

Sunday, September 26, 2021— Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 151 Establishing the Pre-Jamesian Historical Context

Introduction

- The last time we had class on Sunday, May 30, we concluded our study of the pre-King James English Bibles by wrapping up our discussion of the Rheims New Testament in [Lesson 150](#).
- After 150 lessons covering inspiration, preservation, canonicity, transmission, and translation we are now ready to begin discussing the King James Bible specifically.
- As you know, my goal has been to be as thorough and comprehensive as my time and resources would allow. I make no apologies for having devoted more than 150 hours of study on these topics despite criticism from some quarters that I am simply trying to be academic and thereby complicate “the simplicity that is in Christ” when it comes to the King James Bible.
- Unfortunately, as has been demonstrated throughout this class, King James advocates have often used inaccurate information to advance their position. As I stated in my book *The King James Bible in America*:
 - “I believe it is detrimental to the integrity of the position [pro-King James position] to say things that cannot be supported by the historical and/or textual facts. The truth does not benefit from rhetoric, no matter how well intended, that can easily be proven wrong by a better command of the relevant facts. King James Bible Believers have enough challenges as it is, without adopting positions that expose our flanks to further attack. . .

Much that has been written in pro-King James literature in defense of the position, possesses a superficial appeal, but is nonetheless incorrect. As King James Bible believers we need to make sure that we are applying the Berean principal (Acts 17:11) to our position on the Bible, and search things out to make sure they are so. Empty, unsound, and incorrect rhetoric does not help our position; it harms it. Therefore, it is incumbent upon believers who stand for the infallibility of the King James Bible to enunciate a position which is accurate and in accordance with the historical and textual facts.” (Ross, 131-135)
- Historically, the King James position has been championed most visibly and vocally by Acts 2 Baptists who vehemently oppose Mid-Acts Pauline Dispensationalism. Consequently, much has been said in pro-King James literature that is not only inconsistent with Pauline Dispensationalism; but is also detrimental to an accurate enunciation of the pro-King James position in general. Therefore, one of my goals for this class from its inception was to present the pro-King James position in a manner that was devoid of obvious factual errors and questionable rhetoric.

- If asked, I would be hard pressed to think of even one book on the King James position that I could recommend to someone without reservation or equivocation. The available literature on the matter is full of doctrinal problems of a dispensational nature, documentation problems, factual errors, plagiarism, *ad hominem* attacks, or tabloid style sensationalism.
- Over the past decade (since the King James conferences in 2011), I have become convinced that mid-Acts Pauline dispensationalists need to chart our own course with respect to the Bible issue by doing our own research and creating our own literature and resources.
- It is my belief that the King James Bible was the result of a nearly 100-year process of refinement that began with William Tyndale in 1526. Tyndale's rough draft was further refined through the publication of the following English translations of the *TR*: Coverdale (1535), Matthews Bible (1538), Great Bible (1539), Geneva Bible (1560), and the Bishops Bible (1568), as well as the Rheims New Testament (1582).
- One of the goals of this term will be to investigate the historical context in which the decision to retranslate was made in 1604. Was that decision the result of divine supernatural intervention whereby God pulled the political strings of King James to authorize a new translation? Or was there already a movement within the Bible believing English speaking world before 1604 that saw the need for a new translation?
- I believe that the historical evidence speaks to the truthfulness of the later as opposed to the former. If the doctrine of preservation is valid, we should see it conforming itself in history. Furthermore, the later view is a consistent mid-Acts dispensational position regarding God's working in time, i.e., God works through believers as they believe and apply God's word to the details of their lives.
- A second goal revolves around utilizing primary sources from early 17th century to inform our understanding of the translation process and the textual choices of the translators. Consequently, we will be endeavoring to look behind the translation process and demystify it to some degree.
- Thirdly, we will endeavor to ascertain the printed history of the text, its reception by early 17th century Englishmen as well as its impact upon the English speaking world.
- The course that I have charted for this term will be difficult, frustrating, enlightening, and time consuming. This is a story that must be told to shine the light of understanding onto the men and process that gave us our English Bible.

