Sunday, October 26, 2025—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 264 Assessing the Printed History of the King James Text (How The 1769 Text Became The Standard)

Introduction

- The last term of this class began on Sunday, September 8, 2024, and ran through Sunday, April 27, 2025. During that time frame, we studied the printed history of the King James text by looking at the following topics.
    - The 1630s (Lesson 237)
    - The 1638 Cambridge Edition (Lessons 238, 239, & 240)
    - Politics Of Printing (Lesson 241)
    - Kilburne's Dangerous Errors (Lessons 242 & 243)
    - Through 1660 (Lessons 244 & 245)
    - 1660-1713 (Lesson 246)
    - 1713-1760 (Lessons 247 & 248)
    - 1743: The Work of F.S Parris (Lessons 249, 250 & 251)
    - 1762: "You" & "Ye" (Lesson 252)
    - Blayney & The 1769 Oxford Text (Lessons 253, 254, 255 & 256)
    - Pre-1611 Use of Italics (Lesson 257)
    - Scrivener on AV Italics (Lessons 258, 259 & 260)
    - KJVO On The Italics (Lesson 261)
    - KJVO Italics Case Studies II Sam. 21:19 & I John 2:23 (Lesson 262)
    - Italics Evaluation (Lesson 263)
- Before moving forward, it is important to note again the following caveat, even with as thorough as we have tried to be in assessing the printed history of the King James text, an exhaustive study of the topic would require a full collation of every edition of the AV ever printed. At this juncture, no one has been able to accomplish such a feat. Even scholarly works such as *A Textual*

History of the King James Bible (2005) by David Norton and *The Text of the King James Bible* (2025) by Laurence M. Vance, as helpful as they are, only collated the flagship folio editions and therefore missed critical data found in the smaller sized editions. We observed this reality throughout the course of the last term. Recall that we are not faulting these men for failing to be exhaustive. Nor am I claiming that our work in this class is exhaustive.

- At this juncture, a topic that remains outstanding regarding the printed history of the text is how did the 1769 Oxford text edited by Benjamin Blayney come to be viewed as the standard text. It is to this topic that we will now turn our attention.

- To accomplish this task, we will consider the writings of David Norton and Gordon Campbell.

How Did Blayney's Oxford Text Become the Standard?

- Chapter 6 of Professor David Norton's book, *A Textual History of the King James Bible* is titled "Setting the Standard, 1762 and 1769." As one might expect, this chapter deals with the changes made to the text by F.S. Parris (1762) and Benjamin Blayney (1769). The chapter ends with a subsection on why Blayney's Oxford edition from 1769 became the standard text.

    - "It is a massive task to prepare a new text of the KJB (I write with feeling). This is one of the main reasons why Blayney's became the standard text. Oxford and Cambridge, the two chief scholarly guardians of the text, had now each undertaken that task, and it is not to be expected that they would want to do it again immediately. That Blayney's rather than Parris's became the standard was not simply a matter of his offering it as such. Even without close scholarly scrutiny, it was clearly a step beyond Parris: in terms of scholarship it adopted and added to his work, and in terms of orthography, grammar and punctuation it was a large step beyond, achieving a reasonable approximation to contemporary standards. Though it was not perfect, as any close examination would have revealed, it was clearly the best text so far." (Norton, 113-114)

- So, the first reason why the 1769 became the standard text, according to Norton, is because it is a "massive task" to "prepare a new text of the KJB." I take this as a reference to both time and money. Secondarily, Blayney's work was an improvement over the work of Parris as well as "a reasonable approximation to [then] contemporary standards." (Norton, 114) Therefore, taken together, the costs of reediting the text were not deemed to outweigh the marginal gains in textual accuracy. Put another way, the text was deemed good enough and close enough to then modern English orthography and grammar to not warrant another edition.

- Dr. Gordon Campbell concurs with Norton regarding how the Blayney text became the standard text in his 2010 publication *Bible: The Story of the King James Version 1611-2011*. Regarding the editions of Parris and Blayney, Campbell writes, "Parris's text was destined to fade into scholarly obscurity, but Blayney's set the standard for centuries to come." (Campbell, 141)

- Norton goes on to present an additional reason as to why Blayney's edition became the standard text.

    - "One other reason may be suggested. The decade of the 1760s marks a watershed in attitudes to the KJB. Where previously it had had little or no positive literary reputation, it now became generally agreed to be a fine, a great work of English literature, something that popular feeling and the tide of critical opinion agreed in loving and revering. Some seventy years after Blayney's edition, Henry Hallam put the point succinctly: 'the style of this translation is in general so enthusiastically praised that no one is permitted either to qualify or even explain the grounds of his approbation. It is held to be the perfection of our English language' (II, p. 464). This attitude to the KJB as literature I have called AVolatry (History, II, p. 176). Now, ideas of perfection as literature seem to run together with ideas of perfection as religion, as translation and as text. Early in the 1760s new translations were received with encouragement, but by the 1780s neophobia had set in: now 'to reform the text of the Bible would have appeared to the ignorant little less than a change of a national religion'. The reform meant is new translation, but the same spirit and the very way it is expressed would lead to resistance to any change to the received form of the text of the KJB. The same kind of inference could be drawn from Thomas De Quincey's definition of 'bibliolatry' as being, from a Roman Catholic point of view, 'a superstitious allegiance – an idolatrous homage – to the words, to the syllables, and to the very punctuation of the Bible . . . we, according to [the Catholics], deify an arrangement of printer's types'. Though he does not have the KJB in mind and is bent on arguing with such ideas, he is clearly reflecting a prevailing spirit that could attach itself to the smallest details of Blayney's text." (Norton, 114)

