

# The Scriptures in English – A Shorty History to Mark the 400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the King James Bible

## Introduction

1. In 1611, a convergence of circumstances and developments resulted in the publication of one of the English language's most pre-eminent books and Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2011 saw the 400th anniversary of the King James Version of the Bible, popularly known as the Authorised Version [AV]. The story of the Scriptures in the English language, however, does not begin here ... <sup>1</sup>

## In the Time of the Roman Empire

2. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century A.D. trading ships were frequently sailing to the savage shores of Britain from the ports of Asia Minor, Greece, Alexandria, or the Greek colonies in Gaul. Among the merchants would occasionally be found a few pious men from the Roman province of Asia, conversing peacefully about the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and some British prisoners of war having learnt to know Christ in their captivity, bore also to their fellow countrymen the knowledge of this Saviour. It may be, too, that some Christian soldiers, the 'Cornelius's' of those imperial armies, desirous of more lasting conquests, may have read to the people whom they had subdued, the writings of Matthew, John and Paul.<sup>2</sup>

3. It is probable that the tidings of the Son of man, crucified and raised again during the reign of the Emperor Tiberius, later spread through these islands more rapidly than the dominion of the emperors, and that before the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century, Christ was worshipped by not a few beyond the wall of Hadrian. It was about A.D. 200 that Tertullian wrote thus: "*Parts of Britain were inaccessible to the Romans but have yielded to Christ.*" In those mountains, forests, and western isles, which for centuries past the Druids had filled with their mysteries and sacrifices, and on which the Roman eagles had never swooped, even there the Name of Christ was known and honoured.<sup>3</sup>

4. Tertullian [AD 196-212] and Eusebius [AD 263-c339] both state that Christianity reached the British Isles in apostolic times. Chrysostom [AD 347-409] said, "Though thou shouldest go to the ocean, to the British Isles, there thou shouldest hear all men everywhere discoursing matters out of the Scriptures, and Gildas [c AD 540], a Celtic historian writes, "Britain received the gospel in the latter part of the reign of Tiberius" [AD14-37]. We know that Christianity was established in Cornwall by the end of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century [less than 170 years from the time of Christ]. The line of evidence shows that heathenism was stamped out of Cornwall before the conversion of the Saxons to Christianity.<sup>4</sup>

5. It is clear that the Christian faith was firmly rooted in Roman Britain before the departure of the legions in the early 5<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>5</sup> In the 4<sup>th</sup> Century, representatives of the church in Britain attended Councils on the continent, and it is likely that British Christians accepted as truth the creed of Athanasius which combated the heresies of

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<sup>1</sup> [www.kjv400.co.uk](http://www.kjv400.co.uk)

<sup>2</sup> J H Merle d'Aubigné The Reformation in England Vol 1 [p24] Banner of Truth

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. [p25]

<sup>4</sup> Peter Isaac A History of Evangelical Christianity in Cornwall WEC Press

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. [p26]

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the period. Jerome, writing in AD378, in a letter to Marcella wrote: "... the Britons, who live apart from the world, if they go in pilgrimage, they will leave the western parts and seek Jerusalem, known to them by fame only, and by the Scriptures." This is a most interesting and significant quotation.<sup>6</sup>

The Early Mediaeval Period

6. Further evidence of Celtic Christianity can be found in Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People. Known as 'the father of English history', Bede [AD 673-735], spent almost his entire life in the monasteries of Wearmouth and Jarrow in the north of England, where, by the 8<sup>th</sup> Century, a vigorous Anglo-Saxon culture was flowering. Bede knew Latin, Greek and Hebrew and was also expert in the writings of the early Church Father's and wrote many sermons, biographies, letters and poems, commentaries on books of the Bible as well as translating John's Gospel into English.

