

## **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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### **The Bible Speaks Today: How the Bible came into being**

Four hundred years old and still going strong - not a bad record! You may have read in the press or heard on TV or the radio that 2011 is the 400th anniversary of the production of the Authorised Version, or King James Version, of the Bible. This is a good time to reflect on the tremendous sacrifices made by many so that we in this country could have God's word, the Bible, available in our own language. At the same time, we need to appreciate the vital influence that this version of the Bible has had upon our national life. Sadly, today the Bible is ignored by many, but that influence still remains.

Today, we begin a series of four talks under the general heading 'The Bible speaks today'. This talk will concentrate on how the Authorised Version came to us - a potted history if you like. Subsequent talks, God willing, will focus on what the Bible says about salvation, about the Church, and about the future. We hope that you will be able to listen in to all four talks.

We know that the Bible consists of two parts: the Old Testament which was written mainly in Hebrew and the New Testament which was written mainly in Greek. This was all right if you understood Hebrew and Greek but of little use to the majority of people in this country. A Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, was produced in 405 AD for the benefit of the clergy familiar with Latin. Ordinary people, however, were left in ignorance of what God had to say to them and had to depend on others to tell them what the Bible was saying.

It is interesting to note that the first recorded words of God in the Bible are "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3). This was even before the creation of the sun and the moon. That may be difficult to understand but it may help to recall that at the end of the Bible, in the description of the eternal state, we read, "And there shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light" (Revelation 22:5). We might say that one of God's principal concerns is to spread light where there is darkness, not only in the physical realm but also in the spiritual realm (see 2 Corinthians 4:6).

The light of the Christian Gospel has shone on this country. Firstly, through men and women who came to this country announcing the message of the Bible; secondly, it dawned as the Bible was translated into English so that men and women might learn its message for themselves. We will be concerned with this second aspect.

There were three main difficulties to the widespread understanding of the Bible.

1. Until the 15th century, all Bibles had to be written out by hand. It is said that it would take a monk 10 months to do this. Understandably, Bibles were few and very expensive.
2. For centuries, only the Latin translation was available.
3. The majority of people could not read.

It is interesting to reflect on the marked contrast today.

1. Bibles are relatively cheap and plentiful.
2. In many, though not all, parts of the world, Bibles are available in the language of the peoples.
3. In this country, as in many others, the majority of people are able to read. The formation of Sunday Schools by Robert Raikes and others in the late 18th century had a twofold aim: firstly, to teach children the message of the Bible and secondly, to teach them to read so that they might read God's word for themselves.

One of the earliest to produce a translation of the whole Bible in English was John Wycliffe (1330-1384). Under his direction, Wycliffe preachers would travel the country with a few pages of the Bible, proclaiming its message. Sadly, clerical opposition to this movement was so intense that in 1401 the Church persuaded Parliament to pass a law: "We resolve therefore and order that no-one henceforth on his own authority translate any text of Holy Scripture into the

English or any other language". England was the only European country to have such a law. So much for English toleration! The Church's hatred of Wycliffe became so intense that in 1428 his bones were dug up in Lutterworth and burned and his ashes scattered. Nevertheless, his memory is preserved today in the work of the Wycliffe Bible Translators.

Miles Coverdale (1488-1568) and others carried on the work of Bible translation. However, for the Bible as we know it today, we are largely indebted to the work of William Tyndale (1492-1536). He is best remembered for his remark to a visiting cleric who was insisting that only the Church could teach the Scriptures: "If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy who drives the plough to know more of the Scriptures than you do".

During this time, God had been at work in other directions so that the light of His word might yet shine out. In 1456, printing was invented and the first Gutenberg Bible was produced in Germany. The technique was then in place for the mass production of the Bible as soon as Tyndale had finished his work. Because of opposition in England, Tyndale was forced to flee to the continent and carry on his work there. Finally, his English translation of the New Testament was completed in 1525. Copies of this flooded into Britain, hidden in bales of wool brought in from the continent by Christian merchants who were willing to risk their lives since the Bible in English was still a banned book.

Eventually, Tyndale's enemies caught up with him in Europe. He was imprisoned and on 6 October 1536, was tied to a stake, strangled (perhaps as an act of mercy), and his body burnt. Before he died, he prayed, "Lord, open the king of England's eyes". The king of England then was Henry VIII. A few years later, he revoked the law banning the production of the English Bible and ordered that a copy of the English Bible be displayed in every church! We have a prayer-answering God! Proverbs 21:1 reminds us, "The king's heart is in the hand of the LORD, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes." Although Tyndale had started work on the translation of the Old Testament, others had to finish that work.

We need to recognise the tremendous debt we owe to Tyndale and others involved in the distribution of the New Testament who paid for their work with their lives. When Queen Elizabeth II was crowned in Westminster Abbey in 1953, during the Coronation service, as part of an age-old tradition, she was presented with a Bible with the words that here "was the most precious thing that this world affords". Notwithstanding the bejewelled crown of state on her head nor the jewels and rich robes worn by members of the congregation, this was no over-statement! We need, today, to have a similar appreciation of the Bible for it is God's life-giving word to men.

Others, too, were prepared to lay down their lives rather than forsake the clear teachings of the Bible. When Bishops Hugh Latimer and Nicholas Ridley were martyred at the stake, as the fires were being lit, Hugh was heard to say to Nicholas, "Be of good comfort, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle by God's grace in England as, I trust, shall never be put out." This broadcast goes out today only because, by the grace of God, that candle has not yet been put out!

