

Sunday, March 3, 2024—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 227 Triumph: The Final Acclamation of the AV

Introduction

- Since lesson 222 we have been studying the following three topics related to the AV of 1611:
 - Early Reception ([Lesson 222](#))
 - Early Criticism ([Lesson 223](#))
 - Early Sales (Lessons 224-226)
- Under the topic of “early sales” we covered the following points in our attempt to understand the early 17th century English Bible market:
 - Printing Capacity of the King’s Printer, Bible Production Before The AV, Financing & Printing Rights ([Lesson 224](#))
 - Variety of Formats & Market Structure ([Lesson 225](#))
 - Ecclesiastical & Private Sales ([Lesson 226](#))
- Over the course of these Lessons, we have surveyed scholarly articles by John Barnard (2005), Graham Rees and Maria Weekly (2009), Mordechai Feingold (2018), and Kenneth Fincham (2020) that challenge the long-held view that the AV was not well received by the English-speaking world of the 17th century until the 1630s or later. Early 17th century sermons, in addition to early sales data, suggest that the AV was embraced and utilized in public pulpits, both Anglican and Puritan, as well as private homes during its first decade of existence between 1611 and 1621.
- That said, prudence dictates that we spend some time surveying the prevailing orthodoxy on this topic because it is not wholly correct, especially when it comes to the fortunes of the English Bible given the vicissitudes of mid-17th century English politics.
- Written in 2001, before the groundbreaking essays/journal articles mentioned above, Alister McGrath’s book *In The Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* presented the standard understanding of the ultimate triumph of the AV over the Geneva Bible as the most popular English Bible. In fact, Chapter 12 of McGrath’s book is titled “Triumph: The Final Acclamation of the King James Bible.” While I view some of McGrath’s details as a bit dated, his overall treatment is still a valid popular summary and worthy of our time and consideration. Consequently, we will use McGrath’s chapter to frame our discussion. All told we will cover the following points over the next couple of Lessons:
 - The Battle of the Bibles: Charles I and the War Against the Geneva Bible

- Ambivalence: The Period of the Puritan Commonwealth
- Restoration: The Final Acceptance of the King James Bible

Triumph: The Final Acclamation of the AV

- McGrath begins Chapter 12 with the following paragraph:
 - “By 1850, the King James translation had triumphed. What was once a curiosity had become a classic. The nineteenth century showered praise on the King James Bible, viewing it as one of the high points of English literary achievements and perhaps the greatest contribution to the spiritual ennobling of the human race. Such judgments are inevitably projected onto earlier generations, giving the impression that the genius and brilliance of the translation were universally recognized from the outset. It is thus tempting to believe that the new translation was rapturously received on publication, being acclaimed immediately as a lasting monument of English literature as much as a superb translation of the word of God.” (McGrath, 277)
- The next couple of paragraphs underscore the dated nature of McGrath’s analysis, in my estimation.
 - “Yet history gives us no warrant for any such extravagant opinions. Indeed, the evidence at our disposal [important caveat] suggests that many saw the final appearance of the new translation as something of an anticlimax. There were those who would indeed speak of the King James Bible in the highest possible terms—but such a judgment lay over a century away. The irrefutable evidence is that, far from rushing out to buy or make use of this new translation, people preferred to use an English translation from fifty years earlier—the Geneva Bible.

The simple truth is that the “new Bible” was initially regarded with polite disinterest. Nobody at the time really liked the new translation very much. Even some of those who were prominently involved in the translation of the King James Bible seemed hesitant to use it, preferring to cite from the Geneva Bible instead—hardly a commendation for their work [Recall from Lesson 222 that this conclusion was reached by only looking at sermon epigraphs affixed to sermons and not the full text of those sermons.]. The King James Bible might be the bible of the English religious and political establishment; it had a long way to go before it became the bible of the English people.

