BAPTIST MISSIONARY ASSOCIATION THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

A SURVEY OF THE ENGLISH SCRIPTURES THROUGH THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

A RESEARCH PAPER

SUBMITTED TO DR. HAL McNEILL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

OF THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE COURSE

CHURCH HISTORY (CH511)

BY

DON BURKE

SEPTEMBER 15, 2002

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

"The staggering number of versions of the Bible in English, . . . makes the evolution of the English Bible perhaps the most thoroughly studied chapter in the history of biblical translation."[1] For God's Word "… to be effective it must be, as at Pentecost, a proclamation to every man in his own language wherein he was born."[2] This study will attempt to chronicle the history of the English Scriptures and the men who were impassioned to present those Scriptures in the vernacular of the Englishman.

THE ENGLISH SCRIPTURES PRIOR TO THE PRINTING PRESS

The late fourteenth century witnessed the introduction of the Wycliffe Bible, the first entire English Bible. However, the history of English scriptures was several centuries old even at that date. "But back of Wycliffe lie at least seven hundred years of the [English] language, and it is possible to find traces in all these centuries of translations from the Scriptures."[3]

Glosses and Fragments

A number of the early English scriptures were Anglo-Saxon glosses, which are older manuscripts (usually Latin) with the English translations later added between the lines of the original text. Included among these glosses are the Lindisfarne Gospels (ca. 698 Latin with a mid-tenth-century gloss) and Rushworth Gospels (dating after the Lindisfarne gloss and in part a

[1]Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Reformation of the Bible: The Bible of the Reformation* (N.P.: Yale University Press, 1996): 52.

[2] John Brown, *The History of the English Bible* (London: Cambridge, 1912): 2.

[3] T. Harwood Pattison, *The History of the English Bible* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1894): 10.

copy of it).[4] There is also the Vespasian Psalter (ninth century gloss), which contains "the earliest gloss of any part of the Bible in English. . . ."[5]

The history of fragments or portions of English scripture pre-dates the glosses. Caedmon (c. 670) composed poems in Old English "for the people to memorize and sing."[6] Aldhem "…was the first to translate a portion (the Psalter) of the Latin Vulgate into Anglo-Saxon about 700."[7] The early-eighth century also found Bede, or *Bede the Venerable* as he was later known, translating portions of Scripture. Bede is noted as the only translator before the invention of the printing press who translated from the original languages instead of the Latin.[8]

Nearly two centuries later Alfred the Great (849-901) translated a number of materials into English (Biblical and secular) as part of his efforts to encourage literacy in his kingdom.[9] The Decalogue and portions of the Psalms were among these materials. Ælfric also translated portions from the first seven books of the OT into Old English and is credited with the Wessex Gospels (ca. 1000).[10]

The mid-twelfth century forced upon England a new language – a mixture of Norman and English, now known as Middle English. This marked the beginning of three centuries of very little translation activity. The only notable work, from very early in that period, was the Ormulum – a poetic version of a harmony of the Gospels and Acts (including commentary) written by an Augustinian monk named Orm or Ormin.

Other minor works of selected passages were translated into Middle English, but their use was limited to the monks and nuns. The friars opposed the making of an English Bible, deeming

---

[4] F. F. Bruce, *The English Bible* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1961): 7-8.
[5] Elizabeth J. Eisenhart, *A Concise History of the English Bible* (N.P.: American Bible Society, n.d.): 7.
[6] Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999): 274.
[7] Ibid., 274.
[8] Pattison, 12.
[9] Wegner, 277.
[10] Ibid., 278-79.

the common man unable to properly discern the meanings of the passages. However, the plague which four times ransacked England in the mid-fourteenth century fuelled a deep and growing desire within the common Englishman for a Bible in the vernacular.[11]

Thus, over the course of much time and because of many factors, "[t]he English Bible, even in its imperfect form, had laid hold of the hearts of the nation many years before Wycliffe was born."[12]

Wycliffe Bible (1380 – NT / 1382 – OT), by John Wycliffe (1330-1384)

In the twenty-eight years from 1356 and 1384 John Wycliffe, sometimes called the Morning Star of the Reformation, toiled to translate the Latin Vulgate into the English of his day (i.e., Middle English). Pattison writes, "[P]robably no Englishman in so short a time has made so deep and lasting an impression on his land and age," after earlier commenting that Wycliffe's work ". . . represents the highest achievement of the manuscript period."[13] Sadly such noble effort was not well received by the people of that day.[14]

Opinions vary as to how much of the translation was actually done by Wycliffe. Bruce's insights are worthy of note: "It is doubtful if Wycliffe himself took any direct part in the work of Bible translation, but we need have no qualms about referring to the Wycliffite Bible, for it was under his inspiration and by his friends and colleagues that the work was done."[15]

Whether translated by Wycliffe himself or not, the Wycliffe Bible was the first major milestone in the effort to establish the Word of God into the vernacular of the common Englishman.

