

Georgetown Presbyterian Church  
Adult Issues Forum Notes  
“400 Years and Still Going Strong”  
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No matter what your background, if you speak English, you’ve been influenced by the King James Bible. For example, have you ever used any of these expressions?

my brother’s keeper (Genesis 4);  
a good old age (Genesis 15);  
eye for eye (Exodus 21);  
to spy out the land (Numbers 13);  
the apple of his eye (Deuteronomy 32);  
a man after his own heart (1 Samuel 13);  
How are the mighty fallen (2 Samuel 1);  
a still small voice (1 Kings 19);  
the root of the matter (Job 19);  
by the skin of my teeth (Job 19);  
out of the mouth of babes (Psalm 8);  
go from strength to strength (Psalm 84);  
at their wit’s end (Psalm 107);  
heap coals of fire upon his head (Proverbs 25);  
a lamb brought to the slaughter (Jeremiah 11);  
can the leopard change his spots? (Jeremiah 13);  
eat sour grapes (Ezekiel 24);  
the salt of the earth (Matthew 5);  
cast your pearls before swine (Matthew 7);  
the straight and narrow (Matthew 7);  
new wine in old bottles (Matthew 9);  
the signs of the times (Matthew 16);  
Physician, heal thyself (Luke 4);  
all things to all men (1 Corinthians 9);  
in the twinkling of an eye (1 Corinthians 15);  
suffer fools gladly (2 Corinthians 11);  
filthy lucre (1 Timothy 3);  
(the love of) money is root of all evil (1 Timothy 6);

the patience of Job (James 5);  
rule with a rod of iron (Revelation 2).

Have you ever listened to the Messiah, with lyrics by Charles Jennens with some quotes from the Great Bible but most from the King James Bible? “I know that my redeemer liveth” – Job 19.25; “Comfort ye” – Isaiah 40. Then you have some familiarity with the King James Bible.

### **About the English language**

Modern English speakers are aware of the fact that there are many dialects, accents and variations in the language, yet find these mutually intelligible for the most part, and recognize them as forms of English. It is even possible to talk about “standard English,” a form which may be taught in schools throughout the English speaking world. But that has not always been the case. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, for example, there were very great differences in the vocabulary and speech around the British Isles. Between roughly 1400 and 1800 the language evolved and changed in a number of remarkable ways. Most textbooks on the history of English agree that the two most important influences on these changes were the works of William Shakespeare (1564–1616) and the King James Bible of 1611.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in England there were three languages spoken commonly. The Church and academia spoke Latin; many in the aristocracy still used French; and other people used different dialects of English. But as the use of Latin faded throughout Western Europe in the late sixteenth century, the need arose for some sort of standardization of language to use in commerce, government and diplomacy. The French and Italians established academies with the express aim of standardizing their languages. In France, Cardinal Richelieu, the founder of the Académie Française, declared that among the Académie’s goals was ensuring that French was “pure, eloquent, and capable of treating both arts and sciences.”

In England, however, the language was shaped not by an academy of elites but by a variety of influences. One was the growing availability of printed material. Dictionaries and books were increasingly readily available. It was not so much that the printers were striving for standardization, since there is evidence is that this did not really concern them. (One printer spelled “had” three different ways in the same publication depending on whether he needed extra space or not.) Rather, the more published material was read, the more certain forms of the language came to be seen as standard. But most significantly, at a time when English was ready and open to influence that might help standardize the language, there appeared two great enduring bodies of work, both of which were *meant to be heard*.

One was the literary work of William Shakespeare whose plays and poems are both aural arts. They were meant to be performed and heard. The other was the King James Bible whose translators envisioned aural readings of their translation within the context of public worship. Both addressed audiences that were appreciators of their own language, but largely illiterate.

Shakespeare's influence was with new vocabulary. He introduced new words and idioms. "To be or not to be" did not aid the standardization of the language. But his new words did. Words he concocted that we still use include: *accommodation, assassination, barefaced, countless, laughable, premeditated, submerged, courtship, obscene*. Words that didn't survive include: *abruption, exsufficate, vastidity*. The translators of the King James Bible spoke and used Latin much more than English. Miles Smith, who wrote the Preface to the King James Bible, said they had learned it from the cradle. One of them, a man named John Overall, complained "that he had spoken Latin so long, it was troublesome to him to speak English in a continued oration."