The Pre-Jamesian Historical Context

- During the twenty-nine years from the publication the Rheims New Testament in 1582 to the publication of the King James in 1611 (the latter years of the reign of Queen Elizabeth and early years of King James) the English achieved some of the culture's most glorious exploits. While

this is not the main focus of our study, we would be remiss to not note the following from the pen of Charles C. Butterworth regarding this transformative time period.

- “During these years. . . , England achieved some of its most glorious exploits, the record of which still imparts a glow to what have been called the spacious days of Queen Elizabeth. Though the recounting of these triumphs is not vital to our subject they made a lively background for the period of which we speak. Sir Francis Drake [defeated the Spanish Armada thus making England a political power] and Shakespeare [the most prominent figure of the English Renaissance] and Sir Walter Raleigh [played a leading part in English colonization of North America] and Lord Bacon [An English philosopher and statesman who served as Attorney General and as Lord Chancellor of England. His works are seen as developing the scientific method and remained influential through the scientific revolution.] may take no part in our particular chronicle, but they were all upon the stage.” (Butterworth, 197)
- It was also during these years that the Jamestown Colony, the first permanent English settlement in North America, was established in Virginia in 1607.
- Needless to say, the latter years of Elizabeth’s reign saw England emerge as a world power and cultural leader. James would project that power across the Atlantic and begin the process of colonizing what would eventually become the United States of America.
- While these points are interesting, and deserving of further study, they are not our focus. We are primarily concerned with the religious context of the age and the influence it exerted upon the English Bible.
- Please recall from [Lesson 138 The Bishops’ Bible: Understanding the Elizabethan Context](#) that we reviewed the political and religious context that gave rise to the Bishops Bible in 1568.
- Remember that Queen Elizabeth ascended the English throne in 1558 following the death of her half-sister Mary I in November 1558. Mary’s death signaled that it was safe for English exiles to return home from their places of continental refuge. Recall that a group stayed behind in Geneva, Switzerland to finish the complete Geneva Bible that was published in 1560.
- Blackford Condit, author of *The History of the English Bible* has an excellent section discussing this historical context.
 - “The reign of Queen Elizabeth was a transitional period. In ecclesiastical affairs nothing was settled. The short reign of Edward VI gave an impetus to Protestant principles which bade fair to decide the question of supremacy between the Old and New learning. A serious check, however, was given to this progress by the short but fierce reign of Queen Mary. But now the friends of the Reformation look upon the accession of Elizabeth with joy and heartfelt relief. Protestantism, just returned from exile, is stronger in its convictions and broader in its designs. Abroad it came in contact with men and ideas, and

by such contact gained in self-respect; while at home it had been tried in the fire and thereby purified and made stronger.

At the first the reformers were over confident in respect to the friendship of Elizabeth [The Epistle Dedicatory in the 1560 Geneva Bible is a clear example, in my opinion, of their over confidence.]. They attempted radical changes, such as “to set up King *Edward’s* Service, to pull down Images, and to affront the Priests.” But in this they met with an effectual check from the queen, who, though slow in developing her policy, soon made it evident that not even the English Church, much less the Genevan Party, had anything to expect from her by way of partial favors. Passing between the extremes of Edward and Mary, she followed the ecclesiastical policy of her royal father, thinking by a middle course to reconcile opposing parties. She insisted, however, that there should be no persecution for opinion’s sake, that the consciences of all should be respected. The two great ideals of Queen Elizabeth were, order in the State and uniformity in the Church. And the latter, contrary to her boasted respect for the individual’s conscience, was to be enforced for the sake of the former. During the reign of Henry VIII, the Church was made the child of the State, and political considerations ruled in ecclesiastical affairs. So under Queen Elizabeth, though she refused spiritual supremacy in form and title, yet held bishops and deans subject to her royal will. She berated them to their faces, and in writing to them threatened to unfrock them if they did not comply with her requests. Dead to religious convictions, serious controversies in religion had no interest to her...