---

[11] Ibid., 281.
[12] Pattison, 16.
[13] Ibid., 28, 9.
[14] Ibid., 17.
[15] Bruce, 13.

In 1415, thirty-one years after his death, Wycliffe was rewarded for this priceless work when the Council of Constance ordered that his body be "disinterred and burned, and his ashes cast into the river Swift."[16]

As mentioned above, Wycliffe's Bible was translated from the Latin Vulgate, but apparently the particular Latin text was inferior.

> Wycliffe's version was made from the Latin Vulgate, and from the impure text current in his time. Within a few years of his death his followers became so conscious of its defects, that one of the foremost of them, John Purvey . . . prepared a complete revision which was issued in 1388.[17]

Purvey's revision, which apparently was still published as the Wycliffe Bible, incorporated sounder principles of translation while rendering a much smoother English translation.[18] "Purvey's revised Wycliffe Bible became the predominant English Bible until the time of Tyndale about two hundred years later."[19]

THE PRINTED ENGLISH SCRIPTURES

The invention of the printing press was a pivotal point in the history of book making, and nowhere was this impact felt greater than in the area of Bible development and distribution.

Tyndale Bible (1525 / 1530), by William Tyndale (1494-1536)

The spark that helped to ignite the flame within William Tyndale came, at least in part, from Thomas Bilney, the man "who may perhaps be called the initiator in the translation of the Bible [from the original languages] into English."[20] As an aspiring priest studying at Cambridge (1517), Bilney was converted after acquiring a copy of Erasmus' banned Greek NT. He later

---

[16] Eisenhart, 8.
[17] Pattision, 24.
[18] Bruce, 16.
[19] Wegner, 283.
[20] Ken Connolly, *The Indestructible Book* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996): 125.

shared this book with a group of scholars who met at the White Horse Inn (Cambridge). Many were converted, and the excitement caught the interest of many others, including Tyndale.

William Tyndale, often called "the father of the English Bible"[21] was born in England near Wales. In 1524, being unable to find support to continue his translating of the NT into English, he left England for the European continent. Support was difficult to find due to the Constitutions of Oxford[22] (1408) which made the use of scriptures in the vernacular unlawful.

Undaunted, Tyndale continued his work on the continent, convinced that "it was impossible to establish the lay people in any truth, except the Scriptures were plainly laid before their eyes in their mother tongue."[23] Tyndale regularly challenged the priests in the area over doctrinal issues. "'If God spares my life,' said he to one of those priests, 'ere many years I will cause the boy who driveth the plough to know more of the Scriptures than you do.'"[24]

Many elements contributed to the need for an updated English Bible. The English language experienced many changes in the century-and-a-half since Wycliffe's work was first published. Vernacular translations had already been printed on the European continent in Spanish, Italian, French, Dutch, German and Czech. There were also tremendous advances made in the texts of the original Bible languages, with the Hebrew OT published in 1488, and Erasmus' Greek NT in 1516. Such factors made this period an excellent time for a new English translation, and Tyndale's heart was set to accomplish that task.

Tyndale was destined to never return to the land for which his soul was constantly burdened. He lived for a period at Hamburg, then moved to Wittenberg where his translating was completed. Then he moved to Cologne and began printing the English NT. However, he

---

[21] Ibid., 140.
[22] Bruce, 21.
[23] Pattison, 35.
[24] Ibid., 34.

was forced to move to Worms before the job was completed. At Worms the first two editions of his NT were published (December, 1525).

By 1526 copies of these works had reached England, and the king immediately condemned them. Some suggest that many of Tyndale's Bibles were sold to the King for burning – at a price four times their cost. This money was sent to Tyndale who not only reprinted the destroyed Bibles, but also printed three additional copies for each Bible destroyed.