The next significant step in the production of the King James Bible actually took place in Scotland. A meeting of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland took place on 16 May 1601 in Burntisland, Fife. It was presided over by James VI of Scotland. He was highly educated and a noted Bible scholar. It was agreed there that a new translation of the Bible was needed. Little could it have been realised then that in two years time, James VI of Scotland would become James I, king of England and Scotland. Here was striking confirmation of Romans 13:1: "For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God."

Queen Elizabeth I died in 1603 and the Tudor royal line came to an end. Though there were two other possible claimants to the throne, James was announced as Elizabeth's successor. Shortly after succeeding to the throne, James was confronted by representatives of the Puritans and of the Bishops. The Puritans were concerned about corruption in the Church and favoured the Geneva Bible which James knew contained many footnotes of anti-royalist sentiment. The Bishops insisted that all was well with the Church and favoured the Bishops' Bible, the only one allowed by law to be read in the churches of the land. James knew that this was a poor translation.

The decision was again taken that a new translation of the Bible was necessary. James may have hoped that this decision would show his power over both Puritans and Bishops and help to unite both these rival factions and also to unite, what had been up till now, the separate countries of England and Scotland. Whatever his motives, it cannot be doubted that God was behind this decision - another striking example of Proverbs 21:1 which we referred to earlier!

Accordingly, a conference was convened by James the first at Hampton Court Palace on 14 January 1604. Six teams were to be chosen comprising the most able scholars of the land. Two of these were from Westminster, two from Oxford and two from Cambridge. Each team was allocated different books of the Bible for translation. Their work was finished early in 1610. Clearly this was no rushed effort but a work of detailed scholarship and careful effort using the best manuscripts available at that time. Two representatives from each team were then chosen and these representatives met together in Stationers Hall, London for about nine months. Not only did they check the accuracy

of the translations submitted but, perhaps more importantly, they listened to every word being read out and, where necessary, made changes. Their careful effort is responsible for the beauty and the majesty of the words used. After all, at a time when many people were still unable to read for themselves, and would have to listen to others read the Bible to them, it was important that the words they heard would create an impression and be easy to remember. The completed Bible was finally published in 1611, four hundred years ago. Their work owed much to Tyndale's earlier work.

Nine years later, in 1620, the Pilgrim Fathers set sail for America seeking greater religious liberty than was then available in England. Of course, they would have taken with them this recently published King James Version and the colonies they established would be greatly affected by this. Indeed, in parts of America today, the King James Version is almost sacrosanct. As the years went by and the British Empire developed, so the King James Version spread throughout the English speaking world.

We cannot overestimate the profound effect that this translation has had throughout the English speaking world. It has affected our English language and literature, our legal system and our whole way of life. We can only touch on a few examples of this. Incidents of Scripture have left their mark on our language so that expressions like, Job's comforters, Doubting Thomas, a Damascus road experience, are readily understood. But the actual words of Scripture have also passed into everyday language. So we speak of "turning the world upside down" (Acts 17:6), "the powers that be" (Romans 13:1), "a fly in the ointment" (Ecclesiastes 10:1), "no peace to the wicked" (Isaiah 57:21), and there are many others. It is interesting that, over the centuries, the latter expression has been modified to "no peace for the wicked" and then to "no rest for the wicked".

Our English legal system, respected throughout the world, has been largely based upon the King James Bible. What the Bible said was right, our legal system has upheld and what the Bible said was wrong, our legal system has condemned. Sadly, it has to be acknowledged that, in recent years, we have passed laws which fly in the face of clear Biblical teaching. That can only be to our undoing!

While recognising our great debt to the King James Bible, we need to be careful lest we ascribe to it a veneration which, I believe, its translators would not have wished for. We should remember that as early as 1640, major corrections were made to the translation and, in 1769, under Dr. Benjamin Bleaney some 24,000 corrections were made. Our present version is based largely on that later revision.

Today, the Bible is probably the world's bestselling book. Yet there is a danger in this widespread availability that we need to recognise. "Familiarity breeds contempt" is a well-known saying but it can apply also to our attitude to the Bible. We might recoil in holy horror at such a suggestion, yet it was the experience of the people of God centuries ago. When God delivered His people from Egypt and brought them into the wilderness on their way to Canaan, He provided them with manna in the wilderness. Of their experience of that unknown substance, we read, "It was like white coriander seed, and the taste of it was like wafers made with honey" (Exodus 16:31). Some time later, they complained to Moses, "We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic". Of the manna, we read, "Its taste was like the taste of pastry made with oil" (Numbers 11:4-9). Finally, we read, "And the people spoke against God and against Moses: "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and our soul loathes this worthless bread." So the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people; and many of the people of Israel died" (Numbers 21:5-6). May God keep us all from any such attitude to His word! It is His word which tells us of the Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ, and His redemptive work at Calvary. Where would we be without Him?

There has not been time in this short introduction to look at other translations of the Bible which have emerged in the intervening years. It is important that they display the same careful scholarship that characterised those early scholars. In closing, it is worth reminding ourselves of Tyndale's wish which we mentioned at the beginning: "If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause the boy who drives the plough to know more of the Scriptures than you do". There may not be many plough boys in Britain today but it is still important that everyone be able to read God's word in language which is both familiar and understandable to them.

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