



DID KING JAMES ISSUE INSTRUCTIONS TO THE BIBLE TRANSLATORS TO CHANGE THE TEXT TO HIDE HIS OWN SINS?

An interesting discussion on twitter led me to a man who roundly asserted that King James I issued a list of instructions to the translators of the King James version of the bible, with an eye to getting his own sins omitted from it. It sounded quite improbable. In fact it is complete nonsense; but it drew my attention to the matter.

The King James Version or KJV has long been obsolescent and is now little used in England. In some ways this is rather a pity; but it is now quite unfit for daily use by any other than antiquarians. But it stands forever as a classic of the English language.

In 2005 Cambridge printed a version of the KJV, edited by David Norton, who also produced a book on the subject, his *A Textual History of the King James Bible*. Norton inevitably emphasises that the "original" 1611 edition has become changed in little ways as the centuries have passed; for, of course, he was producing his own edition. But the book contains much interesting information.

We know only a little about how the KJV was made. King James did not, of course, supervise the work personally, deputising to Bancroft, Bishop of London. But we do have three copies of a set of rules which seem to have been circulated among the translators. These are extant in manuscript. Norton tells us that British Library Add. 28721, fol. 24r; BL Harley 750; and BL Egerton 2884 fol. 6r contain the text. The first two omit rule 15, suggesting that it was an afterthought. Here is the text as he gives it, modernised from BL Add. 28721:

1. The ordinary Bible read in the Church, commonly called the Bishops' Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit.
2. The names of the prophets, and the holy writers, with the other names in the text, to be retained, as near as may be, accordingly as they are vulgarly used.
3. The old ecclesiastical words to be kept, viz.: as the word 'Church' not to be translated 'Congregation' etc.
4. When a word hath diverse significations, that to be kept which hath been most commonly used by the most of the Ancient Fathers, being agreeable to the propriety of the place, and the Analogy of Faith.
5. The division of the chapters to be altered either not at all, or as little as may be, if necessity so require.
6. No marginal notes at all to be affixed, but only for the explanation of the Hebrew or Greek words, which cannot without some circumlocution so briefly and fitly be expressed in the text.
7. Such quotations of places to be marginally set down as shall serve for fit reference of one Scripture to another.
8. Every particular man of each company to take the same chapter or chapters, and having translated or amended them severally by himself where he think good, all to meet together, confer what they have done, and agree for their part what shall stand.

9. As one company hath dispatched any one book in this manner, they shall send it to the rest to be considered of seriously and judiciously, for His Majesty is very careful for this point.
10. If any company, upon the review of the book so sent, shall doubt or differ upon any place, to send them word thereof, note the place and withal send their reasons, to which if they consent not, the difference to be compounded at the general meeting, which is to be of the chief persons of each company, at the end of the work.
11. When any place of especial obscurity is doubted of, letters to be directed by authority to send to any learned man in the land for his judgement of such a place.
12. Letters to be sent from every Bishop to the rest of his clergy, admonishing them of this translation in hand, and to move and charge as many as being skilful in the tongues have taken pains in that kind, to send his particular observations to the company, either at Westminster, Cambridge or Oxford.
13. The directors in each company to be the Deans of Westminster and Chester for that place, and the King's Professors in the Hebrew and Greek in each University.
14. These translations to be used where they agree better with the text than the Bishops' Bible, viz.: Tyndale's. Matthew's. Coverdale's. Whitchurch's. Geneva.
15. Besides the said directors before mentioned, three or four of the most ancient and grave divines, in either of the universities not employed in the translating, to be assigned by the Vice-Chancellors, upon conference with the rest of the heads, to be overseers of the translations as well Hebrew as Greek, for the better observation of the fourth rule above specified.

These rules were not followed rigidly, but contain much good sense. The "Bishop's Bible" was in general use; the Puritans wanted to use the Geneva edition, which contained much anti-monarchical material in its notes, and translated words like *ecclesia* as "congregation" rather than "church".

The translators then did not want any of this new-fangled nonsense. Instead they wanted a bible which was not radically different from what had gone before.

This was very sound thinking, in practice if not in theory. It is entirely possible to produce a bible which is quite uninspired, at least in a literary sense, and no more than a collection of printed pages. Anybody who has tried to encounter the old "New English Bible" will know what I am talking about.