From 1527 to 1531 Tyndale worked in Marburg where he published many of his extra-Biblical works. It was also here that Tyndale undertook the study of Biblical Hebrew in order to translate the OT. From all indications he, with some help from Miles Coverdale, translated and published the Pentateuch and Jonah. He also translated Joshua through 2 Chronicles, but these were not published during his lifetime. They, however, were later included in the Matthew Bible.[25]

Tyndale second edition (1534) was prompted by two factors. First, great changes were astir in England's religious climate, most notably Henry VIII's quarrels with the pope and Cromwell's rise in popularity. (Cromwell favored the reading of the Bible in the vernacular.) Second, pirated copies of Tyndale's earlier edition were being altered and published under his name.[26] Tyndale's second edition was described as "Tyndale's noblest monument" by Westcott,[27] although Connolly notes that it was "full of printing errors."[28]

Tyndale died at the stake, punished as a heretic, under the hands of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. His dying prayer was, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."[29]

---

[25] Bruce, 42.
[26] Wegner, 291.
[27] Bruce, 44.
[28] Connolly, 145
[29] Gustavus S. Paine, *The Men behind the King James Version* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959): 8.

Coverdale Bible (1535), by Miles Coverdale (1488-1569)

"Next to Tyndale, the man to whom lovers of the English Bible owe the greatest debt is Myles Coverdale."[30] A native of Yorkshire, Coverdale was another product of the White Horse Inn discussions in Cambridge. He became an Augustinian friar but later left his order due to the influence of the Reformation. He moved back and forth to the continent as an exile to avoid persecution from the English monarchs. Coverdale was a Puritan, at least in his later years.

Coverdale's Bible "was the first complete printed Bible in English."[31] It was translated from the German and Latin and depended greatly upon Tyndale's NT and Pentateuch. According to Wegner, he depended on other works more that Tyndale did.[32] Having depended heavily on the works of Tyndale and Luther, "the 'Lutheran' affinities of his version were plain to see."[33]

Coverdale dedicated his translation to Henry VIII ". . . for being a better 'Defender of the Faith' than the pope himself." Seeing this dedication, and finding no reason to believe the condemnation the work received from his counselors, King Henry decreed that this translation be accepted.[34] However, Wegner later adds that although it was a popular Bible, requiring four press runs from 1537 – 1553, ". . . it never became an authorized English version."[35]

The Coverdale Bible was also known as the "Bugs Bible" due to its rendering of Ps. 91:5, "Thou shalt not nede to be afraid of any bugges by night."[36] This was the first Bible to separate the Apocrypha from the other OT books.

Miles Coverdale would also help in the work of the Matthew Bible (1537), Great Bible (1539), the Geneva Bible (1560), as well as other works.[37]

---

[30] Bruce, 53.
[31] Ibid., 54.
[32] Wegner, 293.
[33] Bruce, 64.
[34] Wegner, 293
[35] Ibid., 294.
[36] Paine, 9.

Matthew Bible (1537), by John Rogers (ca 1500-1555)

Born in the city of Birmingham and educated in Cambridge, Rogers enjoyed a short but deep friendship with William Tyndale. Rogers likely helped Tyndale in his translation of the OT historical books (Joshua through 2 Chronicles) as well as in the production of his 1535 NT.[38] After Tyndale's death, Rogers took the pen name of Thomas Matthew and continued Tyndale's work on providing a complete Bible in the English vernacular.

While Tyndale's work served as the primary source for the Matthew Bible, Coverdale's Bible was regularly consulted. The Matthew Bible and Coverdale's second 1537 edition both received royal sanction that same year – the first Bibles to have received such an honor. Both were published the year following Tyndale's death – an answer to his dying prayer. The irony is that while the Bible which was largely Tyndale's work was receiving royal approval, Tyndale himself was being martyred as a heretic for that work.

The Matthew Bible "generated enthusiasm for owning a Bible in English . . ."[39] although many found fault with its footnotes which held strong protestant, anti-Catholic tones.

Following in Tyndale's footsteps set nineteen years earlier, Rogers was burned at the stake in February 4, 1555. He was the first Christian martyred under Mary Tudor's reign. John Bradford, a fellow prisoner, said "he broke the ice valiantly."[40]

Great Bible (1539), by Miles Coverdale (1488-1569)

Thomas Cromwell, vicar-general under Henry VIII, was one of those who disliked the Matthew's footnotes. With the king's permission Cromwell directed Coverdale to produce a

---

[37] Wegner, 292.
[38] Bruce, 65-66.
[39] Wegner, 205.
[40] Connolly, 151.

revised edition of the Matthew Bible, but without the footnotes. Since the Great Bible was a revision of the Matthew Bible which was itself a revision of the Tyndale Bible, England could still felt the presence of Tyndale's work.

