

The 400th Anniversary of the Authorised Version of the Bible.

1611 and all that...



In terms of great political events 1611 was not a particularly momentous year in British history, but was the year in which one of the country's greatest religious and cultural creations came into being. The Authorised Version of the Bible (AV1611) was published 400 years ago this year and has had a profound effect on the language we use in church and on the development of the English language as a whole. Until recently many people could recognise large sections of the Bible, and the words they would remember would be those of the Authorised version. In many homes during those 400 years the Bible was the most treasured, and read, book.

From the start of Genesis "In the beginning God created the heaven and earth" to the last verse of Revelation "The grace of our Lord Jesus be with you all", AV1611 is full of familiar phrases and verses; so dominant has it been, that with William Shakespeare (a contemporary of course), it has the most entries in my copy of the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, more than 30 densely-packed pages.

AV1611 had the advantage of being written and published at a time of great richness in English language and literature, a literary Golden



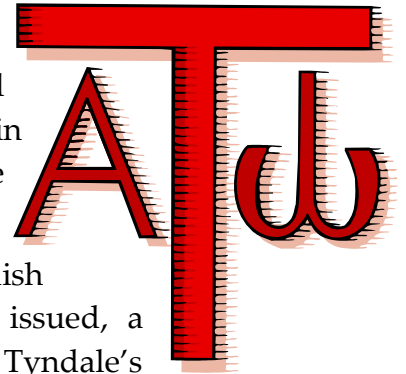
Age, when Shakespeare and fellow dramatists, John Webster, Thomas Middleton and Ben Jonson, were active in the playhouse, and the 38-year old John Donne was writing his love poems. George Herbert was a mere 18 years old. George Chapman's English version of Homer, another hugely influential translation, was also completed in 1611. Interestingly AV1611 uses a smaller vocabulary than

Shakespeare Shakespeare and is linguistically conservative; its contemporary readers and listeners would have found the language rather formal and archaic.

So why was a new translation of the Bible felt to be necessary in reign of James I? English translations of the Bible were not new, the earliest being that by Wycliffe as long ago as 1388, and it became a central plank of Protestantism that people should be able to read the Holy Scriptures for themselves, and for most people who couldn't read Latin, this meant its being available in their native language.

The Reformation followed soon after the invention of printing, and the availability of printed versions of the Vulgate, the Latin text of the Bible (1456), the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, and Erasmus's Greek text of the New Testament, provided the tools for the preparation of translations into vernacular languages.

William Tyndale was the grandfather of the Authorised version; he translated the New Testament from the Greek in 1526 and much of his translation passed unchanged into the Authorised Version.



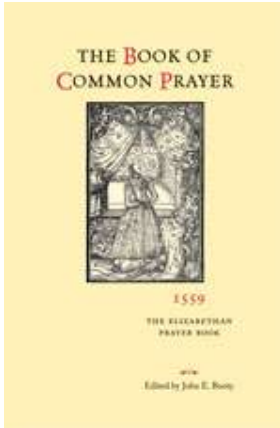
In 1534 Henry VIII was asked to commission a full English translation of the Bible; although no royal warrant was issued, a translation was prepared by Miles Coverdale using Tyndale's translation and the German versions of Martin Luther and Ulrich Zwingli as a basis. Although Coverdale's translation has been superseded, his version of the Psalms is the one incorporated into the Book of Common Prayer (1662), which differs from the version in AV1611. So for the start of Psalm 137 BCP has "By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept, when we remembered thee O Sion" but AV1611 has "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion".

The first authorised version of the English reformed church was the Matthew Bible of 1537 and was followed by the "Great Bible" of 1539. During the restoration of Catholicism many English Protestants fled to the Continent, publishing the Geneva Bible in 1557. This was also known as the "Breeches Bible" because in the passage from Genesis when Adam and Eve realised their nakedness they covered their shame with "breeches" rather the "aprons" of AV1611.

With the accession of Queen Elizabeth the following year and the church settlement that created the relationship between the state and the established church which still exists, Archbishop Matthew Parker undertook a revision of the Bible. The resulting Bishops' Bible was published in 1568 and revised in 1572.



So when a new version was suggested to James I, he asked 54 clergy and scholars to work on what was a major collaborative venture. The Bishops' Bible was the basis but other translations were consulted, so AV1611 was very much a revision rather than a new translation. Although the work had been instigated by the King, it was never formally "authorised" despite its popular title. The title page merely says that it is "appointed to be read in churches".



When the Book of Common Prayer was issued in 1662 the Authorised Version was adopted as the text for the readings throughout the year. It was taken to the English colonies, such as North America, where it was, and is, known as the King James Bible.

Although a revised version was produced in the 1880s drawing on the Biblical scholarship of the nineteenth century, AV1611 continued as the main English version of the Bible. The American Revised Standard version was published in 1952, and the New English Bible in the 1960s.

Older members of the congregation will remember the furore that greeted the publication of the NEB and the complaints that it lacked the beauty of AV1611.

For 350 years AV1611 remained the version of the Bible that everyone knew, one that influenced English literary style and gave us dozens of common phrases and sayings. In a recent book linguist David Crystal (*Begat: the King James Bible and the English language*, Oxford University Press, 2010) identifies 257 common expressions that are found in AV1611, but only 18 that are unique to this version of the Bible and do not appear in any of the other translations that precede it. Some are limited to their religious context, for example, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures in heaven", but others such as "the root of the matter" have entered general usage.

Each month in Magna we invite individuals to share with readers a favourite passage from the Authorised Version.

So to start the series I have chosen a passage from Paul's epistle to the Philippians, chapter 4, which contains one of the 257 expressions, though one originated by Tyndale. These words were set by Henry Purcell for an anthem which has come to be known as the Bell anthem; this short passage encompasses the essence of our faith. Every time I sing this, and we get to the phrase "the peace of God which passeth all understanding", the combination of the AV words and Purcell's exquisite music takes us to the heart of the mystery of God's love for us.

Rejoice in the Lord alway; and again I say, rejoice.

Let your moderation be known unto all men; the Lord is at hand

*Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving,
let your requests be made known unto God.*

*The peace of God which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds
through Christ Jesus*



Peter Hounsell