The English Bible: A Very Short History

Kent P. Jackson

It may not seem like a revolutionary idea to read the Bible in one's own language. But for hundreds of years, it was not only a revolutionary idea but a dangerous one as well. It wasn't always that way. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew, the language of the ancient Israelites. Literate Israelites could read it. The New Testament was written in Greek, the language of most early Christians. Literate Christians could read it. When changes in culture and population took place, the Bible was translated so more people could read it. Jews in the third and second centuries BC translated the Old Testament into Greek, which by then was the only language that many Jews knew. The resulting translation, the Septuagint, served not only a large Greek-speaking Jewish population but also the earliest Greek-speaking Christians. Literate Jews and Christians could read it. When Latin, by the fourth century AD, had become the primary language of a large number of Christians, the Septuagint and the Greek New Testament were translated into Latin. The translator was Jerome (d. AD 420), whose work with the Bible became one of the pivotal events in Christian history. We call his translation the Vulgate because it was in the "vulgar," that is, *common*, language of ordinary people. Literate Christians could read it. Indeed, putting the scriptures into the languages of ordinary people through all those centuries was the desired thing to do.

But in the centuries after the Bible's translation into Latin, things changed. Latin ceased to be a spoken language, at least among ordinary people. It was kept alive by scholars and priests for the use of the church and the academy, and thus the language of the common people eventually became the language of the elites. And unlike in earlier centuries, the process of translating the Bible to meet the changing needs of common people was not continued. The Vulgate remained the Bible of the church, but now it was no longer accessible to ordinary people because they couldn't read it, and it was controlled by the few who could. Then the medieval church developed the notion that God *intended* the Bible to be inaccessible to common people. The fact that it was foreign and unapproachable became a good thing. And finally, to complete the process, the idea became established that the Latin translation was more authoritative than the original texts in the original languages.

FROM WYCLIFFE TO GENEVA

John Wycliffe (d. 1384) was a reformer before there was a Reformation. He became well known in England for contending that the church had no authority in temporal matters, which should be left to the state. As in the days of the Apostles, the church should be poor and outside of politics. This view made him popular with the monarchy and the aristocracy, but it had the opposite effect with the pope and the wealthy bishops and monastic orders. Wycliffe argued his points from the Bible. He believed that the Bible was the authority on such matters and that it showed no precedence for how the church was conducting its affairs in his time. And because the Bible was God's word and was essential for church, state, and everyday life, why not translate it into the language of regular people so they could be aware of its content? Wycliffe was the organizer, facilitator, and one of the translators of the Bible that bears his name. By the time of his death, handwritten copies of the Wycliffe Bible were being circulated, copied, and distributed in England. A revision of the translation made after his death gained even wider currency. The Wycliffe translation was too literal—a mostly word-for-word rendering from the Latin, not from the Hebrew and Greek. But it was a Bible in the English language and the beginning of a popular movement to get the word of God into the spoken tongue of ordinary people.[1]

Over the following two centuries, the Wycliffe Bible continued to be copied and circulated. Its influence became great not because the translation was good—it wasn't—but because it symbolized the idea of bringing not only the Bible but Christianity itself out of the exclusive control of the church and into the hands of the people. It was a movement whose time had come, but it came at a cost.

William Tyndale (d. 1536) was influenced by the legacy of John Wycliffe and his successors. By Tyndale's time, Wycliffe's Bible had been banned, Wycliffe's bones had been exhumed and burned and his ashes ceremonially scattered, and translating the Bible from Latin had become a capital crime. None of that deterred Tyndale, who in violation of the law and in constant danger of imprisonment and death translated and published parts of the Bible into English. He created the translation from which much of the King James Version ultimately descended, and as such, he is the father of our English Bible.[2] Tyndale, like Wycliffe and other reformers of his own time, believed that the Bible should be in the language of the people and available to believers individually. Yet the church's hold on the Bible was stronger than ever, and the authority of the Vulgate was supreme. Tyndale knew that the original Hebrew and Greek texts, in the words of the ancient prophets and apostles themselves, were more authoritative than any man-made translation could be. And he knew that the manuscripts in those languages that were closest to the writers' originals should be the source from which translations should come. Thus, unlike Wycliffe's translation from the Vulgate, Tyndale set out to translate from the earliest sources. Using editions of the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament that only recently had appeared in print, he undertook the first English translation of the Bible from its original languages.

