

THE BIBLE IN ENGLAND AND THE BIBLE IN ENGLISH
An English Project Presentation
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In the original preface to the King James Bible, Miles Smith, a general among the king’s army of translators, says: ‘we weary the unlearned, who need not know so much, and trouble the learned, who know it already.’ (Smith) That expresses well the anxiety of any writer in areas like those of the Bible and the English language where learned and unlearned join company. The pitch must be carefully chosen, but it will not satisfy all readers all the time. Nonetheless, a start must be made, and I will begin by addressing my title. In promising to speak about the Bible in English, I will, for many people, be promising to talk about the bible that King James ordered to be prepared in the English language for use in the Church of England. That bible has come to be called the King James Bible; it has also come to be called the Authorized Version. It appeared in 1611, and 2011 is the year for its celebration in every Anglican cathedral in the world. And not only Anglican cathedrals, because the King James Bible has in four hundred years become a world book as the English language has become a world language. But it will not do to say that the English Bible is the King James Bible because the English Bible is something older and wider. The English Bible is truly all versions of the Bible in the English language from the earliest translations in the eighth century through to the latest versions in the twenty-first.

That is a history nearly nine hundred years older than the history of the King James Bible; it is a history that starts with the Venerable Bede’s now lost translation of the Gospel of John. Bede is known to have compared ‘the texts of the different [Latin] translations of the Bible to which he had access’ in the library at the Benedictine monastery at Jarrow (Campbell), and Cuthbert, a fellow monk, tells us that Bede was dictating his translation on his death bed in the year 735. (Cuthbert: 357-360) That gives us a certain date for the earliest Bible in English of which we have record. However, an even earlier date must be sought for the Bible in England. In his *History of the Bible in English*, Frederick Fyvie Bruce says: ‘The Bible that was known and used in the earliest English Church, as in the British and Irish Churches even earlier, was the Latin Bible. From the fifth century onwards, the Latin bible came to mean the version made by Jerome between A.D. 383 and 405, the version commonly known as the Latin Vulgate.’ (Bruce 1) Bruce reminds us not only that the Bible in England has a history from Roman times forwards but that the Bible for a thousand years and more of Western Christianity was in one form only.

There are, then, four distinct phases for the Bible in England. The first lasted from the time of the earliest arrival of Christianity in the Roman province of Britannia to the Roman withdrawal in 410. The scriptures were not gathered into one volume, and the various books of the Bible circulated separately in what are known as the Old Latin translations. That ancient, first phase has links with the later phases only because it took place in the same geographical space. Invading Germanic peoples in the fifth century took land but not religion nor language nor culture from the peoples that they found inhabiting the space that they were to come to call England. There are few, if any, continuities between the first and second phases, and Christianity itself had to be reintroduced in the sixth century. A second phase of the Bible in England ran then from the sixth to the sixteenth century, a thousand years in which Jerome dominated, and his bible was a shaping force in European culture. The authority of Jerome was ended in England by a hundred years of biblical translation that culminated with the publication of the King James Bible in 1611. A third phase of the English Bible ran from 1611 to the middle of the twentieth century. In that phase, the King James Bible was the primary bible of people speaking English. A fourth phase runs from the middle-twentieth century to the present day. In this phase, the King James Bible has been joined by a very large number of new English translations and versions, none of which is dominant, but all of which challenge in some degree the primacy of the King James Bible. That challenge was first voiced in the late-nineteenth century by clergy who feared that the language of King James was no longer making God's word clear to congregations. Nonetheless, the King James Bible was confidently celebrated in 1911, and it retained its assured place in Anglican parishes until the 1950s.

In the 1950s, English and England had existed for more than eleven centuries; before 400, neither English nor England had come into being, and of the four phases of the Bible in England, it is the second and third, the years of the Jerome and the King James, about which most can be said and about which most should be said. The thousand years of the Jerome Bible in England demand to be treated first, and the first thing to be said is that the British Isles became, in the seventh century, the place in Western Europe where Jerome's Bible was best preserved and most magnificently copied. There, from the seventh century through the ninth, manuscripts were decorated in what is called the insular style, one that fused 'Celtic abstract curvilinear ornament' with 'Germanic interlace, inhabited by a plethora of beasts drawn from both traditions'. (Brown) The monks at the great combined monasteries of Jarrow and Wearmouth in Northumbria produced the most complete and reliable copies of Jerome. They specialized in superbly decorated single-volume bibles, called pandects, and, in 716, one of these was sent to Pope Gregory II. It is known as the *Codex Amiatinus*, and, now in Florence, it is the oldest one-volume Latin Bible in the world. (Bruce 1) It has two thousand and sixty vellum pages. 'Each page measures some fourteen inches in width and twenty inches in height. The Codex, itself, is ten inches thick and weighs more

than seventy-five pounds.’ (Grout) The very weight of the book says much about these pandects, and the way in which they were to be read and used. Such bibles were institutional not personal texts. They had no author but God; they were not a book but *the* Book. They spoke for the Church and for the Vatican.

