

Changes in the background of Bible translation

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When we consider English language formation, we cannot overlook the role of Bible translation. Some attribute the English Bible primarily to William Tyndale (c. 1494-1536), who translated the Bible into an early form of Modern English and holds the distinction of being the first man to ever print the New Testament in the English language. Historian David Daniell examines Tyndale as the person leading to sixteenth-century reformers and even to nineteenth-century Anglican champions of the “native religion” against the “foreign”, referring to Elijah who protested against the importation of foreign religion and stood for the rights of ordinary people against tyranny (Daniell 233-4). Daniell has promoted the idea that Tyndale is the forgotten champion of English liberties. Meanwhile, while acknowledging the importance of the Tyndale translation as an influence in later English translations, Adam Nicolson and Alister McGrath have promoted the King James Version, claiming that recent trends overestimate the Tyndale translation.

After the Tyndale translation, the 1539 Great Bible was produced for Henry VIII, The Geneva Bible had been translated in Geneva, The Bishops' Bible was then translated by bishops, appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and finally, King James produced the “authorized version”. Although each one of these should have concerned and influenced the national language, its aim or intention must have been different or changed. In other words, the role of the Bible and its translation should reflect the culture of the era. For example, Tyndale aimed to spread the Bible among lay people using their language, which eventually led to his death. Meanwhile, within a century's time, King James selected translators for producing his

authorized version of the Bible.

According to McGrath, “the King James Bible was a landmark in the history of the English language, and an inspiration to poets, dramatists, artists, and politicians”. (1) However, it seems to me that the aim of language unification had reduced in prominence as it largely focuses on King James’ political ambition, namely King’s Devine Theory and his self imaged *Rex Pacificus* (Nicolson, xiv). As Nicolson states, The King James Bible is the product of the era, which is also “a deeply political book”. (xiii)

This paper focuses first on the Tyndale Bible and then on the King James Bible (KJB), which should have embodied its historical and cultural backgrounds. As a cultural product, Nicolson focuses on the translators of the era as well. For example, William Tyndale worked alone, while there were 47 to 51 people working together on the KJB¹, comparing it to the Jacobean plays for which it was not uncommon for more than one writer to be involved (Nicolson, 67-8). In that regard, this could be a part of the cultural reflection of the era; however, the most characteristic feature of KJB may be found in the court mask, which had been becoming very popular in the court of King James, so this will also be briefly mentioned.

The Tyndale English Bible

Tyndale risked his life translating the word of God into vernacular language. Despite being unlawful, there was much demand for this among the laypeople of the era. Reading the Bible was an unlawful act until it became official in 1539. Regardless, people were eager to read it. According to Daniell, Tyndale’s use of vernacular language in the New Testament had had been read by hundreds, then thousands throughout the Southern and the Eastern part of

¹ McGrath presents a list of the translators in *In the Beginning*, pp. 178-182.

England (28). Simpson also suggests that around 50,000 copies had been produced despite the fact that it put the owner of each copy in danger before the Bible became official (58).

Tyndale was born in Gloucester, England in 1494 and died in Brussels, Belgium in 1536. Tyndale enrolled at Oxford University and received his Master's degree in 1515. He seemed to be gifted in languages and was skilled in eight languages: Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Spanish, French, Italian, German and English. He became a tutor for the family of Sir John Walsh in Gloucestershire around 1520 and became attached to the doctrines of the Reformation and devoted himself to the study of the Scripture. He openly stated his views and disputed with Roman Catholic dignitaries, which may have caused trouble and brought him to London. Daniell and Simpson suggest that he went to London hoping to find a place to translate the New Testament (Daniell 139-80, Simpson 37).

However, soon after discovering that he was unable to do so in England, he left England for the continent around May 1524 and did not return until his death in 1536. It seems he visited Hamburg and Wittenberg, where he translated the New Testament with the assistance of Martin Luther. It has been said that the printing of this New Testament in quarto began in Cologne in the summer of 1525 and was completed in Worms; the octavo edition was likewise printed before the end of the same year. He then finished translating Pentateuch in 1530 and Jonah in 1531. In addition to his translation work, he produced his own pieces including *The Parable of the Wicked Mammon* (1527), which was originally a prologue to the quarto edition of his New Testament, and *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1527-8).

