

Sunday, November 14, 2021— Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 156 The Hampton Court Conference: The Decision to Translate

Introduction

- In Lessons 154 and 155 we looked at the following aspects of the Hampton Court Conference:
 - Historical Significance ([Lesson 154](#))
 - Date (Lesson 154)
 - Accounts (Lesson 154)
 - Attendees ([Lesson 155](#))
- Today, in Lesson 156, I want to look at the circumstances surrounding the decision to translate the King James Bible at Hampton Court in 1604.

Hampton Court: The Decision to Translate

**Note: The point of this lesson is not to set forth all the details of what transpired at the Hampton Court Conference. For our purposes we will limit our comments to those aspects of Hampton Court that aid with understanding the history of the English Bible.*

- By 1604, there were two Bibles vying for acceptance in England: the Geneva and the Bishops.
- Originally published in 1560 (New Testament only in 1557) by English exiles seeking to escape persecution under the reign of Bloody Mary, the Geneva Bible was the Bible of the Puritans and most popular among the people of England.
- At the same time, the Bishops Bible (1568) was the official Bible of the Church of England. A fact that highlights the popularity of the Geneva over the Bishops is that all the Biblical allusions/quotations found in the plays of William Shakespeare came from the Geneva Bible and not the Bishops.
- By the time of the Hampton Court Conference in 1604, England was in the uncomfortable position of using two different Bibles. Further complicating matters was the reality that the situation had become political. The Puritans, who wanted further reforms to the Church of England, as evidenced by the Millenary Petition, favored the Geneva. Meanwhile, the high churchmen present at Hampton Court favored the Bishops. (Norton, *The KJB*, 81)
- On the second day of the meeting, Monday, January 16, 1604 the Puritans were called to stand before King James. John Rainolds (Reynolds) was their chief speaker. At the end of the day, after being excoriated up one side and down the other by James, at the tail end of a list of

suggestions, seemingly out of nowhere, Reynolds dropped the first seed of the King James Bible. Accounts vary somewhat but Reynolds is reported to have said:

- “May your Majesty be pleased that the Bible be new translated?” (Nicolson, 57)
- “. . . Moved his Majesty that there might be a new translation of the Bible, because those which were allowed in the reigns of Henry the eight and Edward the sixth were corrupt and not answerable to the truth of the original.” (Norton, *The KJB*, 83)
- It is important to note that Reynolds’ request for a new translation appears to have been a complete afterthought. There is no mention of any Puritan misgivings regarding the English Bible in the Millenary Petition or on the agenda of items submitted to the King before Hampton Court.
- Regarding Reynolds’ request, English Bible Historian David Norton writes, “This was not one of the topics that Reynolds had said he would raise, and so appears almost as a casual interjection.” (Norton, *Textual*, 5) Likewise, David Teems author of *Majestie: The King Behind the King James Bible* titles his chapter on Hampton Court, “With all the Lightness of an Afterthought” to capture the apparent flippant nature with which Reynolds appears to have made his request. (Teems, 164-178)
- Reynolds buttressed his request by citing three passages from the Great Bible (1539): Galatians 4:25, Psalm 105:28, and Psalm 106:30 that he believed were poorly translated. According to [William Barlow’s](#) account, found in *The Sum and Substance*, Reynolds stated the following regarding each passage:
 - Galatians 4:25—“the Greek word *sustoicheo* (“answereth” in the King James) is not well translated, as now it is; Bordereth, neither expressing the force of the word, nor the Apostle’s sense, nor the situation of the place.”
 - Great Bible (1539)—For mount Syna is Agar in Arabia, and **bordereth** upon the city, which is now called Jerusalem, and is in bondage with her children.
 - Geneva Bible (1560)—(For Agar or Sina is a mountain in Arabia, and it **answereth** to Jerusalem which now is) and she is in bondage with her children.
 - Bishops Bible (1568)—For Agar is the mount Sina in Arabia, and **bordereth** upon the city, which is now [called] Jerusalem, and is in bondage with her children.
 - Psalm 105:28—“They were not obedient; the original being, they were not disobedient.”
 - Great Bible (1535)—He sent darkness, & it was dark, and they were **not obedient** unto his word.

