

“May your Majesty be pleased to direct that the Bible be now translated, such versions as are extant not answering to the original.” It was Monday 16 January 1604. The speaker was renowned Puritan John Rainolds and the addressee King James I of England. The interchange took place in the palace at Hampton Court where the recently crowned monarch had convened a conference to discuss Puritan grievances. There Rainolds and three companions—all chosen by James and his advisors—were left to “fight their corner” before an assembly of some sixty churchmen for the most part hostile to their cause.

It was not that no English translation of the Scriptures existed. John Wycliffe’s version (circa 1392) suffered from being a translation of a translation (the Latin Vulgate). More significant was the work of William Tyndale, who produced his New Testament in 1525 and parts of the Old Testament in 1534, and who translated directly from the Hebrew and Greek. Tyndale’s simple literary style made his version popular, and it is said that around 90 percent of his readings are retained in the New Testament of the Authorised Version.* Opposition compelled the production of the translation abroad, and Tyndale suffered martyrdom for his convictions in 1536. He died with a prayer on his lips: “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes.” A series of “approved” versions followed—those of Miles Coverdale, Thomas Matthew, and a revision of the latter called The Great Bible—but of greater significance still was the Geneva Bible of 1560. This scholarly production appeared largely due to the efforts of William Whittingham, brother-in-law of John Calvin.

It was the first English edition printed with verse divisions and italics to identify words not found in the original. But it was perhaps most appreciated by English readers for its marginal notes, which were not just explanatory but strongly Protestant and Reformed. And it was the character and tone of these comments that probably governed the nature of the king’s response to John Rainolds.

The Bishop of London, Richard Bancroft, immediately opposed Rainolds: “If every man’s humour might be followed, there would be no end of translating.” But Bancroft changed his tune when he heard the king’s retort. “I profess,” James remarked, “I could never yet see a Bible well translated in English, but I think that of Geneva is the worst.” There can be no doubt that this attitude had little or nothing to do with the merit of the Geneva translation and everything to do with those notes recognised as anti-monarchy and anti-Anglican! And it may be that James felt he had to offer the Puritans something if they were to be pacified. For whatever reason, James gave his assent, and thus began the project that was to issue in the one truly lasting memorial of his reign. Certainly “the king’s heart is in the hand of the LORD, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will” (Proverbs 21:1).

Bishop Bancroft sacrificed his personal scruples on the altar of ecclesiastical ambition—he was duly appointed Archbishop of Canterbury—and set about advancing the royal will. It was determined that the most learned scholars in the land would be set to work. Fifty-four men were to be divided into six groups, two meeting at Westminster (charged with the translation of Genesis through 2 Kings and the New Testament letters), two at Cambridge (1 Chronicles through the Song of Solomon and the Apocrypha), and two at Oxford (Isaiah through Malachi



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and the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation). When the groups had completed their tasks, a committee comprising two delegates from each would meet to review and revise the work as necessary. Finishing touches would be added to the manuscript by three bishops, the last of all by Bancroft himself. The translators were directed to begin with the Bishops' Bible (1568) and to change it only as required by "the truth of the original" (Translation Rules, 1). They were also to make use of other available translations from Tyndale to Geneva. No marginal notes were to be included, unless "for the explanation of the Hebrew or Greek words."

Who were these men charged with such solemn work? Perhaps a few examples will demonstrate their pedigree. The name of John Rainolds has been introduced already. Born a Roman Catholic in 1549, Rainolds went to study at Oxford where he was converted and became Reader in Greek. A celebrated lecturer, his fame grew. He became Dean of Lincoln and later president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Rainolds was a gifted scholar, a sweet preacher, strict in ways, godly, patient, and humble.

One of his Puritan colleagues at Hampton Court was Laurence Chaderton, also born a Roman Catholic, but converted at Cambridge. He refused to recant, was cut off by his wealthy father, and offered a scholarship. A Cambridge career beckoned for this gifted linguist, but he resigned to marry and enjoyed a long life as a plain, robust preacher. He was a firm Calvinist and later occupied significant offices as scholar and minister.

Launcelot Andrewes was not a Puritan. An able scholar from his earliest days at Cambridge, he became a lecturer and progressed to become one of Queen Elizabeth's twelve chaplains at just 31 years of age. By 1601 he was Dean of Westminster, and he served subsequently as Bishop of Chichester, then Ely,

and also Winchester. It is said that he had a working knowledge of fifteen languages, was a striking preacher, much given to prayer, gracious and sincere in all his ways.

Thomas Holland was one of the older translators, master of Exeter College in Oxford. He was especially knowledgeable in church history, and he denied the supremacy of bishops over elders. A gifted preacher and man of prayer, he was accustomed to take his leave of company with a Latin benediction: "I commend you to the love of God, and to the hatred of popery and superstition!"

All in all, it is not difficult to see why the preface to the completed translation ("The Translators to the Reader," no longer included in modern printings) should say of these men, "There were many chosen, that were greater in other men's eyes than in their own, and that sought the truth rather than their own praise."

And so, after long years of effort the task "to deliver God's book unto God's people in a tongue which they understand" was completed. The printing of the finished product was placed in the hands of royal printer Robert Barker, whose family would retain exclusive rights on the Authorised Version for one hundred years. Many printing errors in the first edition of 1611 were gradually corrected in subsequent printings. While the Geneva Bible continued to be the Bible of popular choice for another fifty years, the Authorised Version gradually gained the ascendancy, reigning supreme in the lives of English-speaking Christians throughout the world.

In what they set out to do, the translators surely succeeded: "Ordinary people were to be given a pathway into the text, which its translators believed to be the doorway to salvation, and the only hope and consolation for the world of their day.... We can still celebrate both their achievements—the superb translation of the Bible that they intended to create, and the classic work of English literature that was an accidental, yet most welcome, outcome. Our culture has been enriched by both aspects of the King James Bible. Sadly, we shall never see its equal—or even its like—again" (Alister McGrath). ■

* The Authorised Version is also known as the King James Version.

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