



Celebrating 400 years of the King James Bible, 1611-2011



Six companies of scholars and theologians came together at the invitation of King James I of England in 1604, at a most propitious moment. The initial essay in this exhibit booklet focuses on five streams that converged to flow toward this literary and theologically grounded translation published in 1611. The second essay will set the historical context for the English Bible and the third describes how the King James Bible, itself, was produced.

Five Streams Converge

The English Bible could not have developed independently of the English Church, development of the English language, the scholarly activity that flourished upon the fall of Constantinople, the Reformation, and the invention of printing.

The English Church

Long before Henry VIII broke formally with the church in Rome, relationships between the Church and the secular rulers of Europe were strained. The Papacy imposed taxes to operate the Church, mount crusades and fight wars, but as the nations of Europe gained in power, tension between their rulers and the popes increased.

Between 1309 and 1378, the Church hierarchy resided in the southern French city of Avignon and the Avignon Popes were French — arch-enemies of the English. The English found themselves excluded from the inner circles of the Church. Even after the church returned to Rome, foreign priests were appointed to positions in England, leaving only lower paid church positions for the English.

Henry's break with the Church over his divorce was not an unwelcome development in England. The subsequent establishment of a national church opened the doors for the first officially sanctioned translation, the Great Bible, which was required to be set in every church or chapel, available for any of the King's subjects to read.

The English Language

Parts of the Bible were translated into Old English by Caedmon (7th century), Bede (8th century) and Aelric (11th century) among others. However, in 1066, after the Norman Conquest, the French language supplanted English as the language of the government and the nobility. It was used well into the 14th century when the French influence began to fade. By 1347, French was no longer taught in the schools and by 1360, English replaced French as the language of the nobles and governing elite.

John Wycliffe wrote and preached in English from the mid-1300's through his death in 1384. The first complete English translation of the Bible (written under his name, but not by him) appeared in 1382. It was enormously popular; about 250 handwritten copies remain, more than other English works — including Chaucer's — before the invention of the printing press.

The Fall of Constantinople

The early Latin translation made from Hebrew and Greek by Jerome in 390-404 was called the Vulgate. For nearly a millennium, European clerics and scholars relied on the Vulgate almost exclusively. With the fall of Constantinople in 1453, scholars fleeing the Ottoman Empire relocated in Europe, bringing with them previously unknown Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. These texts encouraged the study of Hebrew and Greek, and scholars like Erasmus and Theodore Beza benefited enormously from them.

The Reformation

Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin reacted to the general lack of learning or incompetence of the clergy as well as unjust practices of the Church. Both of them felt it important that the common people have knowledge of the scriptures so that priest intermediaries were not necessary. Tyndale pressed forward with the idea that scripture should be the sole basis for Christian doctrine and was quoted in Foxe's Book of Martyrs as saying "if God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou doest."

The Printing Press

Without the printing press, reforms might have remained local events and new translations might well have had limited impact. The power of this press took Martin Luther by surprise. A translation of the 95 Theses was printed and distributed across Europe in a matter of months. Likewise, Tyndale's translation was printed in Germany and it is estimated that nearly 18,000 copies were smuggled into England, where it was illegal to own, sell or distribute copies.

The printing press also provided scholars with access to many more resources than they had ever had, including the texts in the original languages, lexicons, grammars and other reference books to help them make sense of the texts.

History of the Bible

The Hebrew Scriptures

Between the 16th and 2nd centuries before Christ, the Hebrew Bible developed as an oral text. During the 8th century BC much literature, including that of Homer, was written down for the first time, and libraries built to house it. It is likely that many of the books of the Hebrew Bible were written down during that shift from primarily oral to written literature, but there were objections to writing the

scriptures. Some felt that written scriptures were more susceptible to errors, physical destruction or malicious corruption than those retained in the memories of the scholars. Others were concerned that readers would be distracted by the words and forget to focus on the meaning or wisdom behind them.

The canon of the Hebrew Bible was established between 200 BC and 200 AD. Beginning just a little earlier, between 300 and 100 BC, the scriptures were first translated into Greek. A substantial Jewish community existed in Alexandria since about 600 BC. After several centuries, they were much more at home speaking Greek than Hebrew, and a group of scholars translated the Hebrew bible into Greek. The work is called the Septuagint, named after the roughly seventy translators — according to legend, seventy-two (six from each of the tribes of Israel) — who worked on it.

The Christian Scriptures

We think of the Christian Bible as a single volume containing Books of the Old and New Testaments, but that was seldom the case until the advent of printing. Individual books that became the New Testament were committed to writing between about 60 AD and 135. Singly and in small groups they were gradually held in greater and greater esteem and, eventually, accorded the authority of scripture. The Christian Bible as a collection of those scriptures took shape over the 4th and 5th centuries.