7. After the extraordinary manifestations of the Holy Spirit, which had produced and distinguished the apostolic age, the church continued for a time in the inward power of the Word and of the Comforter. God had been pleased to give the church a divine religion; but from the 5<sup>th</sup> Century AD this began gradually to be assimilated into religions of human origin. Instead of saying, in the spirit of the gospel, '*the Word of God first, and through it the doctrines and the life – and through them the forms;*' they began to say, '*forms first, and salvation by these forms*'.<sup>7</sup>

8. At the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, Gregory 'the Great' became bishop of Rome and in his view the whole church should submit to his jurisdiction. On the borders of the West, in the island of Britain, was a Christian church independent of Rome which must be conquered. In AD 596 Gregory sent out a mission under the direction of a Roman prior named Augustine who arrived at Canterbury in AD 597. Like Gregory, Augustine believed that faith and holiness were less essential to the church than authority and power; and that the church's prerogative was not so much to save souls as to collect the entire human race under the sceptre of Rome.<sup>8</sup>

9. Early British Christianity had in some degree prepared its own fall, by substituting too often the form for the faith. The foreign superstition took advantage of this weakness, and triumphed in these islands by means of royal decrees, church ornaments and monastic orders for which 'miracles', phantoms and apparitions held more weight than the Word of God. By the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century AD the British Church had become the serf of Rome; but an internal struggle was beginning, which did not cease until the period of the Reformation in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>9</sup>

10. At the start of the 8<sup>th</sup> Century AD a Scottish churchman named Clement declared that the work of God is the very essence of Christianity and must be defended against all the encroachments of man. To tradition he opposed the sole authority of the Word of God; to materialism, a church which is the assembly of the saints; and to salvation by works, the sovereignty of grace. Clement said that the

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. [p18]

<sup>7</sup> Merle d'Aubigné Op.Cit. [p26]

<sup>8</sup> Merle d'Aubigné Op.Cit. [p35]

<sup>9</sup> Merle d'Aubigné Op Cit [p58]

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authority of man substituted for the authority of God was the source of all the errors in the church. Hearing of this, Pope Gregory II decided that if Clement did not retract, he should be delivered up to everlasting damnation and ordered him to be brought to Rome under guard. All traces of Clement of Scotland are lost here, but it is easy to conjecture what might have been his fate.<sup>10</sup>

11. In AD 871 a youthful prince thirsting for the Word of God and who sought, by frequent prayer, deliverance from the bondage of sin, ascended to the throne of Wessex. Alfred, being convinced that Christianity alone could rightly mould a nation, was anxious that the English, like the Hebrews, Greeks and Latins, should possess the Holy Scriptures in their own language. Having learnt Latin in his late thirties, Alfred arranged and took part in the translation from Latin into Anglo-Saxon of a handful of books, included portions of the Bible, that he thought *'most needful for men to know, and to bring it to pass ... if we have the peace, that all the youth now in England ... may be devoted to learning'*. Alfred died in AD 899 while translating the Psalms of David for his subjects.

#### The Late Mediaeval & Renaissance Periods

12. In the first half of the 14<sup>th</sup> Century, nearly two hundred years before the Reformation, England appeared weary of the yoke of Rome. Pope Urban V summoned Edward III to recognize him as legitimate sovereign of England, and to pay as feudal tribute the annual sum of one thousand marks. In case of refusal the king was to appear before him at Rome. The king, irritated by this insolence on behalf of an Italian bishop, called on God to avenge England. From Oxford came forth the avenger – a certain John Wycliffe.<sup>11</sup>

13. Born in Richmond [Yorks.] in 1329, John Wycliffe arrived as a student in Oxford and quickly acquired a great reputation for learning. In 1348 the plague arrived in England after successively devastating much of Asia and Europe. This visitation sounded like the trumpet of Judgement Day in Wycliffe's heart. Alarmed by thoughts of eternity, Wycliffe passed days and nights calling upon God to show him the path to follow. He found it in the Holy Scriptures, and resolved to make it known to others.<sup>12</sup>

