

Bible Translation and the Long Reformation

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More, Tyndale, and the Autonomy of English

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In the penultimate paragraph of their address to the Reader, the KJV translators describe their method in language that recalls the Elizabethan Settlement: “wee have on the one side avoided the scrupolositie of the Puritanes, who leave the old Ecclesiasticall words, and betake them to other, as when they put *washing* for *Baptisme*, and *Congregation* in stead of *Church*: as also on the other side, we have shunned the obscuritie of the Papists, in their *Azimes*, *Tunike*, *Rational*, *Holocausts*, *Praepuce*, *Pasche*, and a number of such like” (30). The translators refer here to arguments about the language of the English Bible that began in the late 1520s with the polemical exchange between William Tyndale and Thomas More. These arguments about the semantics of biblical English – about how biblical English means – outline a structural opposition between autonomy and historicism that, I suggest, shapes both religious and literary culture through the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

Translation Controversies and the Making of the King James Bible

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The literary and cultural impact of the King James Bible has rightly received a great deal of scholarly attention, but what religious controversies and theological debates influenced the translators' choice of words? In particular, what influence did Roman Catholic perspectives and biblical translations exert on the text of the KJB, and what in fact did English-speaking Catholics think of the KJB, as compared with their own Doway-Rheims Bible? This paper explores some of the connections between sixteenth-century debates on biblical translation and the word choices made by the translation committees of the KJB in several contested passages. In this, attention is drawn to the ways in which the text of the KJB had absorbed some "Catholic" readings rejected by previous English translations while remaining, in essence, a very "Protestant" Bible.

Converting the Bible in Early Modern England

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This paper examines the complex transmission and evolution of the term that has come to be used for the process of religious transformation, “conversion,” from its earliest iterations in the Hebrew Bible, through the Greek Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate, and several medieval and early modern English versions, up until the King James Bible. Beginning as an idea of recovery and return, the term gradually accumulated connotative associations suggesting completion and even innovation that are intimately tied to the shift implied in the transformation of the Hebrew Bible into the Old Testament and, more generally, of the particularized idea of Israelite identity and practice into the universalism of Pauline Christianity. As a preliminary meditation of the relationship between translation and religious change, my discussion proposes a fraught interanimation of these different “fictions of conversion.”

Translating the Translation: Metrical Psalms and the KJV

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A great many seventeenth-century writers produced metrical psalms intended for congregational singing, and a survey of them shows early and striking enthusiasm for the KJV. Indeed, versifiers across the ecclesiological spectrum were far more eager than their Tudor predecessors to conspicuously base their paraphrases on English prose translations generally, and on the KJV in particular. This push toward uniform phrasing in biblical translation for public use suggests a shift in the perception of vernacular Bibles: from necessarily provisional representations of God’s meaning to texts that confirm their authority through linguistic stability. For English-speaking people several generations after the beginning of the Reformation, it seems, such stability naturalized the Bible as a truly English text.

Margins of Stability: Translation, Literal Sense, and the Puritan Plain Style

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The accepted narrative tells us that the Geneva Bible, and not the KJV, dominated seventeenth-century literary production in New England. In practice, however, New England ministers often followed neither KJV or Geneva translations to the letter, largely

preferring their own translations, sometimes even from memory apparently. Because of (not despite) the proverbial, rigorous precision of their exegetical methods, New England Puritans maintained a somewhat agnostic attitude regarding the letter of translation, cultivating a degree of hermeneutic skepticism regarding the prospects of single articulations vernacular translation. Though fundamentalists in their theology, they were also savvy scholars of linguistic difference whose commitment to render the *logos* of scripture meant advertising the malleability of translated meaning. In seventeenth-century New England, a vernacular sense of scripture was primarily discursive and only partially indebted to available print translations.