



Cercles (2011)

The Occasional Papers Series

**1611-2011**  
**CELEBRATING THE TRANSLATION OF**  
**THE KING JAMES (OR AUTHORISED) VERSION**  
**OF THE BIBLE IN ENGLISH<sup>1</sup>**

**PAULINE CROFT**

*Royal Holloway University of London<sup>2</sup>*

In 2011 we commemorate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the completion of the King James version of the Bible. Celebrations are being co-ordinated by the King James Bible Trust, and there will be special church services, lectures, conferences, and exhibitions in various great libraries, including those of the universities of Oxford and Cambridge as well as Lambeth Palace, home of the archbishop of Canterbury. The BBC is broadcasting two television programmes, together with three radio programmes, to cover the emergence of the Bible in English. So there is considerable public and media interest in Britain and also the British Commonwealth, while the American protestant Churches are also coming together to honour the occasion.

The King James version was not the first English Bible, but a thoroughly revised translation going back to the original sources, the product of what was, at the time, cutting-edge scholarship in Greek, Hebrew and Latin. The project was suggested originally at an assembly of the Scottish kirk in 1601, at a meeting at Burntisland in Fife, but James VI of Scotland, although agreeing to the project, did nothing further. Of course that text, if it had been translated, would have been in lowland Scots, not English. However, English churchmen were quite independently thinking along the same lines. At the palace of Hampton Court in 1604, the godly, or more puritan-inclined, clergy of the English church pressed King James I of England (as he became King James VI of Scotland in 1603), to implement various reforms in a more low-church, less ceremonial, or puritan direction. (English ecclesiastical scholars are very cautious about using the word puritan these days, as it can have such a variety of meanings). The king did not concede those changes, which

---

<sup>1</sup> This is the expanded version of the lecture given on 1 November 2010 at the Institute of Historical Research, London (Tudor-Stuart Autumn 2010 Seminar).

<sup>2</sup> Pauline Croft MA DPhil(Oxon) FSA FRHistS, Professor of Early Modern History at Royal Holloway University of London. Professor Croft is notably the author of *King James* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

were opposed by many senior churchmen. However, there was also a request for a new translation of the Bible. To this James willingly agreed. The king was a remarkably well-educated man; having already encountered the parallel idea in Scotland, he found the translation project worthwhile in itself. Politically, it was also a tactical concession he could make to those godly clergy who were unhappy with the current state of the Church of England.

The first translations in the vernacular had emerged some 600 years earlier, with Anglo-Saxon versions of the Gospels and Psalms. Around 1300, there were translations of Genesis, Exodus and the Psalms into "middle English", which was just emerging. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century the reform movement known as Lollardy, led by John Wycliffe, saw more Bible translation. Two Wycliffite versions emerged, though neither was the work of Wycliffe himself. The names that have come down to us are Nicholas of Hereford and John Purvey. Others were involved: Purvey noted cryptically in his prologue that he had worked with "divers fellows and helpers". Both texts follow the wording of the Latin Vulgate (c.404 AD), and possibly for many readers they were more of a crib to enable them to read the Latin, than a stand-alone translation. In any case, the Wycliffite movement was condemned in 1407 at the Council of Oxford, which forbade any fresh translations of the whole or part of the Bible, or the use of any translation made in the time of Wycliffe. However, there was a minimal let-out: translation was forbidden, *unless* it had received diocesan or synodical sanction. Probably exploiting that clause, numerous manuscript versions of the Wycliffite texts were copied and circulated right up to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. Clearly there was a real hunger for the Bible in English, well before the Reformation.

Then came printing, the transformative technology of the early modern world. The printed Vulgate emerged in 1456, and was known as the Gutenberg Bible. It was followed by a wave of learned editions of the Greek and Latin texts. These inspired the young and brilliant scholar William Tyndale, but he fell under suspicion and fled to Germany. He probably met Luther at Wittenberg only two years after Luther's own German New Testament appeared in 1522. Tyndale's English New Testament was printed at Worms in 1526. Subsequent editions were expanded to include the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament) and Jonah. Tyndale also left Joshua and 2 Chronicles in manuscript, but tragically, he was burned as a heretic at Vilvoorde in Holland in 1536, the same year that Queen Anne Boleyn, another devotee of the new Biblical learning, was executed on Tower Green. Much of Tyndale's translation, particularly of the New Testament, passed almost unchanged into the 1611 Authorised version, a remarkable tribute to his achievement.

The idea of an English Bible was becoming mainstream. In 1534 the Convocation of Canterbury petitioned Henry VIII for a new translation.