- The additional reason why the Blayney text became the standard is related to changing attitudes towards the KJB as literature, according to Dr. Norton. By the 1780s the literary merits of the English text were being extolled and thereby created the perception that the text should not be changed. While this is Norton's opinion, it is probably not totally incorrect.

- Dr. Campbell also discusses this topic in more detail in his book commemorating the 400th anniversary of the KJB.

    - "The origins of the literary adulation of the KJV in the late eighteenth century [1700s] lie in the religious convictions of the seventeenth century [1600s], when the Greek and Hebrew originals were praised for the eloquence and the values of the KJV was judged by its accuracy. The few aesthetic judgments of the period were restricted to the physical book: Thomas Fuller praised the KJV as 'beautifully printed', but made no comment about the beauty of its prose beyond observing that it 'agreeth with the common speech of our country.' Little enthusiasm for the prose is expressed in the post-Restoration period, because the KJV is deemed too mired in the old-fashioned and often incorrect prose of the early part of the century. . .

In 1731 John Husbands published a collection of poetry (mostly his own) which had an enormous introductory essay on 'natural' primitive poetry, of which the Hebrew Bible was his principal example. Such is the literary merit of the Hebrew Bible, he argues, that its beauty can be glimpsed 'under all the disadvantage as an old prose translation'. Just as Hamlet can be dismissed as an old play, so the KJV can be aside as an 'old prose translation'. Many a twenty-first-century parent will recognize this withering use of 'old'; the KJV had become terribly 'last century'.

The first clear anticipation of the shift in attitude that would occur mid-century came in Johnathan Swift's *A Proposal For Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue* (1712), in which Swift proposed the creation of an English Academy (modelled on the Academie Francaise) to regulate the English language. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a clergyman, he believed that it was the clergy of the Church of England who had created a model language for the lay community. In this tract he argues that,

> If it were not for the Bible and Common Prayer Book in the vulgar Tongue, we should hardly be able to understand any Thing that was written among us an hundred Years ago: Which is certainly true: For those Books being perpetually read in Churches, have proved a kind of Standard for Language, especially for the common People. And I doubt whether the Alterations since introduced, have added much to the Beauty or Strength of the English Tongue, though they have taken off a great deal from that Simplicity which is one of the greatest Perfections in any Language. . . No Translation our county ever yet produced, had come up to that of the Old and New Testament: And by the many beautiful Passages . . . I am persuaded that the Translators of the Bible were Masters of an English Style much fitter for that Work, than any we see in our present Writings, which I take to be owing to the Simplicity that runs through the whole.

Swift wanted to resist linguistic change, and his idea was to use the language of the KJV as a bulwark against linguistic innovation. Such an enterprise was doomed to failure, as such change, like the tide, cannot be halted, but modern readers who shiver at the occurrence of a split infinitive or the use of the apostrophe will surely recognize the sentiment. Swift's elevation of the language of the KJV as a model for English may have been futile, but it was a stepping stone on the road to proclaiming the KJV as the greatest work of prose in the English language.

Swift had his allies, but the KJV continued to have detractors throughout the century, principally because its language was deemed to be obsolete and uncouth. Matthew Pilkington's *Remarks upon Several Passages of Scripture* (1759), for example, mounted an argument to the effect that the 'improprieties, obscurities and inconsistencies' in the English of the Old Testament reflected lapses in understanding of the Hebrew text on the part of the translators. His examples of obscurities are hard to resist: who can now understand 'In measure when it shooteth forth, thou wilt debate with it: he stayeth his rough wind in the day of the East wind' (Isaiah 27:8) or 'Woe to the women that sew

pillows to all armholes, and make kerchiefs upon the head of every stature to hunt souls' (Ezekiel 13:18)? They are both faithful renderings of the Hebrew text, but they are not sufficiently translated to be understood. Similarly Pilkington's list of obsolete words includes many that continue to puzzle readers of the KJV: advisement (I Chronicles 12:19), bestead (Isaiah 8:21), bewray (Isaiah 16:3) blains (Exodus 9:9), holpen (Isaiah 31:3), purtenance (Exodus 12:9), silverlings (Isaiah 7:23), wist (Luke 2:49), wotteth (Genesis 39:8); others such as 'aliant' and "wastness', disappeared in Blayney's modernization of the text.

