

# The Making of the King James Version

by Stephen Wiggins

In his book, *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible*, Adam Nicolson relates the riveting story of how historical events unfolded to culminate in the translating of the most influential English Bible the world has ever known. Fondly known as the "King James Version," the designation seems historically justified from the active part taken by England's King James in organizing the translation and blessing the finished product with his approval.

A few months after James ascended the throne in 1603 he called a conference of churchmen and theologians to discuss issues amiss within the Church of England. Nothing positive resulted from the meeting with the exception of a proposal for a new translation of the scriptures. This by no means met with unanimous consent. But it did meet the approval of the man who mattered the most. James seized the opportunity and thus launched in January of 1604 the initial makings of the King James Version.

The king himself took a leading part in organizing the work of translation. Six panels of translators, composed of 47 of the most capable scholars in England, divided up the work. The Old Testament was entrusted to three panels, the New Testament to two, and the Apocrypha to one. As each committee completed their assignment the draft translation of the whole Bible was reviewed by a smaller group of 12 men, two from each panel. The final draft was then sent to the printer. From 1604 to the published date of 1611, the King James Version was seven years in production.

In another volume entitled, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture*, Alister McGrath lists the 15 rules drawn up and approved as guidelines for the translation process. Of interest is the fact that the new translation was to rely heavily upon previous English versions of the Bible, with special significance attached to the Bishops' Bible of 1568. That the King James Version would be a revision and not a new translation per se is reiterated in the preface, "The Translators to the Reader." Here the author states, "We never thought from the beginning, that we should need to make a new translation." Rather, as translators they understood their purpose was "to make a good one better, or out of the many good ones, one principal good one."

The finished product did not lack for critics. Perhaps none was more forthright in his condemnation than Dr. Hugh Broughton, a skilled linguist himself who had been preparing his own revision for 30 years. When the new version appeared he replied with this colorful critique:

The late Bible was sent to me to censure which bred in me a sadness that will grieve me while I breathe, it is so ill done. Tell His Majesty that I had rather be rent in pieces with wild horses than any such translation by my consent should

be urged upon poor churches . ... The new edition crosseth me. I require it to be burnt (Nicolson, p. 228).

Since the translation process is not as exact a science as some would prefer; and because literally thousands of interpretive decisions go into the making of any translation or revision of the Bible; it is inevitable there are going to be sincere disagreements where human judgment plays a part. Still, Broughton's criticism seems incredibly harsh in light of the fact that he goes on to imply that the KJV "translators might be damned on the day of judgment for their work" (Benson Bobrick, *Wide as the Waters: The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution It Inspired*, p. 257).

In retrospect one must acknowledge that the publishing of the King James Version was certainly the very best English Bible that had thus far been produced. One might suppose, then, that immediately upon publication the new translation would be readily accepted by the masses, especially since it was commissioned by royalty. But such was not the case. The simple truth is that the new translation was initially regarded with polite disinterest. There was no overwhelming reception. No fanfares of welcome or accolades of praise occasioned its publication in 1611. Criticism from both Catholic and Protestant sources, coupled with the people's familiarity and love for the Geneva Bible of 50 years earlier, ensured its failure to gain initial widespread acceptance.

Time would alter that negative reaction. Within a hundred years the King James Version was deservedly hailed a classic and generally viewed as one of the high points of English literary achievements. On more than one occasion literary critics have remarked that the two most influential works in shaping of the English language are the writings of William Shakespeare and the 1611 King James Bible. No other translation of God's word has held sway over English speaking people more than the beloved King James Bible. Its popularity speaks for itself as it remained the number one selling English translation till 1989, and then eclipsed only by the New International Version.

With advance of time, however, it is inevitable that any translation must undergo revision. This is no less true for the King James Version. It has passed through many editions and has been revised considerably over the years. In fact, the whole history of Bible translation in any language is a history of repeated revision and correction. There are several reasons why the King James Version deserves further revision, none of which reflect upon the translators' high caliber of work produced in 1611.

First, languages change. Words become archaic and antiquated over time. Terms take on different meanings or fall out of use altogether. Renditions that were clear 400 years ago may now seem ambiguous or even nonsensical to one unacquainted with Elizabethan language of the 17th century. Who would not agree that the apostle's statement, "Ye are not straitened in us, but ye are straitened in your own bowels" (2 Cor. 6:12), could be clarified by revision? One recent publisher to recognize the need for revision and modernizing of language within the King James Version was the Thomas Nelson

Corporation of Nashville, Tennessee. In 1979 they published the New Testament of the New King James Version and the entire Bible in 1982.

Second, revision is imperative because of our advancement in linguistic studies over the past 400 years. In 1611 the KJV translators did the best they could with what they had. The result of their labors was a brilliant translation of God's word. But the translation and revision process is such that it is possible to make the best even better. Within their preface that accompanied the original publication of the King James Version the translators include an honest admission pertaining to some difficulties they encountered concerning obscure words in the original languages, especially Hebrew, about which they were uncertain of the meaning. Marginal notes, often omitted in current printings of the KJV, indicated where these variant meanings exist. But conjecture in translation inevitably results in mistakes. Knowledge of the Hebrew language is much more advanced today than it was in 1611.

A final reason why revision is necessary pertains to the underlying text on which revisions and translations are based. Advances in textual criticism have resulted in the possibilities of a superior text than that available in 1611. Modern discoveries have allowed scholars to produce a standard edition of the Hebrew Masoretic text of the Old Testament unavailable in the 17th century. For the New Testament the translators in 1611 had no more than 25 late Greek manuscripts. While today there are 5,358 known New Testament manuscripts and fragments. And, while textual variants among the various manuscripts do not sacrifice doctrinal principles, the modern science of textual criticism does allow us to be more exact pertaining to the original readings of the biblical text.

The reader need not suppose that a call for revisional efforts or the betterment of an underlying text to improve Bible translations is a liberal position. Nor does it reflect on the reliability and authenticity of God's inspired word. One of the greatest and most conservative biblical scholars to have ever lived was brother J.W. McGarvey. When discussing the benefits of modern textual criticism, however, he states that this science now allows us to possess "a far purer text than has ever been seen by any previous generation since the sacred autographs disappeared" (*Evidences of Christianity*, p. 56). Another scholar of the same caliber was brother Guy N. Woods. He was asked if the Greek text used for the KJV, commonly called the "Received Text," was superior to that used some 300 years later in the translation of the ASV of 1901. He replied, "No. Quite the contrary is true" (*Questions and Answers*, Vol. 2, p. 242).

In 1536 William Tyndale was strangled and burned at the stake by Catholic authorities for translating and distributing the English Bible within his native country. As he died he cried his last words, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes!" Unknown to Tyndale God's providential hand was already at work. A few months earlier King Henry VIII had granted permission for the circulation of an English Bible, a translation largely based upon Tyndale's previous work. Over the next 75 years a number of English translations and revisions would appear until the King James Version made its debut in 1611. As number nine in the sequence of printed English Bibles, the King James Version

today preserves more than 80 percent of Tyndale's translation of 1526. In tribute to the King James Version of the Bible we say thanks be unto God for one of the greatest translations of holy scriptures that ever blessed the human race.