The king did not respond, but Miles Coverdale, a Cambridge monk, published in 1535 a complete Bible which he tactfully dedicated to Henry. Coverdale knew German, so he could use Luther's translations and convert them into English: he used Tyndale's English text; and he also used the work of the Zurich reformer, Heinrich Zwingli. The rest he translated into English from the Latin Vulgate. Coverdale did not know enough Hebrew to tackle the Old Testament afresh, but his translation of the German Psalms into an English version became a liturgical classic. Archbishop Thomas Cranmer's Book of Common Prayer, published in 1549, and reinstated by Elizabeth in 1559, shortly after her accession, used the Coverdale Psalms within the services of Matins and Evensong. Happily, Coverdale survived to see his work acknowledged. Returning from exile under Mary Tudor, he assisted at the consecration of Archbishop Matthew Parker in 1560, and died in 1568. Coverdale's legacy endures, for devotees of the traditional Anglican Prayer Book continue to use his Psalms.

In 1537, Henry VIII softened his stance on Bible translations and a revised version using the texts of both Tyndale and Coverdale emerged. This was known as "Matthew's Bible" and was the first to bear royal authorisation. The text was probably printed in Antwerp for the London printers Richard Grafton and Edward Whitchurch, who continued to print and reprint English-language Bibles into Elizabeth's reign. The radical protestant John Rogers was the real promoter, and he was to become the first protestant martyr burnt under Mary Tudor, so he paid a high price for his work. Then came the Great Bible of 1539, printed in Paris under the patronage of Henry VIII's leading minister Thomas Cromwell. It was a response to the royal Injunctions of 1538, which ordered a lectern-size English Bible to be set up in churches throughout England. So "great" refers merely to its size, though its position was reinforced by Archbishop Cranmer in 1540 when he re-issued it with a preface he had written, and ordered its use in all English places of worship. The Great Bible has a superb title-page with God blessing Henry VIII, who is seen handing out copies of the Bible to Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell. Almost certainly the original woodcut was by Hans Holbein. All these 1530s editions rely very heavily on the work of Tyndale and particularly Coverdale. However, in 1539 the Oxford scholar Richard Taverner produced a revision of the so-called Matthew's Bible with improved versions of the Greek texts of the New Testament. Taverner was an excellent Greek scholar, but he knew no Hebrew, so he kept the Latin Vulgate as the basis for his English translation of the Old Testament. That example reminds us that translators did what they could to move the project forward: where they did not have the full linguistic skills necessary for the ancient texts, they improvised as best they could, using what was already available. Printing had vastly increased the number of copies that could easily be produced. They were fairly cheap and they sold well, so independent scholars and publishers saw a commercial opportunity, not just a religious one. Bibles in English were in demand. However, commissioning a translation of the whole text of the Bible with a uniform prose style was hardly possible without much greater patronage, to support scholars at

work for the length of time required. Lacking that bounty, the best that publishers could produce was amalgams of different pieces of translation.

Then came the terrible backlash of 1540, with the downfall of Thomas Cromwell, after his disastrous choice of Anne of Cleves for Henry's fourth wife. The rush of translations came to a halt, with the conservative faction at court in the ascendant, led by Bishop Stephen Gardiner. It was back to the Latin Vulgate for official use, and in 1546 the use of Tyndale's and Coverdale's versions was forbidden by royal proclamation. The whole momentum behind the English Bible came juddering to a halt. But only for a year, since Henry VIII's death in 1547 led to the succession of Edward VI, and ushered in the Protestant regimes of initially Protector Somerset and later the Duke of Northumberland. English Bibles could once more be printed, circulated and used in worship. However, in 1553 Edward VI died and his half-sister Mary succeeded. From her base at Framlingham Castle in Norfolk, she overthrew Northumberland and claimed the Crown. The Latin Mass was restored and with it the use of the Latin Vulgate. However, by now printing had made it virtually impossible for any government to control what people had already bought, or what they could read discreetly at home. As technology moves forward, be it printing or television, or now the internet, the level of control that any government can exercise over information that it would prefer you did not know, is steadily shrinking. Just look at WikiLeaks.

In exile at Geneva, the Oxford classicist and Calvinist William Whittingham published in 1557 a revised version of the New Testament, for the use of English protestants there. For the first time the text was divided into verses and printed in modern-style Roman type. He also took a leading part in the production of a full Bible including the Old Testament, remaining behind to supervise its completion after 1558, when everybody else rushed back to England on Queen Mary's death. In 1560 Whittingham produced a full text dedicated to Elizabeth I, known in polite circles as the Geneva Bible but more popularly as the Breeches Bible: from its unfortunate rendering of Genesis where Adam and Eve realised they were naked, so they made themselves "breeches". Whittingham's exile had also made him familiar with the reformers Calvin and Beza (Théodore de Bèze), so it is possible to see their influence as well as that of other French translators like Olivétan and Lefèvre d'Étaples. The Geneva Bible remained influential under Elizabeth and many passages were later adopted into the Authorised Version.