By the end of the 4th century, there was already concern that errors had crept into the Bible. Some of the errors were simply mistakes in transcription, but others occurred when notes jotted in a scholar's text, commentaries and prefaces were copied as part of the text itself. Pope Damasus asked the theologian and scholar Jerome to compare the best sources in Hebrew and Greek and to make an accurate



Woodcut of Jerome from
the Nurnberg Chronicle

translation into Latin, the common language of western Europe from about 200 through 900.

The 12th century was marked by a fairly widespread revival of interest in the Biblical text. Both Jewish and Christian scholars were interested in understanding the original intention of the writers. Christian theologians learned Hebrew to study early manuscripts.

In the 14th century a rift developed between reformers, who emphasized the scriptures as the sole source of religious authority, and the established church, with its emphasis on tradition. The Wycliffe translations (made by Nicolas Hereford and John Purvey) and subsequent translations by William Tyndale, Myles Coverdale, and John Rogers all had to be copied or printed outside of England and smuggled in with shipments of cloth and other goods.

Although the exhibit is concerned mainly with the English forerunners of the King James Bible, much of the activity took place in continental Europe. Erasmus completed his Greek New Testament in 1516 and Cardinal Cisneros' Complutensian Polyglot laid the best Greek and Hebrew sources at his disposal side-by-side for comparison.

European centers of reform included Wittenberg, Hamburg, Zurich and Geneva where the Bible was translated into the common languages of other countries. Luther's New Testament was published in 1522 and the French Bible was translated in 1530 by Jacques Lefebvre d'Étaples and 1534 by Pierre Robert Olivetan. The Geneva Bible, which enjoyed perhaps the longest period of popularity before the King James Bible, was completed by English scholars in exile in Geneva.

The English Bible

Wycliffe. The Wycliffe Bible wasn't printed until 1850, but nearly 180 manuscript copies remain in existence. For a book that was banned as heretical and burned in public on several occasions, that is fairly remarkable. No other hand-produced book from that time period exists in that quantity.

John Wycliffe's name is associated with two translations, neither of which he made himself. Nicholas of Hereford was largely responsible for the first and John Purvey for the second. The first translation is a word-for-word translation which is awkward in spots, whereas the second is more idiomatic and flows more smoothly.

This translation inspired the 1408 Oxford Constitutions which prohibited translating the Bible without permission.

Tyndale. In accordance with the 1408 Oxford Constitutions, William Tyndale sought permission to make a new English translation. However, Henry VIII — who did not break with Rome until 1534 — was sworn to destroy any suspect translations and turned down the request. Regardless, Tyndale spent 1523 in London translating Erasmus' Greek New Testament into English. Knowing it would be impossible to have it printed in his homeland, he went to Cologne where it was printed and copies smuggled into England in shipments of cloth. Many copies were confiscated by the Archbishop of Canterbury and burned in great bonfires, but more editions were published in Europe to replace them.

Although there were enclaves of Protestantism scattered throughout Europe, it was not generally a safe place and Tyndale was imprisoned in Vilvorde Castle for two years before being burned at the stake.

Coverdale. What a difference a few years would make! Myles Coverdale worked on several translations. From 1528 to 1539, he assisted Tyndale with his translation of the Old Testament. He also worked with John Rogers on the Matthews Bible. Although he did not have the depth of knowledge of Greek and Hebrew that many other translators had, he was a superb editor. He brought out his own translation in 1535, just a year after Tyndale's Old Testament.

Coverdale had been a protégé of Thomas Cromwell, advisor to Henry VIII, who encouraged him to make a translation to replace Tyndale's (which had very Protestant annotations). When the king's split with

the church was final and irrevocable, Cromwell suggested Coverdale for the project which resulted in the Great Bible, the first English translation printed in England and officially authorized. By decree, a copy was to be placed in every church and chapel where any person could read it.

The Geneva Bible. Upon the death of protestant King Edward VI and the accession to the throne of his Catholic sister, Queen Mary, John Calvin's church and academy in Geneva attracted the best of the English Protestant scholars. Of that community in exile the Geneva Bible was born. William Whittingham, Anthony Gilbey, Thomas Sampson, William Cole, and Christopher Goodman worked together on it.

It was published in a smaller format than earlier efforts so that it was affordable and small enough for personal study. A simple, easy-on-the-eyes Roman typeface was used. It was full of maps and charts and the margins overflowed with notes. The chapter and verse divisions introduced in the Geneva Bible are still used today.

It was immediately popular and was republished often over the next 80 years. It was the Bible of Shakespeare and it came also to the New World with the Pilgrims and Puritans. However, it was despised by Queen Elizabeth and King James VI & I for its strident tone and marginal notes.