Those works are believed to have been written in places of concealment, so secure and well chosen that neither the

ecclesiastical nor diplomatic emissaries of Cardinal Wolsey and Henry VIII were able to reach them. However, Tyndale was ultimately betrayed by Henry Phillips, the agent of either English ecclesiastics or Henry VIII, or possibly both. After being arrested and imprisoned in the castle of Vilvoorden for over 500 days, Tyndale was tried for and convicted of heresy and treason. He was finally hanged and his body burned in the prison yard on October 6, 1536. It is said that his last words were "Lord, open the King of England's eyes". Three years later, King Henry VIII eventually would with the publication of the English "Great Bible," which is the first officially authorized English translation of the Bible (Daniell, 648).

Although Tyndale ended his life stigmatized as a heretic, he is considered the single most gifted translator and recognized as the father of the English Bible (Filed, 53). In 1535, a year before Tyndale's death, a complete English Bible had been produced by Miles Coverdale (1488-1569) who was in exile, based on Tyndale's work for the Pentateuch and the New Testament and the rest translated by Coverdale using his own translation from Latin and German texts (Simpson, 38). Coverdale's version including Tyndale's material was then used by John Roger, the editor, in Antwerp for the Matthew's Bible published in 1537 . Roger also used Tyndale's translation from Hebrew of Joshua to 2 Chronicles. All this occurred before the significant event – the Great Bible of 1539 – for which Coverdale also worked under Thomas Cromwell (c. 1485-1540).

Scholars tend to attribute national identity to the English Bible. Furrell claims that the translation of the Scripture into the vernacular, whether Martin Luther's German Bible or the early English renderings of William Tyndale and Myles Coverdale, was both a political and religious act tied to rising nationalism.

Rosendale focuses on the power of language itself as the crucial role played in both rising national identity and the Reformation. He explores the English Reformation as an important religious and political component of legitimacy, focusing on the state-sponsored shift from Latin to English in the language of divine access through the vernacular Prayer book (1143-4). In addition, Daniell claims that Tyndale represents both a revolution and a recovery of “native” continuities. Tyndale’s recovery of “Saxon” English, with its frequently monosyllabic vocabulary and straightforward syntax, weakened the power of foreign language, namely French and Latin. When the English language was considered less powerful, Tyndale revived it during the mid-sixteenth century (27). Responding to the argument that English is not fit to bear the weight of a learned language, Tyndale retorted that English has deeper affinities with Hebrew than with Latin (Simpson, 61).

Meanwhile, High supports and praises Tyndale’s translation mentioning the possibility that Shakespeare might have read Tyndale’s or the pieces which had taken Tyndale’s view and remarked that Tyndale is the one who first popularized the historical event in print. Daniell goes even further saying that without Tyndale, there would have been no Shakespeare (406). Shakespeare might have or might not have read Tyndale’s work. Regardless, it could be said that ambiguity, circuitousness and contradiction are key characteristics of Shakespeare, while simplicity, plainness and directness are characteristic of Tyndale. Tyndale and his supporters claimed that the Scripture should be simple, plain and designed for simple people. Tyndale states in his prose that the Scripture “hath but one simple, literal sense, whose light the owls cannot abide”. Throughout his prefaces,

Tyndale warns the reader to “beware of subtle allegories”, since allegory is the surest tool the clergy can wield to preserve their own power over and possession of the Scripture”. (Simpson, 111) With Tyndale, the Scripture became simple and straightforward, with a single interpretation. Tyndale cultivated a plain style with exceptional skill and, as Simpson suggests, it is also doubtless that part of the reason for that style was to allow a much wider access to the Scripture (118). To Tyndale, the Scripture should be simple, unambiguous, and entirely beyond the need for interpretation. Such an attitude towards the Scripture might have been in line with the movement of the era since it has been said that in a society undergoing profound social mobility with written authority replacing the intuitive praxis of smaller ruling elites, the new social forces habitually demand that the rules be clear (or “transparent”) and explicit. They demand that the rules be written in the clearest possible prose (Simpson, 119).

However, there was a person who opposed such simplicity or directness in the Scripture. Thomas More (1478-1535) was against Tyndale’s Bible. More, who entered Royal service in 1518 as a member of the King’s Council, was active and seemed to be clearly driven to be active at the forefront of the fight against English Lutheranism and Tyndale’s vernacular scriptures (Simpson, 45-47). From 1526, the target of official repression seemed not only to be Lutheranism, but also the much greater challenge of vernacular scripture. Starting in 1521, itemized Lutheran opinions had been banned in England and by 1527 specific books had been officially confiscated. Tyndale’s New Testament along with other polemical evangelical books by him and others were on the list of books to be handed in under pain of excommunication in 1527. While serving as chancellor (1529-

1532), More imprisoned men for owning the books, and he “engineered” the arrest of several book dealers and the burning of six Lutherans (Simpson, 50).

