Telling Tales of King James' Bible

A Study Guide

With questions and ideas for group discussion

Introduction

The anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible raises questions for the churches today. What place is there in the contemporary church for a 400-year old bible? How can we decide which translation we read in church, and which we read in private? Bible scholars are now better informed about the Hebrew and Greek texts that make up the Bible. Does that mean that recent translations are better than the King James Bible? The English language has changed during the last 400 years. Can we still make sense of King James' Bible? Should it be replaced by translations in contemporary English, or supplemented by them? How does our choice of translation affect our understanding of the Scriptures?

This short course offers you the opportunity to engage with these questions and more. It is intended for use by church groups over five sessions, but may be adapted to suit the needs of other groups.

Leaders are encouraged to use the discussion topics in a variety of ways, and incorporate visual aids, small group and individual exercises, and the reading of other biblical and non-biblical texts as they feel appropriate.

You may want to use one or both of these prayers at the beginning and end of each session:

O Lord, you have given us your word
for a light to shine upon our path.
Grant us so to meditate on that word,
and to follow its teaching,
that we may find in it the light
that shines more and more until the perfect day;
through Jesus Christ our Lord

'A Prayer before Bible Reading (After Jerome)'

Blessed Lord,
who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
help us so to hear them,
to read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them
that, through patience, and the comfort of your holy word,
we may embrace and for ever hold fast
the hope of everlasting life,
which you have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Source: Common Worship: Daily Prayer, pp. 404 & 442 (adapted).

Sometimes people are confused when they hear about “King James’ Bible”. They wonder if I did the translation work myself. I was a good bible scholar. I wrote a whole book for my eldest son, Henry, explaining what the Bible says about kings and the right to rule.

When I had decided that a new translation was a good idea, Richard Bancroft was able to supervise the whole project. I made him Archbishop of Canterbury in 1604, soon after the conference where I commissioned the new bible.

There were about 50 different translators involved. They worked in groups or “companies”. There were two companies in Oxford, two in Cambridge, and two in Westminster. Each company took responsibility for a different section of the Bible.

They had a long list of instructions to follow. Bancroft told them to begin with the *Bishops Bible*. It was already approved for use in the Church of England. But it was a mix of different bishops’ work, and some of the bishops had used Latin translations instead of the original languages.

My translators were told to match the best English with the original Hebrew and Greek. They had to study familiar English bibles alongside the original languages. This helped them to decide which phrases they should preserve.

Every English bible had strengths and weaknesses, but people had grown used to hearing the Bible read in church. The translators worked hard to produce a bible which sounded familiar *and* stayed faithful to the original words.

Preparation for Session 1

What is in the Bible?

The Bible is like a library, packed with stories, poetry, wisdom, and letters too.

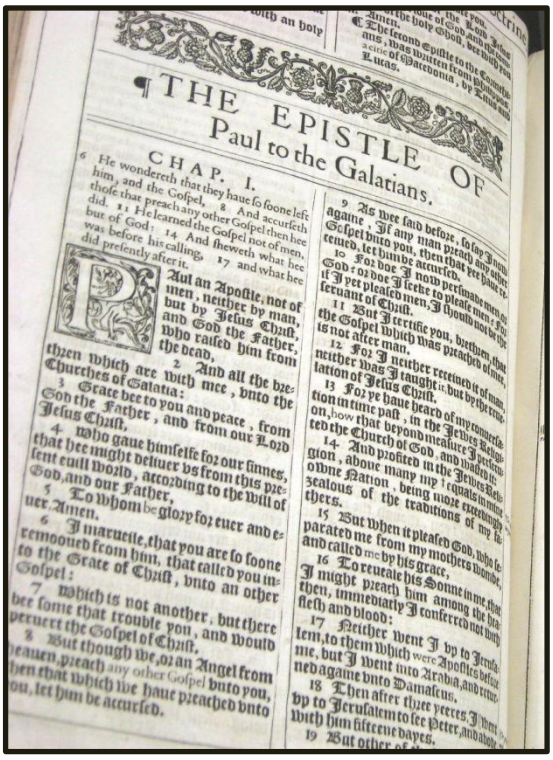
It is normal to think of the Bible as one book. But it is actually many books, collected together. Most Christian bibles are divided into two sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament.

Old Testament

The Old Testament contains the texts which make up the Jewish Bible. It may also include other pre-Christian writings like the book of Judith. The King James Bible included these books as a separate collection, "the Apocrypha".

New Testament

The books which make up the New Testament are exclusively Christian. There are early Christian records about Jesus, his life and teaching, as well as the letters of Paul, a convert who founded new churches around the Mediterranean. The New Testament books were written in common Greek, the language of the eastern Roman Empire, between the years 40-120CE.



¶ THE EPISTLE OF Paul to the Galatians.

CHAP. I.

Paul an Apostle, not of men, neither by man, but by Iesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead,

2 And all the brethren which are with mee, vnto the Churches of Galatia:

3 Grace bee to you and peace, from God the Father, and from our Lord Iesus Christ,

4 Who gaue himselfe for our sinnes, that hee might deliuer vs from this present euill world, according to the will of God, and our Father,

5 To whom be glory for euer and euer. Amen.

6 I marueile, that you are so soone remooued from him, that called you into the Grace of Christ, vnto an other Gospel:

7 Which is not another, but there bee some that trouble you, and would peruert the Gospel of Christ.

8 But though we, or an Angel from heauen, preach any other Gospel vnto you, then that which we haue preached vnto you, let him be accursed.

9 As wee said before, so say I now againe, If any man preach any other Gospel vnto you, then that yee haue receiued, let him be accursed.

10 For doe I now perswade men, or God? or doe I seeke to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the seruant of Christ.

11 But I certifie you, brethren, that the Gospel which was preached of mee, is not after man.

12 For I neither receiued it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the reuelation of Iesus Christ.

13 For ye haue heard of my conuersation in time past, in the Iewes Religion, how that beyond measure I persecuted the Church of God, and wasted it.

