

English Language resources: Historical background and the *King James Bible*

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The following information is provided as information to help students understand the cultural position of the Bible.

Although it is useful for them to have this background knowledge, students are not expected to include this level of historical detail in their textual analysis.

Early translations

Translating the Latin text

Before the early sixteenth century, the standard version of the Bible was in Latin. It was known as the Vulgate and based on a translation from the original Greek and Hebrew made by St. Jerome in the fourth century.

However, since the Anglo-Saxon period, the Gospels and Psalms had been translated into Old English for private devotions. Further vernacular biblical books were added through the Medieval period, despite opposition from the Catholic Church. The Church wanted to control the text and its interpretations, as one of the sources of its authority. It was judged to be heretical to render the Bible into English, and to produce, own or disseminate copies of the Bible in English was punishable by death.

Extensive English translations

Despite the suppression of English translations, a radical scholar named John Wyclif and his followers produced a Middle English New Testament and Psalms, in the same period that Chaucer was writing vernacular poetry. Hand-written copies were passed round by the radical Lollards, until suppressed by the Archbishop of Canterbury. After Wyclif died in 1384, he was declared a heretic and his body exhumed and burnt.

However, the impulse of the Reformation in Europe meant that the desire for this most important religious text in the vernacular could not be stopped. A century and a half after Wyclif (and working from Europe for

safety), William Tyndale produced his English translations from 1525 until his imprisonment in 1535, after which he was executed in 1536. His work was added to by Miles Coverdale (1488-1568) and the advent of printing meant that it was widely distributed.

The stamp of royal authority

King Henry VIII's break from the authority of the Catholic Pope hastened the Reformation within England. Soon after Tyndale's death, the King commissioned his own authorised translation, in order to help legitimise his claim to be Head of the Church of England. Based on the work of Tyndale and Coverdale, this was known as *The Great Bible* (owing to its size). It was placed in every parish church in 1539 and marked a turning point in the history of the Bible in English. Three decades later the Protestant Queen Elizabeth also produced an official Bible reflecting her reign – *The Bishops' Bible* (first printed in 1568).

1611

An authoritative translation

The *King James Bible* was begun in 1604 under the authority of Queen Elizabeth's Protestant heir, King James I of England (already James VI of Scotland). Published in 1611, it was the work of six groups of scholars (a total of 47 men). The text was decided by consulting a range of sources, including Greek, Hebrew, Latin and the English texts of Tyndale and Coverdale, with the 1602 edition of the *Bishop's Bible* being used as the starting point.

Status and stability

The *KJB* appeared at a time of great political and religious turmoil, as England had experienced both the Reformation under Henry VIII in the previous century, as well as a short-lived reversion to Catholicism under Queen Mary. The Church of England was still a relatively new phenomenon, and King James was new to the throne, keen to use a new translation of the Bible to express his status and to consolidate the position of the Church in his newly-inherited country.

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The text was carefully written in order to reinforce James' wish for conformity amongst the many religious factions of England, including using words which reflected the hierarchies and structure of the Church of England at that time. (Although referred to here as the *KJB*, the name *King James Bible* was not used for this text until the late eighteenth century.)

(See <http://www.crossref-it.info/articles/71/English-Bible-Translations> > An authoritative state Bible)

A public Bible

The *KJB* was first published using a large, readable font and sent to churches. It bore the inscription, 'Appointed to be read in Churches' and was sometimes accompanied by a reader, so that its message would be accessible to all.

Smaller, private Bibles became available a little later, so that reading at home, among the family or in individual private study, was possible. In 1611 most people were not able to read but wealthier members of society would have been literate and had the means to purchase a copy of the text. The development of the printing press led to increased availability of texts, increased literacy and greater standardisation of the English language.

Early Modern English

The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries comprised a period of huge linguistic development for Early Modern English (as used by Shakespeare). It was a time of exploration and discovery which led to the introduction of new commodities, new ideas and new words.

