

The King James Bible: 400th Anniversary

***“All scripture is
given by
inspiration of God,
and is profitable
for doctrine, for
reproof, for
correction, for
instruction in
righteousness:
That the man of
God may be
perfect, thoroughly
furnished unto all
good works.”
—II Timothy 3:16,
17***

Lord.”—II Tim. 1:1,2

A GUIDING LIGHT

The year 2011 marks the four hundredth anniversary of the first edition of the “Authorized

THIS TEXT OF SCRIPTURE

is taken from one of the updated editions of the *King James Bible* (Authorized Version) in which the great Apostle Paul was writing to his beloved Timothy. We read, “Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, according to the promise of life which is in Christ Jesus, To Timothy, my dearly beloved son: Grace, mercy, and peace, from God the Father and Christ Jesus our

Version” of the English Bible, also fondly known as the *King James Bible*. It was commissioned by King James and the Church of England and published by the King’s Printer, Robert Barker, in 1611.

The *King James Bible* is a late Middle Age literary treasure of the English language. It has been widely accepted as being one of the most popular and important books ever published. It has been estimated that more than six billion copies have now been printed, and during these four hundred years it has brought peace, joy, and hope to millions of people throughout the English-speaking world.

Many sincere Christians have literally given their lives for its preparation and preservation. Its message of truth has been a guiding light and source of inspiration to devout men and women who have been blessed by the wonderful words of Holy Scripture. All have been guided by its divine principles of truth and righteousness, and it has often been described as the book that changed the world.

JAMES VI OF SCOTLAND

James Stuart (1566-1625) was the only child of Mary, Queen of Scots (1542-1587). He became King James VI of Scotland at the age of 13 months, being formally crowned at the Church of the Holy Rood, Stirling, in 1567. His father was Henry Stuart, 1st Duke of Albany (Lord Darnley) who was killed in 1567. James’ father was also a first cousin and second husband to James’ mother, Mary.

Because of his mother’s faith, James was baptized as a Catholic, but was brought up under the

influence of a reformed Protestant Scotland. He was educated by several tutors and became well-known for his broad knowledge. He is considered to have been one of the most intellectual and learned individuals ever to sit on any English or Scottish throne. During his lifetime, he wrote several books on a wide variety of subjects, and also wrote and published many poems. He was also proficient in translating various French works. James instigated several religious changes known as the “Five Articles of Perth.” Although the Church of Scotland hesitated at first to accept his “Articles,” they later adopted them.

James married Anne of Denmark (1574-1619) in 1589, and they had eight children, some of whom did not survive infancy. However, their second son will be remembered as Charles I (1600-1649), king of England, Scotland, and Ireland. During England’s Second Civil War in 1649, he was convicted of high treason and beheaded.

QUEEN ELIZABETH DIES

King James VI had already ruled over Scotland for 37 years when his mother’s cousin, Queen Elizabeth I, died in March, 1603. He then inherited the thrones of England and Ireland and was crowned the new king, thus uniting Scotland with the other two powers.

In January, 1604, England’s new king began to make extensive plans to produce a new “Authorized Version” of the English Bible. In the century leading up to 1604, there had been three major English Bibles produced—the *Great Bible*, the *Geneva Bible* and the *Bishops’ Bible*. James decided

that all three of them should be replaced with one new and greatly improved edition.

The *Great Bible* made its appearance in 1539 and was England's first "Authorized Version." Although it had been prepared by Myles Coverdale, he had used the Latin Vulgate in his translation of the Old Testament rather than using the original Hebrew text. This was believed by most scholars to be a serious flaw which rendered the edition deficient.

The *Geneva Bible*, which appeared in 1560 had not been approved as an "Authorized Version," but it was very popular and had been widely accepted by scholars and writers. It contained extensive marginal notes that had been written by John Calvin, John Knox, Myles Coverdale, and others. Some found the notations of these reformers offensive because they did not accept Calvin's interpretations, and believed that the comments were biased. King James despised them, and considered the notes on key political texts to be seditious, and a threat to his royal authority. He believed that it was time to replace the *Geneva Bible* with a new version of the English Bible done under his personal supervision.

The *Bishops' Bible* was the second official "Authorized Version." It was first published in 1568, but substantially revised in 1572. The translators of the King James project were instructed to use the latest edition of the *Bishops' Bible* which was published in 1602 as their basis, although several other translations were taken into account. After it was published in 1611, the *Authorized King James Bible* soon took the *Bishops' Bible's* place as the de facto standard of the Church of England.

A DARK AGE

When completed, the *King James Bible* was to be the third official “Authorized Version” in the English language. Its preparation would take into account the dramatic cultural changes that had taken place since the early medieval period in England. During that time, there had been major obstacles that prevented any consideration of translating or producing a Bible written in the English language.

