



# Our King James Heritage

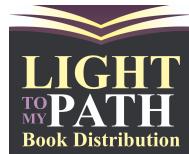
A Objective Examination of the  
History and Heritage of the King  
James Version of the Bible

**F. Wayne Mac Leod**

# OUR KING JAMES HERITAGE

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**Light To My Path Book Distribution**



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# 1 - ENGLISH BIBLES BEFORE THE KJV

**T**he Bible, as we know it today, was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. It took hundreds of years before it was translated into English. By the time the Lord Jesus came to this earth, the Old Testament had been translated from Hebrew and Aramaic into Greek. This made it more accessible to those who could read. Some scholars believe that the Bible of the apostles and the early church was this Greek Old Testament. The New Testament, of course, was originally written in Greek.

With the coming of the Roman Empire, the Greek language and culture began to lose its influence. As time went by, fewer people were able to read Greek. There was a need for a translation of the Bible into Latin, the language of the Romans. The most popular of these Latin translations was the work of Jerome completed somewhere around A.D. 400. This Bible became known as the Vulgate. The word "Vulgate" comes from the Latin word "vulga" meaning "common." This Bible would eventually become the officially recognized Bible of the Christian church. The earliest missionaries to England brought this Latin Vulgate with them on their missionary journeys. Early English believers were instructed in Bible by monks who could read Latin. The Bible, however, was not accessible in their own language.

With the coming of Christianity to the English-speaking world, there was a need for an English translation of the Bible. Between A.D. 600-800, several attempts were made to translate portions of the Bible into English. An Englishman by the name of Bede is attributed with the translation of the Gospels. Alfred the Great, who reigned from 871-899, included an English

translation of the Ten Commandments in his laws. Between the years 900-1100, other partial translations were done into English. Of particular note was a Latin Version of the Bible with English written between the lines. These initial attempts were done by translating the Latin Vulgate into English. No significant attempt was made to consult the original languages of the Bible.

The first English translation of real note was the work of John Wycliffe (1329-1384). Wycliffe had many questions about the practices of the church of his day. He wanted to see reform in the church. He felt that the average believer was being held in the dark with regards to the teaching of the Bible. It was his desire, therefore, to make the Bible available to ordinary people. He believed that as people read the Bible for themselves, they would see this need of reform. With the help of his associates, he completed the translation of the New Testament in 1380 and the Old Testament in 1382. Neither Wycliffe nor his associates understood the original languages of the Bible. Their translation, like other earlier English works, was done directly from the Latin Bible.

To promote their new translation, Wycliffe, and his associates enlisted the help of a group of common Englishmen known as the Lollards. These Lollards were challenged to go throughout England reading the word of God to all who would listen. This brought Wycliffe and his associates into sharp dispute with the church of his day. The Church felt that the interpretation of the Word of God should only be given to those who had been educated in Bible and theology. His work did not receive church approval.

In 1388 one of Wycliffe's associates produced a revision of Wycliffe's translation. This revision would eventually replace the original translation of Wycliffe in the English-speaking world.

By the 1500s there was a renewed interest in the study of Greek and Hebrew. The universities of the day began to instruct students in these languages. It was in 1515 that William Tyndale graduated from Oxford University where he had studied Scripture in Hebrew and Greek. Soon after his graduation, he committed his life to the translation of the Scriptures, not from the Latin as Wycliffe and his associates had done, but from the

Hebrew and Greek. His translation would be the first English translation based on the original languages.

Because of church opposition to his translation, Tyndale was forced to leave England for Germany. By 1525 Tyndale had completed the translation of the New Testament. Fifteen thousand copies of this New Testament were smuggled into England between 1525-1530. The church sought out these copies and burned them. In 1535 Tyndale was arrested. One year later he was burned at the stake. Before his death, however, he had succeeded in translating the Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy), Jonah, and certain of the historical books of the Old Testament.