He succeeded wonderfully. In addition to being a courageous reformer and advocate of religious freedom, Tyndale was also a master linguist and wordsmith.[3] His goal was to make the Bible so accessible that every plowboy in England could own and read a copy. To that end, the New Testament and the Old Testament sections he translated and published were small, portable, and relatively inexpensive. His translation is characterized by what Nephi called "plainness" (2 Nephi 25:4). It is in clear and simple English, the language of middle-class people of his time, and is deliberately free of the elegant and affected literary trappings of the

monarchy and the church. It is "accessible, useful, clarifying, less interested in the grandeur of its music than the light it brings."[4] Tyndale's choice of words has endured. Research has shown that over 75 percent of the King James Old Testament (of the sections he translated) comes from Tyndale as well as over 80 percent of the King James New Testament.[5] Tyndale had another advantage over Wycliffe. In the middle of the previous century, Johannes Gutenberg had invented movable type and the printing press. The technology of printing had arrived just in time for the translation of the Bible into vernacular languages. Tyndale translated and published the New Testament (editions of 1526, 1534, 1535), Genesis to Deuteronomy (1530, 1534), and Jonah (1531). He probably also translated Joshua to 2 Chronicles (published after his death).[6] Before he could translate more, however, he was captured, imprisoned, strangled to death, and burned at the stake for his heresy.

Other English Bible translations followed in succession, and all were not only built on Tyndale's foundation but were also, in large part, revisions of Tyndale's text. Myles Coverdale published the first complete Bible in English in 1535. He based it on Tyndale's translations, and he
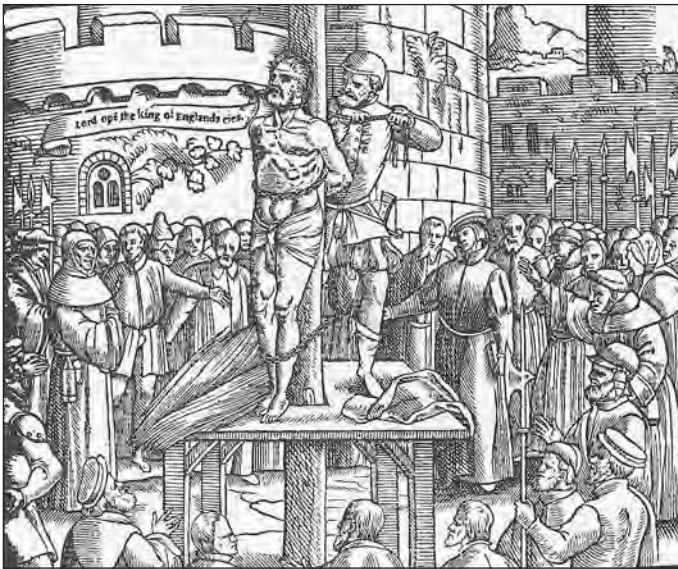
Execution of William Tyndale, Vilvoorde, Belgium, in 1536; according to contemporary John Foxe, Tyndale's last words were, "Lord, open the king of England's eyes"; from an early printing of Foxe's Book of Martyrs.
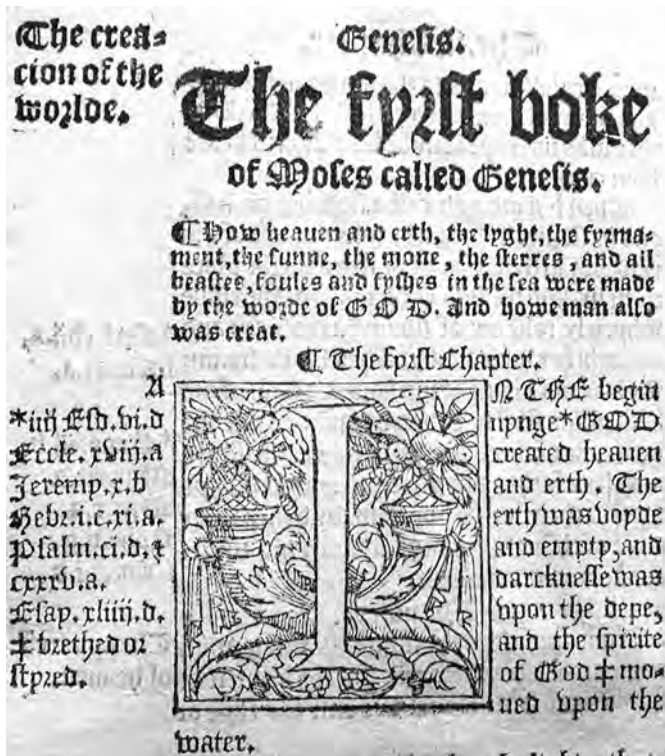
The beginning of Genesis in a 1549 printing of the Thomas Matthew Bible, by John Rogers; black-letter type; the familiar language is that of William Tyndale.