14 And profited in the Iewes Religion, aboue many my equals in mine owne Nation, being more exceedingly zealous of the traditions of my fathers.

15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mothers wombe, and called me by his grace,

16 To reueale his Sonne in me, that I might preach him among the Heathen, immediately I conferred not with flesh and blood:

17 Neither went I vp to Ierusalem, to them which were Apostles before me, but I went into Arabia, and returned againe vnto Damascus.

18 Then after three yeeres I went vp to Ierusalem to see Peter, and abode with him fifteene dayes.

19 But other of

The opening of Paul's Letter to the Galatians, part of the New Testament.

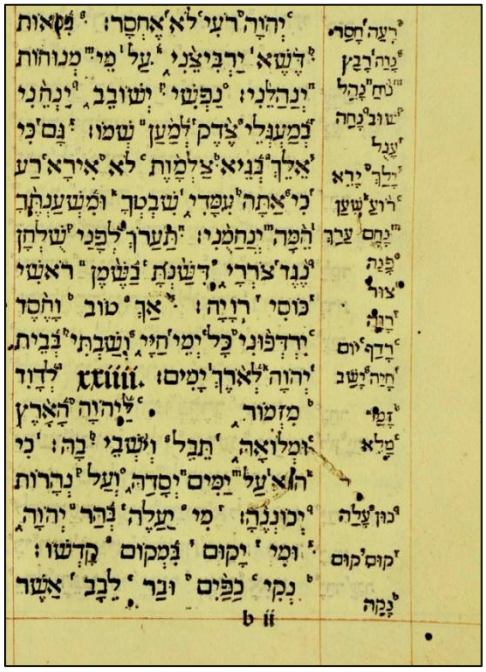
The Jewish Bible or Tanakh

Most of the Christian Old Testament is a translation of the Hebrew Bible. Hebrew was the language of ancient Israel, and remains the holy language for followers of Judaism. The Hebrew Bible is also known as the Tanakh because of the Hebrew names for its contents.

T for Torah

Torah means "way" or "rule" of life. It is often translated as Law. This is the term used to describe the first five books of the Bible.

Jewish tradition teaches that these books were written by Moses. The Torah describes how God relates to the world and people in it. It introduces important ancestors like Abraham. It also tells about Moses' life and how he led his people out of slavery, and the rules God gave people to follow, including the Ten Commandments.



Psalm 23 in Hebrew. The small numbers in this edition are designed to help the reader to cross-reference the words with the same passage in other languages.

N for Nebi'im

Nebi'im means "prophets". This collection includes the books of Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

Each prophet brings a message from God. This is often a warning. Perhaps God's rules are not being obeyed. The prophet calls people to change and explains what will happen if they do not. The prophet may also interpret current events as the result of God's anger when people disobey.

Kh for Khetubim

Khetubim means "writings". The writings are a mixture of songs, sayings and stories. This includes the books of Psalms (songs of complaint and praise), Job (who questions God's fairness), and Esther (who saves the Jewish people from persecution).

The Vulgate

A Latin bible from c. 400 CE.

This Latin translation was produced by Jerome (340-410CE), who was a monk and scholar.

Jerome's translation used the original Hebrew of the Old Testament. Before this, Latin versions of the Old Testament were normally based on a Greek translation.

The name Vulgate is based on a Latin phrase, *versio vulgata,* which means "the commonly used version". Latin was the common language of educated people in Western Europe. For centuries, the Vulgate was the main bible used by Western Christians.

The first complete English bible was based on the Vulgate.

When Roman Catholic Christians translated the Bible in the 1600s, they also used the Vulgate.

Latin is still used by the Roman Catholic Church in their official documents. The Vulgate is still widely respected and used by Roman Catholic Christians.

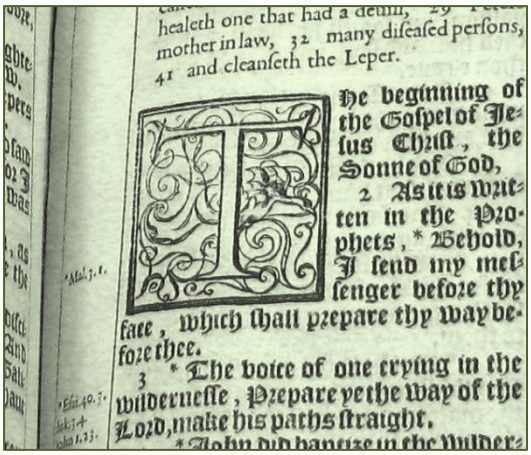
Jerome. Woodcut.

The illustration is from a printed edition of Jerome's other writings, published in France in 1508. In the picture, Jerome has a Greek New Testament to his left. To his right is a Latin text, presumably his translation. Above the Latin is a Hebrew book.

Session 1: Understanding the Bible

How do we know what the Bible says? The act of interpreting scripture can be creative, complex, and controversial.

We can see this already in the New Testament. Jesus uses "the Scriptures" as part of his tool-kit when debating the proper way of life, or teaching his disciples. The gospel-writers make connections between phrases from the Prophets and Jesus' death, and Paul constantly refers to what is "written" when explaining Christian beliefs. Hidden here is a subtle argument: Christians possess the key to unlock "the Scriptures", even though the texts in question have Jewish origins.


healeth one that had a deuill, mother in law, 32 many diſeaſed perſons, 41 and cleanſeth the Leper.

He beginning of the Goſpel of Ieſus Chriſt, the Sonne of God,

2 As it is written in the Prophets, * Behold, I ſend my meſſenger before thy face, which ſhall prepare thy way before thee.

3 * The voice of one crying in the wilderneſſe, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths ſtraight.