The main obstacle during that time was the fact that English was not readily accepted as a language. French was used as the official language of the English King, the Royal Court, the Legal System, and the Church until the end of the 14th century. Anglo-Norman was also used in England until its decline, and English was accepted with “The Provisions of Oxford” in 1258. This was the first English government document published in the English language since the Norman Conquest in 1066. In 1362, Edward III became the first king to address Parliament in English. By the end of that century, the royal court had switched to English, and Anglo-Norman remained in use in limited circles for a short while longer, but it had ceased to be a living language.

Latin and French continued to be the dominant and exclusive languages used in official documents until the beginning of the 18th century. The English church was governed by the Pope from Rome and all church services were conducted in Latin. Latin was not a spoken language, and most people, therefore, were not able to understand the Latin church services. The Catholic Church acted as the

mediator between God and the people, with the priests interpreting the Bible on behalf of their congregations. The church strictly forbade the translating of the Scriptures into the common tongue, and any attempt to translate the Bible into English was punishable by death.

RENAISSANCE AWAKENING

The Renaissance period constituted a major transition from medieval culture to that of the early modern age. The movement began in Italy in the 14th century and gradually spread its influence to the northern areas of Europe. It was a time of rebirth and a renewed interest in the study of the ancient classical cultures, including the study of classical languages, especially those of Greece and Rome. There was an increasing interest in returning to the study of the Holy Scriptures and the restoration of early Christian teachings. Attention began to focus on Old Testament Hebrew and New Testament Greek, which were the languages used in the Bible. Renaissance scholars turned to the study of ancient manuscripts that had long been neglected or forgotten.

An important factor during the Renaissance was cultural and educational reform, which was engaged in by scholars, writers, and civic leaders. This was accomplished through the study of the humanities, which include grammar, rhetoric, history, poetry, and moral philosophy. Those who studied these disciplines were called humanists. Their aim was to create an improved society for those who were able to speak and write with eloquence and clarity.

Some humanists were avid collectors of antique manuscripts, while others worked for the organized church and were in Holy Orders. Many were lawyers or chancellors who would have the advantage of access to book copying facilities.

One of the most influential humanists who lived during the Renaissance period was Desiderius Erasmus (1466-1536), who became known as the “prince of the humanists.” Erasmus was a classical scholar and wrote in pure Latin style. Using humanist techniques and his broad scholarship, he prepared new Latin and Greek editions of the New Testament. These were based on four Greek manuscripts that were available to him. With the help of the printing press, he published the first printed Greek text of the New Testament in 1516. The ability to study the Bible in its original languages encouraged a more accurate comparison of the church of his time with that of the Early Church of the New Testament. There arose a growing realization that some of the teachings and methods of the organized church were not supported by scripture.

THE GREAT REVOLT

Renaissance scholars all over Europe were able to share many of the same interests including a return to the study of the Bible in its original languages. This renewed interest—in the study of the Scriptures and the Hebrew and Greek languages of the Bible—was a powerful factor that contributed to the Protestant Reformation. Biblical humanists also pointed out the discrepancies in the organized church of their day and began calling for internal reform.

The Protestant Reformation officially began on October 31, 1517 when Martin Luther (1483-1546) nailed his famous “Ninety-five Theses on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences” to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Saxony. Luther’s theses criticized Pope Leo X, the Catholic Church, its doctrinal policies concerning purgatory, and its clerical abuses, especially the sale of indulgences.

The religious revolt that soon erupted was one of the greatest revolutions in the history of the world. The stormy, often brutal conflict separated the Christians of Western Europe into two separate groups, Catholic and Protestant, and established Protestantism as a major branch of the Christian world.

So far-reaching were the results of the separation, that the Reformation has been called a turning point in history because it ushered in the Modern Age. Once the people’s religious unity had been destroyed, they began to think and study the Scriptures for themselves. However, from the diversity of the various interests involved, new political, social, and economic problems arose.

JOHN WYCLIFFE

Many courageous Biblical scholars have contributed to the preparation of the English Bible throughout the centuries, but John Wycliffe (c. 1328-1384) will be remembered as the man who produced the first complete copy of the English Bible in the 1380’s. Wycliffe was an Oxford University professor, renowned scholar and theologian. He used the only source text that was available to him at that time, the Latin Vulgate. His handwritten

Bible predated by about 70 years the invention of moveable type and the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in the 1450's.

Copying manuscripts by hand was a tedious and time-consuming task, but the printing press would revolutionize the way Bibles were made in the future. The very first book ever to be printed on Gutenberg's printing press was the Latin Bible which was published in Mainz, Germany, in 1457. This marvelous invention would prove to be essential to the success of the Protestant Reformation.

