

# Commissioning the King James Bible

When King Henry VIII died, he left the following legacy.

- England had broken its ties with the Papal power of Rome, and
- New Bibles were authorised or met with royal approval so that the common people had access to reading the Word of God.

## Who Next?

The order of succession to the English throne was bound to be a bit confusing as Henry had six wives, some Catholic and some Protestant.

- First in line was his son Edward, son of Jane Seymour.
- Next came Mary, daughter of the Catholic Catherine of Aragon, followed by
- Elizabeth, daughter of Anne Boleyn, known for her Protestant sympathies.

### ❖ King Edward VI

Henry died on 27 January 1547 and was succeeded by his very young son, Edward VI. Edward was the first English King to have been raised in a Protestant court. He reigned for only six years and died in 1553 at the age of 15. During his short life he continued the course of reforms set in motion by his father, being influenced by Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury,

### ❖ Queen Mary I

On Edward's death in 1553, Queen Mary I came to the throne. Being a



Queen Mary I – A Catholic Queen

Catholic, she was determined to restore papal authority, so she unleashed a reign of terror upon protestant England to try to achieve that objective. During her reign she executed over 300 people from all classes of society including, housewives, labourers, artisans, professional people, one Archbishop (Thomas Cranmer) and several Bishops, including John Hooper (1555). She also burnt reformers, Latimer and Ridley in Oxford and John Rogers (editor of Matthew's Bible), in Smithfield. In Oxford there is a Martyrs' Monument that bears witness to the cruelty she exercised on her subjects because they possessed or read the Bible.

Within one month of her accession to the English throne, Mary banned the reading of all Bibles in English Churches and reinstated the Latin Mass. She also destroyed many copies of the

1553 Great Bible. Nevertheless, one English edition of the New Testament was published during her reign. The Whittingham New Testament, based largely on the work of Tyndale, was printed in Geneva in 1557.

It had a special feature that we see today in the King James Bible. Italics were introduced for words that are not found in the Greek manuscripts. This practice was also used in the Geneva Bible (1560) for both Old and New Testaments. This simple device enables the reader to easily see which words have been added to complete the sense in English.

### ❖ **Queen Elizabeth I**

After a reign of only 5 years Queen Mary became terminally ill and died, at the age of just 42. She was succeeded by her half-sister, Queen Elizabeth I, on 14 January 1559. This brought a sense of great relief among the exiled Protestant community who were now free to return from the continent. They became known as “Puritans” because they had been influenced by a continental Protestantism which was considered purer than English Protestantism.

Elizabeth now became Supreme Head of a divided church. On the one hand there were the Bishops who controlled the Church and retained many of the vestiges of Catholic ceremony in Church worship. On the other, there was an increasing number of Puritans who challenged the Bishops’ power over the Church and promoted the use of the Geneva Bible. They wasted no time.

On the way to her coronation Queen Elizabeth was presented with a manuscript copy of the four Gospels in Wycliffe’s version. The 1560 Edition of the Geneva Bible was dedicated to Queen Elizabeth I. Despite official

opposition, the Geneva Bible was widely read in both the Elizabethan and Jacobean era. In October 1568 the Bishops responded and presented Queen Elizabeth with a copy of the Bishop’s Bible.

### ❖ **James I**

Queen Elizabeth died on 24 March 1603 and left no heir to the throne. The next in the family line with a claim to the throne was James VI of Scotland, son of Queen Mary I, who was herself the granddaughter of Margaret Tudor, sister of Henry VIII. James VI of Scotland came to the English throne as James I of England. He was christened a Catholic but due to the changing religious scene in Scotland was committed to a Protestant and academic education.

In 1603, James was met on his journey south from Scotland to London, by a Puritan lobby group. They presented the “Millenary Petition” signed by over 1000 churchmen demanding reforms in rites and ceremonies perpetuated in church



*King James I of England*

services. These included the practice of making the sign of the cross at baptism and wearing of clerical dress for which there is no Biblical basis.