At the same time, after 1558, the Great Bible of Cromwell and Cranmer returned to popularity. In 1566 Archbishop Matthew Parker and his colleagues undertook a revision which became the "Bishops Bible", published in 1568. In 1571 all churchwardens were ordered by Convocation to obtain a copy for their churches and it was revised again in 1572. We can see here the impact of the Northern Rising, between 1569 and 1571, where the religiously conservative northern rebels destroyed

both English Bibles and English prayer-books, which had replaced the Latin Mass after Mary's death. This uprising reminded the Privy Council that the north of England was still far from Protestant and far from loyal to Elizabeth; hence the orders to churchwardens and the second revision of 1572. The revision was based on the Great Bible of 1539, but with greater attention to recent Greek and Hebrew scholarship. The Bishops Bible followed the Geneva Bible in dividing the text into verses for easy reference, a practical device that had proved popular with both readers and preachers. It was also mildly censored, with phrases savouring of "lightness or obscenity" discreetly tidied up. No marginal notes were allowed, in case they proved contentious. The translators worked book by book, without much co-ordination, so the translation varies a great deal in quality. However, the frontispiece was very forthright: the Queen and her ministers are shown presiding over a bishop-dominated church. There would be no radical tampering with the 1559 settlement of religion.

Still, it was clear that a small but tenacious Roman Catholic community still survived in England. In Roman canon law it was necessary for laymen to receive special permission to read the Bible in the vernacular. Intent on creating an acceptable version, the members of the English Catholic college at Reims translated the New Testament, largely at the instigation of William Allen, later Cardinal. It was issued in 1582 and the Old Testament in English followed in 1609. Both were translated from the Vulgate, as the Council of Trent had insisted on its primacy, but for the New Testament the original Greek was also consulted. In many places the English is truly Elizabethan, direct and vivid, so the translators of the 1611 version had no hesitation in consulting the Catholic New Testament produced in Reims.

Obviously, the background of the King James Bible was far from simple. The number of possible Bibles in circulation at the end of Elizabeth's reign, together with increasing scholarly knowledge of the Hebrew and Greek texts, led to the request in 1604 for a new translation. In virtually all other ways James at the Hampton Court conference had rebuffed the puritans. The leading divine was the godly Dr John Reynolds, "the principal mouth and speaker". At the end of a long list of suggestions for reform, Reynolds asked for "one only translation of ye bible, to be authentick and read in ye church". Another version has the rather more courtly "May your majesty be pleased that the Bible be new translated". Richard Bancroft, the authoritarian Bishop of London, argued that it was pointless to follow "every man's humour". However, James was taken with the idea, not least because he had strong objections to the Geneva Bible, still popular among Calvinists. To the king, it was offensive, not least in its explicit condemnation of royal rule and its frequent use of the word "tyrant". Significantly, the word tyrant is not found at all in the King James Version.

James made his views clear. "His Highness wishes, that some especial pains should be taken in that behalf for one uniform translation ... and this to be done by the best learned of both the universities; after them to be reviewed by the bishops and chief learned of the church: from them to be presented to the Privy Council; and lastly to be ratified by his Royal authority, to be read in the whole church, and no other". Old Archbishop Whitgift had died in February 1605, and James elevated Bancroft from London to Canterbury. Delighted with his new post, Bancroft was keen to follow the king's wishes, and by 1605, James was clearly behind the project. The archbishop wrote in July 1605, to a group of Cambridge scholars: "I am persuaded his royal mind rejoiceth more with good hope, which he hath for the happy success of that worke (the new Bible) than of his peace concluded with Spain". Strong words, for James was very proud of "his peace", bringing to an end the long Armada war that had dogged Elizabeth's later years. Bancroft also organised the financing: the bishops were required to find livings for the Translators (usually capitalised), of more than £20 per year – a decent income. James was not inclined to pay for it from Crown funds. The translating committee was to be divided into six companies of eight members, with six directors supervising them: 54 men in all (although we only know the names of fifty). The letter of instruction written by Bancroft insists that the base text must be the Bishops Bible, "to be ... as little altered as the Truth of the original will permit". Those instructions were discreetly ignored: modern studies have shown that less than a quarter of the Authorised version can be traced to the Bishops Bible.