translated other parts from other languages, primarily from German and Latin. John Rogers (later burned at the stake) published a Bible under the pseudonym of Thomas Matthew two years later. It was Tyndale's translation with a revision of the work of Coverdale. Coverdale and others then produced what is called the Great Bible, or Whitchurch Bible (named after its printer), also based on Tyndale and on Coverdale's translations from German and Latin. These three Bibles were all large, oversized books published with the intent that they be read in cathedrals. Tyndale, it seems, was far ahead of his time in thinking that the Bible needed to be small and inexpensive so ordinary people could read it on their own.

The Geneva Bible, first published in 1560, was translated and printed by exiled reformers who had fled to Protestant Switzerland in order to avoid persecution in Britain when it was under a Catholic monarch. It was

an excellent translation that for the most part was a revision of Tyndale. The parts of the Bible that Tyndale didn't translate were translated from Hebrew. The producers of the Geneva Bible shared Tyndale's vision of making the Bible accessible to ordinary people. And, like Tyndale, they wanted to help Christians read the Bible in the privacy of their homes. To that end, their Bible included maps, illustrations, cross references, numerous study helps, and copious explanatory notes in the margins. The Geneva Bible was a library, not only for personal scripture study but also for instruction in how to live the life of a faithful Christian. And because of its popularity, its marginal commentary became one of the most widely read works in the English language. The Geneva Bible was what we now call a study Bible, and it enabled readers to drink deeply from the words of the prophets and apostles without the mediation of priests or the church. It was a genuine Protestant Bible. More than any other Bible in English, the Geneva Bible liberated the word of God from its medieval past and placed it in the hands of hundreds of thousands of readers. It was also the Bible of Shakespeare and his contemporaries and was an important foundation of modern English. When England became permanently Protestant, the Geneva Bible was able to leave its exile on the continent, and it was soon printed in England and became the English Bible of choice.

But the Geneva Bible was produced outside the control of the crown and the Church of England, and the marginal notes contained material that displeased both. An authorized version was needed to replace it. The Bishops' Bible, first published in 1568, was prepared by conservative Anglican bishops who were not altogether comfortable with the idea of giving ordinary people free access to the word of God. Thus they produced a translation further removed from the common language of the people than the Geneva Bible was. In its vocabulary and sentence structure, it was a throwback to earlier times, with an increase of less-familiar Latin-based words and much Latin-based word order. It was intended to be used in churches, and to that end its large, heavy volumes were chained to pulpits all over England. It lacked all the marginal notes that the bishops found offensive in the Geneva Bible, with the desired effect that people would need to get their explanations in church. Predictably, people found the Bishops' Bible unappealing, bought few copies of it, and continued to purchase Geneva instead.[7] It soon became apparent to officers of the church that a better authorized version was needed.

15 And Abimelech said, Behold, my land lieth before thee, dwell where it pleaseth thee best.

16 But vnto Sara he sayd, See, I haue giuen thy brother a thousand pieces of siluer: beholde, it is a couering of thine eyes vnto all that are with thee, and to all other: and thus she was reproued.

17 And so Abraham prayed vnto God: and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidens, and they bare children.

18 For the Lord had closed vp all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Abrahams wife.

The xxj. Chapter.