In 1537 another attempt was made by a graduate of Cambridge University by the name of Miles Coverdale (1488-1569). Coverdale had met Tyndale and had worked for some time with him in translation from the original languages. Basing his translation on the original languages of the Bible and leaning heavily on the translation of William Tyndale, Coverdale completed a translation of the entire Bible. By this time, England had broken away from the Pope. Henry VIII gave his official approval to the Coverdale translation of the Bible. The Coverdale Version became the first officially recognized English translation of the Bible.

In 1538 Thomas Matthew (1500-1555) another friend of Tyndale, using Tyndale's unpublished manuscripts, completed yet another translation of the entire Bible. This translation also received approval by the king. His translation became known as "The Great Bible" because of its size and price. While its distribution was limited because of its price, it became the first English Bible to be authorized for public use.

By the 1540s the attitude of the king was changing towards the English translations of the Bible. In 1543 a law was passed restricting the use of the English Bible. It became a crime for an unlicensed person to read and explain the Scripture in a public setting. During this time, many English translations of the Bible were confiscated and burned. When Queen Mary came into power, many Protestant believers were sought out and killed. Miles Coverdale the Bible translator, himself, was executed.

Because of the persecution, many English believers fled England and settled in Geneva. These believers were convinced of the need for an

English translation of the Bible. In the 1550s they commissioned William Whittingham to make a translation of the New Testament. Whittingham used the Latin translation of the Bible as his base but also consulted the original Greek. He also included in the translation a series of notes that reflected the theology of John Calvin who had become a very important figure in Geneva at this time. This Bible, known as the Geneva Bible, was produced in a small size and was affordably priced. It became very popular.

The Church of England refused to accept the Geneva Bible primarily because of its Calvinistic notes. They recognized, however, that the scholarship of the Geneva Bible surpassed that of their own "Great Bible." A decision was made, therefore, to produce a revision of the Great Bible. This revision was published in 1568 and became known as the Bishop's Bible and became the officially recognized Bible of the Church of England.



## 2 - THE BACKGROUND TO THE TRANSLATION OF THE KJV

**A**s we have already mentioned, the 1500s was a difficult period for the church in England. The law of 1543 forbade the public reading and explanation of the English Bible by an unlicensed person. Queen Mary had many Protestant believers executed for their faith. Copies of English Bibles had been confiscated and burned. Many believers left England for Geneva. Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) brought an end to this persecution and permanently established Protestantism in England. While the church of England had separated from the Catholic church, there were still many in the church who were not satisfied. The Puritans felt that even this newly established church needed to be purified. They wanted to do away with the remnants of Roman Catholicism that remained in the Church of England and fought for the abolition of certain religious ceremonies. Puritans wanted the removal of religious articles used in worship. They believed the government of the Church of England was not in accordance with the teaching of the Word of God and wanted stricter discipline in the church. They resisted the power held by the bishops of the church in their day. As strong proponents of the "priesthood of all believers," Puritans believed that all believers had the right and obligation to approach God and minister on his behalf. Beyond this, many of these Puritan believers used the Geneva Bible. This Bible was not accepted by the Church of England because of its Calvinistic notes.

By the time King James came to the throne in 1603 the church in England was in a state of confusion. King James knew that something needed to be

done to help solve the divisions in the church. In 1604 he called a meeting of the Church of England and the Puritans. There were many issues discussed at this meeting, but the only point agreed upon by both parties was the need of a new English translation of the Bible.

The Bishop's Bible (a revision of the Great Bible), which was in use in the church of England, had not been widely accepted. The Geneva Bible contained Calvinistic notes that neither King James nor the Church of England were willing to accept. It was felt that a new translation of the Bible would help to bring unity to the desperately divided church.

King James commissioned, therefore, the translation of a new English Bible. He placed certain restrictions, however, on this new translation. Firstly, there were to be no interpretive notes. The Calvinistic notes of the Geneva Bible tended to divide the church. This new translation was to be a Bible that the whole church could use regardless of doctrinal leaning. Secondly, the translation was to be undertaken by a group of university professors to insure the best possible scholarship. Thirdly, the translators were requested to consult former translations and to take the best of what had already been translated.

