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David Norton

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

Predecessors

ORIGINALS AND TEXTS

THE ORIGINALS

The most important book in English religion and culture, the King James Bible, began to be created at some unknown moment nearer three than two thousand years before 1604, the year in which James VI and I, king of Scotland, now also king of England, assembled the religious leaders of the land at Hampton Court and, seemingly by chance, ordered the making of a new translation of the Bible. That unknown original moment of creation came when the descendants of Abraham moved beyond telling to writing down their beliefs and the stories of their heritage. It was a crucial moment in civilisation. The ancient Hebrews began to be the people of the written word. Their writings became the collection of books we know as the Old Testament. It enshrined their knowledge of themselves and of their relationship to their God. Without it they might not have survived as a people, and without it the Christian world – perhaps also the Islamic world – would have been something unimaginably different from what it is.

The word of God was all in all to the religious Jews. In the beginning God talked with Adam and Eve as a lord to his tenants, person to person, then to Moses ‘face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend’ (Exod. 33:11). The intimacy might have declined and, by the time of the young Samuel, the word of the Lord had become ‘precious’ (1 Sam. 3:1), that is, both rare and valuable. God still spoke through his prophets, and they could say, ‘thus saith the Lord’. But for ordinary people he spoke most surely in the words of the book. These

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words came to be guarded as the greatest treasure, for God and the word were the same thing: 'the Word was God' (John 1:1). Not the smallest detail, not 'one jot or one tittle' (Matt. 5:18) would go unfulfilled, and nothing in it could be changed. So Moses commanded the children of Israel, 'ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall you diminish ought from it, that ye may keep the commandments of the LORD your God which I command you' (Deut. 4:2). Perfect obedience to the commandments of God went hand in hand with an immutable text.

Such obedience was only possible if the book was understood. However simple some parts of it such as the Ten Commandments were, there were parts such as the prophetic visions of Ezekiel that were immensely difficult, so that one might say with the disciples, 'What meaneth this?' (Acts 2:12). Even the literal meaning of individual words could be difficult. The Old Testament represents almost all that survives of ancient Hebrew: it is an exceedingly small corpus from which to determine the meaning of all its words and to understand fully how it works as a language. Its vocabulary has little more than 8,000 words, of which nearly 1,000 occur once only, and four-fifths occur less than twenty times. Moreover, the text was defective in places. The enormous effort of preservation had operated on a text that was in places more than a thousand years old: inevitably, whether through editorial work or imperfect copying, it did not always represent what had originally been written. Indeed, sometimes it scarcely made sense.

Reverence for the text and the problems of understanding it are essential background to the story of books, scholarship and men that becomes the story of the King James Bible.

God promised Abraham that he would be 'a father of many nations' (Gen. 17:4), and many non-Hebrew-speaking nations inherited the Hebrew Bible. However much they revered the text, they could not in practice treat it as the Jews treated it. One thing mattered more than having the Bible in the language of God: having it in the language of the people. With the greatest reverence, it had to be translated, and the practice began early. Aramaic superseded Hebrew as the everyday language of the Jewish people, so, dating back to the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BC, Aramaic

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Targums – translation-interpretations – were made of all the OT except Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel. The next most important language of Judaism was Greek, as Jewish communities developed outside Israel. Their translation was the Septuagint (*c.* third century BC), notable for giving alternative versions of some books such as Esther, Daniel, Jeremiah, Ezra and Nehemiah, and for including other books that were not part of the Hebrew Bible: Tobit, Susanna, the Wisdom of Solomon, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch and Maccabees (here is the basis of the Apocrypha). This was the version of the Old Testament used for quotations in the New Testament. The Eastern or Orthodox Church, keeping Greek as its primary language, still uses the Septuagint as its standard Old Testament. In due course Latin became the dominant language for western Christianity, and it too acquired a standard version, Jerome's Vulgate, made between 382 and *c.* AD 404. These were the main ancient versions used by the Reformation translators.

The New Testament, the sacred writings of what began as a small sect within Judaism, the followers of Jesus Christ, created on the foundation of the Old Testament a new understanding of the relationship between God and humanity based on the teachings of Jesus and the belief that he was the Messiah, the risen son of God. What became the final and most important part of the KJB was written in Greek, and developed within a much shorter time span than the Old Testament. Its rapid development and dissemination prevented it from reaching as fixed a form as the Old Testament. It came to the Reformation through a small number of manuscripts (far fewer than are now known) that did not always read identically. Also, like the Old Testament, it came through the Vulgate.

