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### THE AUTHORISED VERSION OF THE BIBLE

By Roger Beckwith

The Authorised Version of 1611, otherwise called (especially in America) the King James version, was the culmination of the process of Bible translation from the original languages into English that took place at the Reformation. There had been an English Bible of this kind since Henry VIII's reign, the work of William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale, and it had great merits, both for its standard of English and for its faithfulness to the originals. Its main weakness was that Coverdale, who was responsible for much of the Old Testament and the Apocrypha, did not have Tyndale's proficiency in biblical languages, but was dependant on modern intermediate translations into Latin and German. The Apocrypha was included in the translation, but its books were grouped separately, not included as part of the Old Testament proper.

Attempts had been made to revise Coverdale's work, by a more direct use of the original languages, notably in the Geneva Bible of 1560, which became popular in England and especially in Scotland. But when on Elizabeth's death in 1603 King James VI of Scotland became also King James I of England, an opportunity arose for the monarch to participate in the process. On his way to England, he was presented by the Puritans with the Millenary Petition, calling for changes in Prayer Book worship, and he summoned chosen bishops and Puritans to consider the question at the Hampton Court Conference of 1604. A few changes were agreed to, but when the leader of the Puritans, John Rainolds, president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, asked for a better translation of the Bible (which was not on the agenda), the King warmed to the proposal. He perhaps thought that this was something on which the bishops and the Puritans could more readily agree, and on which the Church of England might in time reach a common mind with the Scottish Kirk.

It is James' leadership which accounts for the common title 'the Authorised Version' and for the statement on its title page 'Appointed to be read in Churches'. It was James who authorised it, and he who appointed it to be read. He was prepared to take advice, but he was also prepared to make decisions, often without sanction from others. This was his method with his Prayer Book of 1604 and with his Book of Sports of 1617, not simply with the Authorised Version. If what he decided was not too controversial, it was accepted. He was, after all, the King.

The translation he envisaged would not be needlessly independent, but would reconsider and be ready to amend previous translations. As the title page put it, it was 'Newly translated out of the Originall tongues and with the former Translations diligently compared and revised by his Majesty's speciall Commandment'. At the same time it would not have any explanatory notes, the King having taken great offence at some anti-monarchist notes in the Geneva Bible.

Six companies of translators were set up, comprising 47 named members, two companies each at Westminster, Cambridge and Oxford. The directors at Westminster were to be the Deans of Westminster and Chester (Lancelot Andrewes and William Barlow) and at Cambridge and Oxford the regius professors of Hebrew and Greek there. According to Gordon Campbell's instructive account, the Hebrew O.T. was separated into three parts and the Greek N.T. into two, and one part of each was assigned to each centre, the Apocrypha providing the third Greek assignment (*Bible: the Story of the King James Version*, OUP 2010). Fifteen rules were drawn up for the guidance of the companies. When they had finished their work, the whole was to be reviewed by a chosen panel of twelve, and the final touches put to it by Thomas Bilson and Miles Smith, the latter of whom is thought to have written the preface 'The Translators to the Reader', recently reprinted by the Trinitarian Bible Society.

The text of the Authorised Version is studied in detail by David Norton in his book *A Textual History of the King James Bible* (CUP 2005), a companion volume to his new critical edition of the Authorised Version, which bears the title of *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible*. Norton begins of course with the original text of the Authorised Version, but goes on to trace the changes accidentally or deliberately introduced over the years, and the efforts to correct them.

During the long period when England was a church-going nation, and the religious education of children meant Christian education, the Authorised Version entered into the thought and speech of the nation, and deeply affected its literature. Some account is given of this by David Crystal in his book *Begat: the King James Bible and the English Language* (OUP 2010).

The topical questions about the Authorised Version today have to include the archaisms in its language and the Greek text (*the Textus Receptus*) underlying its New Testament. But this anniversary gives us the opportunity to think about other relevant questions, such as, Would we not be wise to be reading it much more than we are? The archaisms are similar to those of the Prayer Book, ways of speaking which are today unfamiliar, but not usually unintelligible. So a corresponding question arises, Would we not be wise to be using the Prayer Book much more than we are? The Prayer Book aims to be true to the Bible, which is very doubtfully the case with the Alternative Services (Common Worship etc.). Is not that issue much more important than occasional archaisms? Similarly, the Authorised Version aims to produce a faithful, where possible word-for-word, translation of the inspired Scriptures, whereas most modern translations are really paraphrases, and some of them, such as the very widely used NRSV, are corrupted by regular indulgence of the modern secular fad of political correctness.

As to the *Textus Receptus*, or the Majority Text, this is a matter of Textual Criticism, a science of which even the basic principles are not generally agreed. At the Renaissance and Reformation, the majority of manuscripts was regarded as the chief guide, and a growing school of thought is now returning to this principle. In the nineteenth century, under the influence of Westcott and Hort in particular, the oldest manuscripts were given precedence over the majority, though whether Westcott and Hort carried out this principle consistently, by depending on two fourth-century manuscripts of the whole Bible rather than on older evidence of a more partial kind, is open to question. In the twentieth century, critics like Kilpatrick preferred to assess each variant reading independently, on a rather subjective principle of probability. Conservative Evangelicals have been apt to follow Westcott and Hort, because of the advocacy of B.B. Warfield, but are now tending to reconsider the issue.

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