Introduction

The King James Bible and its reception history

HANNIBAL HAMLIN AND NORMAN W. JONES

The story of the King James Bible (KJB) – or the Authorized Version (AV) – is, as its multiple names suggest, not one but many stories. To begin with, its creation entailed many different stories. It was the work not of one translator but of several groups or "companies" of translators[1] whose charge was not to produce their own original translation but rather to cull from and revise the work of earlier English translations of the Bible. The end result was the product of a collective effort not only of the various individuals who made up each company of translators, and the different companies (each assigned to particular sections of the Bible), but also the amalgamated efforts of prior English translators dating back over roughly a hundred years before the 1611 KJB was first published. In addition, this transhistorical translation story itself originated in the court of James I, which involved a still more complex tale about the intimate relationship between politics and religion in Jacobean England.

Yet these are just the beginning of a vastly more complicated and multifaceted story – indeed, a collection of interrelated stories – of how, over the course of the past four centuries, the KJB became the most popular and influential translation of the Bible among English-speaking peoples. Indeed, it became the single most influential book in the English language and arguably the greatest work ever produced by a committee. This larger story – the reception history of the KJB – is a story that comprises not only different individuals but also different peoples, countries, and historical eras. It is a story so complex that it is best told not by one voice but by many. That is why we created *The King James Bible after 400 Years*. Bringing together leading scholars from a wide range of different fields of study relating to the KJB and its influence, this book offers new insights intended to spark new kinds of conversations about the many different roles the KJB has played since 1611.

Yet even a volume that provides as many different perspectives as this one attempts to do must necessarily leave parts of the story untold. Indeed,

this inevitable incompleteness forms part of an implicit argument that runs throughout the various chapters in this book, uniting them in their very heterogeneity: the story of the KJB is large, multifaceted, and multiform. Nevertheless, *The King James Bible after 400 Years* is the most complete one-volume exploration of the story of the KJB and its influence to date, and it is designed as an introduction to some of the different fields of study currently contributing to the ongoing development of our understanding of the KJB and its reception history. Each chapter exemplifies a broader field of study in relation to the KJB, such as literary history, women's studies, the history of the book, translation studies, African American studies, postcolonial studies, and the history of Christianity.

Of course, the extraordinary range of the KJB's influence over the past four centuries extends far beyond the confines of scholarly research and debate. As such, *The King James Bible after 400 Years* addresses not only scholars but a wider audience, as well. This introduction is designed particularly for the non-specialist – and it is worth noting that no one person is a specialist in all of the many fields explored in this volume. The introduction offers an overview of the KJB and its reception history, as well as some underlying theoretical issues, that will help frame the ensuing chapters in terms of their larger contexts.

The specialist and non-specialist alike will also find useful resources for further exploration in the chronologies and bibliography with which this book concludes, as well as in the footnotes that accompany each chapter. The bibliography focuses on major works relating to the KJB; the footnotes offer a more varied range of sources relating to each chapter's specific topic. All of these resources emphasize how large and complex the story of the KJB is and that it cannot be contained, let alone exhausted, in a single volume – even one that speaks in as many different voices as this one does. *The King James Bible after 400 Years* is thus meant to spark further exploration, to invite more voices to join in the telling of this story.

The background and creation of the KJB

The story of the KJB and its Reformation predecessors has been told many times, for both scholarly and popular readers. Although there were some earlier translations of individual books, the history of the English Bible properly begins with John Wyclif in the late fourteenth century. Wyclif