TEXTS

As one would expect from the tradition lying behind it, there was little variation among Hebrew texts, and the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century translators probably used whatever printed edition they had to hand without feeling a need to make comparisons. Though not the first, the basic printed text of the Reformation was the work of a Christian scholar-printer working in Venice, Daniel Bomberg, and a Jewish convert, Felix Pratensis, first published 1516–17. These Bomberg

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or Rabbinic Bibles, most notably the second edition of 1524–5, set the standard. The main editions gave the Targums, printed alongside the Hebrew in smaller type, and medieval rabbinic commentaries on the literal sense, printed round the outside of the text and often completely enclosing it. The commentaries were chiefly by Rashi, highly influential as a preserver of Jewish tradition, the philologist Abraham Ibn Ezra, and the outstanding grammarian, David Kimchi.

The NT text was later to be printed and slower to take something like a standard form. Work to produce the first printed Greek NTs depended primarily on the manuscripts the early editors happened to have access to, then on the way the results of their work were put together by later editors, sometimes using further manuscripts. The first two printed Greek NTs were the result of concurrent, independent work. At Alcalá (Complutum) in Spain a text was printed for the Complutensian Polyglot in 1514 but not published until 1522, and then only in an edition of 600 expensive copies. It claimed to have been made from the oldest manuscripts, but we do not know which they were, only that very creditable work went into the text. Urged on by the printer John Froben, Desiderius Erasmus, among the most famous scholars of the time, gazumped the Spaniards with an annotated Greek text accompanied by his new Latin translation, the *Novum Instrumentum* in 1516. The text was, as the errors showed and as Erasmus admitted, ‘truly more rushed than edited’,¹ prepared in a matter of months principally from two twelfth-century manuscripts, compared with a few others, and a single, incomplete manuscript of Revelation, also from the twelfth century; he used his earliest manuscript, from the tenth century, least because it conformed least with his other texts (it is now thought to be the best of the manuscripts he had available to him).² He had hoped to find a manuscript good enough for Froben to use as copy, but some corrections were needed, and these he made directly on the manuscripts.³ Where his manuscripts had omissions, or where text and commentary were so mixed as to be indistinguishable, he supplied his own Greek translation, based on the Vulgate. Sometimes the results do

¹ ‘Praecipitatum verius quam editum’; quoted in Greenslade (ed.), *Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. III, p. 59.

² Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament*, p. 102. ³ Ibid., pp. 99 ff., plate xvi.

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not correspond to any Greek manuscripts, yet have remained in the Received Text.

Some 3,300 copies of the first two editions of Erasmus's text, its comparative cheapness and convenience, and Erasmus's own prestige all ensured that this was the preferred text through – and well beyond – the time of the translators. Erasmus and subsequent editors refined it, drawing on the Complutensian text and further work with manuscripts. In 1550 the scholar-printer Robert Estienne (Stephanus or Stephens) published a fine folio that highlighted problems of textual accuracy by giving variant readings in the margin based on the Complutensian text and collation of more than fifteen manuscripts by his son, Henri. Nevertheless, the text itself was little changed from Erasmus's final editions. Without making many alterations to the text, the leading Genevan scholar, Theodore Beza, elaborated the critical work in a succession of editions from 1565 onwards; the KJB translators used his 1588–9 and 1598 editions.⁴ In spite of the accumulating knowledge of variant readings, there was a strong sense that the Greek text had attained a similar authenticity to that of the Hebrew. It was sufficiently settled for the Elzevir press, producing relatively cheap, popular editions, to inform the purchaser of its second edition, 1633, that 'you have the text received by everybody'.⁵

'Textus Receptus', Received Text, stuck as the name for this text, and Estienne's 1550 version of Erasmus remained the standard text into the nineteenth century. It represents the general form of the text found in the majority of the manuscripts, the Byzantine text, that is, associated with the Eastern Church in Byzantium (Constantinople). Majority attestation and traditional use have given this, the text that the Reformation translations are based on, special status and importance. It represents what most Christians have understood the truth of the NT to be. Nevertheless, advances in textual criticism and knowledge of many more manuscripts now make it clear that this is not the closest we can get to the lost originals of the NT authors (a complex subject beyond the scope of this book). The choice is between tradition and authenticity: what was believed to be the truth

⁴ Ibid., p. 105.

⁵ 'Textum ergo habes, nunc ab omnibus receptum'; quoted in Greenslade (ed.), *Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. III, p. 64.

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set against something closer to the truth of the NT writers, and, through them, the origins of Christianity.

