

# The Hampton Court Conference: Part III

## The Authorised Version

Added: Dec 28, 2005 | Category: History

---

### THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE COMES INTO ITS OWN

When John Reynolds, President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, spoke up at the Hampton Court Conference and said, "May your Majesty be pleased that the Bible be new translated, such as are extant not answering the original", the English language was going through a period of major transformation. On perusing through manuscripts and printed works from the 16th and early 17th centuries, one finds no standardised spelling, grammar, syntax or vocabulary. Indeed, the various English forms written in Devon, London, Birmingham, York and Carlisle often differed from one another as much as modern German and Dutch. This was no handicap for the comparatively few well-educated members of the upper class who spoke French and Latin but it meant that the average Englishman could not communicate with those outside his own class or district. With the advent of the King James's Bible, commonly known as the Authorised Version, a standard English was developed which became a lingua franca uniting all the people of England. The result was that not only itinerant gospel preaching flourished but also national administration, education and culture. Here, one can compare the Authorised Version with Luther's translation. There was no standard German in the 1520s and Luther wrote in his own Meissen dialect. This quickly became the Protestant dialect and eventually what we now know as High German.

So, too, the King James' Bible put an end to the chaos caused by numerous Bible versions. These were written in an almost arbitrary language and style which not only differed radically from other versions but was inconsistent with itself. Indeed, in the pre-1611 Bibles, the same word was often spelt in various ways in the same version and often grammar and syntax confused rather than enhanced the original meaning. The English found that they heard one version in church, another in the schools and read a third version at home. As most of the former versions relied on various Latin translations of the Scriptures rather than the originals, this often meant that the gospel in them was polluted. This is why Reynold's called the previous versions, according to one note-taker at the Hampton Court Conference, 'corrupt'. So, too, most of the extant Bible versions were in a language already antiquated and were no longer understood by people at the dawn of the 17th century.

### ANGLO-SAXON BIBLES

The first major translations of the Bible into English were undertaken around the fourth to tenth centuries and were used well into the Middle Ages. Most of, if not all, the Bible was translated into Anglo Saxon or Old English. This language was possibly more difficult for the English of 1600 to understand than those of today as the King James' version re-introduced a good number of old Saxon words in a modern spelling and Reformed pastors made sure that the people were taught their meaning. Such teaching had been neglected in papist times. Thus Anglo-Saxon pronouns like 'þis and þæt', adjectives such as 'riht and hl?d', nouns like 'h?s and bæð' and verb tenses such as 'sende and wæs' became when re-spelt 'this, that, right, loud, house, bath, send and was'. However, even after learning the orthographic, lexical and grammatical differences between Old English and present day English, most readers will find, say, the opening words of the Lord's Prayer more difficult to understand in Old English than even a modern German or Swede would:

"Fæder re, þ þe eart on heofonum, s þn nama gehlgod. Tbecume þn rce.  
Gewurþe ðn willa on eorðan sw sw on heofonum."

#### MIDDLE ENGLISH BIBLES

From roughly the twelve century to the fourteenth, Middle English, mixed with much Scandinavian and French, gradually became the language of the common people. Nowadays, pupils and students of English literature still struggle with Chaucer's Canterbury Tales in Middle English and the York, Wakefield and Towneley Plays are still performed before select groups. As late as the nineteen forties, children in Yorkshire still learnt Pask Eggers (Easter Eggs) in Middle English off by heart and huge portions of Saint George's fight with the Dragon. Sir Eglamour and Christabelle was often sung in my Bradford home led by my mother's beautiful voice. Sadly (for one who has tasted the delights of Middle English), Wycliffe's translation of the Bible, which pioneered and served to standardize Middle English, is now left to the experts. Though most of us would understand the following words from Ephesians (Effecies) VI, reading an entire chapter of this 14th century work would be a laborious task indeed:

"For why stryvyng is not to us aghens fleisch and blood, but aghens the princis and potestatis, aghens governouris of the world of these darknessis, aghens spiritual thingis of wickidnesse in hevenli thingis."

Two hundred years later, we find that the so-called Matthew's Bible, the first English Bible to be officially licensed for reading, still used Middle English though it had now become archaic.