and his anti-establishment followers, the Lollards, aimed to make the Bible available to ordinary Christians in a language they understood. The large number of manuscript copies that survive testify to the success of this movement, despite the official legislation against all Bible translation in the 1409 Constitutions of Archbishop Arundel. In the Reformation period, William Tyndale sought to follow the model of Martin Luther and produce a scholarly translation of the Bible into English from the original languages (as opposed to translating from the Latin Vulgate). Tyndale's goal, like Wyclif's, had a political component; Tyndale shared the dream of Erasmus that "the husbandman might sing parts of [the Bible] at his plow, that the weaver may warble them at his shuttle, that the traveler may with their narratives beguile the weariness of the way."[2] Bible translation was still illegal and heretical in England, however, so Tyndale was forced to work abroad. Before his death, and in the face of considerable obstacles, he managed to finish translations of the New Testament (Cologne 1525, Worms 1526, Antwerp 1534), the Pentateuch (Antwerp 1530), Jonah (Antwerp 1531), and the historical books from Joshua to 2 Chronicles (unpublished at his death). Tyndale was strangled as a heretic in 1536 and his body was burned (as Wyclif's had been in 1428, his body exhumed for that purpose forty-four years after his death). Bible translation was serious business.

The obvious proof of the quality of Tyndale's translations, both in their accuracy to the Hebrew and Greek originals and in the strength of their prose style, is the retention of so much of his language in subsequent translations. According to David Katz, in the portions of the KJB that Tyndale translated the text remains about 90 percent "verbatim Tyndale";[3] this is a liberal estimate, and such tallies are bound to vary (as Gergely Juhász argues in ch. 4), but it is clear to anyone who reads Tyndale's translations alongside later ones that he established a model which was followed remarkably closely until the twentieth century. Simply put, he got a lot of it right, and what wasn't broken, later scholars saw no need to fix.

The first complete English Bible (Antwerp 1535) was the work of Miles Coverdale and was translated not from the original languages but from Latin and German. Despite his lack of expertise in Hebrew, Coverdale also influenced subsequent English Bibles, especially in the poetical books, like the Psalms, which Tyndale hadn't translated. For whatever reason, Coverdale had a knack for capturing, at secondhand, the distinctive parallelistic patterns that define ancient Hebrew poetry. Subsequently, in 1537,

the "Matthew" Bible was published (again in Antwerp), which, despite its ascription to one "Thomas Matthew," was actually the work of John Rogers, who took all of Tyndale's translations, including those unpublished at his death, filled in the rest of the Bible with Coverdale's 1535 text, and introduced some revisions of his own. By this time, Henry VIII, with the prodding of Thomas Cranmer and Thomas Cromwell, had come round to reconsidering his position on the idea of a vernacular Bible, and he thus commissioned an official new translation from Miles Coverdale. The Great Bible, so called for its massive size, was published in London in 1539, and reflected Coverdale's thorough revision of Rogers's "Matthew" text. The Great Bible was officially authorized (as the KJB, despite its alternative popular title, never actually was), and it was required to be used and made available to the public in all churches. Henry's 1541 proclamation decreed that, "in al and synguler paryshe churches, there shuld be provided by a certen day nowe expired, at the costes of the curates and paryshioners, Bybles conteynynge the olde and newe Testament, in the Englyshe tounge, to be fyxed and set up openlye in every of the sayd paryshe churches."[4] To encourage the sale of the Great Bible, Henry also fixed its cost at ten shillings, unbound. The translation had a relatively short life, however, since Queen Mary banned the English Bible between 1553 and 1558, and new translations became available early in the reign of Elizabeth I. Nevertheless, Coverdale's Great Bible Psalms became perhaps the best known Psalms version over the next half millennium, since they were eventually incorporated into the English Book of Common Prayer. It is these Psalms, for instance, that (along with the metrical versions of Philip and Mary Sidney) shaped the poems of George Herbert, and they have been heard since the Restoration (1660) by millions of English-speaking Christians set to the harmonies of Anglican chant.[5]

During the reign of Mary, English Protestant exiles in Geneva were busy translating the Bible. The Geneva of John Calvin and Theodore Beza was a hotbed of Bible translation and printing, producing important editions and translations in French (Pierre Robert Olivétan, revised, among others), Italian, Spanish, and Latin (a re-edited Vulgate as well as the "Protestant Vulgate" by Immanuel Tremellius and Franciscus Junius) as well as English. Though the KJB is the most famous translation-by-committee in English, the Geneva was the first, and the scholarship of its committee members was impressive. Supervised by William Whittingham, who completed an

