
'Never perfectly printed': the Authorized Version of the Bible

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A paradoxically new old version of the Bible in English

[The following text is the editor's introduction to *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible* to be published later this year and is reproduced with permission.]

THOUGH it is the most important book in the religious life and the culture of the English-speaking world, the King James Bible or Authorised Version of 1611 has never been perfectly printed. This is not to say either that it is badly printed or that absolute perfection can be achieved, but that the text and its presentation can be improved. First, what we now read as the King James Bible contains numerous deliberate and some accidental changes to the text, and these can be revised to make it more faithful to the King James translators' own decisions as to how it should read. Second, the presentation of the text – spelling, punctuation and formatting – interferes with the clarity with which it speaks to the minds and souls of present-day readers. Unnecessary background noise gets in the way. To use another image, there is dust and dirt on the old master, the paint is darkened and cracked: we can still see that the picture is a great one, but not how great it is.

Such improvements are needed because of the way the text developed and then stopped developing. The first edition was prepared under the supervision of some of the translators and is uniquely authoritative, but it has its unavoidable share of mistakes. Most of these are typographical, but some come from problems in the copy the printer used and some from mistakes the translators themselves made. Subsequent early printings corrected some of the mistakes and introduced others, so variant readings began to accumulate. Printing the King James Bible became both a large-scale

commercial enterprise and a scholarly endeavour. The commercial enterprise produced innumerable editions without much care for the basis of the text they were reproducing. Meanwhile editors worked over the detail of the text, introducing small changes which usually made it a more literal translation of the originals, but sometimes, presumably for reasons of style, changed its English. This work of accidental and deliberate textual development came to an almost complete stop with an Oxford edition of 1769, which thereafter became accepted as the standard. It is still, with very little change, the received text that we read as the King James Bible.

Spelling and punctuation changed steadily through this century and a half. By the time the text became fixed these generally conformed to mid-eighteenth century standards. Some other aspects of presentation such as paragraphing and the two-column format with each verse

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printed on a new line remained unchanged in most editions.

After 1769 the desire for stability prevailed over the desire to 'improve'. This received text was and is a good one, but its chief virtue has been its stability. The King James translators themselves recognised the desire for stability in religion as they justified the work that they had done in making a new translation. In their preface, 'the translators to the reader', they observe

that whosoever attempteth anything for the public (specially if it pertain to religion, and to the opening and clearing of the word of God), the same setteth himself upon a stage to be glouted upon by every evil eye, yea, he casteth himself headlong upon pikes, to be gored by every sharp tongue. For he that meddleth with men's religion in any part meddleth with their custom, nay, with their freehold; and though they find no content in that which they have, yet they cannot abide to hear of altering.

Yet, at the risk of glouting and goring, the stable text does need changing. First, as already noted, it is not the translators' text but has had many readings changed according to the judgements of editors who had made it into a revised version: not a heavily revised version, but still a revised version. Second, it is now possible to go back to manuscript work by the translators which sometimes clarifies exactly what they decided was the right reading or the best phrasing. Third, its spelling and punctuation are neither those of the original nor of the present. Fourth, its usual formatting, by privileging the verse reference system, inhibits clear, contextual reading.

One example must serve to illustrate the kind of changes editors have made and the light that the manuscript work can give. It turns on a single letter. Hos. 6:5 reads in the first edition, 'therefore haue I shewed them by the Prophets'. The second edition removed an s, creating the reading of the received text, 'therefore have I hewed them by the prophets'. 'Shewed' is generally reckoned a misprint because the literal sense of the Hebrew is 'cut down', as in the earlier English translations. However, the King James translators' manuscript work shows it was not a misprint: they struck through 'cut down' in their source text and substituted 'shewed'. In doing so they followed an Aramaic reading from Targum Jonathan, and the general sense of the note to this verse in the popular Geneva Bible: 'I haue still laboured by my prophets, and as it were,

framed you to bring you to amendement, but all was in vaine: for my word was not meate to feede them, but a sworde to slaye them'. To put it another way, God's word, which should have led to reform of life, has been ignored, so, rather than saving, it condemns. Figuratively, what should have been food has become a sword. Troubled as others had been before them at the violent picture of God hewing people down, the King James translators chose what we may think of as a gentler reading. Theology may lie in a single letter, and an apparently correct change may remove the translators' understanding of the original.

This example tells much of the kind of work that lies behind *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible*. All the different readings between the first edition and the current text, as represented by Cambridge and Oxford editions, have been identified. Their history has been traced and their rationale examined, including their relation to the translators' manuscript work and to the original languages. Except where there are good reasons to think that the first edition does not represent the readings the translators decided on, first edition readings are restored. Consequently *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible* gives the reader as closely as possible the exact text that the King James translators themselves decided on – but which was far from perfectly realised in the first edition. *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible* is the translators' Bible.

An important aim is to give the reader consistent modern spelling and presentation in order to make it easier to read and study than the received text. This is the work that is like cleaning an old master. The removal of obsolete and inconsistent spellings, old-fashioned punctuation and cumbersome presentation will be more obvious than the changes to readings. Spelling is the most important issue, especially because it may appear that the King James Bible no longer sounds quite like itself. Where in current texts, Jesus 'spake' to the multitude, in *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible* he 'spoke'. The word is the same but the sound is different.