Wycliffe was well-known throughout Europe for his opposition to the teachings of the organized church, which he believed were contrary to the Word of God. As a precursor to the Protestant Reformation, he became known as "The Morning Star of the Reformation." He founded the "Lollard" movement, and, with the help of his followers and his assistant Purvey, together with many other faithful scribes, produced many copies of the Scriptures in English. His first Bible appeared during the period of 1382-1384. Updated versions were done by Purvey and others in 1388 and 1395. Wycliffe believed that all Christian people should have access to the Scriptures in their own language.

WILLIAM TYNDALE

William Tyndale (1492-1536) was an English scholar and translator who was the first to translate the original Hebrew and Greek into an English Bible. As a gifted linguist, he became fluent in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, German, and Italian in addition to his native English.

In 1522, he acquired a copy of Martin Luther's New Testament, which was printed in German. He was inspired to translate it into English because of his belief that ordinary people should be able to read the Bible for themselves. He went to Cuthbert Tunstall, who was the Bishop of London, to discuss his intentions with him. However, Tunstall refused Tyndale permission to make Luther's New Testament available to the English-speaking people. Tyndale was forced to move to Hamburg, Germany, where he completed his translation in 1524.

After Tunstall's rejection, Tyndale wrote, "Church authorities banned translations of the Bible in order to keep the world still in darkness, to the intent they might sit in the consciences of the people through vain superstition and false doctrine, and to exalt their own honor even above God himself."

His translation of Luther's Bible was strictly illegal, and all of Tyndale's other translation work was banned by Royal Proclamation in 1530. He was not permitted to publish a complete Bible in English. He had finished the entire New Testament; but only about half of the Old Testament, which included a revised version of Genesis, the Pentateuch and Jonah, was published during his own lifetime. Tyndale was the first to translate the Scriptures from the original Greek into English. In 1535, he was arrested and jailed in the castle of Vilvoorde near Brussels for over a year. In 1536, he was tried and executed for heresy, his offense being that he had translated the Holy Scriptures from their original Greek into English, and for being the first man to do so. The Tyndale New Testament

would go on to influence the *Geneva Bible*, and later the *King James Version* of 1611, which contains about 84% of his work.

THE FIRST AUTHORIZED VERSION

The first royally approved printed edition in the English language was called the *Great Bible*. It was commissioned by the Church of England during the reign of King Henry VIII and completed in 1539. Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, hired Myles Coverdale at the king's bequest to publish the new Bible. It included much from Tyndale's work, who was martyred before his Bible could be completed. However, Coverdale translated the unfinished portions of the Old Testament from the Latin Vulgate and German translations rather than from the original Hebrew text.

The *Great Bible* was the first to be authorized for public use, and it was distributed to every church in England. It was chained to the pulpit to prevent its removal from the church, and a reader was provided so that the illiterate could hear the Word of God in their own English language.

It was called the *Great Bible* because of its large size, which was a large pulpit folio which measured more than 14 inches tall. It is also known by several other names. These included the "Cromwell Bible," since Thomas Cromwell directed its publication. It was known as the "Whitchurch Bible," after its first English printer. It was called the "Chained Bible," because it was chained to the pulpit, and it has also been termed less accurately, the "Cranmer Bible," since Thomas Cranmer's preface appeared in the second edition. Seven editions of

this version were printed between the years 1539 and 1541.

THE GENEVA BIBLE

Mary Tudor (1516-1558) was the only child born to Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon who survived infancy. She became Queen Mary I of England and Ireland in 1553. She soon induced the English Parliament to reestablish Papal authority in England. This met with much resistance from Protestant reformers, and bitter persecution followed. The era is known as the “Marian Exile,” during which time great numbers of English scholars were driven to the Continent. A number of English Protestant divines also settled in Geneva, Switzerland, including Miles Coverdale, John Foxe and Anthony Gilby.

Geneva was then ruled as a republic in which John Calvin and Theodore Beza provided the main theological leadership. One of the scholars was William Whittingham, who supervised the translation of the *Geneva Bible* in collaboration with Myles Coverdale and others. He was directly responsible for the New Testament, which was published in 1557, while Gilby oversaw the Old Testament. The first edition of the *Geneva Bible*, with a further revision of the New Testament, appeared in 1560. The New Testament was printed in England in 1575, and the complete Bible in 1576. There were over 150 editions issued, the last one in 1644. It had the distinction of being the first Bible printed in Scotland in 1579, when a law was passed requiring every household of sufficient means to purchase a copy.

The *Geneva Bible* was the most widely read and influential English Bible before the *King James Bible* became available. It was a product of superior translation by the best Protestant scholars of its day, and it became the Bible of choice for many of the greatest writers, thinkers, and historical figures.

