

# Kings & Puritans, Bishops & Bibles:

the Hampton Court Conference, January 1604

by C. P. Hallihan

**O**n January 14th, 16th and 18th, 400 years ago, a gathering of Bishops, Puritans, King James and Royal officials convened in the King's Privy Chamber in the Clock Court' at Hampton Court Palace. Hampton Court is on the north bank of the River Thames, some twelve miles west of central London, easily reached (in the 17th century) by water from Westminster. The conference was 'out of town' because plague conditions prevailed in London. Even so it had been postponed from November 1603 to January 1604 for the same reason. Readers of our *Quarterly Record* would surely consider the most significant outcome of this conference, under the sovereign provisions of our great God and Saviour, to be the publication of the Authorised Version of the English Bible seven years later in 1611.

**King James VI & I**

**E**ngland's last Tudor monarch, Queen Elizabeth I, had died at Richmond Palace, some way down river of Hampton Court, in the early morning of March 24, 1603. She had reigned for



forty-five years. A scant few hours before her death she had told Sir Robert Cecil, principal Secretary of State, “. . . a king shall succeed me; and who should that be but our cousin of Scotland?” James VI of Scotland became also James I of England, and the first to call himself King of Great Britain.<sup>2</sup>

Born in 1566, the son of Mary Queen of Scots and her second husband Henry Stewart (Lord Darnley), James became King of Scotland upon his mother's enforced abdication in 1567, when she was twenty-four years of age, and he was thirteen months! No small part of the opprobrium attached to Mary was the suspicion of having been party to the murder of James' father. Ever a focus for Catholic intrigue, she was imprisoned in England by Elizabeth I, and finally executed in 1587. By the time that he entered England as King in 1603, aged thirty-seven years, James, the Catholic-born orphan-king, with both Stewart and Tudor connections through each parent, had experienced wholly Presbyterian influence and instruction, had subscribed to the Solemn League and Covenant and had publicly declared his admiration of the Scottish (Presbyterian) Kirk and his dislike of the English (Episcopalian) liturgy.

On his accession to the English throne, James found the Protestant churches in this kingdom divided. There were those who were in comfortable agreement with the ecclesiastical government and forms of worship established by law under Elizabeth I, generally we may say the Bishops' party.



There were those for whom the imposition of certain practices and forms caused distress of conscience, and who urged further reformation: the Puritan party. These latter welcomed the accession of James with some pleasure, anticipating that because of his upbringing he would be sympathetic to their cause and grant some relief of their grievances. Others would say, however, that as the nominee of Elizabeth, surely he would maintain her superb balancing of ecclesiastical powers under the Anglican

umbrella. But then again, he was by birth a Catholic Stewart, whose mother had been the child bride of the Dauphin, later Francis II, King of France 'til his early death in 1565—perhaps the minority papal and continental party could expect some crumbs from his table? Such expectations against such a background; such power and opportunity against such an inadequate upbringing; small wonder if James' character is hard to

unravel. Small wonder if historians of differing partiality claim or denounce him according to selectively chosen aspects of his life and times.<sup>3</sup>

## The Millenary Petition<sup>4</sup>

James' journey to London in 1603 became a triumphant royal progress, and he saw this exuberant welcome as a sign of God's approval and as tribute to him personally. He ingratiated himself with all as he went, distributing gifts, offices and

titles, and appointing about three hundred new knights on his way south. The English were pleased that the succession had been a peaceful one, as Elizabeth had no direct heirs.

Amongst those who met him on the way in April 1603 were some of the Puritan clergy, with a written statement of their complaints. This was the 'Millenary' petition, supposedly from a thousand ministers, though in fact signed by not more than seven hundred and fifty. The main points urged in the Petition were:

- The necessity of a trained preaching ministry of able men
- The lawfulness of ministers' marriages
- Strict observance of Sunday as a day of rest and prayer.
- 'That men be not excommunicated for trifles and twelve-penny matters; that none be excommunicated without consent of his pastor' (Let the Church discipline the Church!)
- Pluralism (ministers holding more than one living) to be outlawed.
- Popish ceremonies, garments and terms to be abolished.