However, it was not usual to create full texts of the Bible, and it was a more common practice to take particular sections to copy. The most popular were the Gospels or the Psalms. One such book has a particular place in the story of the both the Bible in England and the Bible in English: the Lindisfarne Gospels. The text is taken directly from the *Codex Amiatinus* (de Hamel 34), it was copied some time between 710 and 721 (Brown), and, according to a tenth-century note at the end of the manuscript, the work was done entirely by one man, Eadfrith. He was Bishop of Lindisfarne between 698 and 721, and he ‘employed an exceptionally wide range of colours, using animal, vegetable and mineral pigments.’ (British Library) It is another superb example of the insular style, and, since it used for its text the *Codex Amiatinus*, some have argued that it was produced not at Lindisfarne but at Jarrow and Wearmouth. However, most scholars favour the Lindisfarne claim. (Brown)

The rare beauty of the Lindisfarne Gospels is the first reason for the importance of the book in the story of the Bible in England. The second reason is that something remarkable was added to the Gospels almost two hundred years after Eadfrith died. At the end of the tenth century when the Lindisfarne Gospels were ‘owned by the Minster of Chester-le-Street, Aldred, the Provost, added an Anglo-Saxon translation in red ink beneath the original Latin. This is the oldest surviving version of the gospels in any form of English.’ (British Library) The dialect of this interlineal text is Northumbrian, one of the four dialects of Old English. To call it a translation of the gospels maybe misleading because it is closer to a gloss. Under each Latin word is given the Northumbrian equivalent. It is intended to help the novice reader understand the Latin, and the result is an awkward English. Nonetheless, English it is, and it uses English calligraphy, including three letter forms not used in Latin. Altogether the Lindisfarne Gospels are one of the greatest achievements of the Northern monks.

If the greatest work in biblical copying and illumination was done in the north of England, important work was also done elsewhere. From the Kingdom of Mercia came three prayer books - the Royal Prayer Book, the Book of Nunnaminster and the Book of Cerne. (Brown) From the Kingdom of Kent came a manuscript to rival those of Northumbria: the Anglo-Saxon *Codex Aureus*, the Anglo-Saxon Golden Book. It appears to have been copied and illuminated in Canterbury in the late-eighth century. Jerome’s text had still not completely replaced the Old Latin translations, and one of these was used from which to copy the *Codex Aureus*. (de Hamel 26) The book was seized in a ninth-century Viking raid and only returned to Canterbury after a ransom had been paid by Earl Alfred and his wife Werburg. ‘And we did that,’ says an inscription that runs along the top of the first folio of St

Matthew's Gospel, 'for the love of God and for the benefit of our souls.' Proud to have secured the codex for Canterbury again, the Earl begs and entreats 'in the name of Almighty God and of all his saints that no man should be so presumptuous as to give away or remove these holy works from Christ Church as long as Christianity survives there.' (Millet) The prayer was not heard because, shamefully, in the seventeenth century, the codex entered the post-reformation book trade. It reappeared in Spain and from there, quite remarkably, reached Scandinavia for a second time. It is now to be found in the Royal Library in Stockholm. Such a book was worth stealing by Vikings and selling by antiquarians because the aureus codexes used gold in their illumination and gold work on their covers. (de Lubac 63)

The *Codex Aureus* did not use Jerome for its text, which was unusual: had it been produced in Northumbria, there is no question that it would have been copied from Jerome. In the beginning, Jerome's text had been called the Latin Vulgate because it was a translation out of the sacred languages of Hebrew and Greek into the common, or vulgar, language of Latin. But in time, Latin became a sacred language itself, one no longer spoken by common people, and with that the Vulgate became not a translation of the Word of God but the Word itself. The Latin Vulgate had, by the year 1000, immemorial authority, but much earlier the Western Church had discouraged whole-text translation from the Latin into the vernaculars. Instead, individual passages were translated by individual priests for individual pastoral purposes. That is what we see Bede doing in Cuthbert's account - a dying priest translates John as a last act of piety.