People tend to find a single well scripted story for the More Tyndale confrontation. On the one hand is the maniacal, persecuting, suppressive More, who rejected the civilized humanism which he had championed earlier and who now leads the troop of all who are hostile to the vernacular Bible, while on the other is the persecuted Tyndale who was singled out and leads the heroic fight for the liberation of the conscience, nourished by liberty to read the Scriptural word in the vernacular. Actually, More was not opposed to vernacular scriptures. He even defends it in his writing, *The Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, which reveals his full agreement with many points of Tyndale’s argument (Simpson, 51). What More could not tolerate in Tyndale’s translation was the choice of words. More must have felt that his interpretation of the Bible, which must have been different from Tyndale’s, had been violated and that Tyndale’s translation was full of prejudice. More had consistently focused on Tyndale’s prejudicial translation of certain key words, such as the choice of “repentance” over “penance” (75).

In fact, recent scholars tend to support the idea that Protestantism liberated readers and society. As for Tyndale’s translation, for example, High greatly praised it, particularly certain word choices over More’s, commending Tyndale as the father of Presbyterianism. He says that Tyndale’s translation of certain words, to which More so fiercely objected, had social roots, as well as being linguistically accurate. Daniell also characterized Tyndale’s translation as a work that spoke directly to the hearts of readers and laid the groundwork for evangelical transformation.

However, Simpson holds a different view of such praise for Tyndale. To Simpson, this sixteenth-century achievement “is better characterized as the origin of fundamentalism than of the liberal tradition” (3). Simpson states that both Tyndale’s translation, which allows only a single interpretation, and an entire evangelical community cultivated a culture of paranoia and intolerance in early Tudor England, whereas Thomas More and the other opponents of this nascent fundamentalism were the true purveyors of liberty and liberality . According to Simpson, Tyndale, along with Luther, insisted that “the Scripture should be simple, unambiguous, and entirely beyond the need for interpretation,” yet their translations of the Scripture were hemmed in by rules and warnings for the unwary reader, demonstrating an essentially anti-liberal attitude (118). He even says “evangelical reading did not produce either liberty or freedom from institutional restraint” and that or the Biblical text actually unleashed different forms of violence (29). Simplicity or directness often limits the liberty of interpretations, which is likely closely related to fundamentalism. At the same time, it has the power to appeal to the mass population, so the straightforwardness of the Bible should have allowed a much wider access. Simpson’s view is impressive and while we may be able to find a tendency for fundamentalism in Tyndale’s insistence, it would be hard to deny the power his vernacular Bible had during the period.

The King James Bible

Only 67 years after Tyndale’s death, King James came down from Scotland to become the King of Scotland and England. Some say he had already decided to publish the newly translated Bible, but this is unclear. Regardless, he eventually assigned translators in

1604 to put his mark on the work. The death penalty for translating God's words into English had become the power tool for the King. This time, the intention was largely political: religious unity on the surface, but in fact a defense of the King's Divine Right. In this section, the background of the new Bible translation and King James' political issues will be examined briefly with reference to the Court masques.

When James I came down to England, it was the scene of religious strife, which Queen Elizabeth was determined to settle and achieve a compromise by offering something to both Protestant and Catholic subjects. Actually, as McGrath has pointed out, by the end of Elizabeth's reign, the most serious religious tensions within England could not have been between Protestants and Catholics, but rather in English Protestantism: Anglicanism and Puritanism (134). When James VI of Scotland succeeded to the English throne, Elizabethan Protestants had much hope that their moment had arrived since King James was a male, Protestant, possessing both rank and experience of the Scottish government in which Calvinism had been dominant and the Geneva Bible had been championed. They saw in the new King an opportunity for a new start. Puritans held great hopes that James was someone whose religious views were similar to theirs and who would establish the Presbyterian Church. For this reason, a delegation was sent to present "Millenary Petitions" to King James who had still been travelling south from Scotland in 1603. Signed by more than 1,000 ministers of the Church of England, it demanded drastic reformation in the church.