3 Isahac is borne. 14 Hagar is cast out, with her yoong sonne Ismael. 17 The Angel comforteth her.

THe Lord visited Sara, as hee had promised, and did vnto her according as he had spoken.

2 For Sara conceiued, and bare Abraham a sonne in his olde age, the same season which the Lord had appointed.

3 And Abraham called his sonnes name that was borne vnto him, which Sara bare him, Isahac.

4 And Abraham circumcised his sonne Isahac, when he was eight dayes old, as God commanded him.

5 And Abraham was an hundred yeres old, when his sonne Isahac was borne vnto him.

6 But Sara said, God hath made me to reioyce, so that all that heare, will ioy with me.

7 She sayd also, who would haue sayd vnto Abraham, that Sara should haue giuen children sucke? for I haue borne him a sonne in his olde age.

8 The childe grew, and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isahac was weaned.

9 Sara saw also the sonne of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had borne vnto Abraham, to be a mocker.

10 Wherefore shee sayd vnto Abraham. Cast out this bond woman, and her sonne: for the sonne of this bond woman shall not bee heire with my sonne Isahac.

11 And this saying was very grieuous in Abrahams sight, because of his sonne.

12 And God sayd vnto Abraham, Let it not be grieuous in thy sight, because of the lad, and of the bond woman: In all that Sara hath said vnto thee, heare her voice: for in Isahac shal thy seed be called.

13 Moreouer, of the sonne of the bond woman will I make a nation: because hee is thy seed.

14 And so Abraham rose vp early in the morning, and tooke bread, and a bottle of water, and gaue it vnto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the lad also, and sent her away: who departing, wandered vp and downe in the wildernesse of Beer-seba.

15 And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the lad vnder some one of the trees:

16 And went and sate on the other side a great way, as it were a bowe shoot off: for she sayd, I will not see the death of the childe. And shee sitting downe on the other side, lift vp her voice, and wept.

17 And God heard the voice of the lad, and the Angel of God called to Hagar out of heauen, and sayd vnto her, what aileth thee, Hagar? feare not: for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he lieth.

18 Arise, and lift vp the lad, and take him in thine hand: for I will make of him a great people.

19 And God opened her eyes, and shee saw a well of water, and she went and filled the bottle with water, and gaue the lad drinke.

20 And God was with the lad, and he grew and dwelt in the wildernesse, and became a principall archer.

21 And he dwelt in the wildernesse of Paran: and his mother got him a wife out of the land of Egypt.

22 And at the same season, Abimelech & Phicol his chiefe captaine spake vnto Abraham, saying, God is with thee in all that thou doest:

23 And now therefore, sweare vnto me here by God, that thou wilt not hurt mee, nor my children, nor my childrens children: but that thou shalt deale with me, & the countrey where thou hast beene a stranger, according vnto the kindnesse that I haue shewed thee.

24 And Abraham sayd, I will sweare.

25 And Abraham rebuked Abimelech for a well of water, which Abimelechs seruants had violently taken away.

26 And Abimelech said, I wote not who hath done this thing: also thou toldest mee not, neither heard I of it, but this day.

27 And Abraham tooke sheepe and oxen, and gaue them vnto Abimelech: and they made both of them a league together.

28 And Abraham set seuen ewe lambes by themselues.

29 And Abimelech said vnto Abraham, what meane these seuen ewe lambes, which thou hast set by themselues?

30 He answered, For these seuen ewe lambes shalt thou take of my hand, that they may bee a witnesse vnto me, that I haue digged this well.

31 Wherefore the place is called Beer-seba: because that there they sware both of them.

32 Thus made they a league together at Beer-seba: and Abimelech and Phicol his chiefe captaine rose vp, & turned againe into the land of the Philistines.

33 And Abraham planted a wood in Beer-seba, and called there on the name of the Lord the euerlasting God.

34 And Abraham soiourned in the Philistines land a long season.

The xxij. Chapter.

1, 2 The faith of Abraham is tried in offering his sonne Isahac. 8 Isahac is a figure of Christ.

AFter these sayings, GOD did tempt Abraham, and sayd vnto him, Abraham. which answered, Here I am.

2 And hee sayd, Take thy sonne, thine onely sonne Isahac whom thou louest, and get thee vnto the land of Moriah: and offer him there for a whole burnt offering, vpon one of the mountaines which I will shew thee.

