

# Jot & Tittle

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## **A Tribute to the King James Version of the Bible on its 400<sup>th</sup> Birthday**

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First published in 1611, the King James Version of the Bible has held a favored position in the hearts of many Christians through the centuries. Its rhythms and phrases still influence church rituals, Christian language, and worship songs. While modern translations have become more widely accepted and made the Bible easier to comprehend, the King James Version still speaks today.

### ***Some English Forerunners to the King James Version***

The King James Version wasn't the first English translation of the Bible. It was, in fact, an outgrowth of several previous English translations. First among the English translations of the Bible was the work of John Wycliffe (c. 1320-1384) and his followers. Wycliffe was a scholar who believed that the Bible should be available to people in their native language. Wycliffe's English New Testament, translated from Latin, was completed in 1380, with the Old Testament completed in 1388.

Following Wycliffe came the work of William Tyndale (c. 1492-1536), a Greek and Hebrew scholar. Tyndale proposed producing an English translation from the original languages that was simple enough that even "a boy that driveth the plough" could eclipse the Bible knowledge of the religious leaders of the day.

Under severe persecution Tyndale completed his New Testament in 1526, the first printed English Bible. Tyndale died as a martyr and cried out at his death, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes!"<sup>1</sup>

After Tyndale's death his assistant, Miles Coverdale (1488-1569), produced the first complete printed Bible in 1535. Another assistant to Tyndale, John Rogers (c. 1500-1555) revised Tyndale's and Coverdale's work, added interpretive notes, and published his work under the name of Thomas Matthew—Matthew's Bible. A later revision of Tyndale's work by Coverdale, called the Great Bible because of its printed size, was published in 1539.

An even later revision of Tyndale's translation that included notes by various authors, most of whom lived in Geneva due to persecution in England, became known as the Geneva Bible. The New Testament was completed in 1557 and the complete Bible in 1560. Later the Bishop's Bible, a revision of the Great Bible produced by bishops in the Church of England, was published in 1568.

### ***The Birth of the King James Version***

Because of the religious and political tensions between the Church of England, the Roman Catholic Church, and the English protestant movement it was difficult to produce a standard English translation of the Bible. As a political move King James I authorized a translation of the Bible that would help eliminate earlier versions that seemed sectarian in nature. This new version was the work of six translation teams located at three universities, each team translating specific portions of the Bible.

The translators were formed into six companies meeting at Westminster, Cambridge and Oxford, with the work distributed among them as follows: (1) Westminster, Genesis-II Kings; (2) Cambridge, 1 Chronicles-Ecclesiastes; (3) Oxford, Isaiah-Malachi; (4) Cambridge, Apocrypha; (5) Oxford, Gospels, Acts, Apocalypse; (6) Westminster, Romans-Jude.<sup>2</sup>

The translators used the Bishop's Bible as their primary English base, but made changes based on other early translations as well as the Hebrew and Greek originals.

Rules drawn up for the companies prescribed that the Bishop's Bible should be followed 'as little altered as the truth of the original will permit', that the translations of Tyndale, Matthew, Coverdale, Whitchurch (that is, the Great Bible) and Geneva be used 'when they agree better with the text than the Bishops' Bible', 'the old ecclesiastical words to be kept, viz. the word Church not be translated Congregation', and '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.'<sup>3</sup>

Once the six translation teams completed their work, a common editorial board consisting of two translators from each team finalized the translation work. Thus was born the King James Version.

### ***The Publication and Acceptance of the King James Version***

"This great work was planned in 1604, and probably the first three years were spent in preliminary work and private study. The work of translation really began in 1607; it was finished and the Bible was published in 1611."<sup>4</sup> Predictably, the King James Version didn't receive immediate acceptance by the various Christian communities in England.

Although a great improvement on preceding versions, like them, the King James' Version did not receive a very hearty welcome. Some met it with cold indifference, some with violent opposition. Roman Catholics accused it of being false to the Scriptures in favor of Protestantism; Arminians thought it favored Calvinism; Puritans liked the theology but not the Church polity and ritual, disliking the use of the words "church," "bishop," "ordain," "Easter," etc. And so on. And for some time the Geneva Bible, which held the affections of the people, was a powerful rival.<sup>5</sup>

However, the King James Version eventually moved into the forefront for English speaking Christians and held that position for nearly 400 years. This priority was based on both accuracy of translation and literary style. "The beauties of the Authorized Version, notably its increased majesty and the music of its rhythm,

have been so often analysed and appraised by students of literature that—as C. S. Lewis well reminds us—it is sometimes forgotten that the effect of the translation depends ultimately on the qualities of the original, and that the majority of its variants result not from literary taste but from the advance of scholarship."<sup>6</sup>

The early printed editions of the King James Version were less than perfect. "As the early editions continued to be published, many various readings and misspellings appeared, some of which are quite humorous: for example, in 1631 the word 'not' was omitted from the seventh of the Ten Commandments, hence, it was called the 'Wicked Bible'; the 1717 edition printed at Oxford was called the 'Vinegar Bible' because of the chapter heading of Luke 20, which reads 'vinegar' instead of 'vineyard'; in 1795 the Oxford edition misspelled 'filled' (writing 'killed') in Mark 7:27, and was called the "Murderers' Bible."<sup>7</sup>

In spite of the struggles to produce an acceptable English translation of the Bible, the political and religious disharmony in England during the Middle Ages, and the mistakes of early printers, the King James Version earned a place of honor and respect among generations of Christians. The history of Bible translation is a reminder that the Word of God is a gift to God's people, a gift to be cherished, read, and obeyed.

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<sup>1</sup> Geisler, Norman L. and Nix, William E. *A General Introduction to the Bible*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1986, p. 551.

<sup>2</sup> Greenslade, S. L. "English Versions of the Bible, 1525-1611" in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*. Edited by S. L. Greenslade. Cambridge: University Press, 1963, p. 165.

<sup>3</sup> Greenslade, pp. 165-166.

<sup>4</sup> Miller, H. S. *General Biblical Introduction*. Houghton, NY: The Word-Bearer Press, 1947, p. 365.

<sup>5</sup> Miller, p. 366.

<sup>6</sup> Greenslade, p. 167.

<sup>7</sup> Geisler and Nix, pp. 567-568.