The Great Bible was the first English translation to be authorized for public church use. "A royal declaration commanded it to be bought by every parish church in the land and made accessible on a reading desk for the public to read at any time. Readers had to be provided for those who could not read it themselves."[41]

Curiously, the popularity of this Bible did prove to have a negative side. Many people, and especially the poorly learned, caused a great disturbance as they read aloud from the scriptures during the public worship, apparently indifferent to the sermon. By 1539 the king enacted a law making it illegal for anyone to read the Bible aloud during times of public worship.[42]

This Bible earned the name Great Bible due to its great bulk. It was also called the Chained Bible (being chained to the reading desks) and the Cranmer's Bible (due to the elaborate preface added by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer in the 1540 second edition.).[43]

The Great Bible underwent a number of changes. It was extensively revised in 1540, and five additional revisions were made in 1541.[44]

Just prior to the publication of the Great Bible, Richard Taverner published a revision of the Matthew Bible. Although it showed a marked improvement in Greek scholarship, it was quickly overshadowed once the Great Bible became available.

---

[41] Ibid., 152.
[42] Wegner, 297.
[43] Connolly, 152.
[44] Wegner, 299.

Geneva Bible (1560), by English Puritans

As a result of an Act of Parliament in 1543, with further restrictions by King Henry in 1546, Tyndale and Coverdale Bibles were banned and burned. Such an act "was a monumental piece of absurdity, when all the time the Great Bible [built as it was on the works of both these men] maintained its prominent position in every parish church in the land."[45]

In 1542 England's ecclesiastical leaders petitioned the king for a new authorized version that would conform to the Latin Vulgate. Henry VIII consented but died before the completion of the project. Edward VI reversed that decision and allowed all previous versions to be reprinted at will. A number of new but minor translations also appeared during Edward's seven years of reign (1547-1553), including John Cheke's version (1550), Bishop Becke's Bible (1551) and William Whittingham's NT (1557).

Whittingham's New Testament was intended to only be an interim edition; the more ambitious work was just getting started. As the persecution under Bloody Mary grew, many of the protestant leaders fled England and found homes in various protestant centers on the continent. Whittingham made one such center, Geneva, his new home.

With Whittingham as the leader, a group of scholars continued to work on the New Testament he had published and also began work on the Old Testament. In addition to Whittingham, the group was composed of John Knox, Miles Coverdale, and other less well known authorities. John Calvin and Theodore Beza were not a part of the regular translation team but were also available when scholarly help was needed. The fruit of this labor appeared in 1560 in the form of the Geneva Bible. This Bible they dedicated to Queen Elizabeth I.[46]

---

[45] Bruce, 79.
[46] Wegner, 301.

"[T]heir source material was greater than that afforded to any previous translator" and included a number of translations from foreign languages.[47] The NT portion of this Bible was primarily Matthew's revision of Tyndale's Bible. The OT required much more work, because the Geneva Bible was the first published Bible to translate directly from Hebrew those books that Tyndale was unable to finish.[48] Overall, this Bible was an exceptional work. Even in its remarkable 120 editions spanning eighty-four years of printing (1560-1644), "[t]he text proved to be so good that a complete revision was never needed, and the method of translation worked so well that it was later adopted by the committees who worked on the King James Version."[49]

The Calvinistic notes of the Geneva Bible are famous, largely because they so irritated James I. (However, Bruce notes that "they are mild in comparison with Tyndale's."[50]) King James' irritations notwithstanding, this Bible was popular for many years among the Protestants of England, and the Puritans in particular. "One may surmise that the Geneva Bible, translation and notes together, played no little part in making British Puritanism the strongly vertebrate movement that it was."[51] It was the principal Bible of the English Colonists in America and was the Bible that the Pilgrim fathers used exclusively.[52] It was also the Bible of Shakespeare.[53]

The Geneva Bible was popular among the common people for a number of reasons. First, it was designed for personal use, being much smaller than the previous Bibles intended for public use. Government also aided its popularity. English soldiers were issued pocket-sized Bibles containing excerpts from the Geneva Bible.[54] The Scottish Parliament required each