The Puritans, it seemed, had taken the initiative and wrong footed the Bishops who were alarmed by these developments. The Puritans argued correctly, that understanding the teaching of Scripture was more important than observing church traditions and the authority of the clergy.

The Apostle Paul encouraged the young man Timothy not to lose sight of the most important priorities in life, when he wrote:

*... from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness ... (2 Timothy 3:15–16).*

## **Hampton Court Conference**

On 24th October 1603 King James sent a letter giving notice of a three day conference he was to convene in January 1604. The conference was to be attended by the King, the Privy Council, bishops and other learned men. The Bishop of London, Richard Bancroft, played a pivotal role in the conference. He worked subtly to influence the King and sought to persuade him that the Puritans were in the same camp as the Papists.

Both, he argued, wanted to challenge the authority and divine right of kings. Bancroft argued that the King's best interests were therefore safe with the Bishops. James believed his royal authority was dependent on the Bishops, if "no bishops, no King". The

Bible teaches us to respect rulers: they are dependent on God. He sets up rulers and removes them according to His purpose with the nations. The apostle Paul told Timothy:

*I exhort first of all that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and all who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and reverence. For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour ... (1 Timothy 2:1–3).*

Nebuchadnezzar King of Babylon learnt this lesson from practical experience when God deposed him for a time and then restored him to his throne. As Nebuchadnezzar put it:

*... my reason returned to me, and for the glory of my kingdom, my honor and splendour returned to me. My counsellors and nobles resorted to me, I was restored to my kingdom, and excellent majesty was added to me. Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honour the King of heaven, all of whose works are truth, and His ways justice. And those who walk in pride He is able to put down. (Daniel 4:36–37).*

## **Bishops**

Bancroft was instructed to select who should attend the conference and was the spokesman for the team of Bishops. The conference delegates totalled 19, which included only four Puritans. The Puritan team was led by John Reynolds, President of Corpus Christi College, Oxford and Lawrence Chadderton, Master of Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Reynolds and Chadderton also had the distinction that they were invited



*Emmanuel College, Cambridge: Lawrence Chadderton was its first Master.*

to be members of the translation team.

The matters to be discussed at the Conference were those expressed in the Millenary Petition. There was no proposal on the agenda for the production of a new translation of the Bible. On the first day the debates focussed on Puritan concerns about phrases in the Prayer Book and other Church matters. These were all dismissed by the King. On the second day Reynolds put forward four demands for reformation of the Church.

The Puritans' hope was that the Geneva Bible would be authorised for use in the Churches. James regarded it as a version which challenged the authority of Kings and was the "worst of all" the English versions.

### **Commissioning the Bible**

In 1604 Richard Bancroft was promoted to Archbishop of Canterbury on the death of the incumbent. The Hampton Court conference was not going well. The Bishops resisted everything the Puritans requested. James rejected all the demands of the Puritans and was unable to offer them anything. They needed to propose something to which the King could assent. John Reynolds speaking on behalf of the small Puritan delegation requested that there might

be a new translation of the Bible.

Bancroft immediately opposed the idea, "if every man's humour were followed, there would be no end of translating". However, the idea appealed to the King and Bancroft was overruled. James was a scholar in his own right having translated parts of the Psalms and produced a paraphrase of the Book of Revelation. King James' decision was that there would be a new translation of the Bible.

By the end of July 1604 the translators had been appointed. Fifty-four scholars had been nominated and divided into 6 groups or companies. Two groups were to work in Cambridge, two in Oxford and two in Westminster. It was agreed that "a translation be made of the whole Bible, as consonant as can be to the original Hebrew and Greek; and this to be set out and printed, without marginal notes, and only to be used in all churches of England in time of divine service."

### **Translation Rules**

Archbishop of Canterbury Bancroft was to oversee the project for the King. Fifteen rules were drafted to be observed in the translation work and served to limit the freedom of the translators. In all this we can see the hand of God working to put things in place ready for the time when the Gospel message would be preached throughout the world just as Jesus had commissioned his disciples:

*"Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:15–16).*

**Peter Moore**

*Next: Translating the Bible*