- Geneva Bible (1560)—He sent darkness, and made it dark: and they were **not disobedient** unto his commission.
 - Bishops Bible (1568)—He sent darkness, & it was dark: and they **went not** from his words.
 - Psalm 106:30—“Then stood up Phinees and prayed, the Hebrew hath executed judgement.” (Barlow)
 - Great Bible (1535)—Then stood up Phinehes and **prayed**, & so the plague ceased.
 - Geneva Bible (1560)—But Phinehas stood up, and **executed judgment**, and the plague was stayed.
 - Bishops Bible (1568)—Then stood up Phinehes, he **executed justice**: and so the plague ceased.
- Upon further consideration, Reynolds’ request not only appears flippant but also weak. In his account, Barlow states the following regarding the three passages cited by Reynolds, “to which motion there was, at the present, no gainsaying, **the objections being trivial, and old, and already in print.**” (Barlow) In other words, the three passages cited by Reynolds to bolster his argument for a new translation did not contain anything that was not already known to those present at the meeting.
- Why did Reynolds cite the Great Bible from 1539 when two subsequent English translations existed, namely the 1560 Geneva and 1568 Bishops? The readings in question cited by Reynolds from the Great Bible were identical to the Bishops Bible, the official Bible of the Anglican Church; but had been corrected in the 1560 Geneva Bible, the Bible of the Puritans.
- Reading between the lines, David Norton points out the subtle nature of Reynolds’ request. By citing these three passages Reynolds attacked the Bible of the church establishment and offered in its place as an alternative the Bible of the Puritans, i.e., the Geneva. According to Norton,
 - “Reynolds probably hoped that his suggestion for a new translation would be dismissed and the much simpler solution be followed, adoption of Geneva as the official Bible of the Church.” (Norton, *The KJB*, 84)
- In *A Textual History of the King James Bible* David Norton points out that, “if the problem was simply a matter of a few such readings, they might easily be dealt with in the next printing of the Bishops Bible”. (Norton, 6) Given the fact that the Geneva Bible corrects the three passages cited by Reynolds, when compared against the Great and Bishops Bibles, and that Reynolds offers

exactly those readings provided by the Geneva, it appears that the goal of his request was the royal sanctioning of the Geneva Bible for use in public worship in the Anglican Church.

- Barlow’s notes record the reaction of Richard Bancroft, the soon to be named Archbishop of Canterbury,
 - “if every man’s humour should be followed, there would be no end of translating.” (Barlow)
- The King’s response no doubt surprised Bancroft and disappointed Reynolds. James supported the notion of a new translation while denying Reynolds’ implicit request for the royal sanctioning of the Geneva Bible.
 - “Whereupon his Highness wished, that some especial pains should be taken in that behalf for one uniform translation (**professing that he could never, yet, see a Bible well translated in English, but the worst of all his Majesty thought the Geneva to be**) and this to be done by the best learned in both the Universities, after them to be reviewed by the Bishops, and the chief learned of the Church; from them to be presented to the Privy Council; and lastly, to be ratified by his Royal authority; and so this whole Church to be bound unto it and none other: Mary, withal, he gave this caveat (**upon a word cast out by my Lord of London that no marginal notes should be added, having found in them which are annexed to the Geneva translation (which he saw in a Bible given him by an English Lady) some notes very partial, untrue, seditious, and favouring too much of dangerous, and traitorous conceits**) as, for example, Exod. 1:19, where the marginal notes alloweth disobedience to Kings. And 2 Chron. 15:16, the note taxeth Asa for deposing his mother, only, and not killing her.” (Barlow & Norton, *The KJB*, 84)
- It turns out that James also believed that there needed to be “one uniform translation” but he would never sanction or recognize the Geneva on account of its marginal notes that he viewed as seditious and undermining the Divine Right of Kings. According to Adam Nicolson, author of *God’s Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible*, James caught Reynolds’ suggestion regarding the official sanctioning of the Geneva and reversed it by answering, “Yes; I will give you the opposite of what you want.”
 - “A translation was to be uniform (in other words with no contentious Geneva-style interpretations set alongside or within the text); with the learned authority of Oxford and Cambridge (which, at least in their upper echelons, were profoundly conservative institutions, both of which had sent to the king long and high-flown refutations of every point in the Puritan’s Millenary Petition); to be revised by the bishops (the very influence that Reynolds did not want); then given, for goodness’ sake to the Privy Council, in effect a central censorship committee with which the govern would ensure that its stamp was on the text, no deviations or subversions allowed; and finally to James himself, whose hostility to any whiff of radicalism this afternoon would be clear. . . The treasured