THE KING JAMES BIBLE

The King James translation, published in 1611, was motivated as much as anything else by the politics of the day, including the continuing popularity of the Geneva Bible. Geneva was popular with the nonconformist Puritans, whose loyalty to the monarchy and the church was under suspicion. Its abundant marginal notes reflected independence from both the church and the crown and in some places reflected Calvinist ideas that the king and his advisors found bothersome. The decision was made to undertake a new translation free of undesirable influences and under the careful watch of authorities. All but one of the committee of approximately fifty translators appointed under King James's direction were bishops or priests of the Church of England, and among them were the best Hebrew and Greek scholars in Britain.

Their instructions were to make a revision of the Bishops' Bible, so each member of the committee was given a fresh, unbound copy (or part of a copy) to work from.[8] They also had before them the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament, as well as all the earlier English translations. Those who worked on the KJV can thus be viewed more as *editors* than as *translators*. But this takes nothing away from their monumental accomplishment. They worked patiently through all parts of the Bible, scrutinizing every passage. They selected the words they felt best represented the intent of the Hebrew and Greek originals, often drawing words directly out of the earlier English translations. Thus the Tyndale Bible and all of the translations that derived from it became the drafts for the KJV—the final product of almost ninety years of work to create the English Bible. The outcome was the most consistent and carefully produced of all the English Bibles to that date. In general, their work succeeded best when they followed the original languages and Geneva (and hence Tyndale). It succeeded least when they remained true to their instructions to follow the Bishops' Bible. Awkward passages from the Bishops' Bible survived in many instances, as in Matthew 6:34: "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (compare with Tyndale: "The day present hath ever enough of his own trouble").[9] But in other instances, the translators wisely abandoned the Bishops' Bible and followed Geneva instead, often improving upon Geneva's wording. On the whole, the language of the

King James translation is strongest in the Gospels, where it is most firmly based on the genius of William Tyndale.

