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Question 89 - What are the facts regarding the King James Bible?

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101 MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BIBLE

89. What are the facts regarding the King James Bible?

- A. One of the first tasks King James I faced upon mounting his throne at the beginning of the seventeenth century was the reconciliation of various religious parties within his kingdom. The King James Version began with a request by Puritan spokesman Dr. Reynolds of Oxford concerning the feasibility of a new Bible translation. James agreed almost at once. He had disliked the popular Geneva Bible because of its footnotes. He also realized that neither the Geneva, nor the Great, nor the Bishop's Bible could be held up by him as a rallying point for Christians.

The following quote is from H. S. Miller:

"On July 22, 1604, the King announced that he had appointed 54 men as translators. The only indispensable qualification was that they should have proven efficiency as Biblical scholars . . . A list of 47 revisers has been preserved; the other seven may have died or resigned before the work had really begun.

The revisers were organized into six groups, two meeting at Westminster, two at Cambridge, two at Oxford. One group at Westminster had Genesis to 2 Kings, the other had Romans to Jude; one group at Cambridge had 1 Chronicles to Ecclesiastes, the other had the Apocrypha; one group at Oxford had Isaiah to Malachi, the other had Matthew to Acts and Revelation. These men were the great Hebrew and Greek scholars of this day.

"Each reviser first made his own translation, then passed it on to be reviewed by each member of his group; then when each group had completed a book, a copy of it was sent to each of the other five groups for their independent criticism. Thus each book went through the hands of the entire body of revisers. Then the entire version, thus amended, came before a select committee of six, two from each of the three companies, and they ironed out ultimate differences of opinion, put the finishing touches . . . and prepared it for the printer.

"The revisers were governed by 15 rules, the gist of a few of them being: (1) The Bishop's Bible shall be followed and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit; (2) The old ecclesiastical words shall be retained; (3) The chapter divisions shall not be changed, unless very necessary; (4) No marginal notes at all, except explanation of Hebrew and Greek words which cannot be briefly and fitly expressed in the text; (5) Whenever the Tyndale, Matthew, Coverdale, the Great Bible, or the Geneva agrees better with the text than the Bishop's Bible, they are to be used." (*General Biblical Introduction*, pp. 363-364)

The King James Version also doubtless made usage of the four available printed Hebrew Old Testament Bibles at that time, the Erasmio's fifth edition of the Greek New Testament.

King James Version is remarkable for many reasons. It was, first of all, undoubtedly the most beautiful, beloved, and popular translation of all time. It was also probably the only translation in which no parties involved had an axe to grind. In other words, it was a national undertaking in which no one had any interest at heart, save that of producing the best possible version of the Scriptures.

It must be said however, that the King James Version was not immediately accepted by the general public. The Roman Catholics claimed it favored Protestantism. The Arminians said it leaned toward Calvinism. The Puritans disliked certain words, such as "bishop," "ordain," and "Easter." But after some 40 years it overtook the popular Geneva Bible and had retained its tremendous lead for almost three and a half centuries.

- B. The actual purpose of the translators of the King James Version was set forth in a lengthy preface written by Myles Smith. In it he illustrates how the translation being done by the six committees actually rested on the immediate predecessors rather than being a new translation from the original tongues. In following that reasoning, the message from "the translators to the Reader" indicates their purpose:

"But it is high time to issue them, and to shew in briefe what was proposed to our selues, and what course we held in this our perusall and suruay of the Bible. Truly (good Christian Reader) wee neuer thought from the beginning, that we should needs to make a new Translation, nor yet to make a bad one a good one, (for then the imputation of Sixtus had bene true in some sort, that our people had bene fed with gall of Dragons in stead of wine, with whey in stead of milke:) but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones one principall good one, not iustly to be excepted against; that hath bene our indeauour, that our marke."

The reasons for the gradual but overwhelming success of the King James Version have been well stated by several writers and may be briefly summarized as follows:

1. The personal qualifications of the revisers, who were the choice scholars and linguists of their day as well as men of profound and unaffected piety
2. The almost universal sense of the work as a national effort, supported wholeheartedly by the king, and with the full concurrence and approval of both church and state
3. The availability and accessibility of the results of nearly a century of diligent and unintermittent labor in the field of biblical study, beginning

with Tyndale and Purvey rather than Wycliffe, and their efforts to “make a good translation better”

4. The congeniality of the religious climate of the day with the sympathies and enthusiasm of the translators, as the predominant interest of their age was theology and religion
5. The organized system of cooperative work that followed the precedent of the Geneva translators, although it may have been improved, resulted in a unity of tone in the King James Version that surpassed all its predecessors
6. The literary atmosphere of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries paralleled the lofty sense of style and artistic touch of the translators.

(*A General Introduction to the Bible*. Norm Geisler & William Nix. Moody Press. Chicago. 1986. pp. 567, 568)