Norton also tells us that:

... one of the translators, Samuel Ward, gave an account of the work to the Synod of Dort (20 November 1618). The account includes specimens of the rules, beginning with a paraphrase of rules 1, 2 and 6, and then, as if they were rules, moves on to the following matters of practice.

He then quotes an abbreviated version, which he references to "Pollard, p. 142", i.e. Pollard, A. W., ed., *The Holy Bible. A Facsimile in a Reduced Size of the Authorized Version*

Published in the Year 1611. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911.^[1]

Pollard is online [here](#). The opening 142 pages reprint a great collection of useful primary documents relating to the creation of the English bible from 1525 to 1611. The material from the Synod of Dort is given in the original Latin and in English:

The theologians of Great Britain offered a written explanation of the design and plan in accordance with which the business of the very accurate English version was instituted by the most Serene King James, of what plan was observed in distributing the work, and what rules were laid down for the translators ; with the intent that any points which might be judged useful to us might be taken from it. A copy of this document is subjoined.

Method which the English Theologians followed in the version of the Bible.

The theologians of Great Britain, unwilling to give a sudden and unconsidered answer to so important a question, considered it their duty to hold an early consultation, and since honourable mention has been made of the very accurate English translation lately set forth, with great care and at great expense, by the most Serene King James, to notify to this numerously attended Synod the design and plan with which this sacred business was furnished by his most Serene Majesty.

Firstly, in the distribution of the work he willed this plan to be observed: the whole text of the Bible was distributed into six sections, and to the translation of each section there were nominated seven or eight men of distinction, skilled in languages.

Two sections were assigned to certain London theologians; the four remaining sections were equally divided among the theologians of the two Universities.

After each section had finished its task twelve delegates, chosen from them all, met together and reviewed and revised the whole work.

Lastly, the very Reverend the Bishop of Winchester, Bilson, together with Dr. Smith, now Bishop of Gloucester, a distinguished man, who had been deeply occupied in the whole work from the beginning, after all things had been maturely weighed and examined, put the finishing touch to this version.

The rules laid down for the translators were of this kind :

In the first place caution was given that an entirely new version was not to be furnished, but an old version, long received by the Church, to be purged from all blemishes and faults ; to this end there was to be no departure from the ancient translation, unless the truth of the original text or emphasis demanded.

Secondly, no notes were to be placed in the margin, but only parallel passages to be noted.

Thirdly, where a Hebrew or Greek word admits two meanings of a suitable kind, the one was to be expressed in the text, the other in the margin. The same to be done where a different reading was found in good copies.

Fourthly, the more difficult Hebraisms and Graecisms were consigned to the

margin.

Fifthly, in the translation of Tobit and Judith, when any great discrepancy is found between the Greek text and the old vulgate Latin they followed the Greek text by preference.

Sixthly, that words which it was anywhere necessary to insert into the text to complete the meaning were to be distinguished by another type, small roman.

Seventhly, that new arguments should be prefixed to every book, and new headings to every chapter.

Lastly, that a very perfect Genealogy and map of the Holy Land should be joined to the work.

All very interesting indeed. The royal backing for the KJV is naturally emphasised. But what we see, in fact, is a cautious and conservative approach, resisting innovation.

The outcome of all this was the standard English bible for 400 years.

I'd like to end with a word about the context of all this.

The original tweeter was not truly interested in any of this. Rather he intended his readers to suppose a theological claim: that the KJV was not inspired by God.

It is a very common thing to encounter arguments of this sort: that claim to be historical, but where the intention is to insinuate a theological claim that won't bear examination and is usually a strawman, that nobody believes. It's always worth trying to get the insinuated claim stated.

In this case the insinuated claim is something like "human beings decided the exact words of the KJV, and some of them were wicked men, therefore this proves that your God" - said with a sneer - "did not inspire the bible".

Basically the claimant is asserting that he knows what an inspired bible "must" look like. It must fall from the sky, written on tablets of gold, or something. No human hand may be involved in any way.

A cynical man might ask how the claimant knows this. This is a statement about God; did he get a prophecy that tells him this?

This claim is not what Christians believe about the scripture. It is merely a strawman, designed to require something that does not exist and never did exist. Jesus himself talked about the rolls of the law as inspired; but these were written by men. However divine inspiration works, it can certainly cope with spelling mistakes, human error, and all the business of living in an imperfect world.

1. ^[1]Norton p.366, where the date of publication is amusingly given as 1611, not 1911.↩