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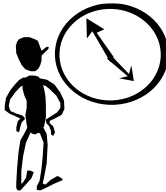
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Time of Assembly



Every other Sunday:

Bible Study 9:00 a.m.

Worship 10:00 a.m.

OR

Bible Study 4:00 p.m.

Worship 5:00 p.m.

Wednesday:

Bible Study 7:00 p. m.

The Origin of the King James Version

By Ethan R. Longhenry

In my personal reading I have just completed two books that discuss the origins of the King James Version: *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture*, by Alister McGrath, and *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible*, by Adam Nicholson. These two books each provided a different perspective on the King James Version (heretofore, KJV): the former looked at it in terms of its role in and impact on the English language as a whole, and the latter was more dedicated to the story of the translation, its translators, and its timeframe. To that end, the former book appreciates the KJV's impact on the English language yet does not apologize for its translators or its time period; the latter book is perhaps a bit too apologetic for the KJV's translators and its time period. What is significant from both works, however, and the reason for this article, is the understanding that we can gain about the origins of the KJV and how that impacts us today.

There is a movement within so-called "fundamental" Christianity, seen especially in some conservative Evangelical groups but also in many ways in churches of Christ, that elevates the KJV to an inspired status: it *is* the Word of God, and any other version or translation is merely a device of Satan. This movement, sometimes called KJV Onlyism, has gained momentum and uses many arguments that may seem persuasive. The problem with this type of belief, however, is that it does not concord at all with the idea of the KJV nor its intended purpose. By examining the historical material in these two works, we can gain a better understanding of the origin of the KJV to see that while it contains the inspired Word of God, it is not in and of itself inspired. Let us now examine

some issues regarding which we can clear up confusion or ignorance about the origins of the KJV.

The KJV was not the first English Bible, nor was it really a translation.

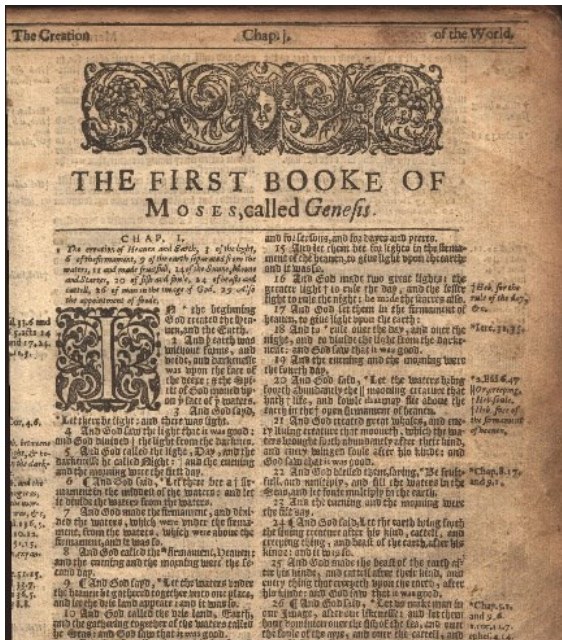
We will speak later about the immediate circumstances that led to the creation of the KJV, but for now, we will say that the KJV was by no means the first English Bible; far from it! The first endeavors at translating the Bible into English were made by John Wycliffe in about 1382; these endeavors compelled Oxford to ban any attempts to translate the Word of God into English. During the Reformation, William Tyndale made the first real English translation of the Bible in 1525 with the New Testament; he was martyred before he could complete the task fully, but John Rogers, under the pseudonym Thomas Matthew completed the work in what would be known as Matthew's Bible in 1537, although by this time Miles Coverdale in England had already completed a full translation of the Bible, known as Coverdale's Bible. In 1538, Henry VIII, as one of the first actions in the newly established Church of England, called for a Bible in English to be placed in every church in the land; the Bible made for this purpose, a revision of Matthew's Bible, was known as the Great Bible, or Whitchurch's Bible. Next, the Calvinist English Protestants exiled in Geneva, Switzerland, under Mary Tudor published the Geneva Bible in 1560, and, as a response in 1568, the Anglican authorities commissioned the Bishops' Bible. Finally, in 1582, some exiled English Catholics produced the Douay-Rheims Bible in English (*Nicolson, 247-250*). We can see, therefore, that there were no fewer than five English versions of the Bible circulating within England when the KJV was produced and in fact the official instructions to the KJV translators bid them to base their revisions on the Bishops' Bible and to consult Tyndale's, Matthew's, Coverdale's, Whitchurch's (the Great Bible) and Geneva Bibles also! In the end, the KJV looked extremely similar to Tyndale's version, and it is evident that there was less translating going on than revision of all that had come before the KJV.

It should be stated at this point, however, that "modern" versions themselves have not really created "new" translations either but ultimately go back themselves to the KJV, save in circumstances of inferior texts and new discoveries. While nuances and styles have changed, the Bible of the English-speaking world has essentially been the same since the 1530s.

The KJV was commissioned for more political than spiritual reasons.

The KJV owes its birth to the Hampton Court Conference of 1604, the meeting of the newly crowned James I of England with the authorities of the Church of England and the Puritan dissidents. James desired to have a unified church in England and was distressed at the polarity he entered. The Geneva Bible was by far the most popular Bible in England in 1604, and while the translation was excellent the notes in it were fiercely Calvinist and anti-monarchical. The Bibles sanctioned by the Anglican authori-

ties left much to be desired, but they at least did not contain seditious notes. One of the Puritans suggested to the King that he should establish one Bible for use throughout the land; James took this idea and from it came the decision to make a new translation (*McGrath, 161-162*). We can see, therefore, that there was no burning spiritual desire to have a new translation, but only the need for a political compromise between the seditious Geneva Bible and the inadequate Anglican versions.