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Spreading the meaning

The process of explaining or making clear the meaning and significance of bible passages predates the New Testament. The book of Nehemiah, set in the 5th century BCE, describes how a priest read from the Torah (the five books of Moses), and then his assistants "spread the meaning", helping the people understand. Within 200 years, Jews in the Egyptian city of Alexandria had begun translating the scriptures into Greek. As Jews spread out, it made sense to "spread the meaning" into languages that could be understood locally.

When Paul wrote, he took advantage of Greek versions of the scriptures already in circulation. Greek was now an everyday language in most of the Roman Empire, and the common language of the early Church.

In or out?

The first detailed list of the Canon, the books accepted as a source of Christian authority, was compiled at the Council of Hippo in 393 CE. It was not controversial but reflected the existing consensus. As with any canon, some books were left out. This might be because they were felt to be less authentic – perhaps the writer was not who he or she claimed to be. Or they contained teachings at odds with the standard belief about the nature of God, who Jesus was, or the relationship between this life and the next.

For discussion

Read **1 Corinthians 13.4-7** in the translations on the next page. *What are the differences?* Which do you like best? *Why?*

1. The King James Bible was particularly intended to be read aloud in church. *Do you think a version for private study needs to be different from one for reading aloud?*
2. The language of the King James Bible can be very beautiful, and very familiar. *How much does it matter that it is not always easy for 21st century people to understand?* Does it matter less on particular occasions (e.g. readings at Christmas carol services)?
3. Are there any books of the Bible you would have left out of the canon of Scripture? *Why?*

To end, read **1 Corinthians 13.8-13**.

Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up,

Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil;

Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth;

Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

King James Bible

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

New Revised Standard Version (Anglicized Edition)

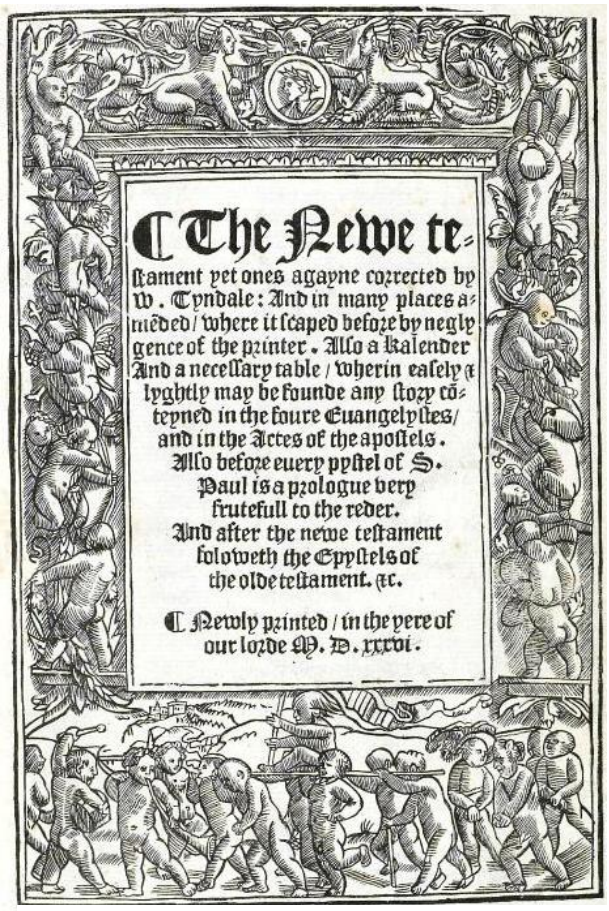
Love is patient and kind; it is not jealous or conceited or proud; love is not ill-mannered or selfish or irritable; love does not keep a record of wrongs; love is not happy with evil, but is happy with the truth. Love never gives up; and its faith, hope, and patience never fail.

Good News Translation

Preparation for Session 2

Tyndale's New Testament (1525)

This was the first English New Testament to be printed.



The title page of Tyndale's New Testament (1536 edition).

William Tyndale chose his English words very carefully, and rejected many of the words that were normally used. He even avoided the word "church".

He used the word "congregation" instead. Tyndale also created new English words to communicate the meaning of biblical terms. His creations include scapegoat, atonement and Jehovah.

The Bishop of London was so unhappy with Tyndale's New Testament that he bought all the copies he could find and burned them. Tyndale used the money to print more.

Although Tyndale was killed before he could finish translating, he did complete and publish the first five books of the Old Testament and the book of Jonah.

Other translators used what Tyndale had done. John Rogers and George Joye are recognised for their contribution.

Henry VIII was King of England in Tyndale's time. Tyndale asked God to open the King's eyes. Henry later agreed to an English bible which used most of Tyndale's translations. My translators had permission to consult Tyndale's work.

Session 2: Tyndale's Repentance and The Theology and Politics of Translation

Tyndale also changed the translation of Matthew 4.17 from "do penance" to "be penitent" it was a dramatic shift. According to his version what counts is not an external action but an internal transformation.

The medieval Church had a well-developed and popular system of penance. After confessing sins to a priest, the appropriate actions would be prescribed. These might include prayers, painful punishments or generous acts. According to some Christian teaching, penance is a necessary part of the purification process. It cleans away the sin.

The Greek word *metanoeite* means something like 'change' or 'reform'. In the Latin Vulgate this passage in Matthew was translated as *paenitentiam agite* -- do penance.

When the same word appears in Mark 1.15, the translation given is *paenitemini*, be penitent, repent. Most English translations now use "repent" in both places.

Somewhere around 1000 CE, the Church began to offer indulgences which excused the receiver from doing penance– based on previous good actions or gifts of money. The Crusaders, for example, were exempted from penance provided that they repented of their sins. Fighting for Jerusalem was a sufficient act. Real trouble started when indulgences were viewed as a heavenly pardon, rather than an earthly arrangement. A Pope could grant exemption but he could not sell forgiveness. Despite this, some people claiming to represent the Pope promised a fast-track to heaven if you donated to their good cause.