James appointed divines, including godly clerics like John Reynolds, but also high churchmen like John Overall and Lancelot Andrewes, and one layman, the pioneering manuscript collector, mathematician, astronomer, and translator of St John Chrysostom, Sir Henry Savile. The Bishops Bible was studied, but other English versions were also consulted. In the Translators' own words, their aim was not "to make a new translation ... but to make a good one better". They wanted a definitive revision. Careful marginal notes were allowed, but only on matters of text and translation, not on theology. The scale of the endeavour was remarkable: the divines divided into six groups, two each working in Oxford, Cambridge and Westminster. Each was to produce an individual translation, which was then to be discussed by the group, and a text agreed on. That was circulated to the other five groups, "seriously and judiciously" as Bancroft instructed, until a final version emerged. If the Translators disagreed about any passage, or if they found something obscure, they were free to ask any learned man of their choice for assistance. There was also an insistence on uniformity: texts quoted in the New Testament were reproduced in exactly the same words as they had been translated in the Old Testament, although it was already obvious to Biblical scholars that the "quotations" in the New Testament were often inexact, paraphrases of the Old Testament rather than direct quotations.

What insights can we gain into the translation teams? The diary still survives of Samuel Ward, one of the Translators working on the Cambridge panel allocated the Apocrypha. It has been described as “an agonised conversation between the diarist and his conscience”, and Ward was undoubtedly a puritan. However, relatively little is known about the years between 1604 and 1611. Once the process was set in motion, once Bancroft had disseminated the rules and the Translators were chosen, the project drops from sight. Only scraps remain. In November 1604, Bishop Lancelot Andrewes sent a note to the secretary of the Society of Antiquaries that he could not attend the weekly meeting, as “the afternoon is our translation time”. There is also an extraordinary vellum-bound book of 125 pages, in Lambeth Palace Library, entitled “An English Translation of the Epistles of Paul the Apostle”. Each page is ruled in red ink in double columns with a margin to left and right. Evidence points to its origins within the second Westminster company under Barlow, and the manuscript has gone through several hands for corrections. From another remarkable document, it is clear that such manuscript books were called in when they were needed for final editing. A letter survives from William Eyre, fellow of Emmanuel College Cambridge, to James Ussher, later to become famous as an Irish archbishop and collector of early manuscripts, including the magnificent Book of Kells. Eyre asked for the return of his manuscript book, because “there was an order taken from the king’s majesty by the archbishop of Canterbury, that the translation of the Bible shalbe finished and printed as soon as may be”. Dated 5 December 1608, the note suggests that James himself was chivvying for greater speed on his pet project. Lastly, the Bodleian Library Oxford holds a copy of the Bishops Bible printed in 1602, the base text on which Bancroft’s rules had insisted. Marked on this copy are the first suggestions of an individual Translator, followed by the comments and corrections of his fellow-Translators. That group met in Merton College, Oxford, for their first meeting on 13 February 1605, and included George Abbot, the future Archbishop of Canterbury. They used the rooms of the cosmopolitan Sir Henry Savile. So here on these pages is a direct link with the initial process of translation.

At some point early in 1610, the only remaining task was to pull together the work of the teams into one reasonably homogeneous whole. By early 1611, a final text was ready for the printer. Bishop Miles Smith wrote the long and beautiful Preface. “Translation it is, that openeth the window, to let in the light ...” He hoped that the translation would bring to readers “the light of understanding, stableness of persuasion, repentance from dead works, newness of life, holiness, peace, joy”.

The translation was a masterpiece of English prose. Moreover, simply by being the work of a team which had cross-checked their draft versions before arriving at the final wording, it was homogeneous, from Genesis to Revelation. What had always been regarded by protestants as God’s word, was now speaking in one divine voice. However, it was not legislated into use: technically, it was never “Authorised”. Of course it carried an aura of

royal authority since the king had set up the project, but there was merely a statement on the title-page: "Appointed to be read in churches". Regarded as simply a revision of earlier texts, it was not even entered into the Stationers Register. The book was in black-letter, an old-fashioned decision by the printer, and had numerous misprints. The Geneva Bible was still widely used, and it was not until after the royalist Restoration of Charles II in 1660 that the King James Version became what it has remained to so many, simply "The Bible". It had a second long life in the American colonies, and Lincoln's Gettysburg address is drenched in its language. The Bible read by multi-millions of Chinese Christians is based directly upon it.

The Authorised Version is, quite simply, the only universally known English version of the Bible, and it remained the only Bible used in British churches until the Revised Version of 1881-85, which gained a certain following. There is no doubt that in 2011 we celebrate an extraordinary achievement, religious, literary, cultural, international, and wholly remarkable. The greatest publication of Tudor-Stuart language and scholarship, and remarkably, still the most widely-used book in the world, is the King James Version of the Bible.