

400 years of the King James Bible

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This month marks 400 years since the publication of the King James Version of the Bible, for which much admiration has been expressed in this, its anniversary year. But just how much has it contributed to Christian theology and the English language? Scripture scholar and translator, Nicholas King SJ describes the traditions and translations on which the King James Version drew, and clears up one or two misconceptions about the text.

This year has been one for praising a much-loved and once familiar version of the Bible, for it is the quarter-century of the King James Version. It is proper that we should show a just esteem for it; and indeed two well-known Oxford colleagues, Richard Dawkins and Philip Pullman, have been doing precisely that in the course of this year. I notice, however, that Anglican services very rarely include it, and when they do, it is with a slightly self-conscious air of swimming against the tide. If I should ever raise the issue with Anglican clergy, expressing my admiration for the King James Version and the 1662 prayer-book, they tend to roll their eyes and say 'It's all very well for you – you don't have to live with it!' Those who are less frequently found to be darkening the doors of the church, by contrast, tend to romanticise about the quality of its English, and the effect that it has had on our tongue.

A point that we neglect at our peril is that the Bible is not a museum piece; when we try and lock it up in an exhibition case, it has an alarming tendency to break out and challenge us. For the Bible is God's word (and we must remember, always, that God has only one word), expressed in the language of human beings, and it therefore needs constantly to be translated afresh. The process of bible translation is a very ancient one. The first evidence of it comes in the 5th or 4th centuries BC, when (see Nehemiah 8:8, for example) we get the first hint of a translation into



Aramaic, which was a much more widely-spoken language than its first cousin from which it was translated, Hebrew. That language has at many points in its history turned into a kind of 'sacred language', to be spoken only by scholars and priests. The translation of Ezra was the ancestor of a series of versions into Aramaic, known as the *targumim*, from the Aramaic for 'translation'. It must be said, however, that they did not content themselves with

merely translating, those creative souls who produced the Aramaic translation; they also added substantial interpolations, mythical tales, colourful expansions of what they found in the Hebrew, and so adapted God's word to the needs of their own day.

The Septuagint, the translation of the Hebrew text into Greek, followed some time in the 3rd century BC. This was a version of enormous influence; at the time that it was produced, more Jews would have spoken Greek, the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean world, than spoke Hebrew, just as today more Jews would speak English than speak Hebrew. That being the case, they needed the Scriptures in a tongue that they could understand, for study, for prayer, and for liturgical purposes. The Septuagint (the name is from the Latin for 70, and refers to the legend that 70 scholars, after prayer and fasting, were locked up in separate cabins, and came up with an identical version) had a massive impact, not least because the infant Christian Church used it as their scriptures.

For the language of the New Testament was not the Galilean dialect of Aramaic that Jesus and his first disciples spoke as their first language (the jury is still out, I regret to say, with regard to the question of whether they might have known Greek); the New Testament was written entirely in Greek, the language of the great urban settlements of the Hellenistic world in which Paul and Luke made themselves so easily at home. When they quote the scriptures, it is almost certainly not the Hebrew text but the Greek of the Septuagint that they reach for; and our Catholic Church was Greek-speaking, even in Rome, until well into the 2nd century AD. So Latin is something of a late-comer onto the scene (and it is in consequence rather puzzling that some are insisting that our liturgical translations should stay close to the language of Rome); it did come in the end, however, with St Jerome's monumental achievement, which we know as the Vulgate, which dates from the 4th Century AD, and which was the Church's Bible for a thousand years. The text never stands still, however, and there is evidence of a need to translate the Bible into contemporary language all the time: Anglo-Saxon authors, for example, offered first 'glosses' (like school-boys writing a crib above the foreign text); then translations in the proper sense of the word start to appear in the 9th century, and pave the way for the great work of Wycliffe and his students in the 14th Century. We have to recall that until the invention of movable type towards the end of the 15th Century, almost all those who knew the Bible were illiterate, so they needed appropriate technology, stained glass windows, for example, or mystery plays, if they were to engage with it. There is evidence of extempore oral renditions into the vernacular; and the growth of literacy inevitably created a demand for the Bible to be rendered in a tongue that was not reserved for those who knew Latin. This tended, inevitably, to be priests and bishops, for the fate that has befallen Hebrew at various stages in its history also overtook Latin: it became a language reserved for an elite, who studied theological problems or who exercised religious power.