14. Elected as master of Balliol College in 1365, John Wycliffe became known and admired as a profound and eloquent teacher, whose biblical studies, penetrating mind, purity of manners and unbending courage enlightened his fellow-countrymen and stirred the zeal of many members in both Houses of Parliament. He energetically set forth the doctrines of grace and demanded that the authority of the Word of God be re-established in the church, accusing the clergy of his day of having banished the Holy Scriptures from the land.<sup>13</sup>

15. By the late 14<sup>th</sup> Century, the church forbade ordinary people to read the Bible believing that it was injurious to them and as a consequence oral traditions alone of Holy Scripture, mingled with legends of the saints, were preserved. The time was

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<sup>10</sup> Merle d'Aubigné Op Cit [p59]

<sup>11</sup> Merle d'Aubigné Op Cit [p79]

<sup>12</sup> Merle d'Aubigné Op Cit [p80]

<sup>13</sup> Merle d'Aubigné Op Cit [p81]

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ripe for the publication of the Bible. Wycliffe, ignorant of Hebrew and Greek, loved the Bible which he read in Latin. To communicate this treasure to others he spent 15 years translating the Latin 'Vulgate' Bible into English, completing the work sometime about AD 1380.<sup>14</sup>

16. *"This pestilential and most wretched John Wycliffe of damnable memory, a child of the old devil, and himself a child or pupil of Anti-Christ ... crowned his wickedness by translating the Scriptures into the mother tongue."* So said Archbishop Arundel. Wycliffe's own reaction to such monstrous allegations is enlightening:

*"You say it is a heresy to speak of the Holy Scriptures in English. You call me a heretic because I have translated the Bible into the common tongue of the people. Do you know whom you blaspheme? Did not the Holy Ghost give the Word of God at first in the mother-tongue of the nations to whom it was addressed? Why do you speak against the Holy Ghost? You say that the Church of God is in danger from this book. How can that be? Is it not from the Bible only that we learn that God has set up such a society as a Church on earth? Is it not the Bible that gives all her authority to the Church? Is it not from the Bible that we learn who is the Builder and Sovereign of the Church, what are the laws by which she is governed, and the rights and privileges of her members? Without the Bible, what charter has the Church to show for all these? It is you who place the Church in jeopardy by hiding the Divine warrant, the missive royal of her King, for the authority she wields and the faith she enjoins."*

*"Christ and his Apostles taught the people in the language best known to them. It is certain that the truth of the Christian faith becomes more evident the more the faith itself is known. Therefore, the doctrine should not only be in Latin but in the common tongue, and as the faith of the Church is contained in the Scriptures, the more these are known in a true sense the better. The laity ought to understand the faith, and as the doctrines of our faith are in the Scriptures, believers should have the Scriptures in a language familiar to the people, and to this end indeed did the Holy Spirit endue them with knowledge of all tongues."*

*"If it is heresy to read the Bible, the Holy Ghost himself is condemned who gave in tongues to the Apostles of Christ to speak the Word of God in all languages that were ordained of God under heaven. If Christ was so merciful as to send the Holy Ghost to the heathen men to make them partakers of his blessed word, why should it be taken from us in this land that be Christian men? If you deny Christ's words as heresy, then you condemn God for a heretic that spake the word, for he and his sword are all one: and if his word is the life of the world how may any Anti-Christ take it away from us that are Christian men, and allow the people to die for hunger in heresy."*

17. In 1408, sometime after Wycliffe's death, Archbishop Arundel presided at a Council which prohibited translations of the Scriptures into English. In 1427, 30 years after his death, it was ordered that John Wycliffe's body and bones be exhumed and publicly burnt and *"his ashes to be disposed of so that no trace of him*

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<sup>14</sup> Merle d'Aubigné Op Cit [p90]

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*should be seen again.*” His ashes were cast into the River Swift at Lutterworth. But Wycliffe was to be heard of great deal more.<sup>15</sup>