The signatories spread the net wide as they drew to a close:

*These, with such other abuses yet remaining and practised in the Church of England, we are able to show not to be agreeable to the Scriptures, if it shall please your highness further to hear us, or more at large by writing to be informed, or by conference among the learned to be resolved; and yet we doubt not but that, without any further process, your majesty (of*

## Historical Background

**1558-1603 Elizabeth I ruler of England**

1560 *The Geneva Bible*

1563 The 39 Articles of  
the Church of England

1565 *Beza's first Greek NT*

1566 *Hebrew Bible of Christopher Plantin, Antwerp edition of the 1525 Bomberg Text*

**1566 James (VI of Scotland) born**

**1567 Abdication of Mary Queen of Scots; JAMES VI of Scotland, 13 months old**

1567 *Welsh NT*

1568 *The Bishops' Bible*; John Knox died

1577 Richard Sibbes born

1582 *Rheims (Vulgate based) NT*

1588 July 19 Spanish Armada sighted off Cornwall

1588 *Welsh Bible*

1590 *Sixtine edition of the Latin Vulgate*

**1598 *Beza's last major Greek New Testament. No single printed text is closer to the presumed ground-text of the AV***

1599 Oliver Cromwell born

1600 Samuel Rutherford born

1602 *Irish NT*

**1603-1625 James I & VI ruler of England**

1603 The Millenary Petition

**1604 Hampton Court Conference**

1605 November 5th Gunpowder Plot

1607 English colony founded in Virginia

1609-1610 *Rheims-Douay RC Bible*

**1611 *Authorised Version***

*(King James Version);*

first Baptist church in England

1616 John Owen born; Shakespeare died

1620 'Mayflower': Pilgrim Fathers sail

1624 *Elzevir Greek NT*

**1625-1649 Charles I ruler of England.**

*whose Christian judgment we have received so good a taste already) is able of yourself to judge of the equity of this cause.*

And concluded by describing themselves as...

*Your majesty's most humble subjects, the ministers of the Gospel that desire not a disorderly innovation, but a due and godly reformation.*

The key phrase for us is 'conference among the learned'. Hopes in the reforming party must have been high when James agreed that such a conference should be held at Hampton Court on November 1, 1603 (later postponed, see above). Given the desire that all should be 'agreeable to the Scriptures' we will not be surprised if they themselves feature on the agenda of the Conference.

## Bibles, Bishops and Puritans

### •Background

It is important to establish in the mind that everything and everybody involved in this anticipated Conference is under the designation of Anglican, and thus Episcopalian, and of the 'one nation, one church' viewpoint. There were Anabaptists in Europe, but no Baptists nearer Hampton Court than Amsterdam! There were Presbyterians of the Geneva and John Knox heritage in Scotland, but not yet in England. Tiny, harried and harassed 'separatist' meetings were appearing in East Anglia and London, forerunners perhaps of the Independent Churches of England and New England a

generation later, but having no voice at all in the church affairs of James' Kingdom. (In 1603 John Cotton was a twenty-year-old Cambridge student, sweetly pierced by the Gospel ministry of Richard Sibbes; Roger Williams was just born; John Owen was thirteen years in the future!)

### •Bibles

After Tyndale had sealed the English New Testament with his life in 1536, the various Coverdale editions, building on Tyndale and culminating in the Great Bible, were an integral part of Anglican worship. This is why the words 'appointed' and 'authorised' began to be associated with these versions. The need was for one appointed Bible to be used for congregational as well as personal reading; and the Anglican Church was big on Bible reading! One agreed, approved Bible, to be read in copious portions day-by-day by week-by-week—a Bible to become fixed in memory from generation to generation, common from family to family and parish to parish throughout the kingdom.<sup>5</sup> Some of the reasons of constancy, continuity and wide familiarity, which supporters rightly urge

