

Sunday, August 13, 2023—The Language of the King James Bible: A Brief History of the English Language & The Age of Shakespeare, James, and the Translators

Introduction

- Read from the introduction to *In the Beginning*.
- “The King James Bible became part of the everyday world of generations of English-speaking peoples, spread across the world. It can be argued that, until the end of the First World War, the King James Bible was seen, not simply as the most important English translation of the Bible, but as one of the finest literary works in the English language. It did not follow literary trends; it established them.” (McGrath, 3)
- “Until very recently, the KJV was the world’s best-selling Bible in English. Sometime in the 1980s it was supplanted by the New International Version, which remains tops today. Still, there are more than one billion English-speakers in the world today, and there are at least two KJV Bibles in existence for each of them.” (Sweeney, 27)

A Brief History of the English Language

- “The English language, like all languages, has been evolving for centuries and will continue to do so throughout the twenty-first century. . . Compared with language development of many civilizations, however, English developed relatively rapidly. For instance, while the development of Greek and other ancient languages spanned several thousand years, the time it took for the Anglo-Saxon language (forerunner of modern English) to develop into words similar to those we speak today can be measure in a few hundred years.” (Brake, 21)
- Three distinct periods mark the development of English:
 - Old English (Anglo-Saxon)—6th century to the Norman Conquest of 1066
 - Middle English—1100 to 1500
 - Modern English—1500 to the present
- “When the Romans landed on the island of England a few years before the birth of Christ, English did not exist. The language of this time and place included both Germanic and Celtic elements. It was not until the sixth century that a small percentage of people in Britain spoke a prototype of English.” (Brake, 22)
- “During this period, from the sixth century until the Norman Conquest, the British were tossed about by an influx of invasions and missionary endeavors that added to the flavor and texture of the English language. The development of English was shaped, in part by the Germanic tribes, Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, who battled for supremacy among themselves and with the tribal Picts,

Scots, and Gaels who inhabited the island. Then in the sixth century, Pope Gregory, who viewed the island dwellers as pagans, sent a monk named Augustine to convert King Ethelbert to Christianity. . . Augustine’s mission was successful, and over time Latin and Greek words found their way into the English vocabulary. Over the course of one thousand years, these combined cultural forces created a hybrid language that assimilated elements of Roman, Saxon, Danish, and Norman into a new strain of English.” (Brake, 22)

- “The politics of invasion and conquest take language captive, along with its people. The early invaders’ language, today known as Old English or Anglo-Saxon English, formed a rudimentary base for the English we speak today. The Anglo-Saxon conquest was so successful that very few words have survived from the original British language (Celtic).” (Brake, 22-24)
- Viking invasions between 750 and 1050 also impacted the development of Old English. Monosyllabic words such as sky, skin, and root have their roots in the Old Norse language. (Brake, 24)
- “The English Language went through a period of severe neglect in the Middle Ages. The conquest of England by the Normans in 1066 (Battle of Hastings) had led to the suppression of English in public life. French—or, more accurately, the form of Anglo-French that arose after the Norman conquest—dominated public discourse, particularly government departments and courts. The English upper class spoke Anglo-French as a matter of principle, to distinguish themselves from the lower classes, who spoke Middle English. . .” (McGrath, 26)
- “The widespread perception that French had established itself as the lingua franca of the cultural elite of Europe inevitably led to English being dismissed as a crude language, incapable of conveying the subtle undertones necessary for diplomacy, the fine distinctions of philosophy, and the complexities of legal and financial negotiations. English would do very well for the common laborer; French was the langue of choice for the elite.” (McGrath, 27)
- It was during this Middle English period that John Wycliffe began the process of translating the Bible into the vernacular English of his day. There was much anxiety amongst the academic elite of England whether English as a language was capable of expressing the deep nuanced truths of the Bible in particular and the Christian faith in general. (McGrath, 33)
- In 1401 a debate over the use of English in church life ensued at Oxford. In 1407, Thomas Arundel, archbishop of Canterbury, issued the following statement:
 - “We therefore legislate and ordain that nobody shall from this day forth translate any text of the Holy Scripture on his own authority into the English, or any other, language, whether in the form of a book, pamphlet or tract; and that any such book pamphlet or tract whether composed recently or in the time of John Wycliffe, or in the future, shall not be read in part or in whole, in public or in private.”