Oxford MA and further studies on the continent, the known members of the team (no complete list survives) included Anthony Gilby (Cambridge MA and noted linguist), Christopher Goodman (Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Christ Church, Oxford), Thomas Sampson (Cambridge MA and Dean of Chichester), and Miles Coverdale, at this point the grand old man of English Bible translation. Other contributors may have included the Scots firebrand John Knox and John Bodley, father of Thomas, the founder of the Bodleian Library. The title page of the 1560 Geneva Bible announced that it was "translated according to the Ebrue and Greke, and conferred with the best translations in diverse languages." It represented the state of the art of English (and continental) biblical scholarship, and was recognized as such. It also represented the state of the art in Bible printing, introducing into English important innovations of the Genevan translators and printers. For instance, the Geneva was the first Bible set in Roman type as opposed to the traditional Black Letter, which corresponded with Genevan Bibles in other languages. More significantly, following French models, the Geneva was the first complete English Bible to include both chapter and verse divisions; without it, English Bible readers could never have referred to the idiomatic "chapter and verse." The Geneva title page also advertized that it included "moste profitable annotations upon all the hard places, and other things of great importance." This was a Bible designed for the general reader, the original of the many "Study Bibles" currently on the market. As the preface (perhaps by Whittingham) explained these annotations, "I have endeavored so to profit all therby, that both the learned and others might be holpen."[6] Given that the Geneva Bible was also printed in inexpensive quarto or smaller editions, it is no wonder that it became the English Bible of choice for the next century.

The Bishops' Bible of 1568 was the work of another team of translators, under the direction of Archbishop Matthew Parker. Despite its popularity, the Geneva Bible was never officially adopted by either the Church or the Crown; its Genevan Protestantism was too radical for the *via media* of the English Church establishment. The Bishops', conceived as a revision of the authorized Great Bible, was an attempt to produce an English Bible more under the control of the Church authorities, a large proportion of whom had never been comfortable with the idea of an English Bible at all. The Bishops' Bible was physically impressive, printed in a massive folio with beautiful engraved illustrations. It was the Bible read in English churches

between 1568 and the appearance of the KJB in 1611.[7] It was never popular, however, and was continuously out-sold, and out-read, by the Geneva. Furthermore, it was to the Geneva Bible that writers like Spenser, Marlowe, and Shakespeare alluded most often, though words and phrases from the Bishops' also appear, presumably lodged in their ears after hearing them in church, which everyone was required to attend by law.[8] The last major Bible translation before the KJB in 1611 was the Rheims New Testament, published in 1582, the work of English Catholic scholars in exile in France. Recognizing that the movement to vernacular Bible translation was irresistible, English Roman Catholics decided to make available an English translation that still essentially reflected the Latin Vulgate sanctioned by Rome. They therefore translated not from Greek and Hebrew but from the Vulgate, a decision defended at length in the preface by the translator Gregory Martin. Although the Rheims was one of the many translations consulted by the KJB teams, and may have had some small influence, it had little impact outside the English Catholic community.[9]

Bible translation has clearly always been controversial. Wyclif's remains were burned for Englishing the Bible, Tyndale died for it, the Coverdale, Matthew, Geneva, and Rheims translations were made in foreign countries by religious exiles, and printed abroad. Even the officially sanctioned Great and Bishops' Bibles arose out of conflict, the first an attempt by the King to wrest control of the vernacular Bible from the influence of Tyndale, the second an attempt by conservative bishops to supplant the too-radically Protestant Geneva Bible. The KJB also began in controversy. The 1604 Hampton Court conference was convened in an attempt to negotiate the future of the English Church between those who wanted it to continue in the direction of reform (the "Puritan" side), and those who resisted more radical reform and advocated a "higher" Church. In the midst of hot debate, John Reynolds, the Puritan President of Corpus Christi, Oxford, suggested a new English translation of the Bible. Although Reynolds's motive seems to have been a dislike of the official Bishops' Bible, King James I, who accepted the suggestion, had in mind instead his own dislike of the Geneva, some of whose marginal notes he found politically, theologically, and personally offensive. Out of Hampton Court developed the largest-scale Bible translation project yet seen in England.