Scenes of Judgment and punishment were common in medieval Christian art.

Christ sits in Judgment. To the left are the Redeemed and to the right the Damned.

Detail from the Mappa Mundi at Hereford Cathedral.

It was this kind of behaviour – selling forgiveness – which motivated Luther and others to protest. Looking at the Greek manuscripts, Luther and Tyndale saw that Jesus instructed people to change not exchange. God's forgiveness is for all who are truly sorry.

The arguments Luther, Tyndale and Calvin put forward convinced many people. They rejected the power of Church authorities as corrupt.

The books of Jonah, Daniel and Job all describe people wearing sackcloth and ashes as a sign of remorse. This gave out a public message: I have sinned and I am sorry.

"Try what repentance can: what can it not?
Yet what can it when one cannot repent?"
Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene 3
Claudius reflects on the impossibility of repenting his role in his brother's murder. True repentance would mean giving up the benefits he got from this crime.

For discussion

1. Read **Matthew 4.17** in the versions printed below.
   Do the modern translations imply inward or outward penitence? Is it possible for us to know which Jesus meant? Or which Matthew meant when he wrote this verse? Do we believe that penitence should be primarily inward, or outward, or both in equal measure?

> From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. King James

> From that time Jesus began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." NRSV

> From that time Jesus began to preach his message: "Turn away from your sins, because the Kingdom of heaven is near!" Good News Translation

2. Translations today still reflect the theological perspectives of their translators. For example the Jerusalem Bible is a Roman Catholic translation, with the Apocrypha included among the other books; the New International Version chooses translation options which reflect evangelical concerns. Do you think this is right? Which translation does your church use most, and why?
3. When we read the Bible, we often find what we expect or want to find there. How can we allow the Bible to challenge our presuppositions? Would reading a different translation help?

To end, read verses from Psalm 51 together:

> Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy loving-kindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions.
>
> Wash me throughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.
>
> For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.
>
> **Psalm 51. 1-3** from the King James Bible.

You may wish to read the remainder of the Psalm too.

Preparation for Session 3

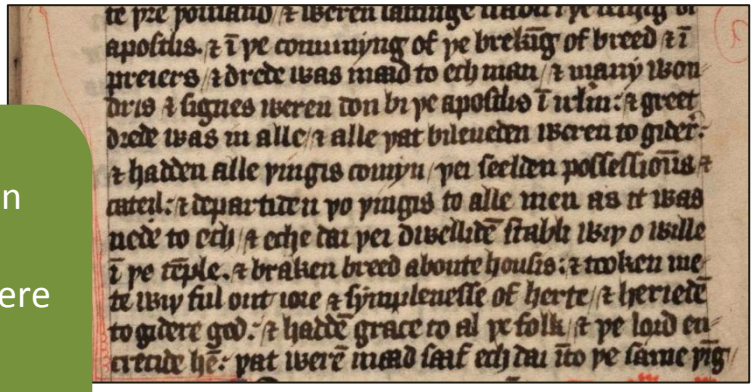
John Wycliffe and his followers made two translations of the Bible during the 1380s.

The first was a literal translation which followed the word order of the Latin Vulgate. This was then revised by John Purvey. Purvey changed the word order to reflect ordinary English.

Because these bibles had to be copied by hand, there are differences between the copies that have survived. They are normally called "Wycliffite" bibles.

The book of Acts describes how the first Christians lived. Wycliffe strongly believed that all Christians should copy the example of the early Christians.

The passage below is from Acts 2.43-47. It explains that believers "had everything in common". They sold their possessions and helped people in need.

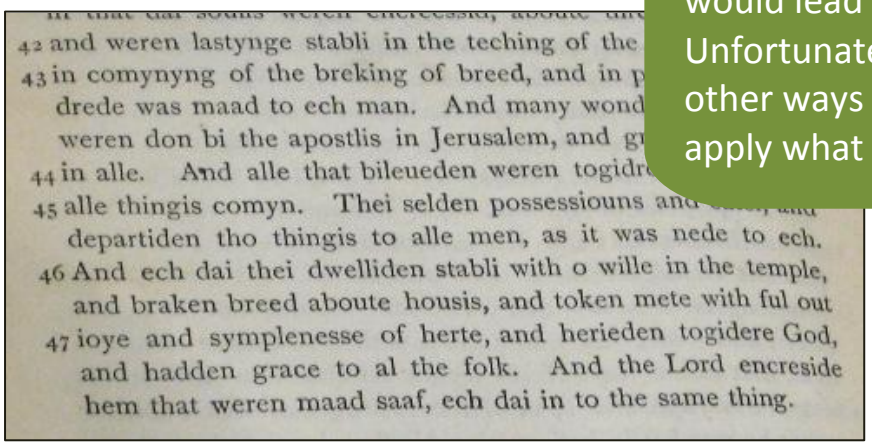


Photograph of a Wycliffite manuscript.

English has changed since the 1300s and Wycliffite bibles can be difficult to read, especially because the original copies were hand-written.

The image below is the same passage from a printed edition of a Wycliffite bible. It was published in the 1870s.

Wycliffe's hope was that introducing people to the Bible would lead to greater freedom. Unfortunately, people found other ways to interpret and apply what they read.



42 and weren lastynge stabli in the teching of the
43 in comynyng of the breking of breed, and in p
drede was maad to ech man. And many wond
weren don bi the apostlis in Jerusalem, and gr
44 in alle. And alle that bileueden weren togidr
45 alle thingis comyn. Thei selden possessiouns and
departiden tho thingis to alle men, as it was nede to ech.
46 And ech dai thei dwelliden stabli with o wille in the temple,
and braken breed aboute housis, and token mete with ful out
47 ioye and symplenesse of herte, and herieden togidere God,
and hadden grace to al the folk. And the Lord encreside
hem that weren maad saaf, ech dai in to the same thing.