- “English thus became the language of the religious underground. To write in English was tantamount to holding heretical views.” (McGrath, 33)
- “The Hundred Years War (1337-1453) served to consolidate the growing popular impression that French was the language of England’s enemy. . . The war with France at an end, English became the language of choice of the upper class and government departments. No longer was English dismissed as the language of the lower classes; it was now the language of choice of a nation with an increasing sense of national identity and shared purpose, strengthened by England’s growing maritime enterprise.” (McGrath, 29-31)
- “The story of the King James Bible cannot be told without an understanding of the remarkable rise of confidence in the English language in the late sixteenth century. What was once scorned as the barbarous language of plowmen became as the language of patriots and poets—a language fit for heroes on the one hand, and for the riches of the Bible on the other. Gone were any hesitations about the merits of the English language. Elizabeth’s navy and armies had established England’s military credentials; her poets, playwrights, and translators had propelled English into the front rank of the living European languages. The King James Bible consolidated the enormous advantages in the English language over the centuries and can be seen as the symbol of a nation and language that believed that their moment had finally arrived.” (McGrath, 24-25)
- “In his 1589 *Art of English Poesy*, written at the height of the Elizabethan Age, George Puttenham declared that English was just as sophisticated as Greek or Latin, and perfectly capable of expressing the full range of human emotions and thoughts.” (McGrath, 25)
- “To write in English—or translate into English—was a political act, affirming the intrinsic dignity of the language of a newly confident people and nation. And why should not that nation have its own bible in its own language?” (McGrath, 26)

The Age of Shakespeare, James, and the Translators

- “The demise of the Roman Catholic Church in England—outlawed as it was from the days of Henry VIII, confiscated as all its properties were, abbeys, castles, lands—left a hole in culture, a big gaping hole.” (Teems, 180)
- “In 1576, James Burbage built the first theater in London. There had not been a theater in town for more than a thousand years, since the Roman occupation. . . What was lost to the people with the pageantry of the Roman Catholic Church was returned to them with the rise of the theater. This great gaping hole in culture gave them a new champion, indeed, a new kind of church, a new priesthood. And it was so very English.” (Teems, 181)
- “The pulpit was exchanged for a stage, and the language of plays was reminiscent of the high tone of the Mass. It was after all, a listening culture, a culture of the word, a peculiarly English occupation. Other forms of art—sculpting, painting, music, even architecture—with only a few exceptions were to be found elsewhere, outside the little island, in Italy, Holland, Germany,

France. English captures its reflection in words, in the subtleties of the human voice.” (Teems, 181)

- “It should be little wonder that English had become the *lingua franca* of the civilized world, or that English dominates music, film, literature, the dramatic arts. . . The English imagination was, and remains, aural. It expressed itself in sound, and the culture was tuned for it. . . Shakespeare and others, would not have written the way they did had the audience not been able to understand. . . Touching Englishness to the quick, the play was the very soul of the English Renaissance. It is a key to understanding the age itself.” (Teems, 181-182)
- “To ignore the development of the theater is to ignore the spirit of the age, the powerful linguistic tide that swept everyone up, that saturated a culture. In the years between 1584 and 1623, hardly more than a single generation, more than fifty million people passed through theater doors.” (Teems, 183)
- “. . . the King James Translators were steeped in this Elizabethan aesthetic, this powerful linguistic vitality, this Hamletized soul of the age that was characterized by a penetrating, high-velocity wit and melancholy that spun forth the finest lines ever written in any language.” (Teems, 187)
- “The Translators were all Elizabethans, all passionately literate. This aesthetic could only enhance the beauty and magnificence that was already there in the fold of Scripture. It had the ability to make the beautiful even more beautiful . . . The Elizabethan aesthetic was the filter through which the King James Translators tested every word. . . It was a literary spirit that governed culture, a spirit of the word, a profoundly English spirit that had risen to its zenith in the age of Elizabeth.” (Teems, 189-190)
- “The plays of William Shakespeare were never written to be read, or worse, studied. He did not publish his plays in his own lifetime. . . The King James Bible was appointed to be “read in the churches. . . One of the last steps of the translation was a hearing, an aural review.” (Teems, 175)
- John Bois records in his notes from the final review committee that in the final step one man read from the translation and the others sat around and listened. . . It was an auditory review. It was an auditory enterprise. (Teems, 209)
 - Andrew Downes— “Jesus Christ, yesterday, and to day the same, and for ever.”
 - Final Version— “Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.” (Hebrews 13:8)
- Read examples from Teems on pages 212, 214, 229.
- One of the major factors that lead to the retention of Archaic forms stems from the literary views of the translators themselves.

- Leland Ryken, commenting on I Corinthians 13:3-4,7 states the following: “The passage flows in a wave-like cadence out of the rise and fall of sound. The passage also shows how the unaccented *eth* verb endings keep the rhythm flowing smoothly. Robbed of these verb endings, modern translations often bump along in staccato fashion.” (Ryken, 140)
- Steeped in the Elizabethan aesthetic, the King James translators conducted their work with an ear for how the text sounded when it was read out loud.

Works Cited

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