The Reformation in England might have been thorough and evangelical had it not been for Queen Elizabeth. There was, on the part of the leaders of the evangelical party, the requisite spirituality, learning, and ability to have accomplished a grand work, especially since the people, weary of the Marian persecution, were so well prepared for it. But Elizabeth ignored the power of the Gospel, and having a decided distaste to Puritan simplicity, determined to hold to a part at least of the pomp and magnificence of the Romish Church. Her opinion was that images were not contrary to the word of God, and that the use of them in the churches “might be a means to stir up Devotion, and that at least, it would draw all People to frequent them the more; for the great measure of her Councils was, to unite the whole Nation unto one way of Religion.” And for the sake of established order, she determined upon a compromise in things indifferent, to which both Papists and Protestants must submit. Elizabeth held to the vain hope that the time would come when Catholic and Anglican “could come together on some moderate common ground.” But this forced unity only begot diversity, and this constrained order only brought forth discord. So that from the beginning the establishment of Elizabeth pleased neither of the parties. “To the ultra Protestants it was no better than Romanism; to the Catholics or partial Catholics it was in schism from the Communion of Christendom; while the great middle party, the common sense of the country of whom Elizabeth was the representative, were uneasy and dissatisfied.

Ecclesiastical partyism was rife in the time of Elizabeth. The Catholics, though under ban, experienced a secret but powerful revival. Priests disguised in “serving-men’s

apparel” swarmed in the North. And in other parts of England, though not permitted to preach, they administered mass in private chapels and reopened the iniquities of “the spiritual courts.” They maintained “the Pope’s authority,” and revived the ancient usages of “commuting penances for money, compounding for moral enormities, and grinding the widow and the orphan by their fees and extortions.” While popery, thus revived, maintained its unity, Protestantism was divided, and yet strong notwithstanding its divisions. Non-conformists grew vigorous by conflict. The Puritan was a sturdy defender of his bald and radical principles; and had it not been for his deep convictions and fierce energy, the English Church party would have been swallowed up by Catholic fanaticism. In the meantime the Presbyterians became a distinct party, setting up a new ecclesiastical polity with its corresponding discipline. They became, as it were, a wheel within a wheel; all of which gave no little offense to the State establishment.” (Condit, 266-269)

- Timothy Berg, author of the blog *King James Bible History*, also sheds some interesting light on the pre-Jamesian religious/historical content in his post titled “The Coming of King James and the Millenary Petition.”
 - “After decades of jolting back and forth, under Henry VIII’s changing whims, Edward VI’s passionate and speedy program of reform, and Mary I’s violent reversal of it, the only constant in English religion for the last three decades had been change. When Mary died and her sister Elizabeth I took the throne in 1558, Protestant reform began again, but of a quite different nature. Elizabeth at the start of her reign froze all the movement with what has come to be called the [Elizabethan Settlement](#).

The Settlement essentially consisted of two Acts of Parliament. First was the [Act of Supremacy](#) which established the Queen as “the only supreme governor of this realm, and of all her highness’s dominions and countries, as well in all spiritual and ecclesiastical things or causes as temporal.” This granted the monarch absolute power over the Church, restoring the Edwardian system that had been revoked under Mary, though Elizabeth wisely styled herself “Governor” rather than “Head” as her father had done (perhaps sensitive to hesitation about a monarch as “Head” of the Church, and a woman at that; a title reserved for Christ in the Bible).

Second was the Act of Uniformity, which established a newly amended 1559 Book Of Common Prayer as the required liturgy of rites and ceremonies in the Church of England; a drastic change from the Catholic reign of her sister, “Bloody Mary” (1553-1558), but not quite the rapidly reforming reign of her brother, Edward VI (1547-1553). Coming with all this was the establishment of the new Articles Of Religion (amending the older Articles), the closest thing that the Church of England would ever have to a consistent doctrinal statement.” (Berg, 5/11/20)

- The 1559 Book of Common Prayer became both emblematic of Elizabeth’s religious policy and a lightning rod for those desiring further reform.