The Hebrew and Greek were often printed with other versions, notably Latin versions. These were of great use for translators, for Latin was the international vernacular of scholarship. The polyglots, the Complutensian and Plantin's Antwerp polyglot (1569–72), included other ancient versions with sometimes interlinear Latin translations. Erasmus's NT had his Latin translation, the *Novum Instrumentum*, in a parallel column. Sanctes Pagninus's extremely literal Latin translation, *Veteris et Novi Testamenti nova translatio* (1528), was highly influential, not just its literal Latin translation of the OT (other versions superseded its NT), but also because of its extensive use of rabbinic sources. Translators in several languages found their teacher in Pagninus. Coverdale was one such; the Bishops' Bible translators were instructed to follow Pagninus and Münster 'for the verity of the Hebrew', and the KJB drew on Pagninus for some readings.⁶ Sebastian Münster had published an annotated Latin version of the OT, printed alongside the Hebrew in 1535 which also drew extensively on rabbinic sources. Though his translation did not have the enduring success of Pagninus's, his annotations were long valued. The Zurich Latin Bible of 1543 included a new translation of the Apocrypha, and a revised version of Erasmus's Latin NT. The latest of these influential, annotated, Jewish-influenced Latin OTs was the work of Immanuel Tremellius and his son-in-law Franciscus Junius. It included translations of the OT, the Peshitta NT and the Apocrypha. The main new Latin version of the NT after Erasmus's was Beza's (1557); both included annotations and were frequently reprinted.

Presentation often enhanced the value of these versions, for they were usually presented as cribs. Ways of highlighting the connections between the Latin and the original languages were developed. The Complutensian Polyglot tied the words of the NT to the Vulgate by using superscript letters: the reader had only to glance from the Greek in the left column to the Latin in the right to see which word represented which.⁷ Interlinear texts were even easier to use. After the publication of Pagninus's translation, 1528, few, perhaps none

⁶ 'Observations respected of the translators', Pollard, *Records of the English Bible*, p. 297; Lloyd Jones, *Discovery of Hebrew in Tudor England*, pp. 41–2.

⁷ Metzger, *Text of the New Testament*, p. 97, plate xvi.

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of the translators would have found themselves working from the original languages alone, aided by nothing more than grammars and dictionaries, and never would they have found themselves working without an already vast knowledge of the text in their heads: most knew the Vulgate intimately.

From the unknown first Hebrew writer to Beza, all these men contributed, directly or indirectly, to the KJB. Many more, especially continental vernacular translators such as Martin Luther and the makers of dictionaries, grammars and concordances, should be added, but this is sufficient to give a sense of the books the English translators worked from.

THE FIRST DRAFT: WILLIAM TYNDALE

The KJB translators thought of themselves as revisers, not as creators of a new translation. In their preface, ‘the translators to the reader’, they say:

Truly, good Christian reader, we never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one . . . but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones one principal good one, not justly to be excepted against, that hath been our endeavour, that our mark.⁸

The ‘good one’ they were to make better was the official Bible of the Church of England, the Bishops’ Bible of 1568, the ‘many good ones’ were the Testaments and Bibles made by William Tyndale and his successors. These many men drafted and re-drafted the KJB. Yet the KJB’s immense debt to its English predecessors is different in kind from its debt to the creators of the Bible and the scholars who established the text and showed how it had been and might be understood. The English predecessors contributed to the understanding but their primary contribution was to develop an English way of expressing it. Expression from the English translators, understanding from the continental scholars: this, too crudely, is the formula for the KJB.

This chapter explores the external history of the preceding versions, thinking of them as drafts for the KJB and sometimes looking at ways

⁸ *NCPB*, p. xxxi.

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they were involved in arguments that influenced the KJB. In the next I turn to the internal history, taking two short passages to indicate how the English translators shaped the version into what we have received as the KJB.⁹

William Tyndale was martyred before he could complete his translation. Printing of his NT was initially thwarted by a raid of the printer's shop in 1525: only a prologue and most of Matthew survive. His complete NT appeared in 1526, with a revised edition in 1534. The first part of the OT, the Pentateuch, was published in 1530, and Jonah a little later. His translation of Joshua to 2 Chronicles appeared posthumously in the Matthew Bible (1537). This was enough to settle the general character of the English Bible through to and beyond the KJB. Without Tyndale, the English Bible would have been a different and, in all likelihood, lesser thing. Reading the KJB, we are for long stretches reading Tyndale, sometimes little revised, sometimes substantially worked over. A single spirit animates the Protestant – even, to a significant extent, the Catholic – English Bible from Tyndale to the KJB, and Tyndale was its first and most important manifestation.

'I had no man to counterfeit [imitate], neither was helped with English of any that had interpreted the same or such like thing in the Scripture beforetime', he declares in the address 'to the reader' in his 1526 NT. He was indeed a pioneer, yet, as this recognises, there had been other translations of the Bible or parts of it into English. Most notable among these was the Wyclif or Lollard Bible which appeared in two versions about 1382 and 1388. This pre-Reformation manuscript Bible was translated from the Vulgate, first with such literalness that it is like a crib for the Latin, then revised towards slightly more idiomatic English. Tyndale may have been familiar with this, but the Latin source, the very dated English and the excessive literalness would have made it a model to avoid.

