

**REPORT ON THE HISTORY
AND RECENT COLLATION
OF THE ENGLISH VERSION
OF THE BIBLE**

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Report on the history and recent collation of the English version of the Bible by American Bible Society

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AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY

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R E P O R T

ON THE

HISTORY AND RECENT COLLATION

OF THE

ENGLISH VERSION OF THE BIBLE:

PRESENTED BY THE

COMMITTEE ON VERSIONS TO THE BOARD OF MANAGERS

OF THE

AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY.

AND ADOPTED, MAY 1, 1851.

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REPORT

OF THE

COMMITTEE ON VERSIONS.

TO THE BOARD OF MANAGERS OF THE AMERICAN BIBLE SOCIETY :

The Committee on Versions, to whom the subject of collating the editions of the English Bible published by this Society with those issued in Great Britain, was referred in the year 1847, respectfully beg leave to present this as their full and final Report.

Three years and a half have now elapsed, since the subject of such a collation was first brought to the attention of the Committee. They have regarded it from the beginning as a matter of high importance; connected as it is with the purity of that Holy Word, which it is the object and business of this Society to diffuse as widely as possible. Having now brought their work to a close, the Committee would, first of all, render thanks to God, for the favour with which he has vouchsafed to attend them in their labours; for the mutual feelings of Christian respect and affection, accompanied by entire unanimity of action, which he has enabled them to cherish; and for the preservation of their lives and health during so long a period.

Since the commencement of the work, only a single change has taken place in the Committee itself; occasioned by the retirement of the Rev. Dr. PECK, and the accession of the Rev. Dr. M'CLINTOCK in his place. One of the Secretaries of the Society, who met with us during the first year, the Rev. Dr. LEVINGS, has been called to his eternal reward; and is now, we doubt not, rejoicing in the truth of God's perfect Word unclouded by any admixture of human imperfection.

From the other Secretaries of the Society, who have often met with us, the Rev. Drs. BRIGHAM and HOLDICH, the Committee have received much aid and many valuable suggestions.

Before proceeding to speak in detail of their own labours, the Committee beg leave to present a brief summary of the facts relating to the origin and history of the present English Version. In this way the Board will be the better able to apprehend the nature and character of the revisions heretofore made, by which the English Bible has been brought into its present form; as also to judge of the importance and necessity of the collation, in which the Committee have been engaged.

ORIGIN OF THE PRESENT VERSION.

Besides the translation of Wickliffe, completed about A.D. 1380, but existing until quite recently only in manuscript, six Protestant English versions had been printed and circulated, anterior to the one now in use.

The earliest published English Bible was that of *Tyndal*. The New Testament was printed in Holland, in 1526 and several times afterwards; the Pentateuch at Hamburg in 1530. This version was followed in 1535 by *Coverdale's* translation of the whole Bible; which was twice republished, in 1550 and 1553. *Matthew's* Bible, so called, was printed in 1537, in Hamburg or some other part of Germany. The name Thomas Matthew is understood to be fictitious; and the work seems to have been mainly made up from the translations of Tyndal and Coverdale. According to some, the real editor was the martyr John Rogers.

In 1539 was published *Cranmer's* or the *Great Bible*, in folio, printed at London by Grafton and Whitechurch, king's printers; and hence sometimes known also as Whitechurch's Bible. This was a revision of Matthew's version; and measures were taken to have it kept in the churches and publicly read. Other editions appeared in 1540.

The *Geneva Bible*, so called, was translated at Geneva by English scholars, who had taken refuge there during the reign of Queen Mary. The New Testament was printed at Geneva in 1557; and the whole Bible in 1560. This version was reprinted at London in 1572, and often afterwards.

In 1568 appeared the *Bishops' Bible*, so called, in folio. It was a revision of Cranmer's or the Great Bible, by archbishop Parker and other bishops; and took the place of Cranmer's Bible as the authorized English version.

At the accession of king James I, in 1603, the two versions last named, the Bishops' Bible and the Geneva Bible, were those mainly in use in England; the former authorized to be publicly read in the churches, and the latter mostly used in private families.

The immediate occasion of the present translation was the celebrated Hampton Court Conference, held before the king, Jan. 12th, 1604. On the second day, Dr. Reynolds, the leader of the Puritans, proposed to the king, that there should be a new translation of the Bible, because of the imperfections of the former versions. The king entertained the proposal; with the understanding, that the new version should "last of all be ratified by his royal authority, and so the whole church be bound to this translation, and not to use any other." Accordingly, before the middle of the same year, 1604, the king commissioned a large number of scholars of both the Universities and elsewhere, to meet, and consult together, in order to make a new and more correct translation of the Bible. These were divided into *six* classes, comprising forty-seven persons, whose names are given; who were to meet at Westminster, Cambridge, and Oxford, two classes in each place. The original Scriptures, including the Apocrypha, were in like manner divided into six portions; one of which was assigned to each class for translation. Certain rules, prescribed by the king, were transmitted to the translators by the bishop of London, at midsummer 1604. Among these the following serve to mark definitely the character of the translation and the manner of proceeding.

"1. The ordinary Bible read in the Church, commonly called *The Bishops' Bible*, to be followed, and as little altered as the original will permit.

"14. These translations to be used when they agree better with the text than the Bishops' Bible, viz. *Tyndal's*, *Coverdale's*, *Matthew's*, *Whitchurch's* [i. e. *Cranmer's*], *Geneva*.