Many of the translators left lists of the books in their libraries, and what you find are continental religious works and commentaries, and Latin and Greek classics. Almost all of these are in Latin. What you don't find are novels, poetry or plays. And nor did they go to plays. John Reynolds, another of the translators, wrote a book (1599) with the title in part, "The Overthrow of Stage Plays. . . wherein is manifestly proved, that it is not only unlawful to be an actor, but a beholder of those vanities." There is every likelihood that these learned men never saw a play by Shakespeare who was writing plays before and throughout the time they were working on the King James Version (KJV).

In short, the mental world of the translators was dominated by theology, scholarship and classics. They probably would have been astonished to discover that they lived in a great age of English literature. So how was the KJV one of the two great influences on the standardization of English? There are two reasons. First, The translators were not trying to create a work of literature. They just wanted a text that would be easily understood by ordinary people when it was read aloud. This is one way it differed significantly from the translation of William Tyndale, even though the KJV borrowed extensively from Tyndale.

Herein is the difference with Tyndale from whom they borrowed 80% of their material. A couple of examples:

I Cor. 13.11-13 Tyndale: When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I imagined as a child. But as soon as I was a man, I put away childishness. Now we see in a glass even in a dark speaking: but then shall we see face to face. Now I know imperfectly: but then shall I know even as I am known. Now abideth faith, hope, and love, even these three: but the chief of these is love:

KJB: When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.

What is involved here is not just that we are more familiar with the KJB; the rhythm and flow is important. It sounds better.

Matt 7.27, Tyndale: and abundance of rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.

KJB: And the rain descended, and the floods came ... Hear the **cadence**?

The King James Bible was not meant to be read silently for personal meditation. It was a preacher's Bible, a Bible *meant to be read aloud* to congregations.

Second, the KJB looked backwards. It used older word orders that had already fallen out of use, e.g. follow thou me, speak ye unto, things eternal. Those –eth endings for third person singular (he giveth) had already fallen out of use to be replaced by –s (he gives). Thou/thine/thee vs. you/yours. Earlier, thou was the subject form, thee the object, and thy and thine were the possessives. Modern English would use “you,” “your” and “yours.”

In early Middle English, thou was the singular form of ye. However, French was widely used in England during the Middle Ages, influencing English as a result. The English word “you” came to have the same associations as the French vous which is used for plural and for addressing a person who is not inferior or not an intimate friend or family member. Normally in French, the singular forms are used within the family or to address children and people of inferior social class. So English began to use thou, thee and thy in similar fashion. As in French, the plural forms ye, you and your were adopted as a mark of respect when addressing a social superior.

By the sixteenth century, the use of the singular form to address a single individual had virtually disappeared, except in the case of family and inferiors. That is, addressing someone as “thou” could be a claim to being superior to that person or it could be a recognition of a degree of intimacy. God is addressed in prayer as “thou” as a mark of intimacy. This is the term someone would use when speaking to a family member. Even though “thee” and “thou” were pretty much on the way out in 1611, the translators used it. Examples would be Solomon's prayer of dedication in 1 Kings 8, Jesus' prayer in John 17, and in psalms such as Psalm 68.

Still, it is interesting how, in many churches and Christian traditions, people address God in prayer with “thee,” “thy,” “thine” and “thou” in the conviction that they are being more respectful, the exact opposite of King James Bible use. The result of all this was that the KJB sounded familiar. Add that to the effort to make it be understandable when it was read aloud, and you can see some of the reason the translation has endured. And since it was the only translation allowed to be read in service, then it was the one everyone became familiar with.

Consequently, readers simply began thinking of the Bible as having been written in English. In George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, the character Henry Higgins tells Eliza Doolittle to remember, “You are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech; that your native language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and the Bible; and don't sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon.” For Shaw and other English speakers, the King James Bible was “the Bible.” The idea of inspiration, which was traditionally applied to the biblical texts in their original languages, now came to be applied to the King James Bible itself.

In the 1960s, every summer I earned money by selling Bibles door-to-door. A frequent question that people asked was “What do you think of these new Bibles? If the King James Bible was good enough for Saint Paul (or, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John), it’s good enough for me.” Or they might say, “I want the Bible in the language that God wrote it.”

### **About the politics of it all**

The Church used the Bible in Latin, the Vulgate prepared by Saint Jerome primarily in the fourth century. Since the general population could not read Latin, the clergy controlled the interpretation of the Bible. In the fourteenth century, they were known as “lollards” meaning either “idlers” or “mumblers.” John Wycliffe, skeptical of many teachings of the church he thought were opposed to the Bible translated the first Bible into English in 1388, based on the Vulgate. Not everyone was pleased. Some 40 years after his death in 1384, his bones were dug up, crushed, and scattered in a river.