#### ELIZABETHAN BIBLES

During the second half of the 16th century, two major efforts were made to produce a purer Bible in a more modern language. This was the Geneva Bible of 1560 which was compiled and modernized from earlier translations by Anglican exiles on the Continent during the Marian

persecutions. It was introduced to England by Archbishop Grindal and bound up with the Book of Common Prayer. It is said to have gone through some fifty editions during Elizabeth's reign. The second main translation became known as the Bishops' Bible and was the first major attempt to have an entire translation from the original languages made by a staff of England's greatest linguists and theologians. The earlier editions of the Bishops' Bible were, however, full of errors but the 1602 version was thought sufficiently accurate to serve as a basis for the work of the 1611 translation commission.

#### CLAIMS FOR THE SUPERIORITY OF THE GENEVA BIBLE

Nowadays, it is again fashionable to pit the Geneva Bible against the Bishop's Bible according to the myth that the former was a Puritan Bible whereas the latter was an Anglo-Catholic Bible. Actually, both Bibles were sponsored, translated, printed and distributed by roughly the same group of people with Archbishops Parker, Grindal, Whitgift and Sandys at their head. Indeed, a greater number of Marian exiles and former members of the underground church in England worked on the Bishops' Bible than on the Geneva Bible. Furthermore, it was the Puritan wing of the Church of England who showed open dissatisfaction with both versions and the Church, in general, agreed with them. It was not until the days of Laud and Charles I that the Geneva Bible was re-printed (1640) as a party Bible for those who somehow identified the Authorised Version too closely with Episcopalianism and Stuart politics. None of the Geneva Bible compilers, however, were Separatists.

Recently, there have been belated attempts to re-popularise the old Geneva Bible, especially in the Presbyterian press, and the archaic version has been reprinted complete with notes. Articles supporting this move have invariably shown a party bias which contradicts the historical evidence provided by early seventeenth century Puritans. In compiling the Authorised Version, most of the versions used as terms of reference, were those translated by Reformers and Puritans of the best credentials. These included the Tyndale, Coverdale, Matthew, Geneva and Bishops' Bibles. Those who believe that the Authorised Version is a reaction against the Geneva Bible on theological grounds might consider the fact that only four percent or so of the Authorised Version differs markedly from the Geneva Bible. Indeed, the A. V. is nearer the Geneva Bible than any other single former version. This, however, speaks rather for Tindale's excellent work on which both versions are built. The few differences between the Geneva Bible and the A. V. are based on the A. V. translators' decision not to use the pagan or secular terms found in the Geneva Bible, so 'Easter' was rendered more accurately 'passover' and 'congregation' more theologically 'church'.

One of the main weaknesses of both these Bibles were the notes which dated the translations heavily because of the current events and political issues referred to. Some of the Geneva notes were radical and harsh and

often far longer than the texts to be 'explained'. They were also added to regularly in various printings until the death of Elizabeth. Although the translators of the Bishops' Bible were told that they should add "no bitter notes on any text", many of the less wholesome Geneva notes were carried over and many quite trivial notes were added. Both versions, however, were prefaced by fine introductory essays reflecting the Reformed faith at its most Biblical and evangelistic. For scholarly work, I would prefer the cold and formal Bishop's Bible but for the poetry of the heart, I would turn to the Geneva Bible.

#### THE KING JAMES BIBLE

The good thing about the Geneva Bible was that though it was reprinted so many times, it was seldom revised so it could be used as a standard work for joint study. The bad thing about the Bishop's Bible was that it went into one revision after another and caused a great chaos as the versions, though including most necessary corrections, became radically different from one another. So there was a general sigh of relief when it was announced by Church and King that a translation to beat all translations was underway. At last there would be a standard version in a standardised form of English, based on the original languages and the best of former versions. Furthermore, the Bible was to be produced as a work in its own right, leaving the Holy Spirit as His own Interpreter, without interpretive notes of any kind save those explaining the meanings of difficult Hebrew and Greek terms.