The culmination of these attacks on the language of the KJV was contained in the introduction and appendices to *A New Literal Translation of all the Books of the Old and New Testament: With Notes, Critical and Explanatory* (1764), which was a new translation by a self-taught Quaker, Anthony Purver. In 'Axiom II' ('a translation should be well or grammatically expressed in the language it is made in') of his "Introductory Remarks', Purver attacks the 'obsolete words and uncouth ungrammatical expressions' of the KJV, arguing that the language of the seventeenth century is scarcely intelligible to his generation. In the fourth, and fifth, of the eight appendices in this introduction, Purver offers a sample of words that are 'barbarous, base, hard, technical, misapplied, or new-coined'. The list is a testament to the vicissitudes of the lexical stock of English, in that, while it does include words and forms that would now be regarded as 'scarcely intelligible' (for example, aliant, bewray, marishes, wotteth), it also condemns words and forms that have since returned to everyday usage (for example, amends, ate, banner, confiscation, dismayed, dismissed, seethe, unwittingly). In the event, Purver's was a lonely voice in the wilderness, and both his translation and his strictures on the KJV have been forgotten. He was a remarkable man whose erudition was an easy match for scholars who had enjoyed a conventional education, but the tide had turned, and the chorus of praise for the KJV was, for the time being, sufficiently strong to drown out dissenting voices.

The publication of Blayney's modernized text in 1769 proved to be the event that stilled criticism of the language of the KJV as obsolete. Thereafter, Swift's lonely vision of 1712 re-emerged as a commonplace view, and the KJV came to be regarded as a model of English prose. The headmaster Vicesimus Knox, who is better known for his books on education and conduct, saw the study of literature as a means of promoting taste, manners, and morality. The second edition of his *Essays, Moral and Literary* (1782) contained a new essay 'on the impropriety of publicly adopting a new translation of the Bible', in which Knox acknowledged that the Hebrew text that had been the basis for the KJV had been revised in the light of scholarly investigation. He argued, however, 'that the present translation derives an advantage from its antiquity greatly superior to any which could arise from the correction of its antiquities'. The argument that he advances introduces two points that are still to be heard today. Frist, he praises the beauty of the KJV and introduces the word 'majestic' to describe its style:

> I cannot help thinking that the present translation ought to be retained in our churches for its intrinsic beauty and excellence. We have had one specimen of a new translation of the bible by a very learned and ingenious Bishop. It is exact and curious, but I will venture to say that it approaches not the majesty, sublimity and fire of the old translation. . . . That translation abounds with passages exquisitely beautiful and irresistibly transporting. Even where the sense is not very clear, nor the construction of ideas obvious at first sight, the mind is soothed and the ear ravished with the powerful yet unaffected charms of the style.
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> Second, Knox acknowledges the popular belief that the KJV was divinely inspired: 'Some devout and well-meaning people. . . profess to believe that our translation was written with the finger of the Almighty, and that to alter a tittle of it is to be guilty of blasphemy'. Such belief is the remote progenitor of the King James Only Movement that emerged in the United States in the 1970s." (Campbell, 142-147)

- So, Campbell's main reason for why Blayney's 1769 text became the standard is related to changing perceptions of the AV in the final three decades of the 1700s.

Conclusion

- While Norton's and Campbell's reasons are somewhat subjective regarding why the 1769 text became the standard, the fact remains that the text has changed little since 1769.

- The 1769 text of the King James Bible, prepared by Benjamin Blayney of Oxford, became the standard largely for historical, practical, and institutional reasons. Here is a summary of possible reasons why it gained that status:

    - Standardization of the Text

        - By the mid-18th century, there were numerous slightly different printings of the King James Bible.

        - Earlier revisions (notably 1629, 1638, 1762 by F.S. Paris) had tried to correct printing errors, regularize spelling, and bring consistency, but inconsistencies remained.

        - Blayney's 1769 revision systematized spelling, punctuation, and italics (used to indicate supplied words not in the original languages).

    - Oxford's Influence

        - Blayney's edition was issued at Oxford University Press which, along with Cambridge, had a dominant role in Bible publishing in England.

        - Because of Oxford's prestige and reach, Blayney's edition quickly displaced other variants.

    - Widespread Printing and Distribution

        - After 1769, most English-speaking Bible printers (both in Britain and later in America) used Blayney's text as their copy source.

        - This was not due to any official royal decree—it was the sheer practical fact that Oxford and Cambridge presses produced vast numbers of Bibles in this form.

    - Modernized Readability

        - Spelling and grammar had shifted since 1611.

        - The 1769 text made the Bible more accessible to 18th-century readers without altering the underlying translation.

    - Long-Term Inertia

        - Once Blayney's edition dominated, later printers simply followed it.

        - Even today, most "King James Versions" printed are essentially the 1769 Blayney text, not the 1611 original or earlier printings.

- In short, the 1769 Blayney edition became the standard King James Bible because it regularized the text, was published by Oxford with wide circulation and, over time, became the base text used by virtually all printers. Its dominance was more a matter of standardization and publishing influence than theological decision.

- In the next Lesson we will look at textual changes in British editions after 1769.

Works Cited

Campbell, Gordon. *Bible: The Story of the King James Version, 1611-2011.* Oxford University Press, 2010.

Norton, David. *A Textual History Of The King James Bible.* Cambridge University Press, 2005.