Despite the peculiar popular legend that the translation of the KJB is shrouded in mystery, it isn't. We know a great deal about it. There were

six companies of translators, a total of about fifty scholars (the numbers vary slightly, since a few members died or dropped out over the years, and others replaced them): two at Westminster, two at Oxford, and two at Cambridge, all under the general supervision of Lancelot Andrewes, Dean of Westminster and chaplain to the Chapel Royal. The scholars involved were the most learned men in the country, expert in ancient languages. Some, like Andrewes himself, were also brilliant writers, though, as David Norton has pointed out, the translators seem to have been little concerned with literary style.[10] They were primarily concerned, rather, with accuracy, as most Bible translators had been before them. The KJB translators recognized the achievements of scholars from Tyndale on. Thus, as "The Translators to the Reader" declared,

> wee never thought from the beginning, that we should neede to make a new Translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one, (for then the imputation of Sixtus had bene true in some sort, that our people had bene fed with gall of Dragons in stead of wine, with whey in stead of milke:) but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principall good one, not justly to be excepted against.[11]

This statement of intent is also an accurate description of the result, which is not "new," for the most part, but a compilation and recension of the best of Tyndale, Coverdale, Geneva, Bishops', and even Rheims, with revisions by the translators according to the latest scholarly standards and their own critical judgment.

Despite modern "AVolatry" – Norton's coinage for the near-worship of the KJB (or AV) from the nineteenth century on – the KJB was not particularly well received in 1611 or for some decades thereafter. The Bishops' Bible, Reynolds would have been happy to know, did disappear, being last printed in 1602. But the Geneva was more popular than ever. The KJB was the Bible now read in English churches, but there was widespread grumbling, from all corners, about both its scholarship and its style. Ambrose Ussher, brother of the more famous James, Bishop of Armagh (famous for calculating biblically the chronology of the world, and also the number of extra sheep required to feed the carnivores on Noah's ark), criticized the KJB as a rushed job, scholarly fast-food, in which "the cook hasted you out a reasonable sudden meal."[12] Those criticizing the KJB style also included the polymath John Selden, the poet Samuel Butler, and the

scientist Robert Boyle, among many others.[13] Even as "high" a churchman as William Laud continued to use the Geneva Bible long after 1611, and, ironically, the KJB translators themselves quote from the Geneva, rather than their own translation, in the KJB preface.[14] The new Bible was not a runaway success.

The last regular printing of the Geneva Bible was in 1644, and by the Restoration of Charles II in 1660 the KJB was securely established as the Bible of the English Church and people. This establishment involved many different forces, some intentional, some accidental. None was probably more important than the printing trade (see ch. 3 on Bible printing by John King and Aaron Pratt). Although printing the KJB bankrupted its first printer, Robert Barker, there was money to be made from the English Bible, and the privilege of printing it, a royal monopoly, was highly sought after. Although the monopoly broke down along with the monarchy itself in the 1640s, English (mainly London) printers continued to prefer the KJB to the Geneva, perhaps because so many editions of the Geneva continued to be printed across the channel. Although one might think that the Puritan Commonwealth would have been committed to the Bible most associated with English Puritans (the Geneva), even Oliver Cromwell now favored the KJB (printed by John Field, first Printer to Parliament and then "one of His Hignes [i.e., Cromwell's] printers"), as did the Quaker printer Giles Calvert, a small KJB being the only Bible he ever printed.[15] The independent (non-Stationers' Company) Finsbury printer William Bentley printed five editions of the KJB, in octavo and duodecimo, between 1646 and 1648. He was shut down by Field and Henry Hills, who accused him of printing "Popish-Books" but were likely just enforcing their monopoly.[16] Even before the end of the Commonwealth, no one was printing anything but the KJB, and its domination of the English Bible market was assured for the next 250 years.