18. 15th Century AD. Wycliffe’s death in 1384 manifested the power of his teaching. The master being removed his disciples now set their hands to the plough. The Wycliffites, known as ‘Lollards’, recognised a ministry independent of Rome, and deriving authority from the Word of God alone. As they travelled around the country, townsfolk crowded around to hear these humble preachers; soldiers listened to them and defended them; and the nobility removed images from their chapels. The Lollards called upon Parliament to “*abolish celibacy, transubstantiation, prayers for the dead, offerings to images, auricular confession, war, the arts unnecessary to life, and the practice of blessing oil, salt, wax, incense, stones, mitres and pilgrims’ staffs.* These, they said, “*pertain to necromancy, not theology.*”<sup>16</sup>

19. Thomas Arundel, archbishop of York, and other prominent churchmen now manoeuvred to bring about the downfall of the Lollards and in 1401 persuaded King Henry IV and Parliament to pass an Act for burning ‘heretics’ and the first Lollard was duly burned in March that year, eight days before the Act became law. William Sautre, described as Lollard and Baptist, was condemned for rejecting infant baptism and saying, “... *instead of adoring the cross on which Christ suffered, I adore Christ who suffered on it.*” He was handed over by bishop Arundel to the ‘mercy’ of the earl-martial of England to be burnt alive at Smithfield, the first of 550 Lollard martyrs described as a ‘noble army’ who ‘loved not their lives unto death.’<sup>17</sup>

20. The intimidated Lollards were compelled to hide themselves in the humblest ranks of the people, and to hold their meetings in secret. The work of redemption was proceeding noiselessly among the elect of God. The Lollards were plain, meek and often timid folk, attracted by the Word of God, affected at the condemnation it pronounced against the errors of Rome, and desirous of living according to its commandments. Their humble piety, passive resistance and the shameful treatment they bore with resignation betrayed the pride of the priests and filled other minds with doubts and vague desires. By a baptism of suffering, God was then preparing the way to a glorious reformation.<sup>18</sup>

### The English Reformation Begins

21. In AD 1516 the brilliant Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus published a Greek-Latin Parallel New Testament. This milestone was the first non-Latin text of the scripture to be produced for a thousand years. Erasmus showed just how corrupt and inaccurate the Latin Vulgate had become, and how important it was to go back and use the original Greek (New Testament) and original Hebrew (Old Testament) languages to maintain accuracy, and to translate them faithfully into the languages of the common people, whether that be English, German, or any other tongue.

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<sup>15</sup> David Fountain, John Wycliffe – The Dawn of the Reformation Mayflower Christian Books 1984 [pp45-46 & 72]

<sup>16</sup> Merle d’Aubigné Op Cit [pp101 – 103]

<sup>17</sup> Merle d’Aubigné Op Cit [pp 103]

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

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22. No sympathy for Erasmus' "illegal activity" was, however, to be found from Rome from where Pope Leo X declared that "the fable of Christ" was quite profitable enough. Nevertheless, the die for reformation had been now been firmly cast. In Germany Martin Luther declared his intolerance with the Roman Church's corruption in 1517, by nailing 95 Theses of Contention to the Wittenberg Door. Luther, who would be exiled in the months following the Diet of Worms Council in 1521 that was designed to martyr him, would translate the New Testament into German from Erasmus' Greek/Latin New Testament and publish it in September of 1522. Simultaneously, William Tyndale would become burdened to translate that same Erasmus text into English.

William Tyndale

23. William Tyndale [1495 – 1536] was a priest and an Oxford university trained linguist who early conceived it to be his mission to translate the Bible into English from the original Greek and Hebrew, and to give it to the common people as the surest way of overthrowing error. A contemporary of Tyndale recorded the famous incident that stiffened Tyndale's commitment to his mission: "*Master Tyndale happened to be in the company of a learned man, and in communing and disputing with him drove him to that issue that the learned man said, we were better without God's law than the pope's: Master Tyndale, hearing that, answered him, 'I defy the pope and all his laws,' and said, 'If God spare my life ere many years, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the scripture than thou dost.'"* Tyndale began his life's work in London in 1523.<sup>19</sup>