William Tyndale (1494–1536) was first to base his translation on Greek and Hebrew texts. He was also first to take advantage of the printing press. To do so, he fled to Europe. His translation was published in 1526, and he smuggled copies back into England and Scotland. Cardinal Thomas Wolsey condemned him as a heretic in 1529. He was arrested in Antwerp, imprisoned at Vilvoorde, tried, strangled, burned at the stake in 1536.

Meanwhile, Wolsey fell from grace when he wouldn’t give Henry VIII a divorce. He was stripped of his property and position and died in 1529. In 1534, Parliament officially broke from Rome. In 1538, Henry VIII authorized Thomas Cranmer to have a Bible translation prepared to be read in all English churches. Cranmer was Archbishop of Canterbury after Wolsey (1533-1555), and was responsible for the first two editions of the Book of Common Prayer (1548). Cranmer turned the job over to Thomas Cromwell who supervised Myles Coverdale, who had worked on and finished up the Tyndale Bible. The result contained a lot of Tyndale’s work with Vulgate material interpolated. Publication started in Paris in 1539, but had to be transferred to England as Cardinal Richelieu wasn’t about to let something so heretical be done on French soil. It was the first “authorized” translation, and was called the Great Bible.

Under Queen Mary (Bloody Mary), a Catholic, Cranmer was martyred, actually burned in the middle of the street in Oxford at the same spot Bishops Latimer and Ridley had been martyred six months earlier. Some Protestant scholars then fled to Geneva including Myles Coverdale. The Geneva Bible resulted from their work (New Testament 1560, full Bible in 1576). It was based on Greek and Hebrew, and had extensive interpretive and doctrinal notes. This was the Bible of William Shakespeare, John Bunyon, John Milton, and John Donne.

Then, under Queen Elizabeth, the Catholics fled to Douai and Rheims. They did a translation in English based on the Latin Vulgate. The New Testament was completed in 1582, the Old Testament was finished in stages over the next 30 years. King James translators had access to this and definitely used it, but they don’t list it in the Preface to the KJV.

Meanwhile, the English reformers returned from Switzerland with the Geneva Bible, essentially a Calvinist translation and commentary. The Great Bible was deficient in many ways, so to have something to combat the Geneva Bible, a group of bishops prepared the Bishops' Bible in 1568, the only one authorized in church.

The English reformers who had been exiled in Geneva felt the English reformation hadn't gone far enough, that it was too Catholic. They thought the Anglican Church retained too many of the rituals and ceremonies, as well as customs such as priests wearing surplices and the prominence given to the emblem of the cross. They were called Puritans. They all used the Geneva Bible, and when a bunch of them sailed in disgust to America in 1621 on the *Mayflower*, they took three copies of the Geneva Bible with them.

Elizabeth kept the Puritans and established church people from killing each other, but there was tremendous tension. She died in 1603 after reigning 43 years. Subsequently, James VI of Scotland became James I of England. The Puritans presented their Millenary petition—"Time had come for change." James being a Presbyterian, gave hope to some in that faction that their time had indeed arrived.

On October 24, 1603 James called for a conference held the following year at Hampton Court. But it turned out that James was no fan of the Puritans' Geneva Bible. He was infuriated at the translation of Exodus 1.19 suggesting the Hebrews' disobedience of Pharaoh was lawful. Still, Puritan scholar John Reynolds seized the opportunity to press James for a new translation into the vernacular.

James was insistent about the translation of ecclesiastical words: "baptism" and "church" should be used instead of "washing" and "congregation" as in the Geneva Bible. James and Archbishop of Canterbury Bancroft insisted that the translation of *ecclesia* as "congregation" and *presbyteros* as "elder" should be "church" and "priest." These were crucial to the English Reformation. An "elder" would not have any ancient priestly significance, that is, would not necessarily be the means of passing on God's grace to humankind. Believing in the priesthood of all believers as did most of the reformers, including the Puritans, meant that there was no need for bishops and archbishops. Similarly, a "congregation" had no need for elaborate and expensive structures of the established church. And "washing" did not have the same sacramental importance as "baptism."

There were six translation companies: three for the Old Testament; two for the New Testament; and one for the Apocrypha. Yes, it included the Apocrypha. Some later publishers dropped these books just to save money. Some disagreed with them theologically, but it wasn't until 1826 that publishers in England and America consistently dropped it.