Printed Wycliffite bible, published in 1879. Photograph (c) The University of Sheffield / Alan Saxby.

Session 3: Reading, Response and Responsibility

The story of the Great Flood with Noah and his ark is one of the best known stories in the Bible. What is often forgotten is that this marks a new start for humankind. Everyone outside Noah's family was drowned.

"And the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights."

If we take the Bible's account literally, everyone now is Noah's child.

From early times, though, people have been puzzled by this. *If we all descend from Noah, how come human beings are so different in things like skin colour and eye shape not to mention culture?*

The story of Noah's sons in Genesis 9 gives one explanation.

Noah digs a vineyard and then gets drunk. One of his sons, Ham, sees him lying naked and tells his brothers, Shem and Japhet. Shem and Japhet cover their father up, walking backwards so they do not even see his shame.

"And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent."
Genesis 9.21

When Noah wakes up, he curses Ham's son Canaan, saying that he will be a slave to his brothers. This is called "The Curse of Ham" as Ham was the one who offended Noah.

Noah blesses his other sons. Shem is made especially close to God. Japhet is told to expand and to dwell in the tents of Shem. Canaan, he repeats, is to be their slave.

Noah's curse was used to justify centuries of slavery and colonial expansion because Africans were seen as Canaan's descendants.

Rachel said unto Jacob...
Behold my maid Bilhah, go in unto her
...that I may also have children by her.

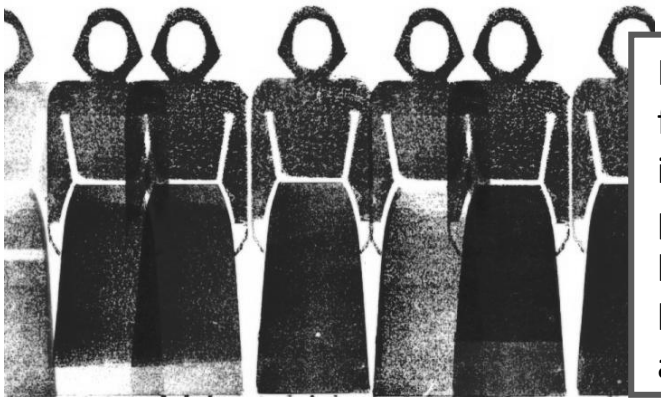
Genesis 30 according to King James' Bible

These are the words Margaret Atwood uses to set the scene of *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).

Atwood's novel introduced readers to the horrors of a country run according to biblical norms. In the totalitarian Republic of Gilead, a Handmaid's job is to have children. Failure to reproduce implies death or marginalization.

The women speak in biblical language: "be fruitful and multiply", "give me children, or else I die..." Handmaids greet one another with fertile wishes: "Blessed be the fruit..." The unfinished phrase recalls the blessing given to Mary, mother of Jesus, and a similar promise in Deuteronomy where fertility is the reward for obedience to God.

The language gives a sense of times past, but the novel is set in the not-too-distant future. Atwood objected to the use of the bible to justify female subordination, a position she saw being promoted by politicians. Locating Gilead in the north-eastern region of the USA, the area now known as New England, linked Gilead and 1980s America to an uncompromising past. This is the region which held witch-trials in the 17th century. Atwood uses the King James Bible to connect past religious passions with a warning against current and future dangers.



Infertile women are a regular feature in the Bible. In a culture ignorant of biology, failure to produce babies was generally blamed on the wife. If her husband died, perhaps that was also her fault.

The Handmaid's Tale, cover image from Vintage Classics edition. Copyright (c) The Random House Group.

For discussion

1. At various times, the Bible has been used to justify
    - slavery (see for example Paul's letter to **Philemon**)
    - the inequality of black people (see **Genesis 9.25-27**)
    - the inequality of women (see for example **1 Timothy 2.11-15**)
    - the banning of the use of pain relief in childbirth (on the basis of **Genesis 3.16**)
    - the unacceptability of homosexual activity (on the basis of texts such as **Leviticus 18.22** and **Romans 1.27**).

    How far is it right to use individual verses of the Bible in this way? Does the way the text has been translated influence how we use it?

2. Margaret Atwood's novel *The Handmaid's Tale* shows the consequences of a society attempting to model itself on the Bible. What would happen if we tried to run our society on the basis, for example, of **Acts 2.44-45**?

3. We are selective about which bits of the Bible we think apply to us today, for example reading the Ten Commandments in church but not other parts of Old Testament law. How do we make these decisions? Can translators help us?

To end, read Galatians 3.27-28 together:

> As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.
>
> New Revised Standard Version

Preparation for Session 4

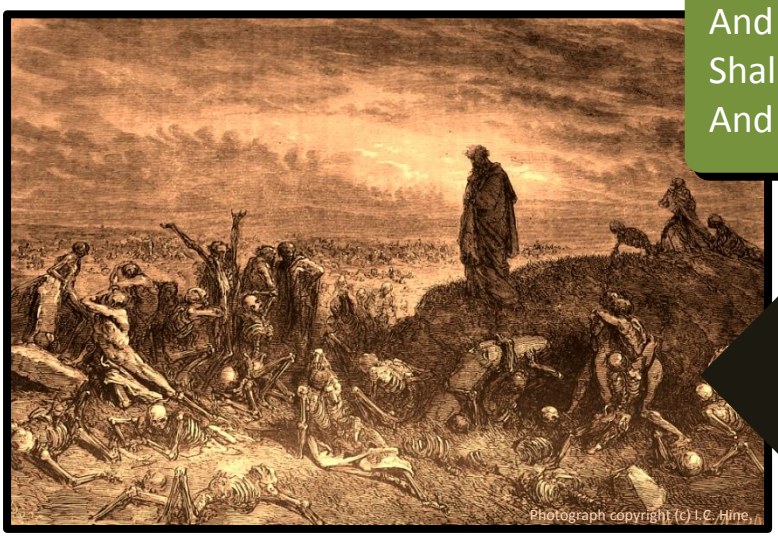
King James' Bible is frequently praised for its elegant and poetic language. As the national Bible it has had an unrivalled and lasting impact on the development of English literature. Writers such as Charles Dickens, P.G. Wodehouse, and Ted Hughes drew on the Bible, confident that readers would recognize even very subtle allusions.