A letter is extant from King James to the Bishop of London, Bancroft, dated July 22, 1604 in which the King tells the bishop that he has already found fifty-four men to work on the new translation and advises them to sound out all who are skilled in Hebrew and Greek in the Church who have made a name for themselves in Bible language work and exposition to add to the list. The King suggested splitting the translators into three groups, meeting at Oxford, Cambridge and Westminster respectively. At Westminster, Lancelot Andrewes was to head a team to translate Genesis to 2 Kings whilst Dr Barlow supervised the translation of the Epistles. The Cambridge group, headed by Hebrew scholar Professor Lively, had the task of translating Chronicles to Ecclesiastes and the Apocrypha was placed under Dr Dupont's supervision. The Oxford group, which included Reynolds, was presided over by Prof. Harding and received the task of translating Isaiah to Malachi. Dr Ravis was to supervise the Gospels, Acts and Revelation.

Each group was to pass on their completed work to the other groups for comment and possible revision. At regular intervals suggested renderings were distributed amongst the entire clergy who were urged to send in their comments to the translation committee. As several native speakers of other languages, such as Edwin Saravia, who was half Spanish and half Belgian, and Thomas Bilson, who was of German stock, were on the committee, most of the Continental Bibles were consulted during translation work.

Two scholars from each group were to take care of the final revision. Scholars and churchmen were to work hand in hand and nothing was done, including the printing, without both the academic and ecclesiastical professions having a say in the matter. Those translators who had pastoral duties were only allowed to return home for their church services and were otherwise required to remain at their desks from early morning to late evening. This devoted and industrious team kept up the immense work for well over a thousand days, many of them with little hope of payment.<sup>2</sup>

The only major contemporary protest against the new version was made by Hugh Broughton, a renowned scholar in Greek and Hebrew who was not invited to help with the work and was angry at not being chosen. One of the main specifications for choosing the scholars was ability to work together with others who were not necessarily of one's own opinion. Broughton, however, was notorious for his sharp tongue and ingrained view that all other scholars were 'dolts and dollards'. Giving Bancroft the major blame for the translation and forgetting that fellow-Puritan Reynolds suggested the work, Broughton wrote to James saying that when the King looked down from Abraham's bosom, he would see Bancroft in hell. He even told the King, "I would rather be torn to pieces by wild horses than see the new version imposed on the poor churches."

#### THE A. V. ONLY ACCEPTED GRADUALLY

There was no overnight rush from the old versions to the A. V.. Bibles were very expensive in those days and most of their owners could not just go out and buy a new one at will. Nor did they wish to throw away Bibles which had become part of their lives. Besides, blank leaves in the Bibles were used to chronicle the family history and important events and, when given at birth, baptism, confirmation or marriage, they were meant to accompany their owners throughout their earthly pilgrimage. Furthermore, it is quite wrong to view the A. V. as a new translation. It was merely a new version of the major versions which had gone before. The old versions were weighed and not found wanting to any major degree in their presentation of history, law, prophecy and gospel. The A.V. was merely a further refining and polishing of the old gold and a presentation of God's word in a more modern form. Thus it took twenty-five years for the A. V. to become popular. Nor were the first printings without errors. These were as bad as in the Bishop's Bible and the A. V. had to be revised and corrected almost every time it was printed. Major reforms in spelling, which marred the language of the A. V. a good deal, continually took place up to well into the nineteenth century. Much of the natural cadence, rhythm, stress and intonation of the original A. V. spelling, which was more akin to poetry than our present day prose, was lost in these 'reforms'. Thus the A. V. as we know it was not a product of 1611 but mainly of the 18th century. This may be a surprise to some who have always believed that their beloved King James Version looks exactly as it did when first written.

## REASONS FOR USING THE KING JAMES BIBLE

Most candid scholars of Greek and Hebrew would admit that the text the A. V. translators used was as fair a text as any and none of the subsequent claims for more accurate texts have been generally acceptable amongst either Christian or secular scholars. Invariably, texts underlining modern versions, which have been pieced together from documents covering some eight hundred years after the canon was fixed, have been compiled to suit party-views rather than linguistic acumen. Nevertheless, modern text critical research is a fascinating pursuit and it is a pity that most evangelical Christians fight shy of this science for what appears to be superstitious reasons. The degree studies in Higher and Lower Criticism which this writer pursued at Uppsala University served to confirm his trust in the so-called Received Text underlining the A. V.. Indeed, the top students in critical work on the Bible texts at Uppsala in the mid nineteen sixties were invariably evangelicals who loved to do Berean work on the Bible.

