How We Got the Bible

The King James Translation

The Setting: The Hampton Court Conference

In 1603 James, King of Scotland, came to England as King James I. The king is also the head of the Church of England. If you were opposed to the established church you were, in effect, opposed to the government and the monarchy. Where did ultimate authority lie? With the Word of God or with the king?

One influential group that was opposed to the church of England was the Puritans. The Puritans did not believe the effects of the Reformation had gone far enough and they saw remnants of Catholicism within the Church of England. Things such as all the garments and trappings of the clergy, the sign of the cross, the use of rings in marriage, and the authority of bishops. They wanted church discipline handled by local ministers and for the Prayer Book to remove non-biblical phrases. They wanted stricter enforcement of Sunday activities. And they wanted a more accurate translation of the Bible.

When King James came to the throne the Bishop's Bible was, by royal and ecclesiastical decree, the official Bible used in the Anglican church for public worship. However, the Geneva Bible was the popular Bible among the people, especially the Puritans.

In January 1604, King James I called for a three-day conference to be held at Hampton Court. James had been king for less than a year but he was trying to establish some degree of religious uniformity. King James called for a group of bishops and moderate puritans for the conference. The leader of the bishops was Richard Bancroft, bishop of London. The leader of the puritans was John Rainolds, president of Corpus Christi College in Oxford. Only one topic of discussion proved to have historic importance. On the second day of the conference, John Rainolds proposed "that there might be a new translation of the Bible, because those that were allowed in the reign of Henry VIII and Edward VI were corrupt, and not answerable to the truth of the original." However, Rainolds took his three examples of translation error from the Great Bible when it was the Bishop's Bible that was in use in the church.

The Complaints: The bishops were content with the Church's use of the Bishop's Bible of 1568. They were not in favor of a new translation. But King James liked the idea because it offered an alternative to the Bible of the puritans- the Geneva Bible. The Geneva Bible was an excellent translation and it was the Bible of the masses. But it was not authorized by the Church. James did not like some of the marginal notes in the Geneva Bible because they approved of the disobedience of government leaders. (Exodus 1:19; 2Chronicles 15:16 See pp. 4) James made himself clear at the conference when he said, "I profess I could never yet see a Bible well translated in English; but I think, that of all, that of Geneva is the worst." This was surprising since the Geneva Bible was first published in Scotland and dedicated to James in 1579, and it was the version he quoted from in his own writings.

The Bishop's Bible was not the smoothest translation in many places and so was widely accepted by the people. Ecclesiastes 11:1 Lay thy bread vpon wette faces, and so shalt thou finde it after many dayes. The bishops were not excited about a new translation but when they saw James agreeing with the puritans, Bancroft cleverly arranged that he would have control in the selection of translators and the rules that would be observed in the translation process.

The Translators

Within five months of the Hampton Court Conference, Bishop Bancroft had chosen his teams of translators. (See list below)

The translators made up six companies, two each in Westminster, Oxford and Cambridge. The surviving lists of translators are not entirely consistent but we do have information on most of them. 48 Anglican; 5 Puritans; 9 of the Anglicans were on the revision team and Richard Bancroft made the final revisions.

The Translation Rules

1. The ordinary Bible read in the church, commonly called the Bishop's Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit.
2. The names of the prophets, and the holy writers, with the other names of the text, to be retained, as nigh as may be, according as they are vulgarly [commonly] used. (This rule was only partially followed; Isaiah/Esaias; Jeremiah/Jeremy)
3. The old ecclesiastical words to be kept, viz. the word 'church' not to be translated 'congregation', etc. (The puritans objected to this rule. They preferred 'congregation' to 'church', 'wash' to 'baptize', 'elder' or 'senior' to 'bishop', and 'minister' to 'priest'.) (Preface pp. 18-19)

Revising the Bishop's Bible

The king's printer, Robert Barker, provided the translators with 40 unbound copies of the 1602 Bishop's Bible. The unbound sheets could then be subdivided between the different companies and translators. There is no clear existing evidence as to how closely rules 8-10 were followed. There is an existing Bible that appears to be a compilation of the sheets with the translators notes and markings. Most, but not all, of the translators revisions were incorporated into the KJV.

