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King James Bible 1611–2011

In March 1603 old Queen Elizabeth died in the palace at Richmond on the Thames. Immediately Sir Robert Carey leapt into action. Already he had a string of horses posted all the way to Scotland and he rode night and day to Edinburgh. Once he fell heavily from the saddle and was kicked in the face by his horse, so he was covered with mud and blood when he arrived at Holyrood Palace. Ushered into the Royal bedchamber the dishevelled Carey knelt and greeted King James VI of Scotland with the news that he was now King of England also.

The king was overjoyed. The long years of waiting were at last ended. The monarch of impoverished, cantankerous, wind-swept, Presbyterian Scotland would now prepare to travel south in style to preside over the prosperous farmland and profitable trading ports and magnificent cathedrals of wealthy England.

The brutal and unkind Calvinist tutors who educated James did their work well. He was cultured and well-read. He wrote poetry and enjoyed music. He spoke Ancient Greek and Latin and was fluent in French. He translated the Psalms into English. He was a scholar; and intellectual and a theologian.

In 1603 England was ready for new beginnings. The English wanted a peaceful transfer of power, something never guaranteed in those days when might was right. The English wanted peace with their neighbours and an end to the expensive wars with Spain that had plagued Elizabeth's reign. The English wanted peace within the Church of England where high church and puritan factions clashed continually. They had heard good reports about James, especially the fact that on his twenty-first birthday he had ordered the noblemen of Scotland, those proud aristocrats so eager to draw swords in anger, to vow to live in peace with one another. As a token of this James persuaded them to walk through the streets of Edinburgh hand in hand.

So the new monarch brought in a new era of hope. James took a month to travel from Scotland's windy, rain-drenched capital to the sunlit city on the Thames. On the way

south he was joined by nobility, gentlemen and chancers. It was a travelling pageant, the like of which no one had ever seen. James was greeted by cheering crowds in each city, entertained in the great mansions of the aristocracy and flattered by all and sundry as he dispenses earldoms and knighthoods and money. A new Jacobean age was dawning and it began full of hope.

From the beginning of his reign in England the shrewd James saw that he had to do something about the English Church. There was a general feeling that the English Reformation was not complete. If it were, then why were there so many disputes in the church between High Church ritualists and Puritan Calvinists? James' solution to all this strife was a great conference of leading churchmen. In calling the conference James claimed to face both ways. *"We hold that bishops are agreeable to God's word and near to the condition of the primitive church,"* he said *"But we hold that some things used in this church are scandalous."*

He saw himself as uniquely qualified to find a solution to the problem by virtue of the Divine Right of Kings. He stated with confidence, *"Our royal majesty, having some sparkles of the Divinity, will settle the conflict."* But he issued a warning to anyone who might expect to use the conference to score points for one side or the other. *"We will never countenance tumult, sedition and violence"* he said, *"nor will we tolerate open invectives and indecent speeches."*

The banks of the Thames were encrusted with ice as the distinguished churchmen arrived at the palace of Hampton Court early on the morning of 11 January, 1604. Huge fires were blazing in the fireplaces to warm the bodies, if not the hearts of the anxious ecclesiastics. The Lord Bishops of London, Durham, Winchester and Worcester, St David's, Chichester, Carlyle and Peterborough were robed in the Episcopal finery which marked out their enthusiasm for ritual to the fury of the Puritans who deplored such frippery. No clergy of Presbyterian convictions were summoned to this hand-picked conference. James had had enough of Presbyterianism back in Scotland. Only four Puritans had been invited and they were given a bench separate from the bishops as if to denote their inferior status. Their modest dress contrasted with the bishops' ornate attire. These were moderate Puritans, Calvinist in

theology but very much part of the English establishment. Their leader was John Reynolds, Master of Corpus Christi College in Oxford.

Just before eleven o'clock the churchmen were ushered into the Presence Chamber. James began the conference by ordering the four Puritans to leave the room, leaving only the bishops and deans. He then began a theological argument in which he did most of the talking. To upset the bishops the King pretended to be a Puritan himself and goaded them with Puritan arguments, which he presented in blunt, crude and vulgar language. James knew well that coarse speech in a monarch who holds all the cards can be most disconcerting for those who hear it.

On the second day of the conference James welcomed the four Puritans. They knelt before him in some alarm. Here was a ruler as learned in theology as they were and with the power to destroy their careers. The interview lasted five hours with James again doing most of the talking. Again he was rude, crude and earthy in speech. He challenged them to produce a single proof from scripture which outlawed bishops, confirmation, the sign of the cross at baptism, wearing of the surplice, and kneeling to receive communion. On the issue of kneeling the king's argument was pressed home by a rhetorical question. "*Do ye pretend,*" he asked mischievously, "*Do ye pretend that God will have us worship him like elephants, as if we had no joints in our knees?*"

Then John Reynolds, the leader of the Puritans, made a big mistake. On the issue of church government he asked if a bishop should be the sole ruler of his diocese or if he should consult a committee of other ministers. But Reynolds used the wrong word; he used the one word which was bound to drive the king into a fury. He used the word "Presbytery". James, recalling his upbringing under harsh Presbyterian tutors and the argumentative mood of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, flew into a rage. "*A Presbytery!*" he roared. "*A PRESBYTERY*" *If you aim at a Scots Presbytery, it agreeth as well with monarchy as God and the devil!*" Fixing Reynolds with those shifty eyes now filled with fire he roared his judgement. "*NO BISHOP, NO KING!*"

At this point the battered and bruised Reynolds somehow found the courage to venture a suggestion. "*May your majesty be pleased,*" he asked. "*May your Majesty be pleased that the Bible be new translated?*"

The quick-witted king saw how he could gain an advantage in such a move. How he hated the popular Geneva Bible which used the word “tyrant” more than 400 times. He responded to Reynold’s request with enthusiasm.

