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All They That Labored

Scholars piece together the monumental job of creating the King James Bible—and reinterpret its legacy

By Jennifer Howard

Generations of Protestant Christians have heard God speaking through the language of the King James Bible. Four hundred years after it was first published, in 1611, it still has an unrivalled reputation as a shaper of English prose, its phrases a lasting contribution to how we use the language. It's given us such expressions as "out of the mouth of babes," "suffer fools gladly," "seek, and ye shall find," and "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Yet the 50 or so learned men who labored in teams to create the King James Bible did not set out to create a literary masterpiece. They wanted to establish as direct a connection as they could to the original languages of the Old and New Testaments. And it's not a miracle that this monumental exercise in translation-by-committee turned out as well as it did. By the time they set to work, in 1604, the King James translators had a hundred years of pioneering work on which to draw. They leaned heavily on texts and translations put together by theologians and linguists such as Erasmus and William Tyndale.

In recent decades, scholarship on the making of the King James Bible has made it plain just how much cumulative human labor and debate went into its creation. "The King James Bible didn't drop from the sky in 1611," says Helen Moore, a fellow and tutor in English at Corpus Christi College at the University of Oxford. Moore led the curatorial committee that put together "Manifold Greatness," an anniversary exhibit at Oxford's Bodleian Library devoted to the making of the King James Bible. The most famous Bible in English, she says, was "made by many different people in many different places using many different people's words and many reference texts."

The King James Bible got its immediate start at a gathering called by Britain's King James I in January 1604. The Hampton Court Conference brought together high-ranking clergymen and courtiers to discuss the calls for religious reform made in the Millenary Petition, which the Puritans had submitted to the new monarch the previous year. Present at the conference was John Rainolds, a Puritan and the president of Corpus Christi College at the University of Oxford. Rainolds complained,

among other things, that English translations of the Bible from the reigns of Henry VIII and Edward VI were "corrupt and not answerable to the truth." (For instance, he pointed out, a line from Psalm 105 should read "They were not disobedient" rather than "They were not obedient.") James agreed. The following year, six companies, or teams of translators—two based at Oxford, two at Cambridge, and two at Westminster—undertook to create a new, more acceptable version.

The names of the translators won't be familiar to most contemporary readers. But they were the academic and religious stars of their day, chosen for their knowledge of Scripture and of Greek and Hebrew and other languages. Many were fellows at Oxford and Cambridge; many were working clergymen.

"They were essentially the most learned people in England at the time," says Hannibal Hamlin, an associate professor of English at Ohio State University. Hamlin co-curated the American version of the "Manifold Greatness" exhibit, which runs through January 15, 2012, at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C.

The translators were given a set of rules to follow as they worked. The rules organized them into six companies, each responsible for a particular section or sections of the Old and New Testaments. The companies were to circulate their drafts among the others. After all the teams completed their work, a smaller group drawn from all three met to prepare an agreed-upon final version.

Rainolds, the prime mover of the idea, served on the First Oxford Company, which was charged with translating the Old Testament prophets. Officially headed by John Harding, the president of Magdalen College, that company met in Rainolds's lodgings. Thomas Ravis, the dean of Christ Church, led the Second Oxford Company, responsible for preparing the four Gospels of the New Testament, the Acts of the Apostles, and the book of Revelation. The First Cambridge Company, under Edward Lively, worked on the Old Testament from 1 Chronicles to Ecclesiastes; the Second Cambridge Company, led by John Duport, took on the Apocrypha. The First Westminster Company, directed by Lancelot Andrewes, handled the Old Testament from Genesis to 2 Kings, while colleagues on the Second Westminster Company, led by William Barlow, the dean of Chester, were assigned the New Testament epistles.

"We know quite a bit about how things worked," Hamlin says. "The actual process was probably exceptionally dull. They're basically slogging through, year after year, word by word, thinking about the most minute detail and trying to get it as perfect as possible."

Moore imagines the process as "very discursive, very communal, and very multiple," meaning that the translators worked through multiple drafts and from multiple sources. "One of the things that made the translation possible at all was the publication, in 1519, of Erasmus's Greek New Testament," Moore says. "Once there was a standard text, translation could really take off." Erasmus's text had many idiosyncrasies and flaws but it gave other scholars something substantial to work with.

Every member of the translation companies was given a loose-leaf copy of the Bishops' Bible, an English translation first published in 1568, to use as a base text. David Norton, a professor of English at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand, is author of *The King James Bible: A Short History From Tyndale to Today* (Cambridge U. Press, 2011), probably the most detailed account of how the translators did their job. In it, he makes the case for the Bishops' Bible as "of very particular importance as a draft of the King James Bible."