The work of translation began in 1607. More than fifty scholars from the best universities of England, trained in the original languages were commissioned to the task. This was a massive undertaking. They worked for four years to produce this new translation that has become known in our day as the King James Version. It is known in Britain as the Authorized Version. The work was completed in 1611 and was authorized for public use by King James himself. It became the standard Bible of the English-speaking world. It is interesting to note, however, that it took fifty years before the King James Version was to replace the popularity of the Geneva Bible.

The King James Version of the Bible was to become the most widely accepted of all English translations. It would be uncontested for hundreds of years. It has been respected for its poetic style and scholarship. It was not until the late 1800s that the church would again feel the need of a new translation. For over four hundred years the King James Version of the Bible would be the best selling Bible in the world. It would retain this

honour until 1987 when it would be outsold by the New International Version. No other book in the history of publishing has held this status for so long. It is an obvious reflection upon the admirable work done by the translators.

## 3 - TEXTS USED BY THE TRANSLATORS OF THE KJV

**W**hen King James commissioned the translation of the KJV of the Bible, he made it clear that the translation was to be from the original languages with former English translations being consulted. This is reflected on the title page of the KJV where it is stated:

*The Holy Bible, containing the Old Testament and the New, newly translated out of the original tongues and with the former translations diligently compared and revised by his Majesties Special Command*

To understand more fully the process of translation, we need to examine the difficulties of the task. Unfortunately, we do not have the original writings of the human authors of the Bible. The work of the original authors was copied by hand and passed on from generation to generation. Many of these copies have been destroyed by time. The Bible we have today has been compiled from thousands of handwritten manuscripts collected over hundreds of years. Very few of these ancient manuscripts are complete. Some contain only a few verses while others contain whole books of the Bible. A close examination of these manuscripts will show that they do not all agree in wording. Some of these manuscripts differ greatly one from another. We presently have over six thousand ancient manuscripts containing portions of the New Testament alone. Added to this is the fact that the books of the New Testament were circulated as individual letters. It was not until later that these letters would be collected and published under one cover. The question that any translator of the Bible must deal with is

this: How do we piece together these ancient manuscripts to discover what the original author said?

Between the years 500-900 AD medieval scribes known as the Mesoretes took up the challenge of producing a copy of the Hebrew Old Testament. By carefully comparing the ancient manuscripts available to them in their day, they pieced together Hebrew texts. It is generally agreed among scholars that the work of these scribes was very diligent. They had access to manuscripts that are no longer in existence today. Their work is known as the Massoretic Text. The translators of the KJV of the Bible based their translation of the Old Testament upon the work of these scribes.

It is interesting to note that in the 1940s some ancient scrolls were discovered in a cave in the region of the Dead Sea. These scrolls contained portions of every book of the Old Testament except the book of Esther. They were older than any other Old Testament manuscript available to the scholar at that point in history. The significance of this discovery is found in the fact that they agreed almost entirely with the Hebrew text of the Old Testament we have today. While the translators of the KJV in the early 1600s did not have the benefit of these scrolls, the Old Testament texts they used were extremely reliable.

With regards to the New Testament, the translators of the KJV used a Greek text known as the "Textus Receptus" or "Received Text." This Greek edition of the New Testament was based on the work of Erasmus (1467-1536). Having been urged by a Swiss printer to produce a Greek Text from the manuscripts available in his day, Erasmus took up the challenge. He began his work in July of 1515. In just eight months (March 1516) his New Testament was completed.

For his Greek New Testament, Erasmus used five or six Greek manuscripts available to him at the time. For the most part, the manuscripts he used were dated between the tenth and the thirteenth century (over a thousand years after the original had been written). The only manuscript he had of the book of Revelation did not contain the last six verses. To complete his work, he was compelled to translate the Latin text into Greek and include it into his Greek New Testament. Despite these shortcomings, and many typographical errors, his work became a standard for two hundred years.

Further editions of this Greek New Testament were produced in the 1600s. The translators of the KJV based their translation of the New Testament upon this work of Erasmus and his disciples.