*“Let special care be taken over one uniform translation,” he said. “Let it be done by the best learned men of both universities, after them to be reviewed by the bishops and the chief learned men of the church. From them let it be presented to the Privy Council, and lastly to be ratified by our Royal authority. Then let this new Bible be read in the whole church **and no other translation.**”*

So more by accident than design out of this conference clouded by the resentments of the clergy and spiced by the King’s vulgarity emerged a translation of the Bible that would be a thing of beauty and harmony and would cause the King’s name to be held in honour long after all his many faults had been consigned to past history.

It was a good time in which to translate the Bible anew. The Church of England was blessed by men learned in the ancient languages and able in theology. The land of England was blessed by a reverence for the spoken word. Every citizen heard two or three hour-long sermons every Sunday so people were used to listening for the Word of God. Moreover poetical expression in English was at its height. Poetry was greatly valued by the general public and in the theatre an accomplished character-actor called Will Shakespeare was at the height of his powers as a playwright.

There were to be six committees of translators, meeting at Oxford, Cambridge and Westminster. Three would work on the Old Testament, two the New Testament and one on the Apocrypha. There would be fifty-four translators in all. And what would emerge would be something which can only be strange in our understanding, a work of art created by a committee! Equally hard for us to understand is that when these learned scholars discussed how best to translate Greek and Hebrew into English, the language they used was Latin, the tongue of the learned and educated! Earlier translations were to be consulted and here the work of the sixteenth century Reformer, William Tyndale at last came into prominence. It is calculated that around ninety per cent of the King James Bible stems from Tyndale’s work.

The new Bible can claim ecumenical credentials. Despite a reference in the Preface to so-called “Popish persons” who wish to keep the people “in ignorance and darkness”, the translators did not hesitate to make use of the Roman Catholic Douai English translation and also the scholarly work of the Jesuits.

At this point St Patrick’s Cathedral in Dublin enters the story. Or to be more precise, part of the unfinished translation crossed the Irish Sea to this great church. James Ussher, then the Chancellor of St Patrick’s, had asked for part of the work in progress to be sent to him for the use of Dr William Daniel, then the Treasurer of this Cathedral, who was working on a translation of the Bible into Irish and presumably wished to consult the new English version.

The climax of the translator’s work was the final revision which took place in Stationers Hall in London. There over the course of many months in 1610 the translators’ work was read aloud verse by verse. If no objections or alternatives were voiced, the reading proceeded, but if there were interruptions, then serious discussion and debate ensued. They read it aloud because this Bible was meant to be *heard*. It was clear to all that if a sentence sounded right it was right.

The new Bible was at last completed and published in 1611. On nearly every page there is majesty, clarity, directness, beauty and deep musicality of language.

The new translation of the Bible was the one lasting source of light to shine out of the reign of the brilliant but unpleasant King James. It was a product of the great dawn of hope that marked the beginning of his time on the throne. For one brief moment in James’ reign the divine light really did shine brilliantly. God’s light shone – and still shines – from the Bible which bears his name.

The Bible that bears the name of that flawed monarch has gone around the world and has entered the consciousness and the hearts of people wherever the English language is spoken. Just think of the phrases that trip off the tongue in everyday speech which owe their origin to James’ great enterprise.

- Am I my brother's keeper?
- I am escaped with the skin of my teeth.
- They have sown the wind, and they shall reap the whirlwind.
- Perfect love casteth out fear.

So Many of the great speeches that have moved the hearts of men and women quote or echo the King James Bible. Listen to President Barack Obama's inauguration address quoting First Corinthians:

"We remain a young nation. But in the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things. The time has come to reaffirm our enduring spirit; to choose our better history; to carry forward that precious gift, that noble idea passed on from generation to generation: the God-given promise that all are equal, all are free, and all deserve a chance to pursue their full measure of happiness."

The sonorous phrases of the King James Bible carry an air of irreproachable authority which is the essence of sacred ritual. It never sounds petty or trivial. It gives out a shared confidence and authority that is one of the greatest monuments to the suppression of the ego. The translators of this Bible knew well that ordinariness is not the Bible's subject. The translators of this Bible knew well that the Word of God is a thing of beauty and should sound beautiful. The translators of this Bible knew well that the World of God has authority and should sound authoritative. The translators of this Bible knew well that Scripture never flatters the human ego, but rather worships the Lord in the beauty of holiness. Thanks be to God. Amen.