- “What was so radical (or confusing) about the new Prayer Book was, first, that it was decidedly Protestant, starkly reversing Mary’s Catholic Church, but second, that it was frozen in place. Rather than simply reinstate the 1552 Book that had finally been moving reform forward at a faster pace, or take the opportunity of the new liberty to press forward with further reform, Elizabeth’s Book took the 1552 as a base, and froze it in time. Indeed, it even sent a glance backwards towards the 1549 Prayer Book that had only been intended as a stop-gap. The crystal-clear “Black Rubric” was removed, and a reference to the real presence was restored. There was still a heavy dose of the ceremonialism that reformers had been intending to abolish as “popish.”” (Berg, 5/11/20)
- These decisions by Queen Elizabeth created a breeding ground of religious controversy that served as the backdrop for James’ ascension to the throne in 1604.
 - “Ceremony, and how much of it (if any) there should be, became the new battleground of controversy in the Church. The Elizabethan Church was the only reformed Church in the world to still have an elaborate episcopacy of bishops over priests and deacons, retaining the medieval three-fold order. These bishops still each held a throne in their massive and elaborate cathedrals. There was still a sharply ceremonial liturgical year, and there was still heavy ritual surrounding the daily life and occasional services of the Church. Its ministers still wore (reduced, but still present) clerical vestments (special clothing for officiants at liturgical services) of sorts, a stark reminder of the medieval Church.

The Act of Uniformity imposed severe penalties for ministers failing to subscribe to the Book of Common Prayer and the Articles of Faith, and required the clergy to wear the vestments of the second year of Edward’s reign (whatever that might have meant). Clerical vestments were a sore point among Puritans for some time in the Church, especially in the Vestiarian Controversy. Questions of what should be worn, when, and by whom, reasserted themselves controversially for years to come. The issue at hand wasn’t so much about clothing, as about what its continuing use, and the Monarchy’s claiming of the prerogative to regulate it, could be argued to represent. Clerical dress, MacCulloch explains, “might seem trivial until one realizes the symbolism involved: separate dress for the clergy in both worship and everyday life implied a continuing doctrine of a separately ordained priestly order within the reformed congregation of God’s people, a notion which cast uncomfortable spotlights over the other, more profound imperfections of Elizabethan Reformation.”

The Settlement thus granted a uniform structure to the Church of England’s worship; a uniformity that remained highly controversial throughout Elizabeth’s reign, and that effectively stalled the violent roller-coaster of change that had afflicted England for three decades. But for many, it was halting what should have kept moving. The 1552 Prayer Book was only meant to be one more step, and the new Prayer Book should have been a further step, with yet more steps to come. “Reformation” Peter Marshall notes, “was a journey; a continual striving after elusive perfection, in the world and in oneself.” Thus,

for some, “The latest measures of 1559 were a staging-post, not a final destination.” But, “the Reformation, Queen Elizabeth believed, was over.” In some minds, Reform had stalled out, just as it was free to reach the bottom of the hill, and those who could see their goal through the windshield were frustrated that Elizabeth seemed to have hit the brakes. Indeed, she could be said to have thrown the car into park, and to have demanded that no one get out to walk anywhere.

In the last decade before James took the throne, discontent quieted down. Not because it had gone away, but because it was clear that Elizabeth would allow no further change in her Church, which some complained was still, “but half-way reformed,” and which it must be acknowledged still, “remained haunted by its Catholic past.” (Berg, 5/11/20)

- Thus, there were many who saw in the death of Elizabeth an opportunity to advance their religious cause with the soon to be coronated James.
- We will continue to explore these issues as a means of understanding the backdrop for the King James Bible in the next lesson.

Works Cited

Berg, Timothy. “[The Coming of King James And The Millenary Petition](#)” on *King James Bible History*. May 11, 2020.

Butterworth, Charles C. *The Literary Lineage of the King James Bible, 1340-1611*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1941.

Condit, Blackford. *The History of the English Bible: Extending from Earliest Saxon Translations to the Present Anglo-American Revision*. New York & Chicago: A.S. Barnes & Company, 1882.

Ross, Bryan. *The King James Bible in America*. Taos, NM: Dispensational Publishing House, 2019.