In response to this petition, The Hampton Court Conference was held in January 1604 to which both bishops and Puritan representatives were invited to discuss the issue. One could say that King James' concern for religious peace and stability led him to

propose a conference at which Anglican and Puritan representatives could set out their concerns with a view to achieving a resolution of religious conflicts. It looked like both candidates were equally chosen; however, it is important to note that the Puritans were not allowed to nominate their own representatives. As a result, all of the Puritans who attended the conference were known to be moderates, not extremists, led by John Reynolds, President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Moreover, there were only four Puritans among 19 representatives. In spite of the well prepared organized formation, Puritans were beginning to realize that their expectations for the new King were overestimated. At the Hampton Court Conference, the issues the Puritans presented in the petition were rejected and then Reynolds proposed a new Bible translation. Puritans demanded that "one only translation of the Bible" should be "declared authentically, and read in the church". (McGrath, 161) McGrath assumes that Reynolds might have proposed this with the expectation that the "Geneva Bible" would be the one newly authorized for use in public worship, either in addition to or instead of the Bishops' Bible (161).

James I had every reason to agree with Reynolds' idea with an intention that the Puritans could have never imagined: he wanted to destroy the popularity of the Geneva Bible and shore up his authority. Some say that James VI was determined to produce the new Bible translation when he was assigned as the King of England, while others say that, as James I could not offer anything to Puritans, he was more than happy to accept Reynolds' idea. In either case, it was obvious that the hope of the Puritans was entirely unjustified.

From the beginning, James I had a greater preference for Anglicanism that focused on the close relationship between the Church and the Monarch and that thought highly of the role of the

Queen or King as the “supreme governor” of the Church of England. His famous words “no bishops, no King” demonstrates his view on the relationship between Church and State. The Presbyterian Church emphasized the sovereignty of God and the authority of the Scripture. James I seems to believe that Presbyterianism could lead to egalitarianism and republicanism, which would threaten the King’s power.

As many have pointed out, King James’ views must have been influenced by the unpleasant experience with Scottish Presbyteries, especially under Andrew Melville, a Scottish Presbyterian who had taught at the Geneva Academy. Acknowledging James as King, Melville nonetheless insisted that Christ was the true king of Scotland, and his kingdom was the Kirk, a kingdom in which James VI was merely a member, not a lord or head. For James VI in 1589 and the 1590s in Scotland, kingship meant primarily establishing his authority over Melville and his followers on the extreme Presbyterian wing of the Kirk. This faction made it very difficult for James VI to manage the Parliament. In addition, the Kirk used a pulpit as the place to openly attack the King. Taking this experience into account, it is not surprising that James I had no intention at all of promoting a Puritan or Presbyterian agenda in England. He much preferred the Anglican system of church government, which he felt would secure his status and power.

This experience must have also motivated King James’ interest in the European debate about the nature of kingship. He wrote *The True Law of Greek Monarchies* (1598) and *Basilikon Dragon* (1599), which contributed to the idea of divine right kingship (Wormald, 29). We can find his idea in the opening sonnet of the piece:

God gives not Kings the style of Gods in vain,
For on his throne his Sceptre do they sway;

And as their subjects ought them to obey,
So Kings should fear and serve their God again.
(cited in McGrath, 141)

Moreover, we can find King James' standpoint by examining the court masques, which had flourished under his reign. The purpose of the masque lies in celebration of the Royal King and his court. Accordingly, it tends to be thought of as flattery. In fact, the main contention of poet Ben Jonson, who wrote most of the masques in King James court, seemed to express the ideal court in a poetic form: to embody the idealization of virtue in the monarchy with his words as a Jacobean poet. Strong says that "the role of poets and artists was to make manifest not only the reality of Kingship, but its ideal as it dwelt in the Platonic realm". (Strong, 223) What Jonson was trying to show with masques was the Renaissance notions of the Golden Age, where no lust in love, no winter and no death exist. Orgel refers to the masque as Platonic and Machiavellian: 'Platonic because it presents images of the good to which the participants aspire and many ascend; Machiavellian because its idealizations are designed to justify the power they celebrate'. (40) The stage of the court masque should also be mentioned. The King was set as a focal point so that all lines of perspective from the stage would meet his eyes. That means only the King had a perfect view; all staging depended on where the King sits. Regardless of Jonson's masque philosophy, his masque was in line with the intention of James I, who insisted on the divine right of the King.