Bede did not wish to make a translation of every book of the Bible, and it may be that we have lost what he did translate because it was not treated as something that asked for preservation. It is likely that Bede the Venerable in the year 700 shared the prejudice of Aelfric the Grammarian in the year 1000. Aelfric feared that translating the Bible would mean that the literate unschooled would not only read the Word of God for themselves, they would go on to interpret that Word for themselves. For this reason, he provided English paraphrases rather than translations of the narrative books of the Old Testament – the Books of Kings and Job, and short versions of Esther, Judith, and Maccabees. This collection is known as Aelfric's Heptateuch. At the same time, there was circulating a West Saxon translation known as the Wessex Gospels. (Kenyon) If we are to judge by what survives in manuscript form and what is mentioned in manuscript record, the Bible was not well represented in the Old English.

Aelfric, the most prolific of Old English writers, died in or about the year 1010 (Godden), and, effectively, Old English biblical scholarship died with him because the arrival of the Normans put an end to Old English culture. That, however, did not mean the end of Latin scholarship nor of the Bible in England. If there were no continuities with what had gone before following the Germanic fifth-century invasion of Britannia, there were striking continuities with what had gone before

following the eleventh-century Norman invasion of England. Jerome continued to be revered and copied lovingly in English monasteries as he had been since the seventh century. The greatness of Jarrow and Wearmouth in the North faded, but monasteries in the South took their place, especially in Winchester, which had come to prominence under Alfred and which welcomed the patronage of the new Norman kings. The traditions of manuscript and illumination continued, and, at the same time, they developed.

Long before the arrival of the Normans, Winchester had become an important centre for a new manuscript fashion that owed a great deal to Charlemagne's Court School. It was 'distinguished by an opulent painting style with much gilding and colours, featuring much heavy acanthus-like ornament and a naturalistic figure-style'. The earliest examples came from late-tenth-century Winchester for which reason it has come to be called the Winchester style. It was not only influential in England; the Winchester style was also practised in northern and western France, especially in Normandy. (Brown) The arrival of the Normans in Winchester meant an intensification of Winchester's dominance in manuscript style and production. The greatest product of the school is the Winchester Bible itself, created between 1160 and 1180. 'It was planned on an almost unprecedented scale of luxury and elaboration.' It was to be a complete Bible in two volumes, and, though it was never completed, what we have is 'one of the greatest works of art ever produced in England', says Christopher de Hamel, a leading authority on the Bible in Western Europe. (de Hamel 80-81)

Magnificent as the Winchester Bible was, and is, it was only one of many great bibles produced in England in the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries. There is however very little evidence of any translation into English in those three hundred years. English had not disappeared, and it had remained the majority language, but for three centuries it was not a language of government or culture. England was ruled in French and educated in Latin. English was a despised language of a defeated people. Its use was forbidden in parliament and in the law courts. If people could not speak French, their statements had to be translated. It was not until the fourteenth century that there was any change in the formal status of English. From 1300 onwards, English came more and more to be the language of the rulers as well as the ruled. In 1362, Parliament approved a Statute of Pleading that permitted the use of the English language in Parliament on the grounds that French was 'much unknown' in England. (Baugh and Cable 144) This law was written in French, but the first speech made in English in Parliament was made that year. From that date, English began to recover its ground, and, in 1382, we meet for the first time something that we can properly call an English bible. It is a text in a new form of English, and it reflects a new way of thinking about the scriptures. It is primarily, though not exclusively, the work of John Wycliffe, and the new bible has come to be called the Wycliffe Bible. (Drabble 98) The story behind it is one that was to become common in later centuries, and it

represents something that we can call modern in the medieval world. An individual, usually a priest, but increasingly it might be any pious Christian, becomes convinced through repeated readings of the Bible that the Church is no longer following the way of Christ and that reform is needed. For this kind of reformer, a first step is to get men and women to see the truth for themselves, and the way to do that is to get them to read the Bible for themselves. So began, after a thousand-year period, a new phase of biblical translation.