*A 1607 copy of the Geneva Bible*

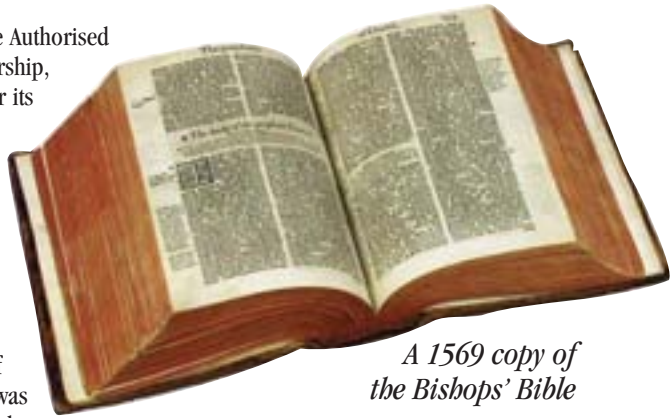


today for the maintenance of the Authorised Version in common use and worship, were among the very reasons for its appearance.

Surely it follows that if there is to be one agreed Bible version in the church and nation, it had better be the best. Amongst the ‘fiercer sort of protestants’ as Elizabeth I had called them, the Geneva Bible of 1560 had become ‘the best’. It was robust in translation, with strongly worded annotations, and it was portable, with the verses numbered. The Anglican establishment had caused the Bishops’ Bible to be produced in 1568, attempting to wean away support from the Geneva, but it was a very lame production with no possibility at all of securing general use. As they came to the conference neither the Bishops nor the Puritans were satisfied with each other’s preferred Bible Version.

## •Bishops and Puritans

Along with the prevailing Anglicanism, it is also essential to know that for all their differences, and they were many, the Bishops and the Puritans (and therefore almost all of the AV translators) were of a generally Calvinistic agreement in doctrine. Jacob Arminius’ Five Points of Remonstrance against Dutch Calvinism were declared only in 1603 (the echoing Five Point synopsi of the Calvinism of the Synod of Dort was fifteen years away). All the Puritans were Calvinists (‘everybody knows that!’), but not all Calvinists were Puritans (‘not many people know that!’). The Archbishop of Canterbury in 1603 was John Whitgift, strongly supportive of Episcopal principles and opposed to Puritanism, and yet the



*A 1569 copy of  
the Bishops’ Bible*

author of the Calvinist Articles of 1595: he was perhaps the most thoroughgoing Calvinist ever to be Archbishop, but not at all a Puritan.

The Bishops were happy to maintain the Elizabethan status quo in every aspect of church and national life. The Puritans wanted further reform within the Anglican Church, edging towards Presbyterian form and government, and desired less fuzzy doctrinal standards, with a Prayer Book that was more serviceable to piety; but still all within the ‘Church of England’. In the course of a generation the hammer of Charles I on the anvil of Bishop Laud forged many Puritans into Nonconformists, a stepping outside of any adherence to the established church, but that is another story.<sup>6</sup> At this point, Bishops and Puritans were all (but only just!) Anglican and Calvinistic—as, necessarily, was the King.<sup>7</sup>

## The Hampton Court Conference

Now that we have some idea of the people who gathered, with their anxieties, anticipations and



agendas, we can look at the Conference itself. On the first day the King met with the chief Bishops, cathedral Deans and his Privy Council, but with none of the Puritan party included. He discussed issues with the Bishops, showing a certain amount of sympathy towards the requests of the Millenary Petition, and even expressing a willingness to make some changes in the English Church. Bancroft, Bishop of London, and Archbishop Whitgift, argued for the status quo, cannily invoking Calvin's support in their pleadings with this Scottish-reared monarch. James wisely observed that in the course of some forty years (i.e. the whole reign of Elizabeth) some corruptions might creep into any institution, civil or church.

The second day saw the leading Puritans, John Reynolds, Laurence Chadderton, John Knewstubs and Thomas Sparke, presenting their case for reform in the Preaching, the Liturgy and the Bible of the English Church. To the dismay of the Bishops, James seemed only too willing to hear, and to show a great deal of understanding and accord. A programme to provide able preachers was as agreeable to the King as to Reynolds. A new translation of the Bible, framed from the Hebrew and Greek and to be published without notes, as suggested by Reynolds, was quite acceptable to His Majesty. However, when the Puritan scheme for Church order revealed a Scottish-style Presbyterian model, the King became exasperated. He would have his Bishops, and the Bishops would have their King; he was equally a religious as well as an hereditary civic and political head of this Protestant nation.