When the King James Bible was published in 1611, it included an eleven-page, small-print introduction titled "The Translators to the Reader." It makes the translators' case for the necessity of publishing the Bible in the contemporary language of its readers, and it expresses the intent of the new translation: "We never thought from the beginning, that we should need to make a new Translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one . . . but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one."[10] Interestingly, the introduction's frequent quotations from scripture come not from its own translation but from Geneva instead. And sadly, although it makes a point of telling readers that the translation is built on the work of others, it never mentions its debt to William Tyndale, who was still viewed with suspicion by some. The king and bishops who produced the King James Version were themselves less enthusiastic than Tyndale and the Geneva translators about turning the Bible over to lay readers. This reluctance is reflected in interesting ways. Whereas the first Geneva title page had an illustration of Moses parting the Red Sea, inviting readers into the promised land of reading the Bible in their own language, the King James title page depicted a massive stone wall guarded on all sides by statues of Moses, Aaron, the Apostles, and the Evangelists. It was a statement of authority, not an invitation. The King James Version's title contained the words "Appointed to be read in Churches," and that is what the translators had in mind.[11] While most Geneva editions were small and portable and were printed in roman type—by then this was the type familiar in most books and is the same type we use today—the 1611 King James Bible was huge (11 × 16 inches), very expensive, and printed in archaic 𝔟𝔩𝔞𝔠𝔨-𝔩𝔢𝔱𝔱𝔢𝔯 𝔱𝔶𝔭𝔢. Fortunately, the people's desire to possess the word of God prevailed, and the King James Version was soon printed in much more economical, marketable, and reader-friendly formats. The translators, at the King's insistence, wisely excluded marginal notes with commentary on the text. That was a reaction to Geneva's copious notes, and the idea was that in the absence of commentary, readers would turn to the church for explanations. The decision actually had the opposite effect. Soon the greatest use of the Bible would be in private homes, not in churches, and the absence of
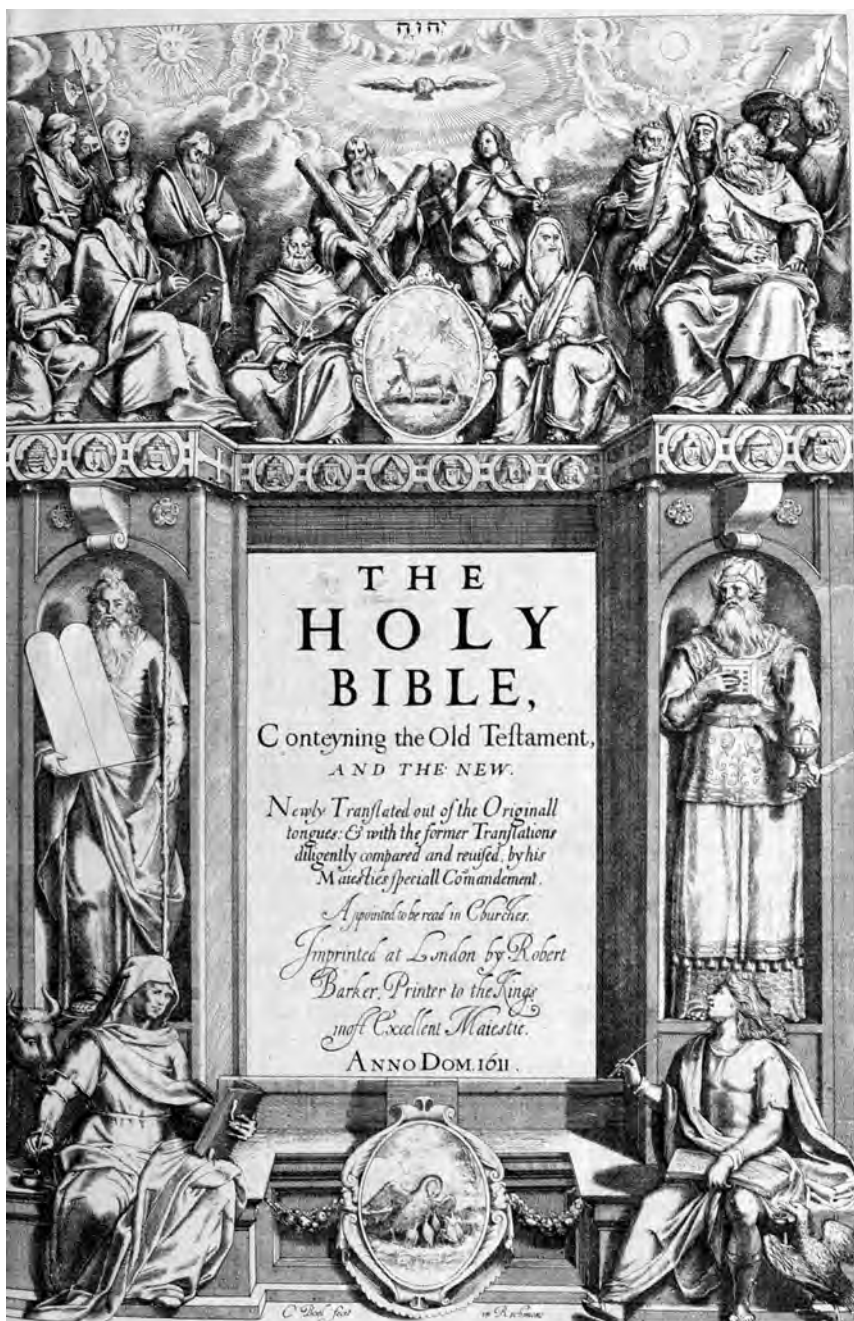
Title page, 1611 King James Bible; Moses and Aaron flank the title inscription; above and below them are seated figures of Matthew (upper left), Mark (upper right), Luke (lower left), and John (lower right); eleven Apostles stand at top, with God the Father (represented by Hebrew letters יהוה), Jesus Christ (lamb holding cross), and Holy Spirit (dove) at center top.

commentary would free the readers to draw their own conclusions about the scriptures—with only the Holy Ghost for their guide.