THE SECOND AUTHORIZED EDITION

The second royally commissioned version, known as the *Bishops' Bible*, was produced in 1568, under the authority of the established Church of England. The bishops believed that the *Great Bible* was severely deficient and needed to be revised because the Latin Vulgate had been used in translating most of the Old Testament, instead of the original Hebrew. It contained notes that were decidedly Calvinistic in tone, and an attempt to replace it with a new translation was authorized by the Anglican bishops. Therefore, this revision came to be known as the *Bishops' Bible*.

The first edition was exceptionally large and included 124 full-page illustrations. It was substantially revised in 1572, and was prescribed as a base text for the "Authorized Version," which would appear in 1611, and which would become the standard for the Church of England. Along with the *Great Bible*, the *Bishops' Bible* was to be read in church. The text of the revised 1572 edition carefully excluded the offending Calvinistic notes and cross references. The wisdom of the common people is evident from the fact that the *Bishops' Bible* went through more than fifty revisions, while the *Geneva Bible* was reprinted intact more than 150 times.

THE THIRD AUTHORIZED BIBLE

In January, 1604, King James summoned England's bishops, clergymen, and professors to the Hampton Court Conference. Along with these distinguished men were four Puritan leaders who were there to discuss ecclesiastical grievances and to settle the issue of a new translation of the Bible. The proposal for the new translation was submitted by Puritan president John Reynolds, of Corpus Christi College. Although the proposal did not meet with unanimous acceptance, it did meet with the king's approval.

James then brought together some of the best-known and most qualified Biblical scholars and linguists in Europe to work on the project. Although fifty-four men were nominated, forty-seven are known to have taken part in the actual work of translation. The translators were organized into six groups, and met respectively at Westminster, Cambridge, and Oxford. Ten translators at Westminster were assigned to work on Genesis through II Kings, while seven others were given Romans through Jude. At Cambridge, eight worked on I Chronicles through Ecclesiastes, and seven were responsible for the Apocrypha. The Oxford group employed seven to translate Isaiah through Malachi, and eight others worked on the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation. Four years were spent on the preliminary translation by the six groups.

The translators used many sources from which to draw information, including various translators' notes and commentaries. Also, the Greek editions of Erasmus, Stephanus, and Beza were available, as were the Complutensian and Antwerp Polyglots,

and the Latin translations of Pagninus, Termellius and Beza. King James directed that they use the second edition of the *Rabbinic Bible*, prepared by Jacob ben Chayim in 1525, and published by Daniel Bromberg in Vienna. Beza's Greek New Testament of 1565 was to be the underlying text for the New Testament. The 1611 King James translation became known as the "Textus Receptus" or the Received Text. James also laid out detailed instructions for the translation work.

When the translation work of each of the six groups ended after seven years, they met at Stationers' Hall in London for review and revision of the entire work. Two men each from the Westminster, Cambridge, and Oxford companies made the final revision. It was then completed by Myles Smith and Thomas Bilson, with a preface supplied by Smith.

The original *King James Bible* contained two prefaces, the first being a short "Dedication to King James," which is still included in most editions. The second entitled, "The Translators to the Reader" contained eleven pages explaining the reasons for a new version, and the translators intention to prepare the best Bible possible for the English people. The second preface is rarely found in modern editions.

The Apocrypha was included in the first edition of the *King James Bible*, being placed between the Old and New Testaments. It first appeared in Luther's Bible in 1534, who cited St. Jerome as an authority, and who applied the term to all quasi-scriptural books that lay outside the canon of the Bible.

When the “Authorized Version” first appeared, it included many marginal notes which were intended to explain the Hebrew or Greek words. In the Old Testament, there were about 6,500 notes that in some instances provided a more literal meaning of the Hebrew text. The New Testament had nearly 800 notes. On a few occasions they indicated textual variants.

The “Authorized Version” has gone through several editions and revisions. Two notable editions, both printed at Cambridge, appeared in 1629 and 1638. Both were supervised by John Bois and Samuel Ward, two of the original translators. Two other important editions appeared in 1762, by Thomas Paris, and 1769, by Benjamin Blayney.

The latest revision was published in 1983 as the *New King James Version*, replacing archaic terms with their modern counterparts, and reflecting the more extensive manuscript evidence.

THE BIBLE: GOD’S WORD

During the 400 years since the “Authorized Version” was published, it soon replaced all previous translations. Although many new and superior versions have been published since that time, the familiar *King James Bible* remains the preferred Bible of English-speaking people. For the labors of the many scholars who prepared this edition of God’s Word, we truly give thanks.

The precious Word of God has been a source of truth and a guiding light for the consecrated child of God during the difficult times of this present Gospel Age. Led by the Holy Spirit of God, the psalmist wrote, “Thy word is a lamp unto my feet,

and a light unto my path.”—Ps. 119:105

“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.”—II Tim. 3:16,17 ■