Now all these translations through the centuries were new in their day and in consequence invariably aroused nostalgic longings for the old and beloved. Now that is not necessarily a disaster; it is not necessarily God's will that all that we hold dear should be, as the cliché puts it, 'thrown out with the

bath-water'. Nevertheless, it is always the case that God invites us to move on. God's one word always retains its undying freshness, which can, even today, shine through in the powerful rhythms of the English prose of the late 16th Century, a time when our language was developing in remarkable ways.

We need to be careful, however. We need to have a proper respect for the King James Version; but respect implies an accurate assessment. At the time when that very distinguished body of scholars published it, the language they opted for was already somewhat archaic. In part this was because they were not creating a new version, but something that was self-consciously a revision. King James was uneasy about the Geneva Bible, and its lack of respect for bishops and (worse still) kings, and he wanted a version that dealt with his own ideological baggage. So there was no sense in which the translators were aiming to produce an original version: they were quite happy to use Tyndale's version, and the Geneva Bible; and they even used some of the translations offered, at least for the New Testament, by the Douai version (though very sensibly they did not acknowledge their debt).

And it is not entirely accurate to insist on the Englishness of the language for which they opted. Very often they bring Hebraisms into English. Consider, for example, the phrase, 'and it came to pass'. That sounds like English, but in fact it is Hebrew, meaning something like 'and it was' or 'and it happened'; but because the philosophy of translation that the distinguished scholars employed was one of 'formal equivalence', giving the feel of the original Hebrew, it has come into English. Notice, however, that if nowadays you were to start a sentence with 'and it came to pass' or 'verily I say unto you', or 'behold', you would inevitably give the impression of engaging in parody. Or look out for the adverb, 'surely' in the King James Version; almost always it is a sign that the Hebrew original has what is technically known as the absolute infinitive, when the Hebrew repeats the verb, as you might say 'dying he died' or 'speaking he spoke', in order to emphasise the action that is being reported. 'Surely' is the closest that we can get to it in English; but it is not really English.

We should be chary, too, of claiming too much for the King James Version's contribution to English; it is

often said, for example, that the phrase ‘salt of the earth’ is a gift of the King James Version to the English language. But the phrase comes early in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:13), and this translation had already appeared in the Geneva Bible and no doubt in all the translations that preceded it. It is practically impossible to translate the Greek in any other way, though I observe that the New Jerusalem translation offers ‘you are salt *for* the earth’, which rather gives the impression of ‘change for change’s sake’, another great temptation for translators.

So we can, and in this anniversary year and month, certainly should, admire the beauty of the King James Version. We should not, though, allow its title to lead us to suppose that it was translated by the monarch, who was a better theologian than many English (or Scottish) kings, nor that it is properly called the ‘Saint James Version’; Jamie the Sixth of Scotland and James the First of England had many qualities, but you could not number sanctity among them. Nor, of

course, was the Bible, as is sometimes supposed, written in English (‘if the English of the King James Version was good enough for God, then it is good enough for me’ is frequently the cry that goes up).

The fact is that all translation fails, including that of the panels of eminent scholars from Cambridge, Oxford and Westminster that produced this remarkable version; and the task of translation never comes to an end (every subsequent republication or reprinting of the King James Version was different to its predecessor). We should, in this year, admire the beauty of the King James Version; but our deeper task is to listen to the radical and subversive word of God. For that purpose, no one translation is any better than any other.

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