As the King James Bible was by design a revision of earlier translations—"out of many good ones, one principal good one"—its language was already old when it was created. It "was born archaic."[12] But this should not be overstated; it was not born four hundred years old, as it is today, yet it was deliberately cast in a language more antiquated than that of common speech. It was a "formal, ritualized language" that created an "atmosphere of holiness." While the KJV provides a literal and faithful rendering of the original Hebrew and Greek texts, it "infuses that translation with a sense of beauty and ceremony."[13]

Our King James Bible today is not that of 1611. The words have remained virtually unchanged, but in every printing for the first century and a half of its history, the KJV underwent modernizations in spelling and grammar and revisions in punctuation and the use of italics. The intent was to keep the Bible current and usable by each new generation. In 1769 Benjamin Blayney, professor of Hebrew at Oxford University, prepared a new edition for the Oxford University Press. In time, his edition came to be viewed as the standard text for British publishing houses and eventually for American publishers as well. It remains so today. With the Blayney edition, the process of modernization more or less came to an end. The King James Bible today, including the Latter-day Saint edition, is Blayney's revision of 1769.[14]

It is one of the ironies of history that we celebrate both the King James translation and the Pilgrims who came to America in 1620 to escape persecution from King James and the bishops who made the new translation. When the Puritans colonized New England, they brought their Geneva Bible, and thus it became the Bible of many of America's earliest English-speaking settlers. But that situation did not last very long. In 1616 the king ordered an end to the printing of Geneva. It continued to be published on the continent until 1644, but by then the market for it had run its course, and the KJV had taken its place.[15] The King James Version had gained preeminence in Britain, and in the New World the colonists came to embrace it as their own. Among other reasons, its lack of marginal notes allowed them to interpret the Bible in fresh new ways that contributed greatly to the creation of an American religious and social culture.[16]

American families bought millions of copies of the KJV, read them in their homes, and learned the gospel from them. The King James Bible had become the Bible of America, and it was firmly in place as *the* Bible at the time the Restoration began.

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NOTES

1. The most comprehensive book on the history of the English Bible is David Daniell, *The Bible in English* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003). Other recent histories, mostly with focus on the King James Version, include Benson Bobrick, *Wide as the Waters: The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution It Inspired* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001); Alister E. McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001); Adam Nicolson, *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003); Gordon Campbell, *Bible: The Story of the King James Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); David Norton, *The King James Bible: A Short History from Tyndale to Today* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

2. The best biography of William Tyndale is David Daniell, *William Tyndale, A Biography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

3. See pages 25–42 in this volume.

4. Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, 193.

5. See John Nielson, "Authorship of the King James Version of the Bible" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 1994), especially 93; and John Nielson and Royal Skousen, "How Much of the King James Bible Is William Tyndale's?," *Reformation* 3 (1998): 49–74.

6. See David Daniell, ed., *Tyndale's New Testament: Translated from the Greek by William Tyndale in 1534* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), vii–xxxii; and Daniell, ed., *Tyndale's Old Testament: Being the Pentateuch of 1530, Joshua to 2 Chronicles of 1537, and Jonah* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), ix–xxxix.

7. Altogether, despite official recognition of the Bishops' Bible and official disdain of the Geneva Bible, there were 49 printings of the Bishops' Bible and 153 printings of the Geneva Bible, not including at least seven editions of the KJV that included Geneva's marginal notes. See A. S. Herbert, ed., *Historical Catalogue of Printed Editions of the English Bible, 1525–1961* (London: British and Foreign Bible Society; New York: American Bible Society, 1968), 60–291.

8. They were given a copy of the 1602 edition of the Bishops' Bible; see David Norton, *A Textual History of the King James Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 35–36.

9. Tyndale's text of 1536; spelling modernized.

10. [Miles Smith], "The Translators to the Reader," xiv, spelling modernized.

11. Thankfully, that phrase was not included in the title in the Latter-day Saint edition, first published in 1979.

12. Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 441.

13. Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, 196; see also 222–23.

14. See Herbert, *Historical Catalogue*, 282–83; Norton, *Textual History*, 103–14, 195–97; F. H. A. Scrivener, *The Authorized Edition of the English Bible (1611), Its Subsequent Reprints and Modern Representatives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1884), 28–36, 101–5, 238–42.

15. See the discussion in Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 451–60; Herbert, *Historical Catalogue*, 192.

16. For the Puritan transition from Geneva to King James, see Harry S. Stout, "Word and Order in Colonial New England," in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 19–38. See also pages 173–76 in this volume.