Work began in the fall of 1604. Although, under Elizabeth, the real struggles in England had shifted from Anglican vs. Roman Catholic to Anglican vs. Puritans, there were still many Catholic supporters. On November 5th 1605 several of them led by Guy Fawkes planned to blow up the opening of Parliament over which James presided. The idea was to put his 9-year-old

daughter Elizabeth, a Catholic, on the throne. Had the plot succeeded, there never would have been a King James Bible!

The KJB was to be based on the Bishops' Bible, but only 8 percent came from there. The translators used the Greek and Hebrew as their base, and looked at a variety of other English translations. Much came from Tyndale's version. And of that, they used much more memorable language. Interestingly, it was never listed as a new translation at Stationer's Hall, but in fact it was that.

### **Printing history**

Readers who compare King James Bibles available in America from different publishers may be surprised to find that they are not all the same. The Bible is being circulated in at least five different categories of editions, all with the same general content, but none completely identical with the others in a number of technical details. In addition, they differ in the pronunciation systems, spelling of proper names, verse style versus paragraph formatting, page and chapter headings, reference systems, printing the words of Jesus in red, and statements at the end of some Epistles.

Why all these differences? How did they originate? Is there one original King James Bible? The answer to these questions begins with an understanding of the printing technology of 1611. After the various companies had finished their drafts, and these had been reviewed and revised by the other committees as the instructions had required, Myles Smith and Thomas Bilson gave the texts some final revisions and turned the manuscript over to Robert Barker, the king's printer, for publishing.

Barker issued the Bible in 1611 in two separate editions, leaving bibliographers guessing which was the first. To add to the confusion, some sheets of one edition were bound with sheets of the other in some copies. The most striking difference is that in Ruth 3.15 one edition had "he went into the citie," and the other "she went." This has given rise to the names "The Great He Bible" and "The Great She Bible." Many contemporary scholars think that the "He" Bible was first and that "She" was a correction. Most current editions of the King James Bible therefore have "she," but the Revised and the American Revised Versions read "he." There were numerous other differences. One scholar has listed 658. Even the title pages differed in the two editions. *There is no such thing as an original first edition!*

The explanation for how these differences came about can be found in the printing methods of that day. Printers in 1611 had a limited supply of type. The custom was to set four pages, print as many copies as were needed for an edition, and then break down the type for further use. It was impossible to save what was set, as can be done today by computers. Nor could plates be stored as was done before computers. As a result, despite every precaution being taken, because of human fallibility, every edition would have some printing errors, and these would be different errors from those in other editions.

Misprints abounded. The most consequential was in an edition of 1631 where by accident the compositors dropped the word “not” from Exodus 20.14, so that it read “Thou shalt commit adultery.” This edition became known as the “Wicked Bible.” The blunder was spread in a number of copies. The king, Charles I, and the Archbishop of Canterbury at that time, George Abbot, were outraged that the Bible contained such a flagrant mistake. Robert Barker and Martin Lucas, the publishers, were summoned to the Star Chamber, an English court of law at the Palace of Westminster, where they were fined £300 and had their printer’s license taken away. The majority of the Wicked Bibles copies were cancelled and burned, with only eleven copies surviving today.

As a result of all these issues, readers can rightfully ask—What was the original King James Version? Or even—Is there *such a thing* as an original King James Bible? The answer is quite simply: There is no such thing as a single, uniform, consistent, and flawless form of an original King James Bible. As we saw, even in 1611 there were two editions, a “She” Bible and a “He” Bible. The variations among the different editions continued to multiply. The lack of records available for inspection and the nature of publishing in the early seventeenth century make it impossible to fully determine for certain that the translators’ preferences were ever fulfilled.

Further, although the King James Bible is referred to as the Authorized Version, especially in the United Kingdom, there is no evidence that it ever received any final written authorization from the bishops, the Privy Council, or the king. The Oxford English Dictionary traces the use of the title “our authorized version” to 1824, but one contemporary scholar has traced it to Ambrose Ussher who used it as early as 1620. Of course, the king had ordered that the translation be undertaken, but he does not seem to have given any final official approval to the translation, nor to its publication. The title page reads in part:

THE HOLY BIBLE, containing the Old Testament and the New. Newly translated out of the original tongues: and with the former translations diligently compared and revised by his Majesty’s special commandment. Appointed to be read in Churches. Imprinted at London by Robert Barker, Printer to the King’s most excellent majesty. Anno Domini 1611.