This chapter aims to tell the story of how an ugly duckling became a swan; how a translation that at first singularly failed to excite the popular imagination went on to be acclaimed as “the noblest monument of English prose”—to use the phrase of Robert Lowth (1710-87), sometime Professor of Poetry at Oxford University. It is a long and fascinating story, which can here only be told in part. (McGrath, 277-278)

- These statements from the pen of McGrath highlight how important the essays surveyed in Lessons 222 through 226 are to developing a complete picture of how the AV was initially received. Sermons from the period between 1611 and 1630 as well as sales figures indicate more

robust interest in the AV than historians have heretofore realized. That said, it is true that it took some time for the AV to displace the Geneva Bible as the Bible of choice on the English-speaking world. Moreover, recall that continued use the Geneva Bible was more related to its marginal notes than the perceived poor quality of the AV as a translation (See Lesson 222 for more information.).

- For good or bad, it is important to realize the fortunes of the English Bible were influenced by political factors, particularly during the period of the English Civil War.
 - “Yet such calls [for early revision of the AV] were not taken with any great seriousness until the 1640s, when the issue became polarized for political reasons. As Parliamentarians—who argued for the authority of the English Parliament over the English monarch—gained influence around this time, the question of who should authorize a new translation of the Bible became a serious political issue. For many, it was Parliament that should commission a new authorized version—and that authority would derive from the English people, not the English monarch. As Parliamentarians were generally Puritan in their religious outlook, it was not a surprise that the Geneva Bible should be suggested as a candidate for such “authorization.”

It is, therefore, no cause for surprise to learn that the opponents of Puritanism during the reign of Charles I did all they could to eliminate the influence of this bible, with its marginal notes.” (McGrath, 279-280)

The Battle of the Bibles: Charles I and the War Against the Geneva Bible

- As we learned in [Lesson 225](#), 1616 was the last year the King’s Printer Robert Barker published the Geneva Bible. McGrath addresses how the politics of the day impacted the English Bible in the next subsection of Chapter 12 titled, “The Battle of the Bibles: Charles I and the War Against the Geneva Bible.”
 - “As a result of pressure from the authorities, after 1616 the printing of the Geneva Bible ceased in England. The work now had to be imported from the Netherlands. This, however, did nothing to stem its sales. James I seems to have been relatively unconcerned over this matter, and did not consider the suppression of the importance of this rival to his own translation to be a matter of pressing importance. He cordially disliked the Geneva Bible, but believed that his own new translation would eventually displace it without any need for special action on his part.” (McGrath, 280)
- When James I died in 1625, he was succeeded by his son Charles I. Alister McGrath chronicles how Charles differed from his father and the impact it had on the English Bible.
 - “However, the death of James I and the accession of his son, Charles I, in 1625 saw a change in the religious climate within England. Charles’s marriage to the French princess Henrietta Maria had caused considerable popular resentment, partly on account of her being a foreigner, and partly because she was a Roman Catholic. Radical Protestants were alarmed at the prospect of a monarch who would be openly sympathetic to the Roman Church cause throughout Europe.

Charles appointed the high churchman William Laud as archbishop of Canterbury in 1633. Archbishop Laud was clearly troubled by the continuing popularity—and correspondingly high sales—of the Geneva Bible. Under Charles I, religious tensions had worsened, with overt opposition between Puritans and Anglicans emerging at point after point. England was divided into the factions that would shortly take opposing sides in the civil war, pitching Puritan against Anglican, Parliament against Royalist. The Geneva Bible, with its notes, was seen as the Bible of the Puritans, and the King James the Bible of the establishment. For Laud, the continuing circulation of the Geneva Bible was, therefore, a significant contributing cause to the religious tensions of his day, which threatened to tear England apart.

Yet it was not the Genevan translation as such that caused Laud and his supporters such headaches. The real problem lay with the extensive marginal notes, which offered guidance to the reader as to how the text was to be interpreted and applied. Although the Geneva Bible dated from two generations earlier, its critique of the abuse of monarchical powers might have been written with Charles I's reign in mind. We have already noted some of the comments which caused such offense to James I, and thus were partly responsible for his desire for a new English translation.