The commitment of the translators of the KJV was to use the best Greek and Hebrew texts available to them in their day. While recent archaeological finds have uncovered Greek manuscripts that scholars believe to be more reliable than those used by Erasmus, the Lord has miraculously preserved His word from doctrinal error.

## 4 - ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES SINCE THE PUBLICATION OF THE KJV

**W**e have already mentioned that the tools of the translator are the copies of ancient manuscripts preserved through time. No other book has as many manuscripts available to the scholar as does the Bible. This is nothing short of a miracle. God is in the business of preserving His Word.

Since the publication of the KJV there have been many important archaeological discoveries. Thousands of manuscripts, unavailable to the translators of the KJV, have been discovered. Many of these manuscripts are hundreds of years older than anything known in the days of King James.

Around 1630, some twenty years after the publication of the KJV, Codex Alexandrinus, a fifth century manuscript containing the entire New Testament was brought to England. This manuscript was five hundred years older than the earliest manuscript used by Erasmus in the production of the Textus Receptus, the basis for the KJV of the Bible. The text of the book of Revelation, found in this manuscript is believed by scholars to be particularly reliable. Erasmus did not have a complete copy of the book of Revelation among his manuscripts when he produced the Textus Receptus.

In the 1840s a German scholar by the name of Constantin von Tischendorf discovered a very important manuscript in a monastery near Mount Sinai. This manuscript would become known as Codex Sinaiticus. Made of animal hide, it is one of the earliest of all manuscripts available to us today. It is dated to around A.D. 360. Codex Sinaiticus contained the entire New

Testament. As you can imagine, the discovery of a copy of the entire New Testament dating back to A.D. 360 was an important discovery indeed.

Also, in the middle of the 1800s another very important manuscript became available to scholars. Codex Vaticanus had been in the Vatican library since the late 1400s but was never made available to Bible translators. It is generally agreed that this manuscript is one of the most reliable of all manuscripts available to us today. It is dated to around A.D. 350 and contains both the Old Testament and the New Testament except for the Pastoral Epistles and Hebrews 9.15 to the end of Revelation.

In the 1930s some very old manuscripts were purchased from a dealer in Egypt. These manuscripts, known as the Chester Beatty Papyri, contain large sections of the New Testament. Some manuscripts in this collection date back to the late first or early second century. This places them very close to the time the original manuscripts were written.

The 1940s and 1950s saw the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. These scrolls contained portions of every Old Testament book except the book of Esther. Scholars have dated these scrolls to around A.D. 70. This placed in our hands manuscripts that were almost one thousand years older than the earliest manuscripts available to the translators of the KJV.

Literally thousands of manuscripts have been discovered since the publication of the KJV. By the middle of the 1800s, there was a feeling among scholars that there needed to be a new translation of the Greek New Testament that took into consideration the evidence found in these older manuscripts. Modern translations of the English Bible have, for the most part, abandoned the Textus Receptus in favour of these newer Greek Texts.

What is the repercussion of all this? The result is a Bible that differs slightly from the King James Version. Consider, for example, the difference between the King James Version and the New International Version regarding 1 John 5.7,8:

*7 For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. 8 And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one. (1 John 5, KJV)*



*7 For there are three that testify: 8 the Spirit the water and the blood and the three are in agreement. (1 John 5, NIV)*

The reason for this difference, according to the translators of the NIV, is that no Greek manuscript dating before the 16th century has been discovered to contain the phrase added by the KJV:

*"... in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth."*

This phrase is only discovered in the Latin translation of the Bible and the less reliable later Greek manuscripts. Erasmus did not include this phrase in his original Greek New Testament. It would not be until his third edition that this phrase would be added when a single Greek manuscript was shown him that contained the additional words.

Other passages such as this can be found. Look up John 5.4 and Acts 8.37 in the New International Version. These verses are not found in the main text. The translators of the NIV have placed them as a footnote at the bottom of the page to indicate that they are not found in the most reliable Greek manuscripts. These changes, as well as changes in wording, have come about because of these archaeological discoveries since the publication of the KJV.