According to Rule 14 it would seem the translators were restricted to certain translations for the revising process. However, it is clear from the preface (pp. 19-20) that they made use of several sources available to them.

The Language

Many people today would say that the KJV has several archaic words. Words such as 'thou', 'thee', and 'ye', as well as words ending in '-eth' or '-est'.

In the early 16th century, the personal pronouns were used as follows:

	Singular	**Plural**
Second-person nominative:	Thou	Ye
Second-person accusative:	Thee	You

By the mid-sixteenth century the distinction between 'ye' and 'you' was fading and 'you' was being used for both forms- except in formal idiom (Shakespeare) and the KJV. Example: Mt. 5:11 Blessed are ye when men shall revile you. John 3:7. Even in 1611 the use of 'thou', 'thee', and 'ye' would have sounded archaic.

The KJ translators always used the formal '-eth' ending for singular verbs. By the 1590's '-es' was the norm except for the plays of Shakespeare and the KJV. The language of the KJV would have sounded a little formal and archaic to most readers and listeners but was probably purposely done give dignity to a sacred text.

The Style

The goal of the translators (Preface pp. 23) was that the translation be understood by the common man. The KJ translators had a clear preference for single syllable words. The Bishop's Bible read, 'God is my shepherd, therefore I can lack nothing'. The KJV reads, 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.'

The text was also often written in poetic rhythm. Genesis 3:12 Adam says, "she gave me of the tree, and I did eat." God said to Eve, "What is this that thou hast done?" You will also notice that all of the words are monosyllable. The rhythm of the KJ Bible makes it easy to read aloud.

The Theology

In some cases the theology of the KJV was established in the guidelines (Rule 4). Other decisions still had to be made concerning 'problem' passages. For example, whether the word 'spirit' should be capitalized or not.

The prominent debate at the time of the KJ translation was predestination. It boiled down to a distinction between foreknowledge and predestination. The appearance of Christ or the choice of a believer for salvation could be "foreknown" (the Arminian view) or "foreordained" (the

Calvinist view). Most of the translators were Calvinists so the issue of what word to use was always under debate.

1Peter 1:20, Bishop's Bible: 'which was ordained beforehand, even before the world was made, but was declared in the last times for your sakes'.
Douai-Reims: 'foreknown in deed before the constitution of the world, but manifested in the last times for you.'
King James Version: 'who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you.'

After much debate the Calvinist reading was decided to be the correct one. There has not been complete agreement among translators and scholars since that time. The Revised Version and the New American Standard Version, for example, read 'foreknown' (consistent with the Arminian view).

The Printing

The first edition of the KJV was printed in 1611 by Robert Barker, the king's printer, who had the right to print all Bibles published in England in English. Printing the KJV was expensive and seemed to cost Barker £4,000 for the rights to the translation. He financed the printing by mortgaging shares in the office of king's printer to two rival printers. The KJV was not listed in the Stationer's Register of new books. This is because the KJV was classified as a revision- not a fresh translation. Because of this registry omission we do not know when in 1611 the translation was printed. There is no evidence to support any particular date.

There were two editions published in 1611 and they became known as the 'She' Bible and the 'He' Bible. In Ruth 3:15 one 1611 Bible reads 'she went into the city', referring to Boaz; the other reads 'she went into the city', referring to Ruth. The difficulty arose because the Hebrew text has 'he', but the context clearly shows it is Ruth that went into the city.

There were hundreds of spelling, printer's and punctuation errors that some would say have survived until today. Editors did not keep a list of mistakes and updates are always being made. In 1760 Oxford and Cambridge worked together to produce a standard, updated text. This was done again by Oxford in 1769. Most King James Bible's today are printed from the 1769 Oxford text. Scholars are always endeavoring to edit the text of the King James Bible as they strive for perfection. Most recently is *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible* published in 2005 and edited by David Norton. Norton stated the text needed to be revised to two basic ways: to undo mistaken changes viz. the text should be that of the translators and not that of subsequent revisers. Secondly, the basic elements of spelling and punctuation should be modernized.

Objections to a new translation: Preface pp. 1, 5, 10, 12, 13, 15)

*The translator's reason for a new translation: Preface pp. 15.

Instructions and Procedures, Explanations.

