

The Making of the King James Bible
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The history of the King James Bible begins in 1604 with the crowning of the new King of England. Queen Elizabeth died on March 24, 1603, and her cousin, James VI of Scotland, was the next heir to the throne. As he made his way to London, he was petitioned by several Protestant church leaders who sought to “purify the church of unscriptural beliefs and corrupt practices, especially those left over from the days of Roman Catholic domination (Rawlings, 145)”. The King was handed the Millenary Petition which rejected the practices of confirmation, the use of the terms “priest” and “absolution”, and several other beliefs that were Catholic in origin (Rawlings, 146).

King James responded by calling the Hampton Court Conference in January 1604. This conference would allow the signers of the Millenary Petition to state their grievances and voice their opinions on the changes needed in church practices. However, the need for a new translation of the Bible in English was not mentioned in the original petition. Over the course of the conference, it became clear that James was not interested in making any changes to the Church of England. “From the outset, James dashed hope after hope for accommodation. He flatly rejected every single proposal the Puritans presented (Price and Ryrie, 116).” As hope for the Puritans dwindled John Reynolds made an unlikely request. He said to the King, “May your Majesty be pleased to direct that the Bible be now translated, such versions as are extant not answering to the original (pg. 116, Price and Ryrie)”. Reynolds’s request received an unlikely answer: King James agreed.

King James was not happy with the current Bible available to the common people because it differed from the translation read by the clergy (Price and Ryrie, 118). He commissioned fifty-four translators from the finest schools in England to work on different sections of the Bible. These fifty-four scholars were divided into six groups and each group was responsible for translating various books of the Bible (Brake, 189).

The King James Bible was not newly translated as many people assume. The translators consulted original Greek and Hebrew texts in order to revise the existing editions of English Bibles. Richard Bancroft, the Bishop of London, created fifteen “translation principles to govern the work (Brake, 190)”. The language of the Bible was not the common language of the day because rule number fifteen of Bancroft’s principles prevented the use of extensive modern language. The actual translation of the work took three years and another three years were required to review the translation. A final nine months were used to prepare it for the press (Rawlings, 155). The final editing was done by Bishop Thomas Bilson of Winchester and Miles Smith of the Oxford Hebrew team (Rawlings, 155).

Work on the King James Bible began in 1607 and was completed in 1611 (Brake, 191). It was the third Bible in English history to be approved for translation. This first edition was “a large folio, about 16 x 10½ inches, printed on linen and rag

paper in large black letter type with the chapter titles, summaries, parallel passages, and marginal references in a more readable Roman print (Brake, 195)". Its title page was beautifully decorated with pictures of Moses and the Ten Commandments and the four gospel writers. The Bible was heavily scrutinized by clergymen and scholars, but overall it was widely and favorably received. In its first year, it was printed in two editions. The first was known as "the great „He“ Bible" and the second was called "the great „She“ Bible" (Rawlings, 155). The editions get their names from Ruth 3:15 which stated "he went into the city" in the first edition. It was corrected to "she went into the city" for the second edition (Rawlings, 155).

This beautiful Bible represents the growing desire for people to take their religion into their own hands. People wanted to be able to read the words for themselves, to know what the Bible was saying to them on their own. For hundreds of years the Catholic Church had tried to stop people like John Wycliffe from translating the Bible and giving it to common people because they knew the power it held. They wanted to keep the power for themselves. They wanted to control the way people thought and what they believed. Heroes like John Wycliffe and William Tyndale, dared to defy the law and put the power of God's word into the common people's hands.

The King James Bible made quite an impression on me as I gazed at it through the glass case. A lot of people in our current age, including myself, often take for granted the access we have to not just one but several translations of the Bible in English. We don't quite realize the years of history behind the book we're holding. We don't realize how much blood, sweat and tears went into copying those words so that people just like us could read it for ourselves. It's so easy to forget how many people gave their lives for this one book. Even in our own time, people in other countries would do anything to get their hands on a Bible in their own language.

I think that if I had been alive when the King James Bible was published in 1611, I would appreciate it so much more. Right now, I see it and I think it's beautiful and amazing, but I am accustomed to beautiful books and I have always owned my own Bible. To be alive in a time where I more than likely would not have access to a Bible or just books in general would break my heart. I can't imagine what it must have felt like to the English people to hold a Bible for the first time in their lives, to hold a book as beautiful and as holy as the King James Bible.

Works Cited

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