Under such a King, it was a vain wish for the Geneva Bible, which had been the favor of the Scottish church, to be authorized. In fact, King James hated the Geneva Bible referring it as the "worst of all" the English versions. (McGrath 160) He hated the marginal notes

of the Geneva Bible text, which could be seen as a challenge to his belief, i.e. the divine right of kings. The notes regularly use the word “tyrant” to refer to kings and claimed that tyrannical kings should not be obeyed. For example, the text and marginal notes for the sixth chapter, dealing with Daniel and his companions being thrown into the lions’ den reads:

Daniel 6:22 My God hath sent his angel, and hath shut the lions’ mouths, that they have not hurt me: forasmuch as before him (h) innocency was found in me; and also before thee, O king, have I done (i) no hurt.

(h) My just cause and uprightness in this thing in which I was charged, is approved by God.

(i) For he disobeyed the king’s wicked commandment in order to obey God, and so he did no injury to the king, who ought to command nothing y which God would be dishonored.

The comments suggest that the commandments of kings can be disobeyed when they conflict with the will of God. We can find more examples of the tyrant king in Daniel 11:36.

And the (s) king shall do according to his will; and he shall exalt himself, and magnify himself, and magnify himself above every god, and shall speak marvelous things against the God of gods, and shall prosper till the indignation (t) be accomplished: for that that is determined shall be done.

(s) Because the angels purpose is to show the whole course of the persecutions of the Jews until the coming of Christ, he now speaks of the monarchy of the Romans, which he

notes by the name of a king, who were without religion and condemned the true God.

(t) So long the tyrants will prevail a God has appointed to punish his people: but he shows that it is but for a time.

(cited from McGrath, p. 143)

This can be interpreted to mean that God has raised such tyrants to punish his people for their sins, but the days of such tyrants do not last. The notes above and other comments in the Geneva Bible regularly use the word “tyrant” referring to kings, which is never seen in the KJB. King James, who promoted the idea that kings had been ordained by God to rule the nations of the world to promote justice, must have wished to get rid of all the comments of the Geneva Bible.

Meanwhile, it has been pointed out that Psalm 105:15 defends the divine right of kings: “Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm”. As McGrath and others have pointed out, this is the line referring to the king to many Anglicans. However, the comments of the Geneva Bible read as follows:

Psalm 105:15 [Saying], Touch not mine (h) anointed, and do my (i)prophets no harm.

(h) Those whom I have sanctified to be my people.

(i) Meaning, the old fathers, to whom God showed himself plainly, and who set forth his word.

The term “anointed” refers to God’s people as a whole, which should deny the King’s privilege. The King should be respected and obeyed unconditionally in all circumstances in James’ view.

Accordingly, it was a good occasion to produce a new translation of the Bible for him

This paper briefly summarized and examined the background of the English-language Bible, focusing on William Tyndale and the King James Version. It is ironic that within a century's time the death penalty had become a tool to demonstrate the King's power. Comparing the intentions behind the two versions, Tyndale's appears nobler than that of James I, who wished to stabilize the King's position. Tyndale wished to translate God's words into English, eventually enabling laypeople to read the Bible themselves. King James, however, wanted to replace the Geneva Bible, which included notes challenging the divine power of kings, with the new versions. Meanwhile, Simpson's characterization of Tyndale's translation and the attitude of his followers toward Bible interpretation as nascent fundamentalism is appealing. While it is true that the simplicity and directness of the words in the Bible tend to allow broad sections of humanity to access its messages, it could lead to narrow-minded intolerance. Regardless, the role of Tyndale and his Bible should not be underestimated as a tool giving rise to a sense of national consciousness and influenced the formation of the national identity of sixteenth century England. Compared to the background behind Tyndale's version, it cannot be denied that the KJB seems to be less virtuous: it was published largely based on King James' political intentions. Although partly intended as a means of religious unification, as Barnaby and Wry say, "the royal project of biblical translation" may have been "a key element in the establishment of a new religious uniformity", (1234) while his less enthusiastic attitude towards Puritans seems to be clear from the beginning attributable to his experience in Scotland. By accepting Reynolds' request to

publish a new Bible translation, he could have disguised himself as an understanding king even to Puritans for a moment, which would soon be unmasked. It was an opportunity for King James to secure his throne in the new country. By omitting the comments in the Geneva Bible and replacing the Bible, which had been popular up to then, he must have wanted to hold Puritans in England. Bible translation must have been the key tool for King James to secure his authority and justify his theory of the divine power of kings.

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