Sometimes people are confused when they hear about “King James’ Bible”. They wonder if I did the translation work myself. I was a good bible scholar. I wrote a whole book for my eldest son, Henry, explaining what the Bible says about kings and the right to rule.

When I had decided that a new translation was a good idea, Richard Bancroft was able to supervise the whole project. I made him Archbishop of Canterbury in 1604, soon after the conference where I commissioned the new bible.

There were about 50 different translators involved. They worked in groups or “companies”. There were two companies in Oxford, two in Cambridge, and two in Westminster. Each company took responsibility for a different section of the Bible.

They had a long list of instructions to follow. Bancroft told them to begin with the Bishops Bible. It was already approved for use in the Church of England. But it was a mix of different bishops’ work, and some of the bishops had used Latin translations instead of the original languages.

My translators were told to match the best English with the original Hebrew and Greek. They had to study familiar English bibles alongside the original languages. This helped them to decide which phrases they should preserve.

Every English bible had strengths and weaknesses, but people had grown used to hearing the Bible read in church. The translators worked hard to produce a bible which sounded familiar and stayed faithful to the original words.
It is thought that Aldhelm, the Bishop of Sherborne, prepared an Anglo-Saxon – or Old English – version of the Psalms in the early 700s.

Old Latin manuscripts sometimes contain English words as a gloss between the lines. These glosses provide a quick definition for each word.

The example here is from the Salisbury Psalter, a collection of the Psalms which belongs to Salisbury Cathedral. The verses are from Psalm 119, the longest chapter in the Bible. This page begins at verse 169.

The main text is the Latin Vulgate. The Old English gloss is written in smaller letters between the lines.

The Latin passage begins:

Adpropinquet deprecatio mea in conspectu tuo Domine iuxta eloquium tuum da mihi intellectum.

Let my supplication, O Lord, come near in thy sight: give me understanding according to thy word.

Psalm 119: 169

King James Bible
John Wycliffe and his followers made two translations of the Bible during the 1380s.

The first was a literal translation which followed the word order of the Latin Vulgate. This was then revised by John Purvey. Purvey changed the word order to reflect ordinary English.

Because these bibles had to be copied by hand, there are differences between the copies that have survived. They are normally called “Wycliffite” bibles.

English has changed since the 1300s and Wycliffite bibles can be difficult to read, especially because the original copies were hand-written.

The book of Acts describes how the first Christians lived. Wycliffe strongly believed that all Christians should copy the example of the early Christians.

The passage below is from Acts 2:43-47. It explains that believers “had everything in common”. They sold their possessions and helped people in need.

Bible chapters were not divided into numbered verses until the mid 1500s.
Henry VIII was King of England in Tyndale’s time. Tyndale asked God to open the King’s eyes. Henry later agreed to an English bible which used most of Tyndale’s translations. My translators had permission to consult Tyndale’s work.

William Tyndale chose his English words very carefully, and rejected many of the words that were normally used. He even avoided the word “church”.

He used the word “congregation” instead. Tyndale also created new English words to communicate the meaning of biblical terms. His creations include scapegoat, atonement and Jehovah.

The Bishop of London was so unhappy with Tyndale’s New Testament that he bought all the copies he could find and burned them. Tyndale used the money to print more. Although Tyndale was killed before he could finish translating, he did complete and publish the first five books of the Old Testament and the book of Jonah.

Other translators used what Tyndale had done. John Rogers and George Joye are recognised for their contribution.
The Coverdale Bible (1536)

The makings of a “Great Bible”!

Miles Coverdale was not an expert in Greek or Hebrew. He did understand Latin, German and Dutch. He used the Church’s Latin bible, Luther’s German bible and other versions to put together an English version of the books that Tyndale had not translated.

He used Tyndale’s own translation for the rest.

The Coverdale Bible was printed in 1536. It was followed by two revised versions.

(1) The Matthew Bible (1537)

This included extra translation by John Rogers. Rogers published it using a pseudonym, Thomas Matthew.

