

## King James Bible endures for 400 years

Excerpts from an article by Melodie Woerman [Episcopal News Service, May 31, 2011]

It has been called one of the two greatest works of the English language, rivaled only by Shakespeare. For many, it is the only Bible they consider "authentic." It was seven years in the making, the work of a 54-member committee, but within 90 years it had come to be known simply as "the Bible."

This year marks the 400th anniversary of the printing of the King James Bible, a work of religious, political and linguistic force that continues to shape the thinking and vocabulary of much of the English-speaking world.

### Centuries of precursors

The King James Bible didn't spring just from the linguistic skills of the 54 learned men who produced it. Rather it was the result of more than 200 years of English translations.

John Wycliffe translated the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible into English in the late 1380s, an act that had the early reformer branded a heretic after his death.

As Reformation ideals spread across Europe, one of its adherents, William Tyndale, asked to translate the Bible into English but was denied the right. He then fled to Belgium, where in 1526 he produced an English New Testament. He translated the entire Bible into English in 1530, but its Protestant leanings were too much for King Henry VIII who feared the egalitarianism advocated by reformers. In 1536 Tyndale was strangled and his body burned at the stake.

### Tyndale's influence

After Henry's break with Rome in 1531, he commissioned his own English Bible, known as the Great Bible. He wanted a text that would promote knowledge of the Scriptures but wouldn't introduce wholesale reformist ideals that were taking root in Europe. Miles Coverdale, gave Henry such a Bible, basing his version on Tyndale's work. Henry ordered that his Bible be placed in every church so it would be available for those who wanted to read it for themselves.

After the reign of the Roman Catholic Queen Mary I, Elizabeth I wanted an end to religious strife with her own Bible translation in 1568. Known as the Bishops' Bible, it struck a balance between Henry's Great Bible and an English version known as the Geneva Bible. It did, however, introduce some odd variations. The Great Bible translated Ecclesiastes 11:1 as "Lay thy bread upon the waters;" the Bishops' Bible offered "Lay thy bread upon wette faces."

Like the Great Bible, the Bishops' Bible was printed in large-format lectern editions. But the Geneva Bible was becoming a favorite among the people, with its smaller size, study aids, and its novel idea of breaking up the biblical text into chapters and verses.

### James' Bible

A year after James became King of England in 1603, a group of Puritan clergy petitioned for greater reform in the church, and for a new translation that recognized the impact of the Geneva Bible on everyday life. James, himself a noted linguist, gathered scholars to create his new text.