There were two distinct activities here that English history has led us to conflate: the reading of the Bible and the reforming of the Church. They are however not necessarily related, and, in France and in Germany, vernacular translations had already appeared and were treated as no more than pious aids to traditional worship and belief. (de Hamel 166) Things worked out differently in England because of John Wycliffe. He not only wanted a Bible in English, he also wanted changes in Christian doctrine. His readings of the Bible led him to reject the doctrine of transubstantiation so that he could no longer believe that the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ were really present in the consecrated bread and wine of the mass. Transubstantiation was the core doctrine of the Catholic Church, and neither the ecclesiastical nor the civil authorities in England would tolerate any denial. (de Hamel 169) At the same time, in terms of biblical scholarship, Wycliffe was conservative and had no quarrel with Jerome. There was no impulse in the 1380s to challenge Jerome's translation, as there would be a hundred years later. The Latin Vulgate was the unquestioned text, and Wycliffe's first translation paid respect to Jerome by being not much more than a gloss. (de Hamel 174) It is not unlike the translation that Aldred had provided for the Lindisfarne Gospels four hundred years earlier: an aid to reading the Latin but a poor thing in itself.

Wycliffe was the leading figure in a group of Oxford scholars, a number of whom had some part in the work of translation. Moreover, after Wycliffe's death in 1384, a second translation appeared, and, this time, the gloss was left behind and free-flowing English took its place. The new text was also attributed to John Wycliffe, and, like the first version, is called the Wycliffe Bible. (de Hamel 175) It was a complete translation of both Old and New Testaments, and it meant that by 1400, England had at last produced a Bible in English. The Wycliffe Bible became the sacred text of men and women whom others called the Lollards, and its impact is reflected in the fact that, today, there are thirty surviving manuscripts of the first Wycliffe Bible and 140 of the second. (Kenyon). Together there are more copies of this than of any other Middle-English text. That is impressive, but the spread of the Wycliffe Bible was hampered everywhere by the hostility of Church authorities, general illiteracy and manuscript copying. It was a long way from being a people's Bible.

A bible in every hand did not become a possibility until Johannes Guttenberg had developed the printing press in the middle of the fifteenth century. Even so, the printing press did not inspire the English to mass-produce vernacular versions of

the Bible. The experience of the Wycliffe Bible, the associated Lollard heresy, and the burning of those who were found to possess English-language bibles meant that England was slow to follow the developing habit in other parts of Europe of printing vernacular bibles. That did not happen until there came from Martin Luther a great Protestant impetus to translation. And Luther, crucially, decided not to rely for his text on Jerome. Jerome had been copied a thousand times over by generations of monks. By 1500, the copies were filled with accumulated scribal error. These error-filled bibles and a new understanding of the Greek language led scholars to go beyond Jerome.

Luther's was not the first bible in German, but it was the greatest, and it is commonly held that Martin Luther's bible not only made Protestantism, it also made the modern German language. Now, that is not the kind of claim that can be made for the King James Bible. In 1500, the English already possessed one of the oldest vernacular literatures in post-Roman Europe. In fact, an English literary prose had already come into full existence twice over: in the Old English used by Alfred's court translators in the ninth century and then again in the Middle English used John Wycliffe in the late-fourteenth century. That work had been done again by 1500 for the Modern English form so that sixteenth-century English prose writers had to hand a magnificent literary instrument best exemplified in Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*. Working with Malory's prose and Wycliffe's bible, men like William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale crafted the exquisite language that we know as biblical English. That goes a long way to explain the paradox that a book apparently written by committee, I mean the King James Bible, reads as well as a book may. What we have in the King James is a final reworking of William Tyndale's powerful, sinuous, individual, idiosyncratic English. Tyndale's New Testament was published in 1526, just four years after Luther's New Testament, and it prompted a rush of English-language translation.

Fifty different English versions of all or parts of the Bible were printed between 1526 and 1611. (Crystal, *Stories* 271) The part translations were commonly of the psalms or a gospel, but many full translations appeared, notably the Great Bible of 1538 that Henry VIII ordered for his English church, the Geneva Bible of 1560 that the Puritans ordered for the Calvinist church, the Bishops Bible of 1568 that the Anglicans ordered for the Church of England, and the Douay Bible of 1610 that the Catholics ordered for the Church of Rome. As David Crystal says in *The Stories of English*, 'Linguistically, despite variations in vocabulary and style, the dependency on Tyndale is apparent throughout, and this influence continued.' (Crystal, *Stories* 272) Over eighty per cent of the King James Bible can be traced to Tyndale. (Crystal, *Stories* 273; Daniell 448) The development can be studied at a website called *Biblos.com* that makes relatively easy comparison of the Tyndale, Geneva, Douay and King James versions.