24. Tyndale soon faced opposition from the church authorities and was forced to flee to the Continent, living the rest of his life in exile in Germany and the Netherlands. His English New Testament was first published in Worms, and thousands of copies were smuggled into England. Tyndale's translation was a masterpiece. Working from Erasmus's Greek text, the Latin Vulgate, and Luther's German version, Tyndale produced a fresh and original rendering of the New Testament, which formed the basis of virtually all English New Testaments until the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, including the Authorised or King James Version.<sup>20</sup>

25. The English Bishops of Tyndale's' day, however, condemned his work as subversive, and seized and burnt as many copies as they could. Tyndale also managed to translate Genesis to 2 Chronicles and Jonah into English before his death. Called variously by Sir Thomas More "a hell-hound in the kennel of the devil", "an idolater and devil worshipper", and, "a beast out of whose brutish beastly mouth cometh filthy foam", Tyndale's unpardonable sin was simply translating the New Testament into English.<sup>21</sup>

26. Ironically, both Sir Thomas More and William Tyndale died for their faith, and both at the hands of the same monarch – More was executed for treason in July 1535 for opposing Henry VIII's break with Rome, and an English Catholic spy in the pay of Henry's government betrayed Tyndale in Antwerp in May 1535. Tyndale was

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<sup>19</sup> Needham N R, 2000 Years of Christ's Power Part Three: Renaissance and Reformation, Grace Publications Trust, London. 2004 [pp 378-379]

<sup>20</sup> Ibid [p379]

<sup>21</sup> Ibid [p 381]

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strangled and burnt at the stake at Vilvorde castle near Brussels in October 1536. His famous last words were, “Lord, open the king of England’s eyes!”<sup>22</sup>

### Miles Coverdale

27. At Cambridge during Erasmus’ time there [1511 to 1514], Miles Coverdale may have had firsthand experience of that scholar’s appeal to the authority of Scripture rather than church tradition. Coverdale declared early for Christ and the Gospel and moved to the continent to help Tyndale, after whose arrest he went on to supervise the first complete Bible to be printed in English in 1535. After Tyndale’s martyrdom, Coverdale began another edition of Scriptures in English in 1538, but that work was seized and burnt by the French authorities. However, the type set was saved and brought to London where under, the encouragement of Thomas Cranmer and the protection of Thomas Cromwell, the work emerged in 1539 and is known as the ‘Great Bible’.

28. Returning to England a year after the death of Henry VIII, Coverdale became Almoner to the Dowager Queen Catherine Parr and Chaplain to the boy king Edward VI, both of whom were in favour of the Reformation. However, after Mary’s accession in 1153 Coverdale was imprisoned, the new Queen’s intention being to put him to death. But the king of Denmark successfully intervened on his behalf and Coverdale was allowed go into exile on the Continent where he met Calvin and worked with John Knox, amongst other great divines of the age. He soon became caught up once more in Bible translation and is counted amongst those who put forth that rugged version of English Scriptures known as the Geneva Bible.

### Puritan Influence

29. The Bible of the Puritans, The Geneva Bible was the first English version to have verse numbers and explanatory notes which allowed for earnest Bible searching. More than 30 editions were printed in Elizabeth I’s reign and it was the first Bible to be widely available and of a handy size. Its margin notes, strongly Protestant and Calvinistic in outlook, aroused hostility within the Establishment. Nevertheless, they were a combination of scholarly help and popular observations. Italics were also used to show interpolations, and literal translations of awkward passages were placed in the margins.

30. When Elizabeth I came to the throne, Mile Coverdale returned to England. In common with many returning ‘Mary-exiles’, he was anxious for a much more thorough work of reformation than was pleasing to the English establishment. Not content to ‘be quiet’ as the rector of St Magnus, London, he resigned the living but carried on a ministry while refusing to wear a surplice. His end was apparently happy, and he died at the age of 81 having served the written and the Incarnate Word through four tumultuous reigns. His enduring exhortation, found in his Bible’s ‘A prologue to the reader’, was, ***‘Go to now (most deare reader) & syt thee downe at the Lordes fete and reade his words.’***

### John Rogers & ‘Matthew’s Bible’

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid [p381]

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31. In 1534 John Rogers [1500 – 1554] went to Antwerp as chaplain to the English merchants and there met William Tyndale. After Tyndale's death Rogers pushed on with the work and in 1537 he published the whole Bible in English under the pseudonym of 'Thomas Matthew', this version becoming known as 'Matthews Bible'. Rogers used the assumed name to avoid persecution by the authorities who continued to forbid, under penalty of death, the printing of the scriptures in the English language. In 1551, John Rogers returned to England during the reign of the godly King Edward VI and served as a divinity lecturer at St Paul's.