The Bishops' Bible. Queen Elizabeth I generally strove for peace both at home and abroad. She favored religious tolerance, but her preference for Catholic rather than Protestant forms of worship caused the church in England to divide into Anglicans, associated with the government and Catholic worship forms, and Puritans, who were Protestant. She tried to enforce uniformity in worship and vestments which rankled the Protestants. As part of this uniformity, her Archbishop suggested a more Anglican Bible be undertaken by a team of fourteen bishops. The Bishops' Bible was the result.

The King James Bible

In 1604 King James I of England and VI of Scotland convened the Hampton Court Conference to take up the Millenary Petition. This was a list of desired church reforms that had been presented to him by a large group of Puritan ministers during his journey to London to accept the English crown in 1603. The conference satisfied neither the Anglican nor Puritan clergy. In fact, the King treated both parties rather harshly. However, a proposal for a new Bible translation —put forward by John Reynolds —was enthusiastically embraced by the King. Reynolds was a puritan and probably hoped for a



bible that was closer to the Puritan Geneva Bible than the Bishops' Bible. If that was the case, he was surely disappointed. Instructions to the translators included directions to follow the Bishops' Bible "as little altered as the truth of the originall will permitt" and to exclude partisan, interpretive notes in the margins like those found in the Geneva Bible.

James took charge of setting up the process, with the assistance of Archbishop of Canterbury Richard Bancroft, naming fifty-four scholars and churchmen to six companies of translators to work from Oxford, Cambridge and Westminster. The translators were carefully chosen for balance between the Anglican and Puritan factions. James, who read and spoke both Greek and Latin from a very young age, exercised great care in his choices of translators for their expertise in the ancient languages.

The six companies were organized under six directors: two at Westminster, two at Oxford and two at Cambridge. Each company was assigned several books to translate. The first company at each location was to translate a third of the Old Testament; the second company at Cambridge, the Apocrypha; and the second companies at Westminster and Oxford, each one half of the New Testament.

Unbound copies of the Bishops' Bible were delivered to the translators to mark up. Each individual translator was to work through all of the chapters assigned to his company. The company then met to discuss, debate and decide on the wording. When a book was finished it was delivered to the other companies, which could register any disagreements they might have. A final general meeting of two members of each company would approve the text to be sent on to Archbishop Bancroft. Rather than simply rubber stamping the material, they continued the debate and made about 30 revisions a day according to the notes of translator John Bois, discovered in 1950. This step took an additional year to complete.

Even then, it was not quite finished. Bancroft changed a few words, Thomas Bilson and Miles Smith added the running titles, and Thomas Bilson provided a dedication to King James and Miles Smith a preface to the translation.

The King James Version, or Authorized Version as it was called in England, was not only the work of fifty-four men appointed to the companies, but it was the culmination of the work of all the preceding English translators. James' first rule for the translators required them to rely primarily on the Bishops' Bible, but Rule Fourteen named the Tyndale translation, the Matthews Bible, the Great Bible, Coverdale's translation and the Geneva Bible as well as any other bible in any other language as sources to be consulted when the Bishops' translation was not adequate.

For more reading:

Karen Armstrong, *The Bible : a biography*. New York : Atlantic Monthly, 2007

Benson Bobrick, *Wide as the waters : the story of the English Bible and the revolution it inspired*. New York : Simon & Schuster, 2001.

David Katz. *God's last words : reading the English Bible from the Reformation to fundamentalism*. New Haven : Yale University Press, 2004.

Alister McGrath. *In the beginning : the story of the King James Bible and how it changed a nation, a language and a culture*. NY : Anchor, 2001

Adam Nicolson, *God's secretaries : the making of the King James Bible*. New York : HarperCollins, 2003.

David Price. *Let it go among our people : an illustrated history of the English Bible from John Wyclif to the King James Version*. Cambridge, Eng : Lutterworth Press, 2004

Experience the Bible, an excellent series of videos produced by the King James Bible Trust and viewable at <http://www.kingjamesbibletrust.org/resources/experience-the-bible-revolution/>

**Quayle Bible Collection at
Baker University
548 Eighth Street
Baldwin City, KS**

The Quayle Bible Collection was a gift of Bishop William A. Quayle, sometime student, professor and president of Baker University. He built an outstanding collection of Bibles and other sacred materials. These rare books and manuscripts include early handwritten and printed materials, handwritten scrolls, significant Bible translations and editions with an additional collection of related reference volumes.

More than 900 works are housed in the wing of Collins Library provided by Kenneth A. and Helen F. Spencer.

Hours are 1:00—4:00 Saturday & Sunday through July 2011. To arrange a visit at other times or a guided tour, please contact us at:

785.594.8414
quayle@bakeru.edu

- > September 2010-July 2011. The history of the English Bible, culminating in the publication of the King James Bible in 1611.
- > September 2011-July 2012. The influence of the King James Bible on subsequent Bible translations, literature and culture.