William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale did such a good job that the succeeding Tudor translators had only to take advantage of continuing improvements in

biblical scholarship. The real differences between these bibles were their notes. Those interpreted the verses according to the theologies of Geneva, Rome or Canterbury. King James was well aware of this. He was himself a fine linguist, said to speak ‘Greek before breakfast [and] Latin before Scots’ (Nicolson 7), and he wanted a bible that could be the common property of the Puritan and Anglican parties in the Church of England. In 1604, he convened a Conference at Hampton Court to outline the means and methods for creating the new bible. James got what he wanted by ordering a scholarly correction of the Bishops Bible of 1568 with no theological notes – notes that were, in the king’s opinion ‘partiall, untrue, seditious, and savouring, too much, of dangerous, and trayterous conceipts.’ (Smith) Fifty-four men in six ‘companies’ were set to work. (Kenyon)

Of the fifty-four translators and editors, I will mention three. First, John Harmer, who was a boy, then a headmaster and last a warden of Winchester College. He was a member of the group charged with revising ‘the four Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles, and the Revelation of St. John’. (McClure) Second, Thomas Bilson, born in Winchester, educated at the College, was appointed its headmaster in 1572 and made Bishop of Winchester in 1596. (*ODNB*) He was a member of the group charged with translating the Apocrypha. Further, Bilson, along with Miles Smith, ‘prepared the summary of contents placed at the head of the chapters’ and saw the work through the press in 1611. (McClure) Third, Lancelot Andrewes, then Bishop of Ely but later Bishop of Winchester. Andrewes was a member of the group charged with translating the books from Genesis to Kings. (*ODNB*) At his funeral, in Winchester in 1626, it was said that his ‘knowledge in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Chaldee, Syriac and Arabic, besides fifteen modern languages was so advanced that he may be ranked as one of the rarest linguists in Christendom.’ (McClure)

The strongest indication of the value of the work that these men had done was that the King James Version put an end to the business of translating the Bible into English for the next two hundred and fifty years. Improvement on its translation was too difficult and too costly. Moreover, there were insufficient developments in biblical scholarship in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to warrant it. A second mark of the strength of the King James Bible was its gradual suppression of its Protestant rivals: the Great, the Geneva and the Bishops Bibles. This victory, if that is the right word, is a much debated one: was it a proof of the intrinsic superiority of the King James Bible or of the extrinsic power of the authority given to it by royal and parliamentary support? There was a royal copyright and the royal bible was ordained for use in Anglican churches, but that does not fully explain why the other bibles dropped away, even in Scotland.

By 1700, the King James Bible was to all effects the English Bible, and its text began a final evolution towards a finish it had never achieved in the seventeenth century. In 1611, compositing, proof-reading and printing were idiosyncratic and eccentric. There were few agreed conventions. Printers got jobs done as cheaply

and quickly as possible. As a result the new bible was peppered with errors, and things got worse for the next hundred years. Some misprints were infamous, leading to nicknames such as the Wicked Bible for an edition that read 'Thou shalt commit adultery.' In the Place-maker's Bible, there was a beatitude that declared: 'Blessed are the placemakers, for they shall be called the children of God'. The Printers' Bible was so called because it replaced 'princes' with 'printers' to produce the lamentation: 'Printers have persecuted me without cause'. (Brewer) The Printers' Bible summed up the whole unhappy business, and a rule-bound, rigorous eighteenth-century would not tolerate it.

However, the first English bible to receive the benefit of eighteenth-century scholarship was not the King James Bible but the Douay Bible. That was the one bible that had not been driven out by the King James, and English Catholics had continued to have their copies printed in the cities of Douai and Reims. French printers had been no better than English ones, and, after one hundred and fifty years, the Catholic text was ready for revision. Richard Challoner began the work in 1749, and, as he did so, he turned often to the King James. As a result, when the new Douay version was published in 1750, Challoner had greatly increased the Catholic debt to Tyndale and Coverdale. In the next century, John Henry Newman acknowledged how much the Catholic bible of his mature years owed to the Anglican bible of his childhood. (Addis and Arnold 287; Ward). As Challoner was revising the Douay, an Anglican scholar, Benjamin Blayney, began a painstaking, and, in its way, a very modern, revision of the whole text of the King James Bible correcting the errors made since 1611. Blayney did his work for the Oxford University Press (*ODNB*), and he is said to have made 20,000 minor changes. The new King James Bible was published in 1769. For a time Cambridge University Press continued to issue its own version, but the Oxford King James won out. That was mainly because the public wanted a single bible. Notions of propriety, convention, decency and, indeed, inerrancy converged. By 1800 the King James Bible had become the Authorized Version not by royal edict but by common consent.

