

## PREFACE

In this book we have attempted to portray a complex topic for the non-expert: the history of the English Bible from John Wyclif to the King James Version (KJV). This study is a result of long-term, specialised research, including many years of reading the actual medieval and Renaissance Bibles. Yet, we have described this history in general terms that, we hope, are comprehensible to all.

The history of the English Bible is not widely known. This is a little surprising, given the devotion to the Bible in the English-speaking world. Virtually every speaker of German (and English, for that matter) knows the name Martin Luther and is aware that he translated the Bible. How many people know the name William Tyndale? Or even John Wyclif? Many people admire the King James Version, yet do so without realising exactly what it is or how it came to be. There is nothing particularly wrong with that manner of appreciation. The King James Version is admirable in its own right, without elucidation of any type. Nonetheless, there are many people who want to know the tumultuous political and literary history of how this masterpiece came to be. This book is for them.

English Bibles took a different path from other European vernacular Bibles. This is because, in England, unlike almost every other country, it was illegal to translate the word of God. The ban lasted some one hundred and twenty-seven years. Overcoming the political and ecclesiastical resistance to an English Bible was not an easy task. Lives were lost along the way – not only for producing English Bibles, but also for merely owning or reading them.

Another issue that burned incandescently on the English scene was partisanship in Bibles. The early Bibles originated in heretical movements that the government opposed. This tension cut in two directions. For one, the Bibles, especially the Tyndale versions, advocated theological (and therefore political) stances. For another, authorities cracked down hard on any attempt to produce an English version. Very few copies of Tyndale's Bibles printed before 1534 are extant. There are eighteen separate printings of the complete German Bible *before* Luther, the first one dating from 1466. Every one was perfectly legal and hundreds of copies of those pre-Lutheran Bibles have survived. No one attempted to print an English Bible until 1525. That first attempt was stopped in press and now only a single fragment of it survives.

When the Bible became legal in England, the government and the new Church of England encouraged neutral presentation of the text. Naturally, that is in essence an elusive goal. But one can still strive for it. Among the conscious attempts at neutral presentation are the Great Bible (1539, etc.) and the King James Version (1611, etc.). Some people even resented the Bishops' Bible because it did not offend Catholic sensibilities. Catholics

and Puritans could use the King James Version, even though the original preface was not entirely free of occasional anti-Catholic and anti-Puritan statements. Yet, partisanship marred several versions. The Douai-Rheims and Tyndale's versions certainly undermined themselves by their promotion of their own views, but the Geneva version, perhaps more than any other, cut off its own – very vigorous – life. If the Geneva version had eschewed partisan theological and political notes, it is highly likely that the King James Version would never have come into existence.

In addition to accounts of the theological and political contexts, this book attempts to give a history of the rhetorical development of the Bible. No other language, save perhaps German, can boast that its vernacular translation of the Bible is a literary masterpiece in its own right. We try to give the reader a sense of the development of the literary style of the English Bible by analysing the language as a translation, by comparing important passages in different versions and by viewing the whole as literature. Such close study of the text itself is warranted because the English Bible has had a profound effect on English language, literature, politics and ideas. It has left a lasting impress on the language that we speak today.

A unique feature of our presentation is the copious use of visual illustrations. We want to narrate the history in our prose account but we also want to tell the history in pictures. Indeed we hope that a reader who only looks at the pictures and reads the captions to them will have mastered the essential aspects of the history. Moreover, we consider the images crucial for our approach. We want the reader to experience this history as well as read it. Consequently, we also quote from the various versions at some length so that the reader can experience aspects of the early versions with little mediation from us.

Naturally, the King James Version is not *the* end of the story, although in some ways it is certainly *an* end. It had no serious competition until the end of the nineteenth century. Even though the KJV is the end of *our* story, we have added an appendix with a list of subsequent English Bibles and brief descriptions of them.

Many of the issues Bible versions face today were also major considerations in the Renaissance. We will not draw parallels but this book will make the reader aware of the basic decisions that have to be faced when preparing a translation of the Bible. The history of the English Bible is fraught with controversy. We have tried to present this complex history in as clear and unbiased a way as possible. The history of the English Bible continues, of course, but the consequences of decisions made during the pivotal period we cover in this book are still being felt today.