32. In 1553 Mary Tudor took the throne and forbade gospel preaching, Rogers preached against Mary's proclamation. For a time he was put under house arrest. Though he had a wife and 11 children he would not abandon the work of proclaiming the gospel. Eventually Bishop Bonner of London had Rogers locked up in the infamous Newgate Prison and condemned to death. On the morning of February 4th 1555 he was awakened and told that he would be burnt at the stake that day. He met his wife and children on his way to Smithfield (the site of execution), but refused to recant his biblical beliefs. On his way to the stake he said, *'That which I have preached I will seal with my blood'*. Thus it was that John Rogers became the first of more than 300 'Marian Martyrs'.

### The Accession of King James – A New Bible Translation Commissioned

33. With the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603, James VI of Scotland became King James I of England. The Protestant clergy approached the new King in 1604 making known their desire for a new translation to replace the Bishop's Bible first printed in 1568. They knew that the Geneva Version had won the hearts of the people because of its excellent scholarship, accuracy, and exhaustive commentary. However, many did not like some of the controversial marginal notes – the King included! What they desired was a Bible for the people, with scriptural references only for word clarification when multiple meanings were possible.

34. The translation was the work of 47 men, selected partly from the Church supporters, partly from the Puritan body, and partly from the learned class; and these were divided into three groups who held their sittings from 1605 to 1609 at Westminster, Cambridge and Oxford. In 1610 the work went to press, and in 1611 the first pulpit folios known as "**The King James Bible**" came off the printing press. The result was a translation that superseded every other, and that has since woven itself into the affections of the whole English-speaking people. The men who executed it evidently felt the influence of the same Spirit that breathes in the original, and they produced a version that remains a monument to simplicity, dignity, grace, and melody of the English language.

### Conclusion

35. Whatever popular opinion may now say about the King James Bible, often called the Authorised Version (AV), there can be no doubt that it towers above all other works as a benchmark of 'mere English' Scripture. The outstanding quality of the 1611 English language Bible should be recognised as a signal gift of God, able to serve the saints and churches of God from generation to generation. A slight

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misquotation from Shakespeare's Julius Caesar serves the AV well: 'Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world like a colossus and we petty [versions] walk under his huge legs, and peep about to find ourselves dishonourable graves'.<sup>23</sup>

36. As you read your Bible today, remember that one of the infallible test questions for revealing a 'heretic' in the Middle Ages was whether he or she possessed, or knew, any part of the Bible in their own language! As late as 1539 a certain Thomas Forret was burned outside Edinburgh Castle for teaching his congregation the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments in English, he had quoted the words of Paul from 1 Corinthians 14.19 in his own defence: "... *yet in the church I had rather speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue.*" - 'Where finds thou that?' his accuser cried. 'In my books, here in my sleeve', was the answer. The book, a Testament, was snatched from him and triumphantly waved at the court. 'Behold, Sirs, he has the heresy book in his sleeve — Know thou, Heretic, that it is contrary to our acts and express commands, to have a New Testament or Bible in English, which is enough to burn thee for', which they then did.

37. Truly, the road leading to the production of our King James' Bible is marked with suffering, death, diligent labour and extraordinary gifts. Jesus said: '*... other men laboured, and ye are entered into their labours*' (John 4.38). Our grateful thanks are unto God!<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> C P Hallihan, The Authorised Version – A Wonderful Unfinished History [p49]. Trinitarian Bible Society

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.