A further development by 1800 was that the King James Bible was to be found far beyond the British Isles, and most especially in North America. Although English was being spoken in both Africa and Asia before it was spoken in America, the major locus of cultural transportation of the English language was to North America, to the territories that we know today as the United States. One of the first things the Americans did, when they had gained their independence (and they were no longer bound by the royal copyrights), was to print their own editions of the King James Bible. (MacCulloch) The Americans went on to take advantage of machine-made paper, stereotype printing, and the steam-driven press to mass produce the Bible. The American Bible Society, alone, was selling a million copies a year by 1862. (de Hamel 261)

The nineteenth century was significant in the story of the English Bible not only because of the proliferation of copies of the King James Bible, but because of the pivotal role that it played in spreading the word in the languages of the world. The English had been translating their bibles into foreign tongues since the seventeenth century. The most famous example is the Indian Bible of John Eliot, the graduate of Cambridge, England who took his bible to Natick, Massachusetts in 1631, and there translated it into Massachusett, the language spoken by the local people. It was a huge undertaking for one man, who had first to teach himself the language, devise a written form for it, and then translate the nearly 800,000 words of the Bible. Eliot completed his task by 1663. (de Hamel 270-271) He almost certainly used the Geneva Bible as the basis for his translation, but the significant points are, first, he based his translation on an English not a Latin version and, second, he undertook the work on his own and saw it through to completion.

What John Eliot had done so early became, in the nineteenth century, a regular practice of missionaries from both the United States and the British Isles, and the bible that they used was the King James Bible. It provided the basis for translations into the languages of North America, Asia, Africa and Oceania. The King James Bible now played the role once played by Jerome's Latin Vulgate. It stood for the Word of God, and it stood between the Bible in the new language and the original Bible in Hebrew and Greek. There was no intention to deny the Hebrew and Greek originals, but men and women living in isolation in the furthest parts of the world had enough to do to learn a language and begin a translation. For the majority, it was not the whole Bible that they translated but the New Testament. The work proceeded throughout the nineteenth and through the twentieth century. It continues today. The United Bible Societies tell us that the gospels are now translated into 1,168 languages. (United Bible)

The process of the translation of the King James Bible into the world's languages inevitably raised the prestige of the King James version. So much so that claims for its inerrancy began to be made, and these claims proliferate on American websites. But beyond any such claim, it is well to ask: What is special about the King James Bible? To answer that question requires the introduction of someone, who though he had no part in the translation of the bible, must be acknowledged as the person who brought it to the attention of the world. His name is Thomas Cranmer. In 1549, he published, in his role of Archbishop of Canterbury and with the authorization of Parliament, the Book of Common Prayer. That was the vehicle by which fifteen Anglican generations heard the Word of God as expressed in the passages from the Old and New Testaments that Cranmer appointed to be read aloud. Cranmer relied on the Tyndale and Coverdale translations, and, those, in due course, became the King James translations. At the same time, Cranmer the writer was quite the match of either Tyndale or Coverdale. 'It is impossible,' says David Crystal, 'to distinguish the linguistic influence of the Prayer Book from that

of the King James Bible, because of the extent to which the former incorporates extracts from the latter.’ (Crystal, *Stories* 278-79)

From 1611 forwards, the King James Bible began its steady advance into the consciousness and then into the language of English speakers, the majority of whom were hearing parts every Sunday in their churches. The influence of the King James has probably been more upon the written language than the spoken language, but the latter is formidable, and it is recognized mainly as the Bible’s provision of so many everyday sayings:

man shall not live by bread alone; the salt of the earth; the light of the world; an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; our daily bread; treasures in heaven; no man can serve two masters; pearls before swine; [a wolf] in sheep’s clothing; weeping and gnashing of teeth; new wine [in] old bottles; lost sheep; the blind leading the blind; the signs of the times. (Crystal, *Stories*, 277)

All of those come from Matthew’s Gospel alone. English speakers have taken a thousand more sayings from the King James Bible, and these are used today by people who have neither read nor heard it. The sayings cover a multitude of everyday situations, and the phrases wait, ready coined, to be used as good currency in everyday speech. Even those few sayings from Matthew give the feel of the King James language: immediate, elliptical, pithy. We sense that there is so much more being meant than is actually being said. The sayings also give a very good sense of the remarkable vocabulary of this language. The language appears plain and simple, and a count of the vocabulary of the King James Bible puts it, indeed, at no more than 8,000 root-words. (Crystal *Stories* 317)

Verbal restraint is apparent in another aspect of the language of the King James Bible - its severe conservatism. That has led to an effect quite opposite from its simple vocabulary. The restricted vocabulary makes for easy reading but the old-fashioned language – the thous, thees, and yees; the saiths, arts, and runeths – those make for difficult reading. The interesting thing is that that was true from the start because those forms were already disappearing in 1611. It is another sign of the influence of Tyndale. His New Testament was completed as early as 1524 when he was thirty. The result was that, after a century of intense linguistic change, the bible translators were being pulled towards the English Tyndale had learned by the year 1500.