## AUTHORS TO THE READER

2004 marks the 400th anniversary of the decision, taken in January 1604 at the Hampton Court Conference, to produce a new Bible, namely, the King James Version. This occasion offers the ideal justification for reconsidering the prehistory of the KJV. The Hampton Court Conference was a momentous event in the history of the church and the history of the English language. Nonetheless, there is one strange thing about the decision – there was no pressing need for a new Bible. Several good ones as well as one distinguished Bible were widely available. However grand and significant the KJV is, it was built on the solid foundations of earlier accomplishments. The preface to the KJV, which was published in 1611, states ‘Truly, Good Christian Reader, we never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation’. These are not empty words.

We are grateful for the interest of several libraries in our project to study the English Bible and for their willingness to mount exhibitions that complement this study. Bridwell Library of Southern Methodist University, Princeton University Library and the John Rylands Library of the University of Manchester are among the very few institutions where readers can study this history with all the major versions from the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century at their fingertips. It also occurred to us that not everyone enjoys proximity to such distinguished collections. And yet, we want you, dear Reader, to experience the Bibles as physical objects. We have, therefore, provided numerous illustrations so that you can see for yourself the beauty and subtleties of the texts. We have identified the images with substantial explanations so that one could, in effect, follow the history of the English Bible using our study as a picture book. We have also added, here and there, information boxes to further aid the reader in filling in gaps. In a way, we have produced three complementary histories of the English Bible that you can follow simultaneously or separately through our chapters: the text, the illustrations and the information boxes.

David Price is a specialist in Renaissance Studies with a PhD from Yale University; he currently teaches at Southern Methodist University. After receiving doctorates from Dallas Theological Seminary and the University of Edinburgh, Charles Ryrie spent his career teaching Bible and Theology; the study of the history of the Bible has been a serious vocation for him for over four decades. Each author took primary responsibility for several chapters: David Price wrote Chapters 1 (Wyclif), 2 (Erasmus), 3 (Tyndale) and 7 (Douai-Rheims); Charles Ryrie is the author of Chapters 4 (Coverdale) and 6 (Bishops’ Bible) and both Appendices (‘Revising the King James Version’ and ‘The Post-King James Era’); they collaborated on Chapter 5 (Geneva) and Chapter 8 (King James Version). Working together and checking each other’s work has been a stimulating experience. We believe

that the process has produced a better book than either of us could have written alone. We would also like to acknowledge that Valerie Hotchkiss has helped us at every stage of writing this book. Stella Butler, Christopher de Hamel, Stephen Ferguson, Dennis Maust, Paul Needham, Peter Nockles, Ben Primer, William Simpson, Jon Speck and Eric White have helped us with the project in general, especially with plans to mount a book exhibition to commemorate the four-hundredth anniversary of the Hampton Court Conference. Megan McLemore assisted with the preparation of the final manuscript. To Adrian Brink of The Lutterworth Press we express our deep gratitude for seeing the book through press. We are also grateful for the support we received from the Highland Park United Methodist Church.

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The reader will notice that we refer to the same Bible of 1611 with two terms – the King James Version and the Authorised Version. The former is most familiar to Americans and also meaningful to British readers. American publishers do not ordinarily use 'Authorised Version' since this translation, despite its popularity, never had an official status in the United States. These questions of terminology, and related ones such as orthography and usage, are difficult in books that aim at reception on both sides of the Atlantic. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, the English and the Americans have everything in common, except language. We ask for the reader's patience with our negotiation of the two forms of English.

The history of the English Bible is a fascinating and compelling story. As you learn more about the foundations of our English Bible, we hope that the knowledge gleaned will enrich your appreciation of your Bible, regardless of which English version you use. Today, there are countless versions of the English Bible, but all are dependent on the translations described in this book. The plethora of English Bibles today has fulfilled the wishes of those who struggled, on every side, in the Reformation.

Our title – *Let It Go among Our People* – is a slight adaptation of a statement attributed to Henry VIII, allegedly uttered as he considered the merits of the Coverdale Bible (1535). The title deletes Henry's ambivalence and his qualification: 'if there be no heresy in it!' Although Henry may have had second thoughts, the Bible did go out among the people, and it had a profound effect on their faith, politics, literature, art and society. Our book describes the circumstances of the launch of the English Bible.