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**King James VI (Scotland), I (England) – 1566-1625**

**The History of the**

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**Word of God**

**V.C. The English Bible – 17th C Branch:**

**The King James Version**

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**C. 17th Century Branch: The King James Version – 1611**

1. **King James, the person**

**King James is one of the most unlikely players in the History of the Written Word of God**. As one Church historian describes,

When [Queen] Elizabeth died in 1603 she left no direct heir, but declared her legitimate successor to be James, the son of Mary Stuart, who was already King of Scotland…. **James's greatest conflicts were with those Protestants who thought that the Reformation had not progressed sufficiently in England, and that this was due to the policies of the sovereigns and their advisors**…. [The radical Protestants] were given the name of 'Puritans' because they insisted on the need to 'purify' the Church by a return to Biblical religion…. The Puritans did not trust the new King, whose mother was none other than Mary Stuart…. James's personal character did little to increase his prestige. He was a homosexual, and his favorites enjoyed unmerited privileges and power in his court and government. While insisting on his right to be an absolute monarch, he wavered between stubborn rigidity and weak flexibility…. [As the Church of England sought to eradicate the Puritans, the Puritans appealed to King James] All attempts at conciliation failed, and the only result of that meeting was the new translation of the Bible that appeared in 1611, generally known as the King James Version. [[1]](#footnote-1)

**2. King James and the clamoring for a new translation**

In 1604, **the Puritans in England petitioned the King (James) regarding several ecclesiastical (church related) matters – one of which was the need for an unbiased translation**. In their words (16th century spelling uncorrected), they appealed …

**that there might bee a newe translation of the Bible, because those which were allowed in the raignes of Henrie the eight, and Edward the sixt, were corrupt and not answerable to the truth of the Originall.**

This King James gladly welcomed since it would serve to overthrow both the Bishop's Bible and the Geneva Bible which he personally detested because of its Calvinistic notes.

**3. The production of a new translation**

**a. The process of the translation**

In order to accomplish this monumental task, fifty-four scholars were divided into eight companies. One historian recounts their method:

Rules drawn up for the companies [of translators] prescribed that the Bishop's Bible should be followed 'as little altered as the truth of the original will permit,' that the translations of Tyndale, Matthew's, Coverdale, Whitchurch [the 'Great' Bible] and Geneva be used …[[2]](#footnote-2)

Translators would also, at that time, have had access to Greek texts, but the vast majority of the Greek manuscripts available to them were of the Byzantine family.

In the end, **the King James was not a fresh translation out of the original languages. Rather, it was yet one more revision of a combination of earlier works**. One scholar characterizes the plan of this edition,

The work was to be a revision, not a fresh translation … The aim of this version, stated in the 1611 preface, 'The Translators to the Reader,' was 'to make a good one [most likely the Geneva] better.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**b. The result of the translation**

The work took nearly seven years. One curious observation was noted of the finished work. Although there were so many men from different backgrounds involved in the work, the language was so remarkably uniform that many took that as a sign of God's oversight of the work. Historians point to another reason …

**Astonishment is still voiced that the dignitaries who prepared the 1611 Authorized Version for King James spoke so often with one voice – apparently miraculously. Of course they did: the voice (never acknowledged by them) was Tyndale's. Much of the New Testament in the 1611 Authorized Version (King James Version) came directly from Tyndale. [[4]](#footnote-4)**

**4. The characterization of the King James Version**

Strictly speaking, **the so-called Authorized Version (KJV) was never authorized. That tradition seems to rest merely upon a printer's claim on the title page that contained the clause from earlier Bibles, "Appointed to be read in Churches."** . . . . There is no evidence that any formal appointment as to the King James Version's liturgical use by either the King, Parliament, Privy Council, or Convocation was actually made. Actually, this Bible was the third 'Authorized Bible' rather than 'The Authorized Bible. [[5]](#footnote-5)

**5. The reception of the King James Version**

Within a year of the first printing, the KJV underwent three edits! Perhaps the most famous typographical error was found in what came to be referred to as "The Wicked Bible" of 1531. The word 'not' was left out of the seventh commandment and thus read, 'Thou shalt commit adultery.' Further, and much more troubling than a mere typographical error, the Roman Catholic Apocryphal books were included in the first edition and in most subsequent editions until the 18th century!

For these and many other reasons, **the King James Version was not immediately well received**. It was attacked as biased and theologically unsound for nearly its first eighty years. Eventually, however, it began to increase in popularity. The Geneva Bible competed with the KJV longer than any of the other versions, but eventually it too gave way.

**6. The evaluation of the translation**

The KJV has enjoyed extreme popularity for hundreds of years, though it was neither immediately nor universally popular. **For more than four centuries, the King James has enjoyed a profound reception**. Devotional readers especially held the King James in the highest esteem, as the quotes below detail …

It met with plenty of criticism…. Eventually, however, its victory was so complete that **its text acquired a sanctity properly ascribable only to the unmediated voice of God**; to multitudes of English-speaking Christians, it has seemed little less than blasphemy to tamper with the words of the King James Version.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Yet the praise of the KJV was never universal. Nor is the beloved version free from enduring criticism:

The full idolatry of this ‘Authorized’ version did not begin until the 1760s but then grew steadily: the official revisers in 1881 declared in their Preface that the Authorized Version had been venerated as a classic since 1611, which is untrue. With that, there grew the worship of the Authorized Version as Sublime English Literature, a movement which reached its height in the first half of the twentieth century. This notion would have been incomprehensible, and indeed alarming, to earlier ages. [[7]](#footnote-7)

**Major Revisions of the King James Version**

**A few of the literally *hundreds* of revisions!**

1629 First edition to omit Apocrypha

1631 "Wicked Bible"

1642-1715 7 editions printed with Geneva notes

1683 Scatterwood's revision

1763 "Baskerville Bible" – nearly flawless print

1769 Belayney – Oxford standard

1799 Ray / McRae's revision

1806 Eyre & Strahand – 'revised with authority'

1815 Ray's – 'revised and improved'

1817 New Family Bible – 'improved KJV'

1833 Noah Webster's – 'revised KJV'

1840 Revised A.V. – 'by a Layman'

1841 Conquest – '20,000 emendations'

1850 Barham's Revised Bible

1851 American Bible Society's 'corrected' edition

1864 American Bible Union – 'immersion'

1867 J. Smith Jr. 'translated and corrected'

1868 Gotch & Jacob's

1869 Alford's – KJV revision – true scholar's effort

1880 Valorium – 'revision'

1909 Scofield

1948 Pilgrim Bible – use of abbreviation

1962 Modern KJV

1966 Living Scriptures – 'new translation'

1982 New King James – 'revised A.V'

**Works Cited**

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E.H. Plumptre, in William Smith's *Dictionary of the Bible*

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Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*

David Daniell, *Tyndale's New Testament* (TNT)

Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (GIB)

1. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity,* p.149-153 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. HOB, p.166 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. TNT, p.xiii [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Daniell, *Tyndale's New Testament* (TNT), p.vii [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Norman L. Geisler and William E. Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible* (GIB),

pp.565-566 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ibid, p.168 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. TNT, pp.xiii-xiv [↑](#footnote-ref-7)