4. The ordinary Bible read in the church, commonly called the Bishop's Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit.
5. The names of the prophets, and the holy writers, with the other names of the text, to be retained, as nigh as may be, according as they are vulgarly [commonly] used. (This rule was only partially followed; Isaiah/Esaias; Jeremiah/Jeremy)
6. The old ecclesiastical words to be kept, viz. the word 'church' not to be translated 'congregation', etc. (The puritans objected to this rule. They preferred 'congregation' to 'church', 'wash' to 'baptize', 'elder' or 'senior' to 'bishop', and 'minister' to 'priest'.) (Preface pp. 18-19) (Octapla pp. 96)
7. When a word hath divers significations [more than one meaning], that to be kept which hath been most commonly used by most of the ancient fathers, being agreeable to the propriety of the place [the context in which the word is used], and the analogy of the faith. [doctrine of the church]. (The puritans were against this rule as well because they believed doctrine should come from the Bible not the church fathers.)
8. The division of the chapters to be altered, either not at all, or as little as may be, if necessity so require.
9. No marginal notes at all to be affixed, but only for the explanation of the Hebrew or Greek words which cannot, without some circumoluction, [paraphrase]so briefly and fitly be expressed in the text. (Hebrews sample)
10. Such quotations of places [verses] to be marginally set down as shall serve for the fit reference of one scripture to another. (Hebrews sample)
11. Every particular man of each company to take the same chapter or chapters, and having translated or amended them severally by himself, where he thinketh good, all to meet together, confer what they have done, and agree for their parts what shall stand.
12. As any one company hath dispatched any one book in this manner, they shall send it to the rest, to be considered of seriously and judiciously, for His Majesty is very careful in this point.
13. If any company, upon the review of the book so sent, doubt or differ upon any place, to send them word thereof; note the place and withal send their reasons, to which if

they consent not, the difference to be compounded at the general meeting, which is to be of the chief persons of each company, at the end of the work.

14. When any place of special obscurity is doubted of, letters to be directed, by authority, [of the bishops] to send to any learned man in the land for his judgment of such a place.
15. Letters to be sent from every bishop to the rest of his clergy, admonishing them of this translation in hand, and to move and charge as many as being skillful in the tongues; and having taken pains in that kind, to send his particular observations to the company, either at Westminster, Cambridge or Oxford.
16. The directors in each company to be the deans of Westminster [Lancelot Andrewes] and Chester [William Barlow] for that place, and the King's professors in Hebrew [Edward Lively, John Harding] or Greek [Andrew Downes, John Perrinne] in each university.
17. 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 [Great Bible], Geneva. (We know however that the translators made use of the Rheims Catholic Bible to some extent) (Preface pp. 15-16)
18. Besides the said directors before mentioned, three or four of the most ancient and grave divines, in either of the universities not employed in the translating, to be assigned by the Vice-Chancellors, upon conference with the rest of the heads, to be overseers of the translations as well Hebrew as Greek, for the better observation of the fourth rule above specified. (This rule as added late and there is doubt as to whether it was followed)

The Procedures in Practice.

Most of the rules were followed but of course there were exceptions. The rules did not cover everything and some instructions were added later (as rule 15). One account gives a paraphrase of rules 1, 2, and 6 and then says:

Thirdly, where a Hebrew or Greek word admits two meanings of a suitable kind, the one was to be expressed in the text, the other in the margin. The same to be done where a different reading was found in good copies. [Preface pp. 16, 17]

Fourthly, the more difficult Hebraisms and Graecisms were consigned to the margin.

Fifthly, in the translation of Tobit and Judith, when any great discrepancy is found between the Greek text and the old vulgate Latin they followed the Greek text by preference.

Sixthly, that words which it was anywhere necessary to insert into the text to complete the meaning were to be distinguished by another type, small roman. (Hebrews sample)

Seventhly, that new arguments should be prefixed to every book, and new headings to

every chapter. (Hebrews sample)

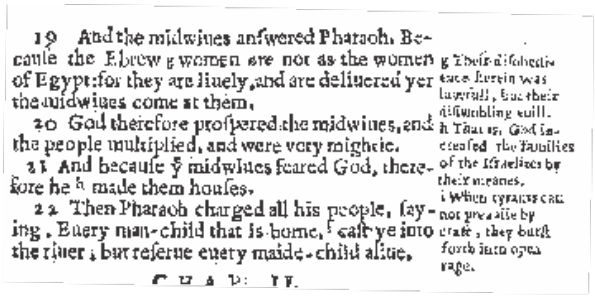
Lastly, that a very perfect Genealogy and map of the Holy Land should be joined to the work.