---

[47] Connolly, 155.
[48] Wegner, 301.
[49] Connolly, 155.
[50] Bruce, 90.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Connolly, 155.
[53] Bruce, 92.
[54] Connolly, 155.

household above a given income level to buy a copy of the Geneva Bible[55] (which was there called the "Bassandyne Bible"[56]). In 1580 Parliament even commissioned a John Williamson to go house-to-house to verify that each house owned such a Bible.[57] One can readily see why Paine labeled this Bible the ". . . household Bible of the English people."[58]

The Geneva Bible was also called the "Breeches Bible" due to the reading of Genesis 3:7, "and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves breeches."[59] Quotations from this work are even used in the preface to the AV of 1611.[60]

Bishops' Bible (1568), by Matthew Parker and others

Seeing that the Great Bible was inferior to the Geneva Bible, but unable to accept the latter because of the Calvinistic notes, Matthew Parker, Archbishop of Canterbury, organized a revision of the former. Parker "believed that a new Bible was needed because the success of the Geneva Bible not only undermined the prestige of the Great Bible, England's official Bible, but also weakened the authority of the bishops."[61] A number of bishops were invited to help in the work, thus giving the Bible its name.

In working on the Bishops' Bible, or what has been called "the fourth revision of the Tyndale translation,"[62] the revisers were directed to "use the Great Bible as their basis, and depart from it only where it did not accurately represent the original." Accuracy of the OT was checked by comparison with the Latin, not the Hebrew.[63]

---

[55] Wegner, 301.
[56] Connolly, 155.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Paine, 9.
[59] Ibid.
[60] Bruce, 92.
[61] Connolly, 156.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Bruce, 93-94.

This new Bible was not without its merits. "Had the Geneva Bible never been produced, the Bishops' Bible would have been the best English Bible to appear thus far."[64] The Bishops' Bible attempted to impress its readers with the outward amenities, including thicker paper, the finest printing, and many impressive woodcuts. However, these only proved to make the volume both cumbersome and expensive. Nor did these trappings begin to offset the work's inconsistency in style or the lack of quality in the translation itself. The Bishops' Bible never surpassed the Geneva Bible's popularity.

Parker requested that Queen Elizabeth license this Bible as the sole edition for reading in public worship, but the queen never granted that request. The decree of 1573 given to this end was not given by the queen, but by Parker himself.[65]

Rheims-Douai Version (1582 / 1610) – Gregory Martin and others

With so many protestant Bibles being printed, the Roman Catholics felt pressure to issue a Bible reflecting their own doctrinal bent, fearing that the constant reading of the protestant Bibles would sway the people.

> The translators acknowledge in the preface that they were compelled to make a translation to refute the many 'false translations' produced by the protestants: "To meet the Protestant challenge, priests must be ready to quote Scripture in the vulgar tongue since their adversaries have every favourable passage at their fingers' end. . . ."[66]

To accomplish this task William Allen, who was building a college for training English Catholics in exile, encouraged Martin to accept the job. Martin asked Richard Bristow to join in the work. Martin translated the OT then the NT, progressing at a rate of approximately two chapters a day. Allen and Bristow reviewed and revised his completed work.[67]

---

[64] Ibid., 94.
[65] Connolly, 158.
[66] Wegner, 304.
[67] Bruce, 114.

Political pressure required that Allen's college move from Douai to Rheims and later back again. The NT was produced at Rheims (1582), and the OT (1610) after the move back to Douai. Thus it is given the name Rheims-Douai Version – at times shortened to Douai Version.

As a Bible written by Catholics in response to protestant works, this Bible naturally contained marginal notes with strong Roman Catholic tendencies. The translation was not based primarily on the Hebrew and Greek (although these were consulted), but upon the Latin Vulgate which the Catholic Church held to be the purest version.