The American-born poet T.S. Eliot shunned newer Bible translations. None could match the King James Version as an "exemplar of English prose". His poem *The Waste Land* was written during a period of great personal pain. He was unhappily married and recovering from a mental breakdown. The poem is bleak but its style and phrasing echo biblical texts. The extract shows traces of Ezekiel's dialogue with God in the valley of dry bones ("Son of man, can these bones live?"):

> What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow
> Out of this stony rubbish? *Son of man*,
> You cannot say, or guess, for you know only
> A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,
> And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,
> And the dry stone no sound of water.

Some years later, Eliot became a British citizen and joined the Church of England, declaring himself a convert. A poem from this era, *Ash Wednesday*, returns to Ezekiel's vision. This time Eliot incorporates the prophecy of resurrection:

> And God said,
> Shall these bones live? [...]
> And the bones sang.



This picture of Ezekiel's vision is from a family edition of King James' Bible. (Ezekiel 37)

Session 4: The Bible in Culture

At the height of the racial and immigration tensions in 1970s Britain, a popular sitcom was produced with a white couple and a black couple as next door neighbours who cannot get along. The show's title was *Love Thy Neighbour*. The programme was not about religion or the Bible. Borrowing the phrase "love thy neighbour", the writers poked fun at the hostile attitude with which the new neighbours were greeted.

The Bible continues to appear in unexpected places.

BBC sports commentator Stuart Hall regularly quotes 2 Samuel 1.20, "Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Ashkelon" (the follow on from "how are the mighty fallen"). The metaphors used in biblical encounters apply well to the gains and losses of sporting life. These may include getting there by "the skin of my teeth" (Job 19), going "from strength to strength" (Psalm 84), or seeing "the writing on the wall" (Daniel 5).

Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash, Bob Marley, Metallica, U2… To catalogue all the artists and musicians inspired by the King James Bible would surely prove an impossible task.

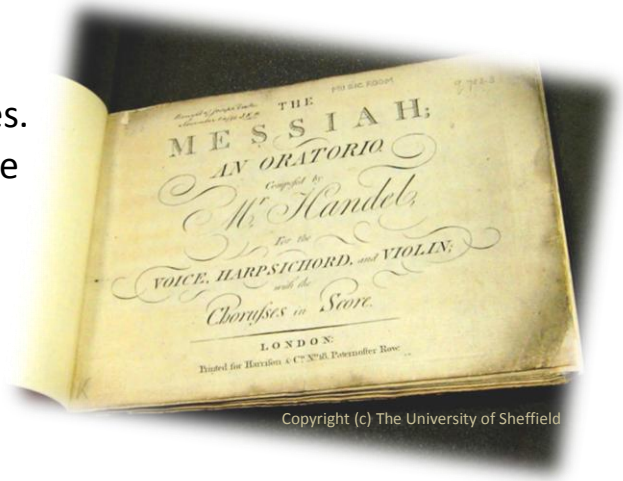
Many bible passages started out as songs. According to tradition, the Psalms were composed by King David. As a young man, David was a skilled harp-player winning King Saul's attention with his beautiful music (1 Samuel 16). His son and successor, Solomon, was credited with the composition of some remarkable love-songs.

The King James Bible has been a particular source of inspiration for composers. Perhaps the most famous example of this is Handel's *Messiah*, the *Jesus Christ Superstar* of 18th century England.

David playing the harp.
From the title page of the Coverdale Bible.

Messiah

If Handel was the Andrew Lloyd-Webber of his day, Charles Jennens was his Tim Rice. As lyricist, Jennens carefully selected verses from the King James Bible to tell the story of Jesus, his birth, life, death and resurrection.



Messiah's first performance in 1741 provoked anger in some church circles. Taking the Bible to a popular audience was seen as blasphemous and disrespectful. The outcry was partly overcome by the Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin who instructed Handel to add to the title: *A Sacred Oratorio*.

Handel wrote many other dramatic musical retellings of episodes from the King James Bible as did his imitators and successors. In England especially, these biblically-based works, known as oratorios, became a central part of musical culture. *Messiah* retains a central place in the programme of annual Handel festivals. Indeed, for a composition completed in just 23 days, Handel's work has lasted the test of time.

Well into the twentieth century, the King James Bible was familiar to people in Britain as much through musical works they listened to and sang as from their own reading of the Bible. Artists continue to draw on the power of biblical language, though today's audiences may not recognize every reference.

***Messiah* is a Hebrew word meaning "the anointed one". According to Jewish belief – and the Old Testament – God will anoint a Messiah to lead people (and save them).**

The first Christians identified Jesus as the Messiah, making connections between promises made in the Old Testament and Jesus' life and actions. The name Christian comes from the Greek translation of Messiah "Christos" or Christ.

For discussion

1. Phrases from the King James Bible have become part of everyday speech, like the sporting examples given above. Do you know other phrases which originate in the Bible? Are there any verses that you can recite from memory?

2. Do you have a "family bible"? If so, what version is it? Which bible translations do you have at home, and why?

3. If possible, listen to a part of Handel's *Messiah*, and/or a track from *Jesus Christ Superstar*. How has the Bible influenced the composer? How does hearing the music influence the way we understand the Bible? For example, do we instinctively understand "for unto us a child is born" (**Isaiah 9.6**) in a particular way because we can hear Handel's music in our heads?