In the course of the third day of the conference James again discussed issues with the bishops before the Puritan spokesmen were also brought in. All were

urged to be peaceful, obedient and temperate. Some Puritan requests were declined, and some that were then thought to have been agreed were never subsequently acted upon or only partially accomplished. There was no real Prayer Book revision until 1662, by which time England was a very, very different place for Puritans. In propounding their Presbyterian solutions to church order and national life<sup>8</sup> the Puritans seem largely to have dissipated the general good will with which the King, intelligent and theologically aware, had received them. It was all a bit of an anticlimax, no real winners or losers.

BUT—the new translation of the Scriptures was to be undertaken (the Geneva Version must be displaced somehow!), according to very direct instructions. The fruit of this labour, first appearing in 1611, was to be the English Version ‘appointed to be read in Churches’, and read by multitudes still to this day throughout the world. In the United Kingdom it has been usually referred to as the Authorised Version, the AV. Elsewhere it has more often borne the name of the king<sup>9</sup> who presided at the Hampton Court Conference, and is the King James Version.

## The King James Version – The Authorised Version

**B**y July of 1604, the sixty-year-old Bishop of London, Bancroft, had succeeded Whitgift as Archbishop. It was to him that King James wrote, giving directions for the accomplishment of this great work. As well as particular

appointment of translators and provision for their maintenance, the King added:

*Furthermore, we require you to move all our bishops to inform themselves of such learned within their several dioceses, as, having especial skill in the Hebrew and Greek tongues, have taken pains, in their private studies of the Scriptures, for the clearing of any obscurities either in the Hebrew or in the Greek, or touching any difficulties or mistakings in the former English translation, which we have now commanded to be thoroughly viewed and amended; and thereupon to write unto them; earnestly charging them, and signifying our pleasure therein, that they send such their observations either to Mr. Livelie, our Hebrew reader in Cambridge, or to Dr. Harding, our Hebrew reader in Oxford, or to Dr. Andrewes, Dean of Westminster, to be imparted to the rest of their several companies; that so our said intended translation may have the help and furtherance of all our principal learned men within this our Kingdom.<sup>10</sup> [underlining added].*

Under the good hand of God, King James, though never directly involved in the work of translation, is from this point very much the driving force, and obviously concerned for the quality of the work. The AV translation story from here on, after Hampton Court, strictly belongs to a future article, say in about seven years' time, but, for your consideration, here is a succinct directive as to principles and procedures from the King to the translators;

*1. The ordinary Bible read in the church, commonly called the Bishops' Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the original will permit.*

2. *The names of the prophets and the holy writers, with the other names in the text, to be retained, as near as may be, accordingly as they are vulgarly used.*

3. *The old ecclesiastical words to be kept, as the word 'church' not to be translated 'congregation'.*

4. *When any word hath divers significations, that to be kept which hath been most commonly used by the most eminent fathers, being agreeable to the propriety of the place, and the analogie of faith.*

5. *The division of the chapters to be altered either not at all, or as little as may be, if necessity so require.*

6. *No marginal notes at all 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.*

7. *Such quotations of places to be marginally set down, as shall serve for the fit references of one scripture to another.*

8. *Every particular man of each company to take the same chapter or chapters; and, having translated or amended them severally by himself where he thinks good, all to meet together, to conferre what they have done, and agree for their part what shall stand.*

9. *As any one company hath dispatched any one book in this manner, they shall send it to the rest, to be considered of seriously and judiciously; for his Majesty is very careful in this point.*

10. *If any company, upon the review of the book so sent, shall doubt or differ upon any places, to send them word thereof, to note the places, and therewithall to send their reasons; to which if they consent not, the difference to be compounded at the general meeting which is to be of the chief persons of each company, at the end of the work.*

11. *When any place of special obscurity is doubted of, letters to be directed by authority to send to any learned in the land for his judgment in such a place.*

12. *Letters to be sent from every bishop to the rest of his clergie, admonishing them of this translation in hand, and to move and charge as many as, being skilful in the tongues, have taken pains in that kind, to send their particular observations to the company either at Westminster, Cambridge, or Oxford, according as it was directed before in the king's letter to the archbishop.*