Connolly holds that the work was slightly inferior but did not differ greatly from the protestants' versions.[68] However, Wegner holds that, "[T]he literal reading of the Latin yielded a stilted translation that was hardly intelligible unless one was familiar with the Latin behind the text."[69] Either way, the Bible was not very popular.[70]

King James (Authorized) Version (1604-1611) – Various Scholars

With the Catholic-leaning Bishops' Bible having enjoyed over a quarter of a century of official recognition, the Puritans hoped their new king, James I, would be sympathetic to their desire for a new authorized Bible. The king heard arguments concerning this proposed work at the Hampton Court Conference (1604). Dr. John Rainolds (or sometimes "Reynolds") addressed the king on the Puritans behalf, arguing that "[t]he Great Bible was cumbersome, the Geneva spoiled by Calvinist notes, and the Bishops' of inferior quality."[71]

James granted this request, probably due more to reasons of ego than kindness to the Puritans. Richard Bancroft, the bishop of London and a high churchman who was unsympathetic

[68] Connolly, 163.
[69] Wegner, 305.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Connolly, 164.

to the Puritans, was appointed director of the new translation.[72] Bancroft advised the king against the work, but yielded to the king's directive.

Forty-seven translators divided into six panels worked on this project.[73] The translators were the leading classical and Oriental scholars in England, with both Anglican and Puritan backgrounds, and included some laymen.[74] Paine shows that while their scholarship was impressive, many were not above some personal problems and vices (e.g., drinking and jealousy).[75]

King James approved, if not actually formulated, a number of guidelines for the translators. The number of actual guidelines varies between sources, but Paine lists fifteen.[76] The first guideline required that the text of the Bishops' Bible (1602 edition) was to be followed unless changes were demanded by the Greek or Hebrew texts.

The Hebrew text used in the translation was the Masoretic text in the 1514-1517 Complutensian Polyglot. The NT was based on the critical editions of the Greek texts published by Estienne (1550) and Beza (1588-89, 1598).[77] Walton states that this Greek text was the Textus Receptus,[78] but since the TR was not published until 1633 it is more accurate to say that the KJV and the TR both came from a common Greek text(s). Jack P. Lewis, former professor of Bible at Harding Graduate School of Religion, is credited with stating that "the [Hebrew and Greek] sources used for the Authorized Version were significantly inferior to those available today. . . ."[79]

---

[72] Ibid.
[73] Bruce, 98.
[74] Wegner, 309.
[75] Paine, 69.
[76] Ibid., 70-71.
[77] Connolly, 166.
[78] Robert C. Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of Church History* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986): Chart 83.
[79] Wegner, 311.

The Authorized Version of 1611 included the Apocrypha, which continued to be a part of the KJV until ca. 1826 when it was dropped "primarily for financial reasons."[80]

It was necessary to assign two separate printers the task of producing the 20,000 copies ordered for the first edition. There were numerous printer errors, resulting in many, though minute, differences between these two simultaneously printed editions. The two became known as "the Great He Bible" and "the Great She Bible" due to differences in Ruth 3:15.[81] Misprints occurred in later editions as well, prompting such designations as The Wicked Bible (1631), the Vinegar Bible (1717), the Murderer's Bible (1795), and a host of other infamous errors.[82]

Bruce notes that the expression "authorized version" is often misunderstood. "The 1611 version is commonly called the Authorized Version, but it was never formally authorized by any competent body either in church or state. In order to be 'authorized' in any formal sense for use in the Church of England, it would have required [the authorization] to be imposed by Act of Parliament. . . ."[83]

Overall the KJV was well accepted. "The Authorized Version was recognized as the standard edition of the Bible relatively quickly. . . ."[84] Naturally it had its critics, too. "[A]mong the most fervent [detractors] were the pilgrims who brought the Geneva Bible to the New World. The Authorized Version was rejected for its emphasis on the divine right of kings."[85]

The detractors notwithstanding, Connolly states that the KJV was the greatest translation up to that time – textually, procedurally, and stylistically.[86] An incredible 182 or more editions of the Authorized Version were made between 1611 and 1644.[87]

---

[80] Ibid., 313.
[81] Ibid., 312.
[82] Bruce, 108-109.
[83] Ibid., 99.
[84] Wegner, 313.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Connolly, 166.

Wegner goes to some lengths to detail the changes that have been made to the KJV.[88] "…[T]oday's version [of the KJV] differs significantly from the original. Primarily the language has been modernized, but other modifications have also occurred, some authorized and others not." A major revision was made in 1629 and another in 1638. Other significant revisions include those by Edward Wells (1724), Daniel Mace (1729), and John Wesley (1768). Four years later (1762) Thomas Paris edited the KJV, producing the Cambridge Bible which became the standard edition of its time. The Oxford Standard Edition (1769), revised by Benjamin Blayney, is "the standard edition with which we are familiar today" and has an estimated 75,000 changes from the original 1611 version. The Cambridge Bible revision (1762) and the Oxford Bible (1769) "are considered to be as nearly perfect in mechanical execution as human skill can make them."[89]

Maybe Bruce best summarizes the long-lasting impact that the King James Version has made.