4. Richard Dawkins has said that "you can't appreciate English literature unless you are steeped to some extent in the King James Bible". Do you agree? Re-read the quotation from T.S. Eliot. Would you be able to understand it if you had never read Ezekiel?

To end, read 2 Samuel 1.17-27.

And David lamented with this lamentation over Saul and over Jonathan his son:
(Also he bade them teach the children of Judah the use of the bow: behold, it is written in the book of Jasher.)
The beauty of Israel is slain upon thy high places: how are the mighty fallen!

King James Bible

Preparation for Session 5

Advances in printing technology helped to spread new religious ideas and new bible translations. Printing was also an ideal way to create a high quality version of the original Greek and Hebrew texts.

Desiderius Erasmus was born in the Dutch town of Rotterdam in 1466, about thirty years after Gutenberg published his bible.

He was an expert at Latin, and became a Professor at the University of Cambridge. During his stay in Cambridge he was inspired to learn Greek and study the New Testament.

Erasmus compiled a Greek New Testament with his own Latin translation, and this was published in 1516. He published revised copies in 1519, 1522, 1527 and finally in 1535.


NOVVM TESTA-
MENTVM OMNE, MVLTO QVÀM ANTEHAC DI
ligentius ab ERASMO ROTERODAMO recognitũ, emẽ
datum ac translatum, nõ solum ad Græcam ueritatẽ, uerum
etiam ad multorũ utriusq; linguæ codicum, eorumq; ueterũ
simul & emẽdatorum fidem, postremo ad probatissimorũ
autorum citationem, emẽdationem & interpretationẽ, præ-
cipue Origenis, Athanasij, Nazianzeni, Chrysostomi, Cy-
rilli, Theophylacti, Hieronymi, Cypriani, Ambrosij, Hila-
rij, Augustini, unà cũ Annotationibus recognitis, ac magna
accessione locupletatis, quæ lectorem doceant, quid qua ra-
tione mutatũ sit. Quisquis igitur amas ueram Theologiam, le
ge, cognosce, ac deinde iudica. Neq; statim offendere, si quid
mutatum offenderis, sed expende, num in melius mutatum
sit. Nam morbus est non iudicium, damnare quod non in-
spexeris.
SALVO VBIQVE, ET ILLABEFACTO
ECCLESIAE IVDICIO.
Addita sunt in singulas Apostolorum epistolas
Argumenta per ERASMVM ROT.

The title page of Erasmus' Greek New Testament.

Desideratus Erasmus.

My New Testament was used by Tyndale, the Geneva translators and King James' scholars too. It became known as *Textus Receptus*, the Received Text. It was edited by later scholars and continued as the main source for biblical translators until the late 1800s.

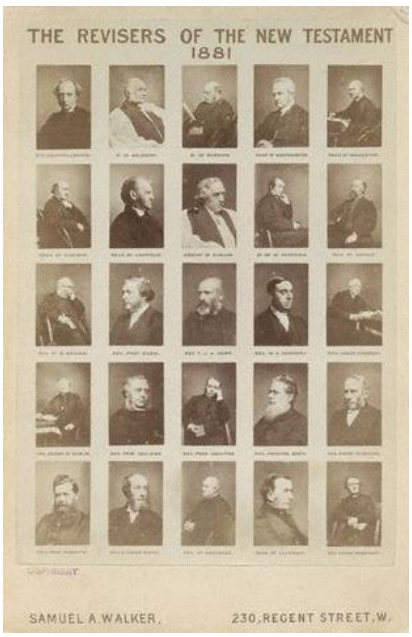
Revising King James' Bible

By the mid 1700s, my bible was in danger of becoming unrespectable. The number of printing errors had multiplied and it was nearly impossible to know which parts were correct.

Scholars at Oxford University worked through the entire Bible, comparing editions with the Greek sources. In 1769 the University Press published the result. They had removed thousands of errors. They also updated and standardized the spellings to reflect contemporary usage. This is the version of the King James Bible which is on sale in shops today.

The two most common names for King James' Bible – the King James Bible and the Authorized Version – appear in the late 1700s to mid 1800s. Before this, it was described as "the bible approved for reading in churches" or "the bible commissioned by His Majesty King James".

By the mid 1800s, a new problem was developing. Scholars knew more about the Bible and its languages. They had begun to identify real errors in the translation work. The decision was made to revise what had become the Authorized Version.



US Library of Congress collections. No known restrictions.

The revised New Testament was published in 1881. It was known as the *Revised Version*. The Old Testament and Apocrypha followed, and a complete Revised Version was published in 1895.

The revision committee aimed to update the English too, but they hoped to preserve the overall tone and style of language. People were familiar with the words and sounds of King James' Bible.

Codex Sinaiticus

King James' translators used the best known sources for Greek and Hebrew, and compared other ancient translations of the Bible as well. But older, more reliable manuscripts have been found.

In the mid-1800s, a German scholar found a manuscript in a monastery near Mount Sinai, Egypt. It contained the complete New Testament in Greek as well as parts of an Old Testament translation.

This became known as Codex Sinaiticus and can be dated to the late 4th century. Its New Testament is now kept in the British Library.

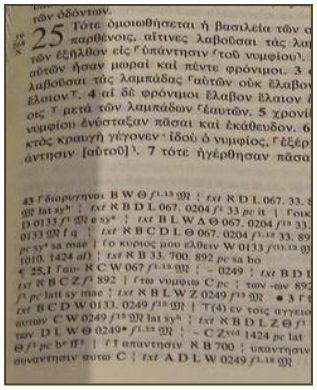
Map adapted from freeworldmaps.net.

Why are old manuscripts valuable?

When a manuscript is copied by hand, there may be mistakes. In old Greek manuscripts there are no gaps between the words. This saved paper, but it also made it hard for the copyist. They could easily miss out words, or parts of words.

If a copyist thought there was an error in the manuscript, he might change or correct it. Over time, more and more changes can emerge.