Geneva Bible would be forced to retreat into the privacy of people's homes and could no longer be used for public preaching." (Nicolson, 60)

- Regarding James' decision, David Teems writes, "this was James' *Irenicon* or message of peace, meant to reconcile the differences. (Teems, 169) In other words, by agreeing to the translation, James had struck a "middle path" between the Anglicans and Puritans. James' decision at Hampton Court is precisely in line with the political philosophy he outlined in *The True Law of Free Monarchies* and *Basilikon Doron* from the late 1590s. In short, it is quintessential James.
- Regarding this notion David Norton writes,
 - "He (James) may further have thought that agreeing to the proposal would show him sympathetic to the puritans while allowing him to strike a blow at the mainstay of their beliefs. He may also have thought that it would keep the leaders of all parts of the Church busy and working together." (Norton, *The KJB*, 85)
- On the surface, it might appear that James responded rashly to the Reynolds' request. After all, the Puritans never mentioned prior to Hampton Court that they even desired a new translation of the Bible. How does one explain the swift and decisive nature of James' decision?

Historical Context for James' Decision

- Actually, James was already of a mind that the English Bible needed to be retranslated before 1604. John Spotswood's [*History of the Church of Scotland*](#) records that James favored a new translation of the Bible into English in a 1601 meeting of the general assembly of the Kirk (Church) of Scotland.
 - "A proposition was made for a new translation of the Bible, and the correcting of the Psalms in metre: his Majesty did urge it earnestly, and with many reasons did persuade the undertaking of the work, showing the necessity and the profit of it, and what a glory the performing thereof should bring to this Church: speaking of necessity, he did mention sundry escapes in the common translation, and made it seem that he was no less conversant in the Scriptures then they whose profession it was; and when he came to speak of the Psalms, did recite whole verses of the same, showing both the faults of the metre and the discrepancies from the text. It was the joy of all that were present to hear it, and bred not little admiration in the whole Assembly, who approving the motion did recommend the translation to such of the brethren as were most skilled in the languages, and revising of the Psalms particularly to Mr. Robert Pont; but nothing was done in the one or the other." (Spotswood, 465)
- While nothing substantial was ever done with this Scottish resolution, Spotswood reports "the revising of the Psalms he (James) made his own labour, and at such hours as he might spare from the public cares, went through a number of them, commending the rest to a faithful and learned

servant.” (Spotswood, 465) James’ translation work on the Psalms was published in 1631 under the authorization of King Charles I. (Norton, *The KJB*, 83)

- What this proves is that prior to Hampton Court in 1604, James, through his own study of the English Bible, had come to believe that all was not as it should be. This notion was no doubt solidified via his own translation work in the Psalms. Independent from any Puritan prodding, James had come to believe that the English Bible needed to be revised before Hampton Court in 1604. Consequently, when Reynolds floated the idea for a new translation James seized the opportunity to do something he already believed needed to be done.
- Spotswood depicts James as having fulfilled his purpose from 1601 to “perfect” the English Bible via the translation of the King James Bible. For James this was the continuation of a process that began in 1601 during a meeting of the Church of Scotland. To this end Spotswood states the following,
 - “. . . yet the king did not let his intention fall to the ground, after his happy coming to the Crown of England; which with great pains and the singular profit of the church they perfected.” (Spotswood, 465)
- Before moving off this point, it is important to note that in the 1601 meeting of the Church of Scotland, King James was merely agreeing with a proposition made by someone else calling for a “new translation of the Bible.” In addition, after much discussion, the motion was adopted by the Church of Scotland, according to Spotswood. This proves that there were others in addition to the King who believed the English Bible needed revising.
- A deeper look into the history of the English Bible before 1604 reveals that King James and the Church of Scotland were not the only ones clamoring for a new translation of the Bible into English. Historical evidence from the 1590s proves that a growing chorus of Bible believing Christians within the English-speaking world had come to believe that a retranslation of the English Bible was in order and were calling for such a revision.
- We will consider this evidence in the next Lesson.

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