13. *The directors in each company to be the deanes of Westminster and Chester, for Westminster, and the king's professors in Hebrew and Greek in the two universities.*

14. *These translations to be used, when they agree better with the text than the Bishops' Bible.*

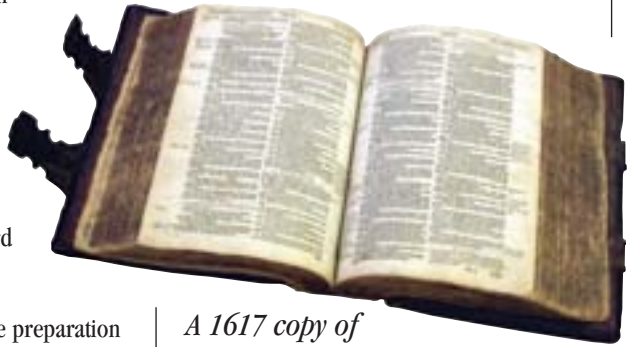
*TYNDAL'S, COVERDALE'S, MATTHEW'S, WHITCHURCH'S, GENEVA.<sup>11</sup>*

Almighty God will ever accomplish His own purpose, and fulfil His own counsel. Reynolds would have liked to maintain the Geneva Bible, but would not endure the Bishops' Bible. James declared '...that he



could neuer, yet, see a Bible well translated in English; but the worst of all, his Maiestie thought the Geneua to be'.<sup>12</sup> From their different viewpoints the Puritan and the King were pleased to agree that a new translation should be put in hand, in despite of the Bishops, and yet calling upon their labour and support! From the viewpoint of the Gospel in the English language, and the Word of God into all the world, the living God was pleased to use these means to bring about the preparation of the Authorised Version of the Bible, the

crowning jewel of one hundred years of translation work in Reformation England. Thanks be to God!



*A 1617 copy of  
the Authorised Version*



#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The Clock Court is still to be seen, but that particular chamber was later destroyed. I did not know that when spending a confusing morning trying to identify it!

<sup>2</sup> Though not officially pertaining to the English Crown until the Act of Union in 1707.

<sup>3</sup> I decline to enter the controversies about James' morals. It is even less relevant to the nature of the AV than David's murderous adultery is to the nature of the Psalms. Perhaps the king was indiscreet in his display of affection, perhaps he was of unprepossessing appearance. Perhaps he has suffered, even as the Conference itself has suffered, from the 'everybody knows...' syndrome, when in effect nobody knows, but everybody says so, on the slenderest and unsupported authority of hostile comment.

<sup>4</sup> The full text is available at <http://history.hanover.edu/project.html>.

<sup>5</sup> The word 'authorised' then, is not of itself a statement of perfection, but a declaration by the ecclesiastical (and political) authorities that this is the one agreed version, approved, and 'appointed to be read in churches'.

<sup>6</sup> The whole story of Puritan within the Anglican Church to Puritan comprehensively outside it, is comprehended in every aspect of the life and ministry

of John Cotton, from Boston, Lincolnshire, to Boston, Massachusetts.

<sup>7</sup> In the use of these terms in this article I intend only identification, and not evaluation. These were the facts of the time.

<sup>8</sup> This conjunction of state and church affairs may not be easy to understand today, but it was a very real matter, and so seen by all parties at that time. Bishops anointing and crowning and advising a king was fine. A presbytery, with perhaps 'laymen' in its make-up, discussing a king's theology or morals was not to be endured.

<sup>9</sup> Sometimes giving rise to the most disturbing, yet stoutly advocated, misconceptions as to the author and authority of this best of versions, particularly amongst those who would ordinarily have no dealings with kings, or bishops, or state churches!

<sup>10</sup> From 'A history of English translations and translators', chapter 45: in *Bagster's English Hexapla*. Available online at [http://members.aol.com/pooua/Bagster\\_Hexapla/Page0045.htm](http://members.aol.com/pooua/Bagster_Hexapla/Page0045.htm)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> William Barlow, *The Summe and Substance of the Conference...* (London: Matthew Law, 1604) pp. 6-7, quoted in *Translating for King James*, Ward Allen, ed. (London: The Penguin Press, 1970), p. 4.