The world’s expert on the English bible as literature, David Norton, believes that the King James has been excessively praised for being something that it is not; that is, great literature. ‘The much-repeated modern idea that the [King James Bible] is a literary masterpiece represents,’ he says, ‘a reversal of opinion as striking as any in the whole history of English literature.’ (Norton 2) But the list of those who have praised the language of the English Bible is impressive: among them are

George Herbert, John Milton, John Bunyan, Isaac Watts, Alexander Pope, Charles Wesley, William Blake, Samuel Coleridge, Percy Shelley, Thomas Macaulay, Emily Dickinson, Thomas Hardy, D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot. All of them owed an acknowledged debt to the King James Bible, but Norton believes that many of them show by ‘their extravagant praise the influence of [...] excessive respect for the Authorized Version at the expense of its English originals, especial the Geneva Bible.’ (Ford) Norton emphasizes the primacy of Geneva, but as we have seen this is an artificial distinction. And, indeed, the real source is not the Geneva Bible, but it is, as David Crystal says, William Tyndale; it is his English that floods to us through the English bibles.

But there is something deeper that David Norton is missing. It is summed up by the American novelist Eudora Welty. Talking of her childhood in Mississippi, she said that the cadence of the King James Bible ‘entered our ears and our memories for good.’ (Harris) In the three hundred years from 1650 to 1950, the King James language became instinctive, and it may well be that this is what makes it beautiful. Great writers, Wordsworth tells us, must create the taste by which they are ‘to be relished’ (Wordsworth 3). If we find the language of Tyndale and Coverdale beautiful, one explanation is that their words have been heard as the Word of God for close to five hundred years. Heard so often, they have created their own aesthetic. Listening was shaped for many before they knew well what the words meant. It is likely that understanding and love came together. What Jane Austen said of Shakespeare, she might have said of the English bible: ‘one gets acquainted with [it] without knowing how. [...] [Its] thoughts and beauties are so spread abroad that one touches them everywhere; one is intimate with [it] by instinct.’ (Austen 338) I said earlier that the King James language is immediate, elliptical, pithy. It means more than it says. That is the Tyndale effect.

In 1909, two years before the tercentenary of the King James Bible, Sir Frederic Kenyon, palaeographer, biblical scholar and Director of the British Museum (ODNB) said “On the character and spiritual history of the nation [the King James Bible] has left an even deeper mark, to which many writers have borne eloquent testimony; and if England has been, and is, a Bible-reading and Bible-loving country, it is in no small measure due to her possession of a version so nobly executed as the Authorized Version.” (Kenyon) The year 1911 saw the King James Bible established as a magisterial literary text, yet unchallenged in terms of the majesty and beauty of its language; it was however nearing the end of its domination. In the mid-nineteenth century, biblical scholarship had begun raising serious questions about the quality of the King James translation, exactly as biblical scholarship had raised questions in the early-sixteenth century about quality of the Jerome translation. Moreover, parish priests were concerned that the laity no longer understood Tyndale’s English. In 1870, the Convocation of Canterbury put in hand an exercise as great as that that had been set in hand at Hampton Court in 1604.

Once again the translation groups were called companies, ‘The Old Testament company consisted of 25 (afterwards 27) members, the New Testament of 26’, and these Old World companies of Anglican scholars were matched in 1872 by two New World companies of Episcopal scholars. ‘The collaboration of the English and American companies was perfectly harmonious’. The new New Testament appeared in 1881 and the new Old Testament in 1885. ‘On the whole,’ said Sir Frederic Kenyon in 1909, ‘it is certain that the Revised Version marks a great advance on the Authorized Version in respect of accuracy.’ However, ‘the Revisers, in their careful attention to the Greek, were less happily inspired than their predecessors with the genius of the English language.’ (Kenyon) ‘That lack of inspiration was in part the result of an anxiety to make every passage readily intelligible. The nineteenth-century Anglo-American team laboured to make the implicit explicit, the metaphorical literal, the difficult easy. And, arguably, it is the Tyndale effect – immediate, elliptical, pithy – that has been progressively lost since the Victorians began the process of modern translation. The kingdom, the power and glory of Tyndale’s language may now be passing but, in December 1999, forty-three writers were asked by the *Times Literary Supplement* to name the ‘books of the millennium’. The clear winners were the King James Bible and Shakespeare. (Orlans) The great change that has taken place since 1611 for both Shakespeare and the King James Bible is that they have been carried across the world by the great sweep of the English language, and the story of that language is one that has to be told along with the stories of the Bible in English and the story of the Bible in England.