Furthermore, the translators of the A. V. were not run-of-the-mill scholars such as do Bible translation work today on a mass-production scale. They were clearly men who beside their natural talents, had a life-long calling and devotion to their studies and stood head and shoulders above their fellow scholars. Un-cluttered and unhindered by modern university curricula and a nine-to-five approach to a working day, they sat at their desks for years on end without relenting until their task was done. Several of the translators, such as Reynolds himself, died whilst the work of translation was in progress. Seeing fifty-eight-year-old Reynolds wasting away due to the hard work, his friends told him to desist and save his life so that he might enjoy old age. Reynolds replied, "For the sake of life, I would not lose the very reason for living."

Another reason for using the A. V. is the sublime simplicity but accuracy of its English language. When the New English Bible came out in 1961, I immediately compared favourite passages with the A. V.. Coming from my Yorkshire background where we called a spade a spade, I pronounced the translation a Cockney joke as such dwellers within the sound of Bow Bells are prone to speak in the cryptic culinary language of 'plates of meat', 'butchers' hooks', 'tea-leaves' and 'apples and pairs' which brings total linguistic confusion to the non-initiated. The number of cant words used in the wrong places and in a style-breaking manner in the NEB seemed legend and I was faced with dozens of regional slang expressions which I had never encountered before. On the other hand, the A. V. is still well over 90 per cent basic English and never mixes bathos with pathos as does the NEB and most subsequent versions. The remaining percentage is firmly anchored in English poetry and prose and the average reader will not have to consult local dialect and jargon dictionaries to understand the meaning. Furthermore, the A.V.'s 6,000 or so words are within the learning scope of people well below average intelligence. In days when school children are not taught to tell the difference between the imperfect, perfect and pluperfect tenses, nor the active and passive voices, nor adjectives and adverbs, nor subjunctive and indicative moods, the short, pithy sayings of

the Bible, often in monosyllabic words, would make a fine grammar book. Some of Britain's greatest authors learnt to read and write with the A. V. or previous versions as their only text-book.

So, too, a re-introduction of thee, thou and thine and ye alongside 'you' would help us out of the grammatical chaos caused in common conversation. Modern corrupt English is just about the only language which cannot distinguish between one person and two. It is the only one in which its speakers address their family and their God as if they were total strangers. One of the poems I learnt as a child to teach me good manners, depicted a young man wishing to show his sweetheart that he loved her, so he said, "May I, when thy folks are nigh, call thee "Thou". The English do not even call God "Thou" now!

To a teacher of the English language and literature, one of the most outstanding features of the A. V. is that it is far easier than the modern versions to learn off by heart. Nowadays, little attention is paid to the natural music of the English language. Rhythm, stress and the use of literary devices to give elegance and flow to the language are scarcely taught today so that modern poetry and prose has become little more than a string of words. Children are taught to read and write isolated words without sense content and sentence structure, so from the beginning of life they learn a false intonation coupled with a false understanding of the meaning. The A. V. English, in spite of the spelling reforms it has undergone, is as near poetry as any prose can approach and is ideally formed in its music, diction, syntax and sentence structure for learning by portion and by rote. This never becomes mechanical learning as God's word always speaks to the heart. Sadly, today we are lost in a veritable jungle of versions, undertaken neither by poets, scholars nor men and women of sound Christian standing. Indeed, there are several versions read much by young Christians today 'translated' by authors of otherwise seditious and immoral literature who would not know a Greek noun from a Hebrew verb. This Babel chaos must be seen as the work of the Anti-Christ. In the A. V., we have truly an anchor for our souls second to none. We Christians, I believe, should be most diligent in adhering to it until, when God so wills, the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ regains the necessary spiritual and academic qualities to give us a better and lasting standard version.

- i. I am only dealing solely with English Bibles here and not earlier Celtic translations.
- ii. Eventually, adequate means of reimbursement were obtained.

PLEASE FEEL FREE TO USE AND DISTRIBUTE CONTENT FROM NEW FOCUS BUT PLEASE MAKE SURE TO INCLUDE A CREDIT TO "NEW FOCUS [HTTPS://GO-NEWFOCUS.CO.UK](https://go-newfocus.co.uk)"

---

Source: <https://go-newfocus.co.uk/articles/app/category/history/article/the-hampton-court-conference-part-iii.pdf>

© New Focus 2024