Genesis 1 from a 1620-1621 printing of the King James Bible

The texts as the basis of the translations were not the most accurate, even for the early seventeenth century, and the knowledge of the translators of those languages was not always the best.

To quote Nicholson:

The Hebrew and particularly the Greek texts they were working from were not the most accurate, even by the standards of their own time. Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor as the head of the church in Geneva, had prepared an edition of the New Testament some forty years earlier based on a more ancient and a less corrupt manuscript. The English scholars were still a little adrift on tenses in Hebrew, while *koine*, the form of rubbed down and difficult Greek in which the New Testament is written, so unlike the Greek of Plato and Aristotle, still held mysteries for them, which only later translations would correct,(224).

The printing procedures involved many errors in and of itself.

Again, to quote Nicholson:

And it was littered with misprints, 'hoopes' for 'hookes,' 'she' for 'he,' three whole lines simply repeated in Exodus, and alarmingly 'Judas' for 'Jesus' in one of the Gospels. None of these was quite so catastrophic as a misprint that would appear in a 1631 edition, the so-called Wicked Bible, which failed to put the word 'not' in **Exodus 20:14**, giving the reading, 'Thou shalt commit adultery,' but the degree of muddle is scarcely what a modern scholarly text would tolerate. When, finally, in the nineteenth century, Dr. F. Scrivener, a scholar working to modern standards, attempted to collate all the editions of the King James Bible then in circulation, he found more than 24,000 variations between them. The curious fact is that no one such thing as 'The King James Bible' -- agreed, consistent, and whole-- has ever existed, (226).

We can see from this, then, that those who would consider "the 1611 Authorized Version" as THE Bible have much explaining to do as to which version of the 1611 "Authorized Version" they refer to!

The translators themselves continued to use other Bibles.

If the intent of the translators were to make THE Bible for all time, one would expect them to use it. After 1611, however, we find that the major translators are all still quoting from the Geneva Bible-- even the most anti-Puritan among them!

The KJV was not popular when first produced.

The English world did not immediately embrace the KJV; the Geneva Bible was still far more popular, even after it was no longer allowed to be printed in England; only after 1660, in the attempt to return to the status quo from before the social upheaval of the Protectorate, did the KJV begin to become popular.

The KJV was instrumental in the development of the English language and learning the English language.

In our attempt to understand the influence of the KJV, especially in America, we have to realize that English as a written, intelligent language only really began with Shakespeare and the KJV. For hundreds of years before this period, English was the vulgar language of the people, Latin was the language of the intelligentsia, and French was the language of the court. Only in the Tudor period in the sixteenth century do we see a desire to cultivate the English language, and its vocabulary was so limited that Shakespeare and the KJV have combined to essentially make the language for us!

After this period we find that the English language revolved partly around Shakespeare but mostly around the KJV. Throughout the English speaking world, and especially in less-sophisticated America, both men and women learned to read with the KJV. The words of the KJV shaped their religion, their beliefs, and their language; the overall religious unity of the English world of the pre-colonial era allowed for the Eng-

lish language to change little from 1611 to 1880. Throughout the period of 1660 to 1880, the KJV was one of the few, if not only, books that English speaking people read and meditated upon.

The KJV became the Bible.

This statement may seem odd on the surface, but it explains the ideology of KJV only-ism well. There was not felt a need to adapt or revise the Bible after the KJV until the discovery of more ancient and superior texts in the 1880s and then with the major changes in the English language that occurred in the colonial and post-colonial periods in the twentieth century. The KJV was the Bible to so many people that many soon forgot that the KJV was only a translation of original Hebrew and Greek texts. The KJV took on a form of inspiration in and of itself, and many, many people could not disassociate in their minds the original Hebrew and Greek texts that represent the inspired Word of God and the KJV that was the translation of those works. We may joke today that "the KJV was good enough for Paul, so it should be good enough for me," but behind this statement is the belief of many.

The follies and the politics in Jacobean England that produced the King James Version were, of course, all but forgotten in later periods, and the only thing that remained was the KJV. The KJV was a monumental work for its time and its language exceptional; it is extremely literal and yet is written in a form of polished English not found in modern versions and translations. Despite its age and its inaccuracies it most certainly deserves a place on the Christian's bookshelf and is certainly appropriate for study. Unfortunately, however, there are many myths and misconceptions about the KJV that have caused some to believe incredulous claims about its inspiration and the idea that it alone is the true Bible and the rest are the works of Satan. We can see how these ideas developed: the success of the KJV in the English-speaking world caused people to consider the KJV the standard by which all other texts were to be compared, and not, as seen originally by the translators, as the endeavor to produce in English the best rendering of the Hebrew and Greek texts which they considered to be the standard.

The KJV stands as an important witness in the development of the Word of God in English, but it is best seen, as in the eye of the translators, as one landmark in the progression of the translation of the Word of God into English. The KJV translators took advantage of the work done before them and made an impressive edition; they would not want their translation to be enshrined as something it was not -- the only approved and God-certified Bible -- but as an important step in the understanding of God's Word for mankind. Today we have the advantage of better texts and a better understanding of both Hebrew and Greek, and we, in turn, can have Bibles more accurate to the original authors. Let us continue to carry the torch lit so long ago and held by a long time by the KJV.