The translators were also intimately familiar with a translation called the Great Bible of 1539 and with the Geneva Bible (1560), compiled by Protestant exiles in Europe. Small and printed in roman type, the Geneva Bible was much more of a pocket edition than the Great Bible. Moore describes the Geneva Bible as "the reading Bible of the Elizabethan public," the Bible that Shakespeare used.

Running through those Bibles is the work of William Tyndale, an English theologian born about 1494, who was the first to work from the original languages. Before England finally broke with the Roman Catholic Church, it was heresy to translate the Bible into English. Tyndale dared to do it, often working more or less on the run during self-exile in Europe. In 1536, he was captured and executed, in part because of that work. Miles Coverdale, his assistant, published some of Tyndale's translations posthumously. Within four years of his death, sanctioned English translations began to appear. Later English Bibles, including the King James, preserve large portions of Tyndale's language. It's only in recent decades, thanks to the work of scholars such as the biographer David Daniell, that Tyndale's contribution has been more fully appreciated.

"The way I see it is that it's reasonable to think of Tyndale as the first draft of the King James," Norton says. He points specifically to Tyndale's work on the New Testament and the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. "That's foundational for all that comes later. It's also particularly good work."

For instance, Tyndale threw a distinctive liveliness into his translations. Norton cites an example from Genesis in which the serpent reassures Eve that there's no danger in taking a bite of the forbidden fruit. "Tush! Ye shall not die," the tempter tells them. Norton says, "It gives you a sense of

the kind of talent for language he had, and his very strong sensitivity to what's being said in the original languages."

The King James translators came up with many of their own phrasings, of course, and sometimes improved upon Tyndale's. As an example, Norton cites a passage from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 6:28-9. The King James version has "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they toil not, neither do they spin. And yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these." Compare that to Tyndale's rendering of those lines: "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They labour not, neither spin. And yet for all that I say unto you that even Solomon in all his royalty was not arrayed like unto one of these."

Norton says, "Quite a lot could be made of this famous saying, including the improvement of rhythm—'neither do they spin,' etc.—and the removal of wordiness. Tyndale's 'for all that' has no equivalent in the Greek."

By the time the King James translators set about their work, humanism and Protestantism had encouraged several generations to acquire the language skills necessary to undertake fresh translations of Scripture. "One of the most significant things that was possible by 1611 was the understanding of Rabbinic commentaries," Moore says. "They were able to read not just the first layer of Hebrew but the commentaries as well. But of course they leaned heavily on English translations as well."

Based in centers of learning, the King James translators could consult some of the great libraries of the time. According to Moore, Merton College, where one of the Oxford companies met, holds in its archives a list of books checked out by the translators and carried off to their rooms.

The translators also had their own books. Steven Galbraith, now curator of the Cary Graphic Arts Collection at the Rochester Institute of Technology, co-curated the Folger version of "Manifold Greatness." According to Galbraith, Rainolds and many of his colleagues would have owned polyglot Bibles, which carry side-by-side columns of Scripture in different languages. "It allows you to see how each passage was translated," the curator explains. "These were all clergymen, really, and they would have had these tools at their disposal."

Norton says it's essential to appreciate how steeped the translators were in languages and literature. "What's worth keeping in mind is just how much they lived with all the materials they were working with," he says. "It's an intensity of involvement that very few modern scholars would ever match."

For instance, John Bois, of the First Oxford Company, knew his Hebrew alphabet by the time he was 5 years old, according to Norton, and he spent almost every day of the rest of his life working with ancient languages and texts.

We have Bois to thank for one of the three primary documents—Moore calls them "the big three"—that reveal something of how the translators worked. (The "Manifold Greatness" exhibit marks the first time all three have all been displayed together.) A member of the final editing committee, Bois kept notes of some of its proceedings. Some time in the 17th century, Moore says, an antiquarian made copies of those notes. The originals later disappeared, but the American scholar Ward Allen rediscovered a copy in the library of Oxford's Corpus Christi College in the 1950s. Allen's discovery helped jump-start scholarship on the translators' process.

The second of the big three is a manuscript copy of a partial King James draft that survives. Known as the Lambeth Manuscript, it belongs to the Lambeth Palace Library, the library of the Archbishop of Canterbury.

The Lambeth Manuscript contains a translation of the New Testament epistles, with the text written out in a column on the left-hand side of the page. The column on the right has been left blank, presumably to leave room for people to comment if they wanted to as the draft circulated among the companies.

The manuscript represents an interim translation, Moore says; it does not match the final language in the 1611 edition. "When I sat in the Lambeth Palace Library and opened it, my heart actually turned over," Moore says, because the manuscript represents a glimpse of the stages the translators worked through on their way to a final version.

