

King James Bible endures for 400 years

By Melodie Woerman,

[Episcopal News Service] It has been called one of the two greatest works of the English language, rivaled only by Shakespeare. For many, it is the only Bible they consider "authentic." It was seven years in the making, the work of a 54-member committee, but within 90 years it had come to be known simply as "the Bible."

This year marks the 400th anniversary of the printing of the King James Bible, a work of religious, political and linguistic force that continues to shape the thinking and vocabulary of much of the English-speaking world.

Two copies of first editions of the Authorized Version, as it was known when printed in 1611, are in the Episcopal Diocese of Kansas at the Quayle Bible Collection at Baker University in Baldwin City, Kansas, along with first or early editions of works that led up to the creation of the Bible authorized by King James I of England. Kay Bradt, director of library services at Baker and the wife of Episcopal priest the Rev. George Wiley, serves as curator for the collection. She said the two originals there are known as the "He" and "She" Bibles, based on differing translations of Ruth 3:15 — one says "he went into the city," and the other, "she went into the city." That difference comes, she said, because different printers produced the first runs of the newly revised translation.

The confusion on their part is understandable, she said. "The Hebrew says 'he,' but the context indicates it should be 'she,'" Bradt said. These first editions are quite rare, with fewer than 50 of the "He" Bibles and fewer than 150 of the "She" versions still in existence. The collection also has a copy of the infamously nicknamed "Wicked" Bible, an edition printed 20 years later in which the printer glaringly omitted "not" in the seventh commandment, rendering it "Thou shalt commit adultery." Most of the 1,000 copies were destroyed, making this version very rare.

Bradt said errors in these Bibles were common, even in first editions, given that all the type was set by hand. "They would print some copies, find errors, change them, and then print more," she said. That didn't help the printer of the Wicked Bible, though. He landed in debtors' prison, she said, unable to pay the fine levied against him for his mistake.

Centuries of precursors

The King James Bible didn't spring just from the linguistic skills of the 54 learned men who produced it. Rather it was the result of more than 200 years of English translations of the Scriptures, and the Quayle Collection includes all of them, including many first editions. John Wycliffe translated the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible into English in the late 1380s, an act that had the early reformer branded a heretic after his death.

As Reformation ideals spread across Europe, one of its adherents, William Tyndale, asked to translate the Bible into English but was denied the right to do so. He then fled to Belgium, where in 1526 he produced an English New Testament; copies of it were smuggled into England in bales of cloth. He translated the entire Bible into English in 1530, but its Protestant leanings were too much for King Henry VIII. In spite of his eventual break with the Church in Rome, Henry feared the egalitarianism advocated by reformers. In 1536 Tyndale was strangled and his body burned at the stake.

Tyndale's influence

But the influence of Tyndale's Bible already was being felt. After Henry's break with Rome in 1531, he commissioned his own English Bible, known as the Great Bible because of its size, which was produced in 1538. He wanted a text that would promote knowledge of the Scriptures among his subject but wouldn't introduce wholesale reformist ideals that were taking root elsewhere in Europe.

Myles Coverdale, who had done his own translation in 1535, gave Henry such a Bible, basing his version on Tyndale's work but removing things the king found too Protestant, like the use of "congregation" for "church," and "senior" instead of "priest." Henry ordered that his Bible be placed in every church and chained to the lectern so it would be available at all times for those who wanted to read it for themselves.

After the tumultuous reign of the Roman Catholic Queen Mary I, Elizabeth I wanted an end to factional religious strife and hoped to advance that with her own Bible translation, which appeared in 1568. Known as the Bishops' Bible, it struck a balance between Henry's Great Bible and an English version produced in 1560 by English Protestants who fled to the continent during Mary's reign, known as the Geneva Bible. It did, however, introduce some odd variations. The Great Bible translated Ecclesiastes 11:1 as "Lay thy bread upon the waters," but the Bishops' Bible offered the peculiar "Lay thy bread upon wette faces."

Like the Great Bible, the Bishops' Bible was printed in large-format lectern editions. But the Geneva Bible was becoming a favorite among the people, with its smaller size, study aids like maps, and its novel idea of breaking up the biblical text into chapters and verses. It also was printed in easier-to-read Roman type, not the fancy Old English print style of the large lectern Bibles.

James' Bible

A year after James became King of England in 1603, a group of Puritan clergy petitioned for greater reform in the church, and from that grew the desire for a new translation that recognized the impact of the Geneva Bible on everyday life. James, himself a noted linguist, gathered scholars to create his new text. He ordered them to use as their basis the Bishops' Bible, "as little altered as the truth of the original will

permit," he decreed. They also relied on previous English editions, as well as their knowledge of the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts available to them.

In 1611 they gave their monarch the new Authorized Version that came to bear his name. However, Reformers wanting a more radical translation were left disappointed, as James' text avoided many of the changes they had sought. This version's impact was so great that by 1700 James' Bible had become the English Bible. A new, official translation wasn't even undertaken for another 250 years. The real hero of the King James' Bible, however, turned out to be William Tyndale. More than 80 percent of his 1530 translation ended up in it, and his work introduced into the English language such phrases as the powers that be, my brother's keeper, the salt of the earth, knock and it shall be opened unto you, seek and you shall find, and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.

Quayle's editions

In addition to its copies of the King James, the Quayle Collection has first editions of the Great Bible, the Bishops' Bible and a Roman Catholic translation from 1582 called the Douay Bible. It has very early, but not first editions, of Tyndale's and Coverdale's Bibles and Wycliffe's New Testament. It also has a 1732 version of Luther's Bible, as well as a 1692 reproduction of a Bible in Anglo-Saxon that dated to the year 1000.

Its impact today

The impact the King James Bible has had upon the English language — beyond the everyday phrases it introduced — includes the rhythmic cadences heard in the likes of Abraham Lincoln, poet Walt Whitman and Southern author Willa Cather. Even noted atheist Richard Dawkins said that with its influence on the culture of English-speaking countries, "...not to know the King James Bible is to be in some small way, barbarian." Bradt said she hopes the Quayle's display of the He and She Bibles, as well as all the versions that preceded it, will help people better understand this 400-year-old translation that has played such a key role in the formation of modern English Christian thought.

Quayle Collection Bibles on display

The collection is open to the public every Saturday and Sunday afternoon from 1-4 p.m. Tours by appointment also can be arranged by calling 785-594-8390. On display are the two first editions of the King James Bible, as well as copies of the Great Bible, the Bishops' Bible and other predecessors of the King James, as well as a page from a Gutenberg Bible, fragments of clay tablets and papyrus scrolls, and other rare works. The Quayle Collection is located at the south end of Baker University's Collins Library at 518 8th St. in Baldwin City, Kansas, south of Lawrence.

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