James's son, Charles I, felt similarly threatened by the Geneva challenge to the doctrine of the divine right of kings. Charles had absorbed much of his father's belief in this doctrine and saw it as essential to the religious and political well-being of his kingdom. William Laud, archbishop of Canterbury, had a strong personal vested interest in maintaining both the monarchy and the established Church of England, and rightly saw the doctrine of the Geneva Bible's marginal notes as a serious threat to the situation. It was thus natural for Laud to want to minimize the influence of the Geneva Bible at this point. But what could he do? One option might have been to mount a major theological critique of the Geneva Bible, by publishing immense numbers of learned treatises countering its criticisms of the doctrine of divine right of kings. But his would take time and would have little impact at the popular level. Laud was aware that there was a much simpler solution. All that was needed was an order banning the Geneva Bible from England. But what reason could be given? In the end, Laud hit on an ingenious solution. To support the Geneva Bible, he argued, was unpatriotic.

Laud suggested that the Geneva Bible posed a threat to the livelihood of the patriotic English printers, whose livelihoods were being threatened by the importation of cheap and well-produced Geneva bibles. The commercial success of the Geneva Bible seemed to Laud to offer an entirely reasonable excuse to suppress it. As the work was printed abroad, Laud argued, would not permitting its continued importation threaten the English printing industry as a whole. The Geneva Bibles printed in Amsterdam were better in every respect than the early printings of the King James Bible. If market forces alone were allowed to dictate the outcome of this economic battle of the Bibles, the Geneva Bible would dominate the English market. It may be added that the costliness of the King James Bible was the direct result of Robert Barker's monopoly on the text, which allowed him to profit extensively from the work [Note tension between these statements from the pen of McGrath in 2001 and the later more recent research we considered in

Lessons 222 through 226.]. Laud, however, passed over this awkward point, and summed up his objections to the Geneva text as follows:

By the numerous coming over the [Geneva Bible] from Amsterdam, there was a great and just fear conceived that by little and little printing would quite be carried out of the Kingdom. For the books which came thence were better print, better bound, better paper, and for all the charges of bringing, sold better cheap. And would any man buy a worse Bible dearer, that might have a better more cheap?

Laud thus has a simple economic and patriotic reason for wishing to block the importation of Geneva Bibles. Although Laud was careful to present his reason for wishing to limit, and even terminate, the circulation of these Bibles in England as fundamentally patriotic and economic in motivation, many realized that this was merely a convenient excuse for suppressing a work that he disliked for religious reasons. The Geneva Bible had its origins within Calvinistic circles and was seen as being overtly supportive of a Puritan agenda. A simple answer to Laud's concerns about the future of the English printing industry lay to hand: permit production of the Geneva Bible in England. But this option does not appear to have been given serious consideration.

. . . Laud's action proved highly effective. The flow of the subversive text into England was staunch. The final known edition of the Geneva Bible was published in 1644. As a result, the King James Bible enjoyed a new commercial success—the word “popularity” is not yet apposite. However, it was not long before a compromise was developed that allowed the Genevan notes a new lease on life in England. The popularity of the Geneva Bible rested not so much on the translation itself, as on the explanatory material appended to the translation. So why, some reasoned, should not the Geneva translation be replaced with the King James bible, while retaining the Genevan notes? Between 1642 and 1715, at least nine editions—eight of which originated in Amsterdam—are known of the King James Bible with the Geneva notes.

But many Puritans regarded this as an unsatisfactory compromise and pressed for the replacement of the King James Bible. With the outbreak of the English civil war in 1642, an opportunity to challenge the authority of the King James Bible arose.” (McGrath 280-285)

Ambivalence: The Period of the Puritan Commonwealth

- McGrath explains the fortunes of the English Bible as follows during the period of the Puritan Commonwealth under Oliver Cromwell.
 - “In the closing years of the reign of Charles I, the growing political influence of Puritanism began to become of importance to the reception of the King James Bible. The new emphasis upon the authority of Parliament—as opposed to that of the king—within Puritan circles led to demands for revision of the translation to be undertaken by the state. Parliament, it was argued, should commission a new translation, which would eliminate the errors and ecclesiastical bias of the King James Bible. William Laud had been one of

the most formidable opponents of the Geneva Bible, and a staunch defender of the King James Bible. However, Laud found himself outmaneuvered by an increasingly confident Puritan Parliament. In 1641, he was imprisoned in the Tower of London; in 1645, he was executed.