(2) The Great Bible (1539)

This was the first English bible to be authorized in the Church of England. Thomas Cromwell, who was Henry VIII’s chief minister, persuaded the King to authorize it ‘to be read aloud in churches’.

All these bibles were used by the scholars who worked on mine.
Henry VIII agreed to license a bible for use in English churches. It was part of his new role as Supreme Head of the Church of England. It was time to say goodbye to the Latin Vulgate.

Thomas Cromwell persuaded Henry that making a brand new translation would take a very long time. It was better to reuse what was already available. Fortunately, Coverdale was willing to help. He agreed to revise his bible and remove some of Tyndale’s most controversial terms.

The title page advertises Henry’s role as Head of Church and State. He is responsible for giving out Verbum Dei (the Word of God) to the people.

The first to receive it are Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury and Thomas Cromwell, the King’s chief of staff. It is handed down, until it reaches the preacher.

The preacher quotes a passage from Paul’s first letter to Timothy, “I exhort therefore, that, first of all, supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men; For kings...”

Everyone responds saying “Vivat Rex.” Long live the King!
The Geneva Bible

The first English bible translated wholly from the Hebrew and Greek.

Like most Christian bible translations, the New Testament of the Geneva Bible was completed before the Old Testament. It was published in 1557. The New Testament was revised again and a complete Geneva Bible was published in 1560.

What was special about the Geneva Bible?

For many Christians this bible had extra value because it used the original Greek and Hebrew, not a Latin translation. The translators indicated different possible readings, printing alternative words in the margins.

The quantity of notes and commentary were useful for those who wanted to study the bible in depth. There were also diagrams, maps and other information.

It also promoted Puritan values, and ideas which could be dangerous for a monarch.

But it was a good translation.

My translators were allowed to use the Geneva Bible. But not to add any of those controversial notes!

Photograph (c) The Chapter of Durham Cathedral.

The motto written around the picture explains the image. God has sent Time to bring Truth into the open.
The Bishops Bible (1568)

Translated by English bishops and licensed by Elizabeth I.

Many people in the Church of England were unhappy with the Geneva Bible. It promoted ideas which were hostile to certain church practices.

But the Great Bible, which had been approved for use in English churches, had disadvantages. Much of its Old Testament had been translated from Latin not Hebrew. By 1560, people recognised the value of returning to the original languages.

As Archbishop of Canterbury, Matthew Parker persuaded the Queen that it was time for a new bible. He divided the responsibility for translation between different bishops.

Unfortunately, the bishops did not all understand Hebrew.

They had to base the Old Testament on two recent Latin translations instead. The Latin bibles were translated directly from the Hebrew, but the situation was not ideal.

Each bishop was ordered to keep a copy at home and one in his cathedral. It was also hoped that every parish church would have a copy.

When I became King of England, this was the “ordinary bible” read in churches. My translators had to use this as their starting point for a new English translation.
The Douay-Rheims Bible (1582-1610)

A Roman Catholic response to the Geneva Bible.

Roman Catholic Christians were also exiled from England because of their beliefs. Seeing the popularity of the Geneva Bible, they decided to produce their own edition of the Bible. It included notes to justify and explain their view of scripture.

The New Testament was published in 1582, in the French city of Reims (formerly known as Rheims). This was during the reign of Elizabeth I.

The translators used the Latin Vulgate, which they described as “the authentical Latin”. They also compared it with the Greek and with other bible translations, but the Vulgate was their primary source and they tried to stay close to its wording.

The title page of the Douay Old Testament (1609). (c) Durham University Library.

In 1589, William Fulke produced a copy with the Rheims text in the left-hand column, and the Bishops Bible on the right. At the end of each chapter, he set out Puritan arguments against the notes of the Rheims version.

The Old Testament was published in two volumes, both printed in Douay (1609, 1610).
James’ commissioned the new bible at a special conference in 1604. It was partly a compromise to meet the demands of Puritan Christians. But he also used the opportunity to create a bible that would be acceptable for everyone.