Older manuscripts are closer to the original. This means they are more reliable as witnesses to what was first written.



Scholars today have clear ways of recording where there are differences. A modern copy of the Greek New Testament contains notes at the bottom of the page.

A bible scholar can use these to weigh up the evidence of different manuscripts.

Matthew 25.1-7 with footnotes from a scholar's Greek New Testament.

Further Developments

Elizabeth Cady Stanton
US Library of Congress collections. No known restrictions.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was disappointed by the *Revised Version*. She objected to use of the Bible to justify the low social status of women. She felt that this was sometimes the fault of the translation rather than the original text.

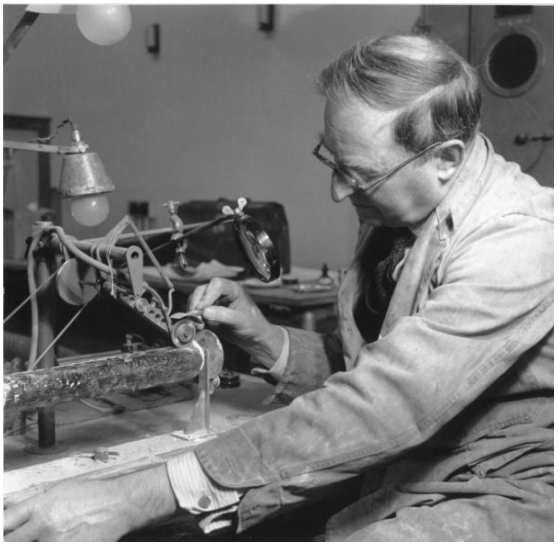
Stanton worked with other women to produce the *Woman's Bible*, completed in 1898. It was not a critical success, but it was a sign of social change. Bible translators now think carefully about the words they use and the impact they may have on social status.

The Dead Sea Scrolls

In the 1940s, scrolls were found in caves at an area known as Qumran, close to the Dead Sea. The dry desert heat had preserved them.

There are manuscripts with parts of the Hebrew Bible including the prophet Isaiah. There are also records of the community who owned these scrolls, how they lived and their beliefs.

The scrolls can be dated to the period between 150BCE and 70CE.
They create a more complex picture of life around Jerusalem in the time of Jesus.



If a scroll is complete it must be taken apart carefully.

Session 5: In the Beginning was the Word

The Revised Version of King James' Bible was the start of an ongoing process. It was followed by the Revised Standard Version (1952) and the New Revised Standard Version (1989). Both took the style of the Authorized Version as their starting point.

My bible has grown into a whole family of bibles.... the *American Standard Version*, the *New King James Version*, the *English Standard Version*. Many new bibles are based on mine.

Older people remember hearing my bible when they were children. There are also individuals – mostly in the USA – who think there is no need for another bible. Mine is perfect.

In the 1940s, a decision was made to produce a completely new bible, independent from King James' Bible. The translators used other sources as well as the Hebrew and Greek. They examined new evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls and Codex Sinaiticus. The result was a New Testament published in 1961, 350 years after King James' Bible, and then the complete New English Bible (1970).

Is King James' Bible a perfect translation?

James' translators relied on the accuracy of Erasmus' work, but Erasmus' main concern was his Latin translation. The Greek manuscript he used lacked the last six verses of Revelation so Erasmus produced his own Greek translation from the Latin Vulgate. In a later edition of his work he was persuaded to add words to 1 John 5 (verses 7-8) based on a late manuscript that was probably faked.

The meaning of English words is not fixed. The differences between King James' English and today's language can cause confusion.

"Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a **publican**." Luke 18.10

Some parts of the 1611 translation were inaccurately "Christianized". Examples include mention of Easter in place of Passover in Acts 12, and church-robbers instead of temple-robbers in Acts 19.

Faithful Translation

There is no longer a desire that everyone should use the same bible. Churches in England now have the freedom to choose.

Some bibles stay close to the original words. This is the traditional approach taken by bibles in the "King James family", and by the New English Bible. Others aim to copy the function of a word or phrase rather than its exact meaning in the host language.

Paraphrases, which explain the contents and meaning without trying to copy the exact sentences, have also become more acceptable. *The Message* is the best known modern paraphrase.

Psalm 23

God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing.
You have bedded me down
in lush meadows,
you find me quiet pools to drink from.
True to your word,
you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.

4 Even when the way goes through
Death Valley,
I'm not afraid
when you walk at my side.
Your trusty shepherd's crook
makes me feel secure.

5 You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.

6 Your beauty and love
chase after me
every day of my life.
I'm back home in the
house of God
for the rest of my life.

THE MESSAGE.

For discussion

1. Scholars and translators now have much more information about the Bible. They are skilled in recognising and making sense of the earliest manuscripts. Is it right to go on using the King James Bible with its inaccuracies? If so, on what grounds?

2. Look back at the examples of changes in Luke and Acts. What does "publican" mean to you? In modern English, "tax collector" is a better equivalent to the Greek. Is this important?

3. The world has changed much in the last 400 years. Should Bible translations change with culture? For example, we are now careful in written English to use language that does not exclude women, and some bible translations (e.g. the NRSV) use inclusive language where possible. The Bible is now available in "text-speak", the style of language used in mobile text-messages. How far should translators go to reflect modern usage?

4. Read Psalm 23 in the King James Bible and Message versions.
   Is any one translation the "right" one? Do we all need to learn Hebrew and Greek in order to understand the Bible? How can we trust the English bibles we read? In what sense, if any, can an English translation be described as "the Word of God"?

To end, read Psalm 23 again.
You might want to vote for which version to read.

The University Of Sheffield.

This Study Guide has been produced by the Department of Biblical Studies at the University of Sheffield as part of Sheffield King James Project, with additional material from Sheffield Cathedral. www.sheffield.ac.uk/kjv