

## Lecture Eighteen

### The King James Version

**Scope:** Just as Jerome's translation of the Vulgate brought some order to the chaotic world of ancient Latin translations, so did the Authorized Version of the Bible ordered by King James I of England in 1604 have a similar effect in stabilizing the English Bible. The process by which this revision (not really a fresh translation) was carried out set a pattern for future efforts. It involved teams of scholars who were experts in the original languages, seeking a mediating path among existing translations, among which that of Tyndale exercised the greatest influence. The translation appeared in 1611 (including the Apocrypha) and immediately won widespread approval because of its outstanding literary merit.

### Outline

- I. The Authorized Version, or the King James Version (KJV), of the Bible came about as an attempt to standardize a chaotic state of affairs.
  - A. Several English translations vied for primacy in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.
    1. The Geneva Bible appeared in 1560, translated by William Whittingham. It was the first English version to have numbered chapters and verses. It had an introduction by John Calvin, and its many notes reflected a pro-reform and anti-Catholic bias (see the translation of *congregation* and *elder*). The Geneva Bible went through 140 printings before 1640 and was used by James I and the Puritans; it was the Bible of Bunyan and Shakespeare.
    2. The Bishops' Bible was authorized by Elizabeth I precisely to counter the Geneva Bible. Published in 1568, it retained traditional ecclesiastical terms, but it was less literarily impressive and popular (20 reprints before 1606).
    3. Meanwhile, Gregory Martin and Richard Bristow, Catholic scholars in exile in Rheims, produced a New Testament in 1582 with a distinctly Catholic preface. The translation is from the Vulgate but takes the Greek into account. In 1610,

Catholic scholars publish the Old Testament in Douay. This version became known as the Douay-Rheims Bible.

- B. Similar to the way in which Damasus I assigned Jerome the task of revising existing Latin versions into the Vulgate, so King James desired a version that would be “authorized” and could—and eventually did—supplant other English versions.
- II.** The process by which the KJV was produced was official and elaborate and set the pattern for many subsequent projects.
- A. At the Hampton Court Conference in 1604, James I responded to a petition for a new translation that was needed because of the inadequacy of earlier ones.
    - 1. The conference issued a set of principles to guide the translation, making clear that it was to be conservative and without annotation.
    - 2. Fifty-four scholars from Oxford, Cambridge, and Westminster formed teams to translate assigned sections.
    - 3. In 1609, a review panel of three scholars went over the preliminary work of the six teams.
  - B. The translation had as its basis the Masoretic text of the Old Testament and the Textus Receptus of the New Testament, but it also made steady use of earlier versions. About 80 percent of the New Testament, for example, agrees with Tyndale. It is fairly literal, with words not found in but implied by the original marked in most printings by square brackets or italics.
  - C. The Authorized Version (with Old Testament/Apocrypha/New Testament) was published by Robert Barker in 1611. It went through five editions, with the 1769 version (by Benjamin Blayney) being the most commonly cited.
  - D. The use of the familiar red letters marking the sayings of Jesus in the New Testament is a recent addition, added by Louis Klopsch (editor of *The Christian Herald* magazine) to the New Testament in 1899 and in an edition of the entire Bible in 1901.
- III.** The Authorized Version became “the Bible” for generations of English-speaking people in England and its many colonies, including America.
- A. The merit of the translation is real but can also easily be overstated.

1. Its combination of simplicity, grace, and power is obvious when familiar passages are read.
  2. But comparison with the Geneva Bible shows that its rivals also had merit, and it must be remembered how much the language of the KJV is drawn from Tyndale.
  3. The supposed influence of the KJV on English literature can also be overstated. Milton and others used it, but Bunyan, Shakespeare, and John Donne used the Geneva Bible.
  4. Part of its influence comes from its quasi-“authorized” position and its success in eliminating others (the last printing of the Geneva Bible was in 1644).
- B.** The deficiencies of the KJV are not due to its translators but to other factors.
1. The textual basis of the KJV is inadequate when measured by the developed science of text criticism of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament.
  2. The knowledge of Hebrew and Greek has advanced considerably as a result of intense scholarship in the past 400 years.
  3. The English language itself has changed dramatically, so that a translation that was simple and direct in the 16<sup>th</sup> century appears obsolete and even unintelligible in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Essential Reading:**

B. Bobrick, *Wide as the Waters: The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution It Inspired*.

### **Supplementary Reading:**

B. M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions*.

### **Questions to Consider:**

1. Compare the translation of 1 Corinthians 13 in the King James and any contemporary version as a way of assessing the beauty and intelligibility of the respective translations.
2. How does an understanding of the process by which the KJV came into existence affect claims made for its unique authority for Christians?