This describes what was done most of the time. But the rules were not followed by all the translators in every instance.

One significant reason why the KJ translation was so unique is that it was done by a large group of scholars using a careful process of collaboration and review. Previous translations were the work of small groups or of one man. Nothing like this had been done since the translation of the Septuagint.

Geneva marginal notes King James objected to:

Exodus 1:19



19 And the midwiues anſwered Pharaoh, Becauſe the Ebrew g women are not as the women of Egypt: for they are liuely, and are deliuered yer the midwiues come at them,

20 God therefore proſpered the midwiues, and the people multiplied, and were very mightie.

21 And becauſe ỹ midwiues feared God, therefore he h made them houſes.

22 Then Pharaoh charged all his people, ſaying, Euery man-child that is borne, i caſt ye into the riuer, but reſerue euery maide-child aliue,

g Their diſobedience herein was lawfull, but their diſſembling euill.

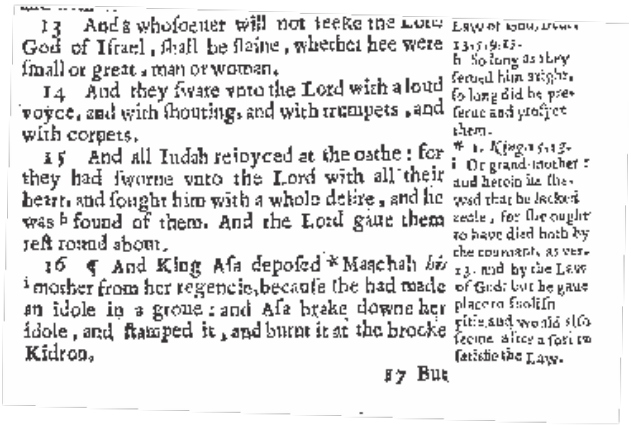
h That is, God increaſed the families of the Midwiues by their meanes.

i When tyrants can not preuaile by craft, they burſt forth into open rage.

19. And the midwives answered Pharaoh, Because the Hebrew[g] women are not as the women of Egypt: for they are lively, and are delivered yet the midwives come at them.

[g] Their disobedience herein was lawfull, but thier dissembling evill

2Chron. 15:16



13 And g whoſoeuer will not ſeeke the LORD God of Iſrael, ſhall be ſlaine, whether hee were ſmall or great, man or woman.

14 And they ſware vnto the Lord with a loud voyce, and with ſhouting, and with trumpets, and with corpets.

15 And all Iudah reioyced at the oathe: for they had ſworne vnto the Lord with all their heart, and ſought him with a whole deſire, and he was h found of them. And the Lord gaue them reſt round about.

16 ¶ And King Aſa depoſed *Maachah his i mother from her regencie, becauſe ſhe had made an idole in a groue: and Aſa brake downe her idole, and ſtamped it, and burnt it at the brooke Kidron.

17 But

g Law of God, Deut. 13.5.9.13.

h So long as they feared him aright, ſo long did he preſerue and proſper them.

* 1. Kings 15.13.

i Or grand-mother: and herein he ſhewed that he lacked zeale, for ſhe ought to haue died both by the couenant, as ver. 13. and by the Law of God: but he gaue place to fooliſh pitie, and would alſo ſeeme after a ſort to ſatiſfie the Law.

13. And whosoever will not seek the Lord God of Israel, shall be slain, whether he were small or great, man or woman.

16. And King Asa deposed Maachah his [i] mother from her regency, because she had made an idol in a grove: and Asa brake down her idol, and stamped it, and burnt it at the brook Kidron.

[i] Or grand-mother: and herein he showed that he lacked zeal, for she ought to have died both by the covenant, as ver. 13, and by the Law of God: but he gave place to foolish pity and would also seem after a sort to satisfy the law.

Dissembling: conceal one's true motives.