He did have a very few non-English models, but, of all the English translators, he was the one who came closest to working from the original languages alone. This is suggested in his last surviving letter, written in Latin from prison shortly before his martyrdom, where he

⁹ 'External history' and 'internal history' are the two main divisions of Westcott's *History of the English Bible*, one of the best works on the subject.

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asks for 'the Hebrew bible, Hebrew grammar, and Hebrew dictionary, that I may pass the time in that study'.¹⁰ We should not take this as suggesting that he continued his translation in prison – he would have needed much more for that, paper not least – but it does show what he considered basic for his study: text, grammar and dictionary.

His revised NT points in the same direction. The title proclaims it to be 'diligently corrected and compared with the Greek', and this is the first point he makes in both his prefaces. In 'W.T. unto the reader' he writes that 'I have looked over [it] again (now at the last) with all diligence, and compared it unto the Greek, and have weeded out of it many faults, which lack of help at the beginning, and oversight, did sow therein'. He adds that 'if ought seem changed, or not altogether agreeing with the Greek, let the finder of the fault consider the Hebrew phrase or manner of speech left in the Greek words', and he goes on to explain some of the Hebrew characteristics of NT Greek.¹¹ Tyndale's first study was the original language text, and his primary effort was to be as true to it as possible, including keeping to its 'phrase or manner of speech'.

He had helps – text, grammar and dictionary were enough for private study but not for translation. For the NT he had Erasmus's Greek text and Latin translation, and the Vulgate; he appears also to have had a general knowledge of other translations, for he writes of 'all the translators that ever I heard of in what tongue soever it be'.¹² And he had Luther. Martin Luther, giant among giants of the Reformation, published the first edition of his German NT in 1522; the Pentateuch followed in 1523, and Joshua to the Song of Solomon in 1524. For the OT, Tyndale had the Vulgate, the Septuagint, Luther and possibly Pagninus.

Estimates of Tyndale's dependence on these aids vary. Westcott and Hammond are most persuasive. Westcott demonstrates that 'both in his first translation and in his two subsequent revisions of the NT, [Tyndale] dealt directly and principally with the Greek text. If he used the Vulgate or Erasmus or Luther it was with the judgment of a scholar' (p. 146). His Greek was proficient, but he probably needed more help with the Hebrew, since he began to learn that

¹⁰ As given in Daniell, *William Tyndale*, p. 379.

¹¹ New Testament, 1534, fol. *v^r. ¹² Ibid., fols *viii^r, **iii^v.

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language late, probably about 1526.¹³ Hammond's view of the OT work suggests that Tyndale gave similar primacy to the Hebrew but

that [he] relied heavily on Luther; that he quite probably made some use of Pagninus' version; that he made as much use of the Vulgate as would be consistent with his automatic familiarity with the established church version; and, most important of all, that his knowledge of the Hebrew original was sufficient for him to respond sensitively and effectively to the peculiarities of Hebrew vocabulary and style.¹⁴

Tyndale's judicious independence was a model for his successors. Just as he, revising his NT, moved it closer to fidelity to the original texts, so they, completing and revising what he had commenced, moved it towards further fidelity – something which often meant a greater literalness of rendering. Sometimes this work of revision was even, as Daniell points out, at the expense of clarity.¹⁵

While truth to the original languages was Tyndale's scholarly priority, his motivation was to make the Scriptures comprehensible to his fellow countrymen. The martyrologist John Foxe reports him as saying to a clerical opponent in the heat of an argument, 'if God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost'.¹⁶ There were issues of huge importance involved in this seemingly simple ambition: to give the people a basis on which to come at their own sense of the truth was to challenge the Catholic Church's power and inevitably to split Christendom. For the Church, heresy went hand in hand with translation – an act that placed an unauthorised approximation of one part of truth, shorn of the wisdom and guardianship of the Church, in the hands of the uneducated. Yet the early heretics had been raised in the Church and could not, even if Tyndale wished to, rid themselves of the belief that the Bible was difficult. They had learnt that there were levels of meaning beyond the literal; they had learnt too that every detail of the text was to be pressed for its sacred meaning. The words they chose would not be the whole truth and might perhaps be no more than the beginnings of truth, but they would certainly be

¹³ Daniell, *William Tyndale*, p. 296.

¹⁴ Hammond, 'William Tyndale's Pentateuch', p. 354. See also Hammond's *Making of the English Bible*, chapters 1 and 2.

¹⁵ Daniell, *William Tyndale*, p. 2.

¹⁶ Foxe, *Acts and Monuments*, p. 514b.