> [I]t is well recognized that, throughout the English-speaking world, there are hundreds of thousands of readers by whom this version is accepted as "The Word of God" in a sense in which no other version would be so accepted. Such an attitude towards what is but one among many available translations may be open to criticism, but its persistence is a tribute to the sound workmanship of the men to whom we owe the version of 1611.[90]

Miscellaneous Works

In the two-and-a-half centuries that followed the introduction of the KJV, a number of minor translations were produced. Most of these were revisions to the KJV, attempting to bring it more in line with the growing number of discoveries of ancient manuscripts. Included among these translations are Edward Wells' *The Common Translation Corrected* (1718-24), William

---

[87] Wegner, 313.
[88] Unless otherwise noted all information in this paragraph comes from Wegner, 314.
[89] Connolly, 168.

Whiston's *Primitive New Testament* (1745), John Wesley's NT (1768), Samuel Sharpe's NT (1840), and Henry Alford's NT (1861/1869).[91]

During this period Richard Challoner produced another revision (1749/1750), but of the Rheims-Douai Version instead of the KJV. Challoner's concern was that the older RDV was no longer understandable by the common man, so he determined to "revise it in such a way that they could read and understand it with ease."[92]

Other works during this period were more like original translations than revisions of former editions. These works include the Darby Bible (1871/1890), Young's Literal Translation (1862), Rotherham's *Emphasized Bible* (1872/1897), and Thomas Newberry's *The Englishman's Bible* (end of the nineteenth century).

Revised Version (1881 / 1885) – Various

The next revision of major significance was published nearly 275 years after the King James Version. In the common man's world the English language was continuing to change. In the scholar's world there was improved knowledge of the original languages, and textual criticism was coming of age. Both of these elements encouraged the production of a new work.

Connolly notes that an international committee of 99 members worked on the Revised Version, or sometimes called the English Revised Version. The scholars were of varying theological convictions,[93] and this committee included thirty American translators.[94]

Bruce lists eight principles that governed the work of the revisers, the first being "[t]o introduce as few alterations as possible into the Text of the Authorized Version consistently with

---

[90] Bruce, 112.
[91] Ibid., 128-131.
[92] Ibid., 124.
[93] Connolly, 177.
[94] Wegner, 315.

faithfulness."[95] This instruction notwithstanding, the translators took efforts to update archaic words and to bring a consistency in translation. Connolly notes that 36,191 changes were made from the AV.[96]

Since the translators were instructed to follow the AV as nearly as possible it is natural to think that they relied heavily upon the Greek and Hebrew texts behind the AV. Although they did attempt to follow such a pattern, the proliferation of ancient manuscript discoveries since 1611 made significant changes in the Greek text necessary. The translators edited their own version of the Greek NT, which became known as the "Revisers' Text." Also, the British translators Westcott and Hort were concurrently working on their own Greek NT, which they made available to the committee.

The involvement of Westcott and Hort brought another advantage to this translation. These scholars forged some of the greatest advancements in modern textual criticism, and many of the principles they developed were used in this work. "This was the first major translation to make use of modern textual critical principles."[97]

However, that which was one of the RV's greatest assets was also its largest shortcoming. Because of its rigid adherence to exactness in translation, the RV was often called the "schoolmasters' translation,"[98] and Spurgeon suggested that it was "strong in Greek, weak in English."[99] This rigidity resulted from the attempt to exact a translation that allowed only one English word to be used for each Hebrew or Greek word. This stiffness is largely the reason that the RV's popularity never surpassed that of the KJV.

---

[95] Bruce, 137.
[96] Connolly, 177.
[97] Wegner, 317.
[98] Bruce, 142.
[99] Wegner, 317.