It is believed by most Biblical scholars that these archaeological discoveries of the last 200 years have enabled us to come much closer to the original wording of the human authors of Scripture. It is unthinkable, however, for others that whole verses should be removed from a Bible that has been in existence since the 1600s. Strong advocates of the KJV reject the validity of these recent discoveries. They see them as undermining the Word of God. What would the early King James scholars have done with these manuscripts had they been available to them in their day? You be the judge.

## 5 - THE KJV TODAY

**T**he KJV has been the vehicle through which God has communicated to English-speaking believers for over 400 years. It has pointed millions of sinners to the Saviour and to the truth of God.

### *Readability of the KJV*

Recent debate concerning the need of a more modern translations revolves around two main issues. The first of these issues relates to the readability of the KJV. The KJV was a product of the 1600s. The English language has radically changed since then. This can cause a problem for the modern reader. Let me illustrate what I mean.

The meanings of English words have changed over the years. The word "quick," for example, in the time of King James really meant "living." When the KJV tells us in Hebrews 4.12 that "the word of God is "quick" and powerful" what it means is that the word of God is "living" and powerful. The modern reader needs to be instructed in the language of 1611 to appreciate the meaning of this verse. There are many other examples of this type of problem.

A second example of this difficulty can be found in Isaiah 63.15:

*Look down from heaven, and behold from the habitation of thy holiness and of thy glory: where [is] thy zeal and thy strength, the sounding of thy bowels and of thy mercies toward me? Are they restrained? (Isaiah 63:15)*

The expression "the sounding of the bowels" would have a totally different meaning to a modern reader than it did to the original writer. The bowels do

not have the same connotation for us today. The NASB translates this phrase "the stirrings of Thy heart." The NIV translates it "Your tenderness." The Hebrew word refers to the "innermost parts." The bowels or innermost parts were considered by the Old Testament writers to be the seat of the emotions. It was from the bowels that one expressed compassion and tenderness. The sounding of the bowels, therefore, referred to the expression of God's tenderness and compassion. Unless the reader of the King James Version is familiar with this concept, he will not likely understand the meaning of this verse.

Expressions and words may, over time, lose their acceptability. Words used in the time of King James may even be considered vulgar in our day. Consider for example 1 Samuel 25:34:

*For in very deed, [as] the LORD God of Israel liveth, which hath kept me back from hurting thee, except thou hadst hasted and come to meet me, surely there had not been left unto Nabal by the morning light any that pisseth against the wall. (1 Samuel 25:34)*

This expression "any that pisseth against the wall," is translated by modern Bibles by the word "male." What David is really saying is that if Abigail had not come to him at that precise moment there would not have remained a single man in the household of Nabal. His men would have killed them all.

These examples, and others like them, render the reading of the KJV difficult for the modern reader. This can be solved, however, by instructing the reader in the English of 1611. It is also possible to obtain a dictionary of terms and expressions found in the KJV that have changed meaning over time. The serious reader of the KJV will take the time to learn the language of seventeenth century England. The question is asked in our day, however, whether it is necessary to learn the English of 1611 when modern translations have simplified this for us. I leave this for the reader to decide.

### *Archaeological Discoveries*

The second major objection to the KJV is related to the discovery of older and, generally considered, more reliable manuscripts. As we have

mentioned, since 1611 manuscripts, hundreds of years older than those used by Erasmus for his Greek Text, have been discovered. We now have complete New Testaments dating back to the fourth century. These manuscripts are considered very reliable by Bible scholars. The question has been asked: What would the translators of the King James Version of the Bible have done with these early manuscripts? Would they have consulted them if they had been available to them in the 1600s? Would these early manuscripts have influenced how they translated the KJV? Can we simply ignore the textual evidence that has been unearthed in the last few hundred years?

