

## How We Got Our King James Bible

The following has been taken from a book written by Col. R. B. Thieme, Jr. The title of the book *Canonicity*.

“By now the rift between Protestants and Catholics had widened considerably. In England, where Parliament consisted primarily of Puritans, Protestants and Anglicans, the people began to talk about a new standard translation. James I was on the throne, and it seemed that Tyndale’s prayer was being answered.

It is necessary, however, that you understand some of the background connected with the reign of King James I. Elizabeth, Queen of England, had a beautiful cousin, Mary Stuart, who had returned from France in 1561 to take her rightful place as Queen of the Scots. Scotland was in a state of turbulence: the clans fomented discontent; the new faith preached by John Knox swept across the chilling lochs; and Catholic Mary was held in contempt, not only for her presence in Scotland, but for her continuing claim to the Tudor crown of Elizabeth. Mary unwisely married the Scottish Lord Darnley. This created further antagonism, both to the English because of his Tudor connections and to the Scots because he was Catholic.

The Scots had become Calvinistic in their beliefs and resented Mary’s Romanism and the influence of her French court. The people were determined that never again should the Roman Church be allowed to gain and hold political power in their nation. After a series of indiscretions and acts of poor judgment, Mary was forced to abdicate in favor of her infant son, who then became James VI of Scotland. Fleeing the wrath of the Protestant nobles, Mary sought refuge in England.

Elizabeth was in a quandary. She dared not send Mary back to Scotland, for the Scots might execute their ... monarch; she was equally afraid to give her sanctuary in England where Mary was certain to be a rallying point for all manner of malcontents. Therefore, Elizabeth was obliged to keep her ‘guest’ strictly confined and thus began a kaleidoscope of intrigues and plots that was to span almost two decades. Eventually, Mary’s continued sedition left Elizabeth no other alternative. Mary was executed in 1587.

James VI, Mary’s son by Lord Darnley, who had been King of Scotland since 1568 under the regency of the Earl of Moray, was reared a protestant. He was taught Calvinistic theology, Greek, Latin and Hebrew. Jamie was quite a student. He could discourse on theological subjects in both English and Latin. When Elizabeth died, she left no heirs, thus ending the House of Tudor. James VI was brought down from Scotland and crowned James I of England, beginning the reign of the House of Stuart.

The year was 1603. James had led an uneasy life in Scotland and actually looked forward to coming to England.

However, he soon found that England, too, had its troubles; the Puritans were in revolt against the established church. One thousand Puritan preachers had gathered together to write a petition. They beseeched his noble Majesty and parliament for a change in the established church service and the removal of such superstitions as the sign of the cross. Furthermore, the Puritans refused to use the prescribed prayer book because of its corrupted translations.

This petition became known in history as the Millenary petition because of the thousand signatures affixed to it. It resulted in the Hampton Court conference on January 14, 1603, over which King James himself presided. It was during one of the endless debates that the leader of the Puritans, John Reynolds, said, "May your Majesty be pleased, that the Bible be new translated, such as are extant not answering to the original."

Immediately Reynolds' request ran into opposition from Bancroft the Bishop of London. The Bishop claimed that if all who wished were permitted to come up with translations, the country would be swamped with Bibles. So the talks dragged on.

Finally the King of England grew weary listening to the debates in Parliament. He sided firmly with Reynolds in favor of a new Bible. He admitted that he had "never yet seen a Bible well translated into English," and he wished that "some special pains were taken for a uniform translation . . . done by the best learned of both Universities . . . lastly ratified by royal authority . . . to be read in the whole church and not other."

James was vitally interested in theology and in languages. He was knowledgeable in the Scriptures and in Bible doctrine. Besides, the thought that a new and better translation of the Bible should be published during his reign appealed to James tremendously. He made but one condition: He would handpick the translators himself. Although the new translation had his complete backing and would eventually be ratified by him, he did not contribute one penny toward its expense. It is said to have cost 3500 pounds sterling – a considerable sum in those days.

On July 22, 1604, the King announced that he had appointed fifty-four men to make the new translation. How did he select the scholars? His only requirement was that they must be good linguists. Half of them were Hebrew experts and the other half experts in Greek. The list included Anglicans and Puritans, believers and unbelievers. Of those selected, seven men died before the work was begun, including John Reynolds, who had asked for this translation. Actually, only forty-seven men worked on what we call today "The Authorized" or "King James Version of the Bible."

It was a perfect time for the translation to be undertaken, for the English language had been greatly improved by men like Shakespeare, Donne, and Spenser; classic literature had reached its peak.

The beauty of the English language of that day and its power of expression are thus preserved for us in the King James Bible. Thus, a style of language which would otherwise be long outdated has come down to us fresh and, with the exception of some words, very much to the point.

The scholars were divided into six teams; two teams worked at Oxford, two at Cambridge, and two at Westminster, with the work portioned among them. In each of the groups, the teams were further broken down into an Old Testament team and a New Testament team. All worked independently of each other.

That explains, of course, why the word *pneuma* was translated “spirit” in one place and “Ghost” in another. It was simply a matter of *esprit de corps* – school spirit. The Westminster group used Ghost, and the Oxford group used Spirit. Each put down what he preferred. One of the teams worked entirely on the Apocrypha, which as you know, is no longer included in the King James Version of the Bible.

The teams translating the Old Testament used the Masoretic Text as their source. Work on this text had begun in the fifth century A.D. and was completed in 1425. It was an accurate rendition of the original Hebrew Scriptures. For the Greek, the *Textus Receptus* (“the text received by all”) was used. This edition was based on tenth-century manuscripts that had been put out by Erasmus of Rotterdam in 1516 and published by Elzevir. ...

It took the scholars three years to finish their work of translating the Bible and an additional nine months to revise the text and put it together. To everyone’s satisfaction, the old ecclesiastical words of the Bishop’s Bible of 1568 were all retained. Surely four years or less is not too long for a work of such magnitude. The preface says, “matters of such weight and consequence are to be speeded with maturity: for in a business of moment a man feareth not the blame of convenient slackness.”

All in all, the 1611 edition was a good translation from the manuscripts that were then available. The majestic Anglo-Saxon, with its clarity and style, its directness and force, have made the King James Bible an English classic and a model for hundreds of years.

Yet upon its release, the Authorized Version turned out to be the most unpopular and universally condemned translation that had ever come off the printing press. It caused the biggest ruckus ever raised over an edition of the Bible in the English-speaking world. Some criticism was justified because, in the process of printing, over four hundred typographical errors were made which had to be corrected. For the most part, however, the criticism was unfounded and biased. The Catholics condemned it for favoring the Protestants. The Arminians thought it favored Calvinism. The Calvinists claimed that it favored Arminianism. The Puritans objected to the church polity and the ritual, as well as the use of such words as “bishop,” “church,” “ordain” and “Easter.”

In short, everyone who considered himself to be an expert on the subject screamed in protest and began to write pamphlets condemning the new version of the Bible. No one liked it except King James I.