The companies of translators took four years to complete the initial translation work. This had to be reviewed by a committee with representatives from each group.

When they had compiled a complete translation, the reviewers took it in turns to read passages aloud. This was necessary because they wanted to produce a bible which sounded right for use in church. The others would listen and look at the same passage in other languages. They were all language experts.

Unfortunately Bancroft died before my bible was actually published. He had gone over the whole text, and made a few amendments.

Miles Smith, canon of Hereford Cathedral, helped to proof-read the final version when it was laid out by the printers. He also wrote a long “Preface to the Reader”. This explained how the translators had made their decisions.

The book finally appeared in 1611, printed by the King’s Printer. It was a massive volume, more than 30 cm tall and about 8 cm deep.

The first edition contains a dedication to the King as well as Miles Smith’s letter to the reader. There is a series of calendars for calculating feast days and a list of readings for church services throughout the year.

There is also a map of Ancient Israel, and genealogical tables of the biblical characters.
By the mid 1700s, my bible was in danger of becoming unrespectable. The number of printing errors had multiplied and it was nearly impossible to know which parts were correct.

Scholars at Oxford University worked through the entire Bible, comparing editions with the Greek sources. In 1769 the University Press published the result. They had removed thousands of errors. They also updated and standardized the spellings to reflect contemporary usage. This is the version of the King James Bible which is on sale in shops today.

The two most common names for King James’ Bible – the King James Bible and the Authorized Version – appear in the late 1700s to mid 1800s. Before this, it was described as “the bible approved for reading in churches” or “the bible commissioned by His Majesty King James”.

By the mid 1800s, a new problem was developing. Scholars knew more about the Bible and its languages. They had begun to identify real errors in the translation work. The decision was made to revise what had become the Authorized Version.

The revised New Testament was published in 1881. It was known as the Revised Version. The Old Testament and Apocrypha followed, and a complete Revised Version was published in 1895.

The revision committee aimed to update the English too, but they hoped to preserve the overall tone and style of language. People were familiar with the words and sounds of King James’ Bible.

King James’ translators used the best known sources for Greek and Hebrew, and compared other ancient translations of the Bible as well. But older, more reliable manuscripts have been found.
Modern English Bibles

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was disappointed by the *Revised Version*. She objected to use of the Bible to justify the low social status of women. She felt that this was sometimes the fault of the translation rather than the original text.

Stanton worked with other women to produce the *Woman’s Bible*, completed in 1898. It was not a critical success, but it was a sign of social change. Bible translators now think carefully about the words they use and the impact they may have on social status.

The Revised Version was the start of an ongoing process. It was followed by the Revised Standard Version (1952) and the New Revised Standard Version (1989). Both took the style of the Authorized Version as their starting point.

In the 1940s, a decision was made to produce a completely new bible, independent from King James’ Bible. The translators used other sources as well as the Hebrew and Greek. They examined new evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls and Codex Sinaiticus. The result was a New Testament published in 1961, 350 years after King James’ Bible, and then the complete New English Bible (1970).
Today’s English Bible

There is no longer a desire that everyone should use the same bible. Churches in England now have the freedom to choose.

Some bibles stay close to the original words. This is the traditional approach taken by bibles in the “King James family”, and by the New English Bible.

Others aim to copy the function of a word or phrase rather than its exact meaning in the host language.

Paraphrases, which explain the contents and meaning without trying to copy the exact sentences, have also become more acceptable. The Message is the best known modern paraphrase.

Psalm 23

God, my shepherd! I don’t need a thing.
You have bedded me down in lush meadows,
you find me quiet pools to drink from.
True to your word,
you let me catch my breath
and send me in the right direction.

4 Even when the way goes through
Death Valley,
I’m not afraid
when you walk at my side.
Your trusty shepherd’s crook
makes me feel secure.

5 You serve me a six-course dinner
right in front of my enemies.
You revive my drooping head;
my cup brims with blessing.

6 Your beauty and love chase after me
every day of my life.
I’m back home in the house of God
for the rest of my life.

THE MESSAGE.

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