611 text. This complaint was investigated by the Oxford University Press and they concluded that the changes were of no importance whatever to the message.



Title page to the modern King James Bible, printed by Cambridge University Press,'Wide Margin Edition'.

In 1883 to convince any doubters of their conclusions, they published the original 1611 text, so that people could read and make comparisons between the different editions and draw their own conclusions.

Publisher's Monopoly

The 'Constitutions of Oxford' (1407) were designed to prevent John Wycliffe from producing Bibles and religious tracts. From then on there were restrictions in force on printing Bibles. From the time of King Henry VIII the publishing of Bibles required Crown approval. Henry granted a five year licence to Thomas Cromwell (1539) to print Bibles. This produced revenue for the Crown and income for the printer. The Catholic Queen Mary I granted a Royal Charter to the Stationers Company (1556) which gave them a monopoly and control in printing books.

Copyright

King James Bibles usually include the words 'Cum Privilegio' on the title page indicating that the printer had been granted the privilege of printing the Bible. In the seventeenth century there were only three approved publishers of the King James Bible. In Scotland this monopoly was abolished in 1839. However, this restriction on who is permitted to publish King James Bibles still applies today. One new publisher has entered the arena because they are licensed in Scotland and sell Bibles both North and South of the border. Today two printers have the rights to publish in England the King James Bible – the Oxford and Cambridge University presses – because Cambridge now own the Queen's printer, the Eyre and Spottiswoode publishing house.

Title page to the Great Bible 1549, printed in Fleet Street, London by Edwarde Whitechurch.

To America

Providentially there was a conjunction of events that led to the King James Bible going to America and becoming the leading translation of God's Word for the nation. The Lord had spoken through the prophet Isaiah that His Word was to go to all nations. Jesus was to come and the Gospel message was to show God's purpose with Israel and to be a light to the Gentile nations.

Listen, O coastlands, to me, and take heed, you peoples from afar! The Lord has called me from the womb; from the matrix of my mother He has made mention of my name ... Indeed He says, 'It is too small a thing that you should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be My salvation to the ends of the earth' (Isaiah 49:1,6).

This is how it all worked out, under the hand of God:

1607

Sir Walter Raleigh founded the English colony of Virginia where Jamestown was established the

same year. This presence of English speaking people from the British Isles led to companies developing trade links with America. Many were Puritans who sought religious tolerance beyond the influence of King Charles I.

1620

The Pilgrim Fathers emigrated to America to settle in Virginia. They were Puritans who did not find a place that was acceptable to them either in the Netherlands or in the England of Charles II, where the Church of England was the basis for political and religious stability. Therefore, early in the seventeenth century, the King James Bible crossed the Atlantic. Towards the end of the seventeenth century more colonists followed in their thousands to the Eastern coastline of America, from Georgia to Maine. They were responsible for the King James Bible being the Bible of first choice and English being the common tongue. All imported English language Bibles were the King James Version because the 'copyright' restrictions on printing Bibles applied to the colonies. Due to the American War of Independence the British Government imposed an import-export embargo. This included cutting off the supply of Bibles to the colonists. This only provided a spur for the colonists to print their own Bibles!

1777-81

Robert Aitken, a Scottish immigrant printed four editions of the New Testament and in 1782 with the approval of Congress and the commendation of George Washington he published the first American printed Bible. It was the King James Version with the Apocrypha omitted. After the American Revolution (1776-83) Independence was achieved and the restrictions of the English Crown on printing Bibles became meaningless. However, trade resumed and the importing of King James Bibles resumed and dominated the market.

1861

Abraham Lincoln used the King James Bible (the 1853 edition, printed in Oxford) when he took the oath of office of President of the United States. The same Bible was used again for this purpose by President Obama in 2009.

1856

The American Bible Society was concerned to maintain textual accuracy and published an American version of the Authorised Version text. The result of their work was a King James Bible with corrections of printing errors and the use of more modern words.

As you can see, the King James Bible has had a lasting influence on American political life. it is a Bible which has remained as far as possible true to the original documents from which it has been translated. It is important for modern version translators to maintain this integrity.

Peter Moore

Next: The impact of the new versions of the Bible