But the mother lode of evidence—and one not yet fully mined—is a copy of the Bishops' Bible that carries strike-throughs and changes recording the translators' decisions. The notations in the margins were most likely made by the scribes they employed, Moore says. The annotated copy that survives belongs to the Bodleian; it is made up of leaves from different translators' copies, which were bound together at some point.

"The Bishops' Bible is enormously important because it both shows the translators at work and gives really valuable evidence about what the translators thought should be in the text," says Norton, who along with Ward Allen has probably studied the book more closely than any other scholar. People have known about the annotated copy "for a very long time," as far back as the first half of the 19th century, he says. For years scholars saw little of interest in it, though, until the late 1990s, when

Norton took a close look at the annotations in the Old Testament and recognized their value. He hopes that someone will sit down some day and work through the annotated Bible to transcribe all the Bible's annotations.

That will be difficult, according to Helen Moore. "David Norton and Ward Allen have done what work has been possible," she says, "but the Bodleian will not unbind it." That's a problem because some of the annotations in the margins got swallowed up by the binding.

"So our knowledge is very, very partial," Moore says. To transcribe all the annotations "would be a lifetime's work anyway."

As they worked with the many sources at their disposal, the King James companies were guided by a desire to recreate, in English, a sense of direct engagement with the languages of the Bible. For instance, the Tyndale model on which they relied "has to do with emulating the diction and the syntax of the Hebrew," according to Robert Alter, a professor of Hebrew and comparative literature at the University of California at Berkeley and a noted Biblical translator. "The diction is very simple, almost homespun, and yet it has a terrific dignity." The translators managed to preserve those qualities in much of their work.

They did it without some of the resources that modern scholars have. Four hundred years ago, the Dead Sea Scrolls hadn't been discovered, and much remained to be learned about the linguistic family of Near Eastern languages.

But the King James translators had other advantages. "These were men of serious literary culture, which I think is no longer possible. If you go to Harvard or Johns Hopkins and do a Ph.D. in Biblical studies, the odds are strongly against you reading James Joyce," Alter says. "Nowadays people who are specialists in the field don't have the feel for literary language."

Alter describes the King James Bible as a masterpiece, but a flawed one. "It is not as seamlessly eloquent as everybody remembers it is," he says. "There are beautiful lines of poetry, and then lines which are clunky, lines which run on to a multiplicity of words and symbols, which is not only unlike the original but pretty much lacking in poetic rhythm. I don't think they paid much attention to the sound."

In a lecture, Alter elaborates on that assessment. The "grandeur of the 1611 version is not infrequently interrupted by stylistic lapses, awkwardness, and patches of gratuitous wordiness," he says, especially in stretches of poetry. In Job 3:11, for instance, Job laments that he didn't die at birth. "The English

rendering of the first half of the line could scarcely be surpassed: 'Why died I not from the womb?'" Alter says. "But in the second half of the line, the translation becomes unhinged: 'Why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?'" Describing the line as arhythmic, Alter notes that it substitutes 15 English words for the Hebrew version's three.

Over all, though, Alter thinks that the King James Bible deserves the place it has held for so long. Unlike most technology, he says, literature "doesn't necessarily become obsolete. Nobody writes English now like Shakespeare or Milton, and yet the poetry they wrote still rings in our ears and is part of our inner lives. Warts and all, the King James is very much like that. It has this eloquence, it has this high, dignified simplicity following the Hebrew, so it speaks with a literary power that all these modern committee translations do not possess."

David Norton agrees that what we have come to admire as the King James version's literary power grows out of the direct connection to the original languages made by the translators, following Tyndale's lead. That's "quite different from our modern sense of what was achieved by the King James," he says.

In recent decades, the King James Bible has faced more competition from other translations and has lost some of its status as a result. Literary power aside, it enjoyed such a long reign in part because it was ubiquitous. Very few printers in England enjoyed the right to print Bibles, and that helped cement the King James's reputation. For centuries, "it was the book that was most present in English-speaking people's lives from birth to death," Norton says. "That's an incredible monopoly of consciousness. So it became enormously familiar to people."

As Norton says, "We learned to love it. And as we got used to it, as we learned to love it, we saw qualities we liked in it, we saw rhythms in it that could be admired from a literary point of view. And so the reputation of the King James as a literary achievement grew and grew."

The men responsible for the King James Bible would have been taken aback by that, Hannibal Hamlin says. "I think they'd be surprised to hear how much credit they get," he says. "They would have been perfectly well aware that they were not doing something new."

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