The story of the Bible in England began before there was a story of the English language to tell, but by the year 400, a proto-English was forming, and, by 500, an English was being spoken by perhaps 100,000 people. Within five hundred years, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes had become a single people numbering perhaps a little over one million. (*Doomsday Book Online*) They had a single king and written forms of their language, one that they called English. Into that they were translating Latin texts. Jerome had translated the opening lines of Christianity’s great prayer as:

Pater noster, qui es in caelis
sanctificetur nomen tuum

In Northumbria, a monk translated the opening of the Paternoster as:

fader urer ðu bist in heofnas
sie gehalgad noma ðin (Lindisfarne Gospels, about 990)

In Wessex, a monk translated it as:

fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum
si þin nama gehalgod (Wessex Gospels, about 990)

Then, for a long time after the arrival of the Norman French, the monks ceased to translate the Lord’s Prayer into the English language. The language had no more status than the people. But the kingdom developed and the language evolved, and

by the end of the fourteenth century, the Lord's Prayer was appearing in a new English:

Oure fadir that art in heuenes
halewid be thi name. (The Wycliffe Bible, about 1390)

English still had no great status, and it was an indistinguishable language among the world's many languages, but it was becoming recognisably the language we are using today, and the number of people speaking it by 1500 grew to two million. (Martinsson) Shortly after 1500, the Lord's Prayer appeared in these words:

O our father, which art in heaven
hallowed be thy name. (The Tyndale Bible, 1525)

That was a form that was to persist because Tyndale's wording, with only the exclamatory 'O' dropped, was used in both the Geneva Bible of 1560 and the King James Bible of 1611. The English-speaking population had by then increased to four million. (Martinsson) English was still a language used only by its native speakers. Nonetheless, this language did have two things that were going to make it a world language. First, it had produced a writer in William Shakespeare whom many would be saying four hundred years later was the world's greatest writer, and it had produced in the King James Bible a book that many would be saying four hundred years later was the world's greatest book. Second, the English language was already being spoken in trading posts in Asia, in slaving ports in Africa, and in settlements in America.

As a result of the expansion of the English language beyond the British Isles, the number of English speakers had increased by the end of the nineteenth century to one hundred and twenty million (UK National Statistics, US Census). At the same time, by 1900, the King James's language had become archaic and new versions of the Lord's Prayer were available as in the one that John Nelson Darby offered for Plymouth Brethren students:

Our Father who art in the heavens,
let thy name be sanctified. (The Darby Bible, 1890)

But not everyone wanted the old prayer in new language, and the American Standard Bible still retained something close to the Tyndale wording:

Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name. (The American Standard Bible, 1901)

The 'who' after 'Our Father' had replaced Tyndale's startling 'which' since 'which' was a form that had long ago come to be used only of inanimate objects. A hundred years later, in 2001, the translation of the American Standard Bible had moved further from the King James but had not entirely forgotten it:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name. (The New American Standard, 2001)

By the year 2001, the King James Bible was a world book, loved as much for being a creation of linguistic beauty and an object of cultural meaning as it was for being a vehicle of Christian message. Perhaps it is more loved today by lovers of the

language and culture than it is by the lovers of the message because other vehicles of that message have been found. In 1611, the story of the King James Bible was at its beginning, and, then, the message was all. The language and the culture were peripheral. Those dimensions had yet to grow, but their lines of development were already staked out in those English posts, ports and settlements in Africa, Asia and America. There the story of the English was often to be a terrible one, but the posts and ports and settlements have evolved into seventy independent nation states where English is, today, a majority language or an official language or a lingua franca. By 2011, two billion people will be using the English language. Many, maybe half of them, will be using it to do business; they will be using it only instrumentally. But almost as many will be using it for its full potential as a vehicle of every kind of thought; they will be using it imaginatively. And all users, instrumentalists and imaginers alike, will have ahead of them, as the measure of how far they must reach to reach the limits of this world language, the language of 1611.

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