Translation

As Paul Gutjahr shows (see ch. 7 below), there are many different attitudes and approaches to translation, whether of the Bible or other works. One common distinction in current translation theory, originating in the work of Eugene Nida, is between "functional" and "formal" equivalence. Nida, whose work inspired *Good News for Modern Man* and the *Good*

News Bible, favored the "functional," urging Bible translators to translate, as Gutjahr puts it, "thought-for-thought, rather than word-for-word." The goal of such an approach is accessibility, rendering the original text into language a modern reader can easily understand. Nida made his argument with reference to the Prophets in an early essay:

> for most persons in the Western world, presenting the prophetic utterances of the Old Testament in poetic form, as the closest formal equivalence, often results in serious lack of appreciation for the urgency of the prophet's message, which was put into poetic form in order to enhance its impact and to make the form more readily remembered. Such poetic forms are often interpreted by persons in the Western world as implying a lack of urgency, because poetic forms have become associated with communications which are over-estheticized and hence not relevant to the practical events of men's daily lives.[17]

Whatever one may think of such generalizations about poetry and readers in the "Western world," this approach to translation, which aims to convey the message of the Bible rather than its specific words (and conceives this as possible), is responsible for the *Good News* translation of Isaiah 40:1–3:

> "Comfort my people," says our God. "Comfort them! Encourage the people of Jerusalem. Tell them they have suffered long enough and their sins are now forgiven. I have punished them in full for all their sins." A voice cries out, "Prepare in the wilderness a road for the LORD! Clear the way in the desert for our God!"[18]

The message is clear, whether more urgent or not, and Isaiah's poetry has been converted into prose.

The KJB translators, and indeed all English Bible translators between Wyclif and the KJB, aimed instead for a "formally equivalent" translation. In the KJB preface, the translators declared, "wee have not tyed our selves to an uniformitie of phrasing, or to an identitie of words," posing facetiously, "Is the kingdome of God become words and syllables?" Yet, by any modern standard they stayed scrupulously close to the Hebrew and Greek originals. Indeed, the translators go on to say, "we desire that the Scripture may speake like it selfe, as in the language of *Canaan*, that it may bee understood even of the very vulgar."[19] Letting the Scripture "speake

like it selfe" meant adapting the English language to the requirements of the original non-English text. Gerald Hammond has described in detail the Hebraic English of the KJB and its precursors.[20] For example, the unusually paratactic style of the KJB, stringing together clause after clause with only the semantically neutral coordinating conjunction, "and," follows Hebrew practice, in which subordinating pronouns are rarely used. Hebrew also has no genitive or possessive construction equivalent to the English *'s*, and the many instances in the KJB of "noun + of + noun" constructions reflects this ("the face of the deep" in Gen. 1:2, for instance, rather than "the deep's face"). A variety of other grammatical and syntactical peculiarities result from the translators' efforts to find formal equivalents for the Hebrew. Even vocabulary is sometimes Hebraicized, as in the famous case of "biblical knowledge." In Genesis 4:1, readers of the KJB (and Geneva, though not Tyndale) are told that "Adam knew his wife," which makes no sense according to any recorded usage of "know" in English. The New International Version ("Adam lay with his wife") or especially the New Living Translation ("Adam had sexual relations with his wife") make the meaning much clearer for English readers.[21] What is lost in these later versions, though, is the Hebrew wordplay that links the first postlapsarian sex with the "knowledge" of the forbidden fruit (Gen. 2:17) and also Adam and Eve's subsequent "knowing" that they are naked (3:7). Robert Alter pursues such matters in greater detail in chapter 2.

The "formalistic" approach of the KJB translators was not without critics even in the seventeenth century. John Selden, for instance, himself a brilliant Hebraist, criticized the KJB translators for rendering the Bible "into English words rather than into English phrases," which resulted, he claimed, in mockery from the common reader ("Lord what gear do they make of it!").[22] Over time, of course, what at first seemed awkward Hebraisms became naturalized into English, though such language was still recognizable as specifically biblical. This is one of the ways in which the KJB influenced literature in English, when writers, deliberately or not, imitated biblical prose style (for more on this, see the chapters by Stephen Prickett, Michael Wheeler, and James Wood). When George Wither wrote prophecies of England's fall, for instance, he adopted a suitably biblical style:

> harke ye *People*: harken you, I pray,
> That were preserv'd with me to see this day;