Does the recent discovery of ancient manuscripts mean that readers of the King James Version were held in darkness for hundreds of years regarding the truth of the word of God? By no means. Examine the faith of our great English-speaking spiritual fathers of the last four hundred years. Their Bible was the KJV. As they studied the pages of this translation of Scripture, they came to the same conclusions as you and I. We stand confidently upon the same doctrines as these men and women of old. These modern archaeological discoveries have not changed the truth held by our King James ancestors. God has seen fit to preserve sound doctrine despite the lack of ancient manuscripts. This is nothing short of a miracle.

On the other hand, the discovery of these ancient manuscripts, has enabled the scholar to understand more clearly what the original human authors said. The translators of the KJV did not have access to the manuscripts available to us today. What Moses and Paul wrote on animal skins or parchment has long disappeared. The Word of God has been made available to us in English, thanks to the tireless efforts of godly men and women who have gathered ancient fragments of Scripture and diligently compared them to produce for us a Bible that represents as accurately as possible the words of the original author. In our effort to understand what the original author said, can we ignore the evidence of the manuscripts made available to us since the publication of the KJV?

Added to the evidence of these new manuscripts is the increased understanding we have today of the original languages. As more documents and ancient fragments are discovered, scholars can gain a greater

understanding of the meaning of words. This heightened understanding of the original languages is reflected in these newer translations of Scripture.

What is our conclusion to all this? We have a long and great heritage in the King James Bible. For centuries it has guided our English-speaking ancestors into the truth of God. While language has changed, if we combine our reading and study of the KJV with a proper understanding of 1611 English culture and language, we can be confident that this Bible will lead us into the same truth as our ancestors. The variant readings of more modern translations should not change our doctrine.

Good modern translations of the Bible, however, combine for us the evidence of older and more reliable manuscripts with words that are more readily understandable to English speakers of our day. The burden of the original translators of the English Bible was that the Bible be written in the language of the people so that they could read and understand it for themselves. They felt that the Word of God needed to be accessible to the simplest believer. Before the work of these translators, the only way the common man could understand the word of God was if someone educated in Latin could read it and explain it to him. Do I dare say that there are men and women today that are in the same situation? All they have is a King James Version of the Bible. The only way they can understand it is if someone educated in the language of 1611 England explain it to them. Was it not the burden of the translators of the King James Version that the Bible be available in the language of the people of 1611 England? They rejected the idea that the only acceptable Bible was a Latin Bible. They rejected this idea because they believed that English-speaking believers needed a Bible they could read and understand for themselves. Do we not walk in their footsteps by providing English speakers of our day with a Bible they can read and understand?

It has been my purpose in this study to give the reader greater appreciation for our King James heritage and the issues surrounding the KJV debate. I recognize that there are believers who take a strong stand in this debate. It is my prayer that this booklet will foster a greater understanding between believers on both sides of the fence. John Wycliffe was persecuted by the church of his day because of his belief that the Bible needed to be translated into the language of English-speaking believers. William Tyndale, and

Miles Coverdale were both executed by the church because of their efforts to produce a Bible that our English-speaking ancestors could read and understand for themselves. This is indeed a regrettable part of our Christian heritage. We cannot afford to continue to devour one another over this issue. May the Lord grant to us the grace to accept our differences.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

## Light To My Path Book Distribution

Light To My Path Book Distribution (LTMP) is a book writing and distribution ministry reaching out to needy Christian workers in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Many Christian workers in developing countries do not have the resources necessary to obtain Bible training or purchase Bible study materials for their ministries and personal encouragement. F. Wayne MacLeod is a member of Action International Ministries and has been writing these books with a goal to distribute them freely or at cost price to needy pastors and Christian workers around the world.



Tens of thousands of these books have been distributed and are being used in preaching, teaching, evangelism and encouragement of local believers in over sixty countries. Books are now being translated into a variety of languages. The goal is to make them available to as many believers as possible.

The ministry of LTMP is a faith-based ministry and we trust the Lord for the resources necessary to distribute the books for the encouragement and strengthening of believers around the world. Would you pray that the Lord would open doors for the translation and further distribution of these books?

For more information about Light To My Path visit our website at [www.lighttomypath.ca](http://www.lighttomypath.ca)