In 1611 spelling varied freely. One notable aspect of this variation involves forms that we would think would have to be pronounced differently, for instance 'murderer' and 'murtherer' (Num. 35:18 and 19). Similarly, a word might be treated as aspirated according to the printer's convenience, as in Ezek. 40:42, 'a

cubite and an halfe long, and a cubite & a halfe broad'. Such variations in close proximity strongly suggest that the 1611 spelling cannot be taken as a reliable guide to pronunciation, and that therefore editors should ignore apparent changes of sound in modernising the spelling.

The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible keeps the modernisation within strict limits: spellings may be modernised, but words and grammatical forms cannot be changed. 'Thou wouldst' does not become 'you would' because that changes the character of the language. Throughout the language stays the same, that of the translators. Occasionally this means that older words or forms are reintroduced, either because at some point in the history of the text the translators' word was changed to a similar, different word, or because a modern form obscures the meaning. When Paul, in the received text, wishes 'that women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness and sobriety' (1 Tim. 2:9), he appears to want them not only to be modest and sober, but also ashamed. This is not what the translators meant. They used a word that might once have sounded the same as 'shamefacedness', 'shamefastness'. This is not so easily read as 'ashamed': its authentic strangeness takes the reader to the right meaning, holding fast to modesty. 'Instead' illustrates how a modern spelling can obscure meaning. Its usual meaning now is abstract: as an alternative to. However, in the English of the King James it is always given as two words, 'in stead', and often has a much more concrete sense that fits with phrases such as 'reigned in his stead'. When one reads in current texts that God took one of Adam's ribs 'and closed up the flesh instead thereof' (Gen. 2:21), one might well be puzzled: instead of what? one might ask. The real meaning becomes clearer in the first edition's 'closed up the flesh in stead thereof'. *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible* restores old spellings of this sort.

Consistency of spelling is not made a fetish. The translators, again in their preface 'to the reader', argued their right to use a range of vocabulary rather than a single English word for a particular word in the original. 'Is the kingdom of God,' they ask, 'become words or syllables? why should we be in bondage to them if we may be free?' *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible* uses the same freedom with words that have more than one current form,

such as 'toward' and 'towards', or 'among' and 'amongst'. The eighteenth-century editors tried to settle on one form, deciding, for instance, that 'among' was preferable to 'amongst'. Yet, with understandable frailty, they missed two early examples. The first edition had used both forms freely. Rather than completing those editors' work by banishing the last two uses of 'amongst', *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible* has gone back to the translators' choices as represented in the first edition. Again the result is a more authentic text.

In short, what *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible* does is to modernise the spelling of the Bible without sinning against the language of the translators.

Like the spelling, the punctuation of the received text belongs to the eighteenth century and often appears heavy to modern taste. Since the original punctuation is often closer to modern practice, it is usually restored, but the punctuation of the received text is drawn on wherever the original is impossible by modern standards and in some other cases where it seems to be more helpful. Speech marks have been added, again as an aid to the reader. Rather than just indicating the beginning of a speech by the use of a capital letter, as in most editions from the first onwards, this also indicates the end of a speech, and it helps to reveal the often considerable complexities of speech within speech.

In all likelihood, the first edition of the King James Bible was hurried through the press before the translators had fully completed their work. One of the casualties of this hurry was the paragraphing. It emerged rough and incomplete: for instance, there are no paragraph breaks marked in the New Testament after Acts 20. Curiously, this unsatisfactory situation has remained unchanged in the received text. What *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible* does is to present the entire text in paragraphs that conform as far as possible to present-day ideas of paragraphing. This contributes to the aim of making the King James Bible as readable and comprehensible as possible without falsifying the essentials of the translators' work.

Poetic parts of the text have been given in verse lines. Here a word of caution is necessary: it is not always clear what parts of the original were poetry, nor how that poetry should be lineated; moreover, the King James Bible was made as a prose translation, and its

words only sometimes work as verse. Nevertheless, the appearance of poetry, at the least, may act as a reminder that some parts were originally poetry. Sometimes it may do more, bringing out the structure of the poetry and more of the rhythm of the text.

The King James translators were instructed that 'no marginal notes at all [were] to be affixed, but only for the explanation of the Hebrew or Greek words, which cannot without some circumlocution so briefly and fitly be expressed in the text'. Consequently they supplied in the margin notes that give either alternative translations or literal renderings of the original (most of these begin 'Heb.' or 'Gr.' for Hebrew or Greek). Subsequent editions added a few more such notes. The reader may find

these additional notes helpful, so *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible* keeps them within square brackets, thus making clear which notes are original and which are not.

Thousands of specks of dust have been blown away from the received text in *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible*, leaving the King James Bible presented with a fidelity to the translators' own work never before achieved, and allowing the most read, heard and loved book in the English language to speak with new vigour to modern readers.

A full account of the history of the text and of the principles on which *The New Cambridge Paragraph Bible* was made is available in David Norton, *A Textual History of the King James Bible* (Cambridge University Press), 2005. ■