"6. No marginal notes at all to be affixed, but only for the explanation of the Hebrew or Greek words, which cannot, without some circumlocution, so briefly and fitly be expressed in the text.

"7. Such quotations of places to be marginally set down, as shall serve for the fit references of one Scripture to another.

"8. Every partioular man of each company to take the same chapter or chapters; and, having translated or amended them

severally by himself where he thinks good, all to meet together, to confer what they have done, and agree for their part what shall stand.

"9. As any one company hath dispatched any one book in this manner, they shall send it to the rest, to be considered of seriously and judiciously."

Besides these forty-seven translators, it appears that "three or four of the most eminent and grave divines of each university" were appointed to be *overseers* of the translations; and these with the others probably made up the number of *fifty-four* mentioned in the king's letter of July 22nd, 1604.

After the work was actually commenced, more than *three* years, or, as the original Preface has it, "twice seven times seventy-two days and more," were spent by the several companies in completing the first draught of the new version. When thus far finished, three copies of the whole Bible were sent to London; one from Cambridge, one from Oxford, and one from Westminster. From the companies in these several places, two persons were now selected from each place, *six* in all, who met in London to review the whole work, and prepare one copy from the three, to be committed to the press. Their labours extended through three quarters of a year. "Last of all, Bilson bishop of Winchester, and Dr. Myles Smith afterwards bishop of Gloucester, again reviewed the whole work, and prefixed arguments to the several books;" by which "arguments" are probably intended the contents of the chapters, etc. Dr. Smith also wrote the Preface. The translation thus laboriously and faithfully prepared, was first printed and published in A.D. 1611, in folio, and in the old black letter.

In the Preface the translators say: "We never thought from the beginning, that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one; but, to make a good one better, or out of many good ones one principal-good one, not justly to be excepted against, that hath been our endeavour, that our mark." This is doubtless a true and appropriate statement of the object and motives, which these eminent persons had before their minds, in executing the great work thus solemnly committed to their charge. They claimed no infallibility for themselves, nor for their labours. The work assigned them was strictly a revision of the Bishops' Bible; which itself had grown up out of all the preceding versions. But they every where took the original Scrip-

tures as their basis; diligently comparing likewise all the former translations. In this way they certainly succeeded in making "one principal good translation, not justly to be excepted against." Yet notwithstanding all their care and diligence, their own first edition exhibits some grave errors of the press; most of which were speedily corrected in subsequent editions.

Such was the origin of this venerable and truly national work; which immediately became the standard English Bible, and superseded all the other versions. Confined at first to the limited territory of the British Islands, and intended only for a population of a few millions, it had the effect at once to develop and fix the structure and character of the English language; and with that language it has since been borne abroad even to the ends of the earth. And now, during the lapse of almost two and a half centuries, it has gladdened the hearts, and still gladdens the hearts, of millions upon millions, not only in Great Britain, but throughout North America and India, in portions of Africa, and in Australia. At the present day, the English is probably the vernacular tongue of more millions than any other one language under heaven; and the English Bible has brought and still brings home the knowledge of God's revealed truth to myriads more of minds, than ever received it through the original tongues.

The translators little foresaw the vast results and immeasurable influence of what they had thus done, both for time and for eternity. Venerated men! their very names are now hardly known to more than a few persons; yet, in the providence of God, the fruits of their labours have spread to far distant climes; have laid broad and deep the foundations of mighty empires; have afforded to multitudes strength to endure adversity, and grace to resist the temptations of prosperity; and only the revelations of the judgment day can disclose, how many millions and millions, through the instrumentality of their labours, have been made wise unto salvation.

The English Bible, as left by the translators, has come down to us unaltered in respect to its *text*; except in the changes of orthography which the whole English language has undergone, to which the version has naturally and properly been conformed; and excepting also the slight variations and discrepancies, which in so long an interval must necessarily arise, by reason of human

imperfection, in the preparation and printing of so many millions of copies.

The exposure to variations from this latter source is naturally greater, wherever the printing of the Bible is at the option of every one who chooses to undertake it, without restriction and without supervision; as in this country since the Revolution. In Great Britain, where the printing has been done only under royal authority, by the Universities of Cambridge and Oxford, and the king's printers in London and Edinburgh, the like exposure does not exist in the same degree; although, even there, slight variations are continually manifesting themselves between the copies bearing these different imprints. This will appear more fully in the sequel.

In respect to the *accessories* of the text, comprehending the contents of the chapters, the running heads of the columns, the marginal readings and references, and the chronology, the Bibles of the present day are much less conformed to the original edition. The translators, as we have seen, were to append "no marginal notes at all, but only for the explanation of the Hebrew or Greek words;" and also "fit references of one Scripture to another." To this requirement the early editions were entirely conformed; and the marginal references were very few. In the lapse of time, however, extensive changes and additions have been made in most of the above particulars. The contents of the chapters only have been preserved in the editions of larger size, without very great variation; while in copies of a smaller form, these likewise have been frequently and variously altered and abbreviated.

VARIOUS EDITIONS AND REVISIONS.

The following is a brief summary of the periods and editions, in which these changes seem to have been first made.

An edition of king James' Bible was printed in octavo at Amsterdam, in 1664, with a preface by John Canne, a leader of the English Brownists. His purpose was to *make Scripture the interpreter of Scripture*, by the addition of important marginal references "so far as the margin could contain." This edition, with the preface and references of Canne, was several times reprinted by the king's printers in Edinburgh and London. There were editions by them in 1696, 1698, 1701, 1762, 1766, etc.