With Laud out of the way, serious opposition to the King James Bible gathered momentum. Calls for the revision of the translation became increasingly frequent and strident. In a sermon delivered before the House of Commons, assembled at the church of St. Margaret's Westminster, on August 26, 1645, John Lightfoot (1602-75) argued the case for a revised translation, which would be both accurate and lively:

It was the course of Nehemiah when he was reforming that he caused not the law only to read and the sense given, but also caused the people to “understand the reading.” And certainly it would not be least advanced that you might do to the three nations, if not the greatest, if they by your care and means might come to understand the proper and genuine reading of the Scripture by an exact, vigorous, and lively translation.

The Parliamentary Grand Committee for Religion eventually agreed to order a subcommittee to look into the matter. It was clear that the complaints against the King James Bible could be broadly divided into two categories: the many misprints in the printed version of the text, which caused confusion to readers; and, perhaps more seriously, questions concerning the accuracy of the translation itself. A Parliamentary group that crystallized around Henry Jessey (1601-63), noted for his competence in sacred languages, concluded that the literary style of the King James Bible left something to be desired; “many places which are not falsely may be yet better rendered.” Similar comments can be found in Robert Gell's *An Essay Towards the Amendment of the Last English Translation of the Bible* (1659).

Yet, perhaps one may conjecture that a political issue colored this discussion, in that hostility to the King James Bible reflected a perception that it was hostile to Puritanism—or at least that it lacked the Puritan emphasis that made the Geneva Bible satisfying to its readers. One Parliamentary group, meeting in 1652-53, argued that the King James Bible used “prelatical language”—in other words, the traditional church terminology, such as “bishop.” This practice, which was specifically laid down in Richard Bancroft's rules for the translators, was very offensive to the Puritans. It reminded them of the religious establishment that they had worked hard to overthrow. There was also new and increased resistance from many Puritans to the inclusion of the Apocrypha in the King James Bible. The Westminster Confession of Faith would reject the inclusion of this group of works in Bibles; some Puritans wanted immediate action on the matter.

It might be thought that the period of the Puritan Commonwealth would have seen a new lease on life for the Geneva Bible. In fact, this was not the case. Perhaps there was a realization that the Geneva translation was not as good as might be hoped. In any case, the marginal notes could be had by other means. In the first year of the Commonwealth, an edition of the King James Bible with the Genevan notes was published, with official backing in London. The Soldier's Pocket Bible, issued in 1643, consisted of selections

from the Geneva Bible. The following year saw the final reprinting of the Geneva Bible, which henceforth virtually disappeared from the radar screen of English religious controversy.

This is a curious fact and its explanation remains far from clear. The simplest explanation is economic and relates to the continuation of earlier monopoly regulations under the Commonwealth. Oliver Cromwell conferred the monopoly on the King James Bible to John Field and Henry Hills in 1656, during which year Field also became printer to Cambridge University. Field was widely regarded as a monopolist on a grand scale, and it is possible that Field, wishing to gain as much as it was possible from his monopoly on the King James Bible, sought to discourage the publication of rival versions, or the development of revisions. Entirely plausible though this explanation may be, it must be stressed that we simply do not know with any certainty the true reasons for the waning in popularity of the Geneva Bible at a time which it might have been expected to enjoy a resurgence in popularity.

The Commonwealth thus came to an end without the anticipated resurgence in popularity and influence of the Geneva Bible. Oliver Cromwell, who was installed as “Lord Protector” of the English nation in December 1653, failed to ensure the Puritan succession. As a result, his death in September 1658 led to the Puritan government falling apart. The resulting political instability eventually led to the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. With Charles II restored to the English throne, and a growing public backlash against the excesses of the period of the Puritan Commonwealth, the earlier Puritan opposition to the King James Bible virtually guaranteed that it would be the established translation of the new administration.” (McGrath, 285-287)

Conclusion

- In the next Lesson we will consider a couple of important details regarding the editions of the Geneva Bible discussed in this Lesson. Furthermore, we will conclude our discussion of the ultimate Triumph of the AV by looking at the final point identified above:
 - Restoration: The Final Acceptance of the King James Bible

Works Cited

McGrath, Alister. In the Beginning: *The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 2001.