This translation was one “appointed to be read in churches.” “Appointed” does not, however, imply that the work had been authorized for this purpose, as a modern English reader might assume. What this meant in seventeenth century English was that the work was laid out in a way suitable for public reading in churches. Many later editions dropped these words. The fact that it was to be read in churches proved significant, however, as this led to this translation influencing the population and the English language at large. Whether it was “authorized” or not, eventually this Bible was widely accepted and popular far longer than the translators anticipated. Its accuracy and clear language ensured that. Also, as more people became literate, it was increasingly used for personal study and devotional reading, not just for public reading. After the civil wars in England when the Puritans were finally ousted and the monarchy re-established in 1660, as a Bible that supported monarchy it finally assumed its role as the establishment Bible.

## **Oratory**

The King James Bible has been a strong and powerful influence on public speakers. Its recurrent use in the churches gave it regular exposure. Especially in North American oratory, its language continues to resonate, and today, especially in the African American community. Martin Luther King, Jr. for example, not only often quoted, but he even used features like –eth in his own speech! It sounded “King Jamesy.” But if you study the speeches of Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt you’ll see real resonance with the KJV. And many of Abraham Lincoln’s major speeches, especially the second inaugural address, have significant quotes and allusions to the King James Bible.

## **Influence even on Jewish translations**

In America, the most important Jewish leader in the period before the Civil War was Isaac Leeser (1806–1868). His translation of the Bible published in 1853 was the first Jewish translation in English in the United States. Leeser reasoned that if the Bible was the center of American Christianity, then it should also be the center of American Judaism. And if that Christian Bible was the King James Bible, then it also had to be the basis of a Jewish version. His aim therefore was to prepare a translation that would not run counter to rabbinic understanding, but at the same time would essentially be a Judaizing of the King James Bible. For example, in 1 Samuel 3.3, the King James Bible has the young Samuel lying down “in the temple of the Lord,” but Leeser’s translation has Samuel “sleep in (the hall of) the temple.” This insertion in parentheses brought the translation into agreement with the rabbinic understanding of priestly protocol.

## **Acceptance of the King James Bible in America**

It was not immediate. The Puritans carried three copies of the Geneva Bible on the Mayflower in 1621. Calvinist Christianity of that era put primacy on a sovereign and vengeful God and constantly doubted the validity of worldly governments. By emphasizing the differences between those who were chosen to be saved and the lost who would surely perish, adherents of this doctrine had little motivation for establishing strong and stable governments or founding a nation. The Geneva Bible notes and translation fueled these separatist inclinations, and the American Pilgrim Fathers carried these notions to North America. But as the country grew and spread, the northern and southern colonies lost some of their distinctiveness. Consequently, political processes developed and matured, and the need for a “separatist gospel” declined. In time, a need for a Bible that supported nation-building supplanted one supporting separatism. So the “establishment” Bible, the King James Version, became the Bible of America, and by the end of the seventeenth century it was treasured as much by the British of the American colonies as by those at home, and was well on its way to becoming one of America’s national texts.

The Geneva Bible brought over by the Puritans or Pilgrims was never printed in America. The first English Bible printed in America was a King James Bible, printed by Robert Aitken in 1782. Aitken was a Scot who had settled in Philadelphia and was the official printer for the Journals of Congress. The U.S. Congress actually gave him permission to print this Bible, the

only occasion it authorized the printing of a Bible. By the way, I said “English Bible.” An Algonquin Bible was printed in Cambridge, Mass. in 1663.

### **Democracy**

Before the establishment of printing in Western Europe, most people did not know what the Bible actually said. The Bible was expensive, not readily available, and in Latin. Once it was translated and printed in the languages of Europe, reformation in the church was inevitable. People could obtain the Bible easily, read it with comprehension, and decide for themselves what it meant.

Historians point out that in England, for example, free discussion of the authority of the church and state helped bring about constitutional changes, leading to a monarchy with very limited rights and powers. And in America the climate of free and open discussion reached even greater heights and was one factor that led to the American colonial revolt. The Bible in English, specifically the King James Version, allowed and even gave authority to people to think for themselves. Quite possibly democracy as we know it would not have come about in Western Europe and North America without this.

G.K. Chesterton (1874–1936), the Roman Catholic writer, once said of the English that they “did not really drive away the American colonists, nor were they driven. The [Americans] were led on by a light that went before.” That light was the King James Bible. From it [readers] understood the equality of humankind. Each person was equally important and sacred, each one made in the image of God. In short, to quote Benson Bobrick, “Why is the King James Version of the Bible important? Because in the end, it sanctioned the right and capacity of people to think for themselves.”

Happy Birthday, King James Bible.