The initial sales for the RV were impressive. Oxford and Cambridge each had a million advance orders. Almost half-a-million copies were sold in the US within twenty-four hours of their arrival.[100]

In spite of its shortcomings, the RV did attempt to keep the Bible in the vernacular of the common people. "This is an important point, for if the Bible had remained entrenched in the vocabulary of the King James Bible, later translations would have encountered even greater difficulty in gaining a foothold."[101]

American Standard Version (1901) – American scholars

The reaction to the RV was not positive among the American translators who worked on it. They felt the British team, who had the final decision on all matters, rejected a disproportionate number of their revisions. In response, the British proposed that the American revisions be set in an appendix to be printed in all copies made in the first 14 years (until 1899), provided that the Americans not publish their work in any other form during that time. Although the American team agreed to those terms, the British later disbanded their committee and subsequent volumes did not contain the American revisions.[102] The Americans nevertheless remained true to their commitment and when the fourteen years were completed they started producing their own version. This work was published as the American Standard Version.

"Most of the differences between the English and American versions seem small, but many scholars consider them to be decided improvements."[103] One of the changes involved using American words instead of British words where such differences occurred. Unlike the RV, the ASV contained no Apocrypha.

---

[100] Connolly, 178.
[101] Wegner, 318.
[102] Connolly, 178-179.

The ASV was revised in the 1960's, then again in the 1970's, and lastly in 1995. It was more widely received in the US than the RV was in England but failed to achieve the same popularity that the KJV reached. Wegner notes two reasons for this: "Numerous advances in biblical archaeology and comparative semitics made the translation obsolete almost immediately; and there was a significant upsurge in interest for modern-speech versions (something this translation clearly was not)."[104]

CONCLUSION

To draw conclusions on the work of countless men which spans well over a millennium and included at least a dozen major works is no simple task. However, one common thread that runs through the history of the English Bible is a passion to see God's Word accessible and understandable to the common man. There is no indication that any of these pioneers, and certainly not the noblest ones, intended to change the eternal message of Hope. Yet with the constant evolution in the language of the common man it was and continues to be necessary to constantly monitor and periodically update the language used to convey that Hope. Failure to do so obscures the Hope from the hearts of those unfamiliar with the outdated and obscure verbiage.

The ongoing discoveries of ancient manuscript evidence and advancements in textual criticism also required periodic review and revision of the texts – for both original languages and translations alike. The forefathers of textual work have set a noble pattern: Based upon the best available data, one must make every effort to produce a work that most accurately reproduces the first century signatures.

That such fluidity is an inseparable part of the unchangeable seems to be a contradiction of terms, and many find such thoughts unsettling. However, such unsettled-ness can be

---

[103] Ibid., 179.

overcome with an open mind and a clear understanding of the history of textual transmission – two things that the Bible student must have. "Scripture deserves to have intelligent readers, and intelligent readers will not have their faith shaken by being reminded that the men who copied the sacred text throughout the early Christian centuries could occasionally fail to copy exactly what lay before them in the master-copy."[105]

On the other hand, those who accept this challenge to bring God's Word in the language of their own day must be aware of the obvious difficulties. If the history of the English Bible teaches anything, it teaches that those who provide such noble service to their generation often receive ridicule and persecution for that service. This principle was well established even in the days of John Wycliffe.

> Preferring older although less satisfactory translations to the noble version of John Wycliffe, the English people furnished an early illustration of that conservatism which has been in all their history an element alike of national weakness and of national strength. The old word was not to be too readily abandoned, nor was the new word to be too readily adopted in the book which was already so dear to their religious experience. . . . Kept within bounds, it has warned the scholar not to trifle without good cause with the pure 'well of English undefyled'…[106]

May God continue to stir the passions and grant the necessary grace, wisdom, and perseverance to those involved in the unending and often unappreciated task of providing the never-changing message in the ever-changing language of contemporary mankind.

---

[104] Wegner, 320.
[105] Bruce, 140.
[106] Pattison, 17.

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brown, John. *The History of the English Bible.* London: Cambridge, 1912.

Bruce, F. F. *The English Bible.* London: Lutterworth Press, 1961.

Connolly, Ken. *The Indestructible Book.* Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996.

Eisenhart, Elizabeth J. *A Concise History of the English Bible*. N.P.: American Bible Society, n.d.

Paine, Gustavus S. *The Men behind the King James Version*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959.

Pattison, T. Harwood. *The History of the English Bible.* Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1894.

Pelikan, Jaroslav. *The Reformation of the Bible: The Bible of the Reformation.* N.P.: Yale University Press, 1996.

Walton, Robert C. *Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986.

Wegner, Paul D. *The Journey from Texts to Translations*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999.