In the publication of any text there is pressure to use the most up to date language; however the status of the Bible as a traditional and 'fixed' text worked to resist the movement towards change. This accounts for the

preference of the translators for slightly archaic forms of words and for sentences, which were closer to Latin than English styles. It also reflects the older age of many of the translators, who harked back to the English of their youth. For example, the 'eth' suffix (as in, 'The Lord giveth') is frequently found in the *KJB* even though contemporary English was moving to the modern 's' ending (as in, 'The Lord gives').

1769

Reproductions

Between 1611 and 1769 the many re-printings of the *KJB* introduced numerous changes (reflecting new scholarship) and also some misprints, such as the omission of 'not' from 'Thou shalt not commit adultery', in what became known as 'the Wicked Bible'. The need was felt for a new version which could be trusted.

Reasons for change

Accuracy

The eighteenth century was an age characterised by the desire for linguistic correctness and prescriptivism. The English language had changed over the last 150 years in terms of spelling, punctuation and grammar, and it was felt that a more modern version of the 1611 text was needed. Information about the English language was becoming widely available in dictionaries and grammar books, and there was a larger, more educated reading audience which was eager for accurate copies of Christianity's central religious text.

With some 24,000 changes to the 1611 original, the 1769 version of the *KJB* is the one which is widely referred to today, building on the popularity of the 1611 version and extending its influence well into the twentieth century.

Ideas

Major advances being made in science, technology and industrialisation during the eighteenth century also affected the reception of the *KJB*:

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- ❖ Religion was still a strong presence in the lives of eighteenth century people, but some of the ideas in the Bible were increasingly called into question by the discoveries and theories of scientists such as Newton, Erasmus Darwin and Davy
- ❖ Humanism began to emerge in opposition to traditional religious belief, and Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* (1793) mocked the claims of the Bible
- ❖ Although agriculture and ruralism remained central to the consciousness of the period, as urbanisation and industrialisation progressed these concerns became more idealised as 'the pastoral'. In this light, the rural metaphors and imagery of the Bible may have encouraged eighteenth century readers to regard scriptural narratives as idealised fiction rather than accounts rooted in everyday experience.
- ❖ Cheaper publishing and greater disposable wealth meant that more people had the finance to buy books, with the library movement also increasing access
- ❖ Ideas about the position of women in society were beginning to change, which had an impact on language. In the twentieth century, feminist movements drew attention to 'sexist language' in English texts, and some Bible translations such as *Today's New International Version* (2005) reflect the pressure to use inclusive language.

Modern English and the Bible

Current trends in English towards informalisation and the blurring of boundaries between written and spoken language have largely been avoided by Bible scholars, keen to preserve the authority and 'correctness' of the text. However, some versions have been produced which meet the perceived needs of the younger audience, aiming to employ a youth sociolect in order to appeal to an excluded and possibly cynical reader.

Paraphrases

Modernisation of the biblical text has been particularly prevalent in America, since the *KJB* is still widely used as a text from which to preach. Thus the *Good News Bible* (1966-76) was produced as a paraphrase which simplified its language in order to include more readers. Subsequent versions have taken this modernisation further: *The Message* is a good example of a highly colloquial and accessible Bible text.

The strength of American influence in terms of creating new versions of the Bible reflects the strong social standing of Christianity in the US, representing up to 80% of the population. England, by contrast, has become a more secular society and the Bible is no longer a bestseller, nor indeed is there a Bible in every home, unlike the situation in the previous century.

The nineteenth century and beyond

Social change

The King James Bible remained the dominant version of the Bible in English throughout the nineteenth century and into the first half of the twentieth, with a version to be found in every home and school. Through the processes of colonisation and missionary activity it was also taken around the world and became a 'primer' for many coming into contact with the English Language for the first time.

Meanwhile, vast social and political changes were sweeping Europe:

- ❖ The expansion of the British Empire ensured prolonged contact with many other languages, which led to increases in the English lexicon
- ❖ Educational provision widened and by 1900 was available for all British children