Book Review: Alister McGrath.  *In the Beginning, The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture*; Anchor Books, 2001

Reviewer: Okamo, Takumi

**Abstract**

It has generally been said that no other books or literature have influenced the shaping of the English language more than the works of William Shakespeare and the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible published in 1611. Why the Bible, especially the KJV? What type of English does the KJV represent? What kind of roles did the KJV and other preceding English translations of the Bible play in the history of England, as well as in the English language? Who were the translators? What seemed to have been the problems and obstacles facing those translators? *In the Beginning* written by Prof. Alister McGrath answers these fundamental questions by covering the relevant topics chronologically.

**Key Words**

the King James Version, the Oxford Convocation, William Tyndale, the English Reformation, the Hampton Court Conference, the vernacular, Englishing
Alister McGrath, a professor of historical theology at Oxford University, is the author of In the Beginning. McGrath is also the principal of Wycliff Hall, one of more than 30 different Colleges and Halls at Oxford University. The Hall was founded in 1877 as a Church of England theological college and was named after John Wycliff, master of Balliol College, Oxford, in the 14th century. Wycliff Hall, one of Oxford's six Halls, is now an evangelical theological college. In 1996, the hall became a Permanent Private Hall of the University of Oxford under the leadership of Alister McGrath.

McGrath is well known for his work in Christian theology and the relationship between science and religion. More than 16 books written by this author have been translated into Japanese. Among the best-known are Christian Theology and The Enigma of the Cross. It is unfortunate that In the Beginning has yet to be translated into Japanese.

The reviewer of this book had the privilege of visiting Christ Church, All Souls College, and Merton College in 1997 for a Methodist-related college conference. Throughout my short visit, I really enjoyed the solemn, historical, and academic atmosphere that permeates the college city of Oxford. My academic mentor at Kobe University in Japan, Professor Keiji Notani, is an English religious historian who studied at Campion Hall, Oxford, so the name of Oxford is quite familiar to me. I even recommend a short visit to Oxford to young Japanese college students who major in English as a Second Language, English Literature, or English History. In addition to reading In the Beginning (with the help of an English-Japanese dictionary), a first-hand visit to Oxford will undoubtedly enhance their motivation and help to shape their understanding of the academic contour of the English culture and language.

Let us begin now with my review of the book entitled In the Beginning. On the whole the book gives an excellent outline of the linguistic, religious, and socially innovative movements throughout history, including the invention of the printing press in Europe. These changes eventually created a demand for an English language Bible during the English Reformation in the 16th century.

The author sketches the movement of the Bible into English via Wycliff, Tyndale, Coverdale, Rogers, Whittingham, and other translators. He also explains the political necessity for yet another translation under King James I in the 17th century. Through this book, readers will come to know much about the King James Bible's religious, historical, and etymological contexts. In the introduction of the book the author points out (and this has also been widely acclaimed) that the two greatest influences on the shaping of the English language have been the works of William Shakespeare and the English translation of the Bible that appeared in 1611.

It is, therefore, essentially important for young university students in Japan who are studying the history of the English language and literature to read this engrossing story of In the Beginning. It cannot fail to deepen their understanding of the vital role that the King James Version (KJV) and other preceding English translations of the Bible played in shaping the development of the English language and its prose.

Books with similar titles and themes to that
of *In the Beginning* exist nowadays, and although some critics have said that the style in which McGrath writes the narrative of this book seems rather didactic, verbose, or tedious, I feel that *In the Beginning* is a very compelling and intriguing narrative of well-grounded chronological stories whose interest and importance far outweigh any minor annoyances.

His story mainly includes the impact and historical challenge that the process of "Englishing" the Bible (translating and adapting it into the English language) had upon the great tumultuous period of the English Reformation and on English history thereafter. There is no doubt that this is an outstanding and very readable work. Readers will never again hear or read the English language in the same way after having read *In the Beginning*.

This book consists of 12 chapters, along with the author's introduction and afterword. The book includes 16 portraits and 11 illustrations that influenced the process of Englishing the Bible and the course of English history as a nation. There are comparative Bible verses for Psalm 23 from various English translations, as well as a very useful Biblical timeline at the back of the book that helps to identify the major landmarks leading to the production of the KJV.

Let us make a brief summary of each chapter.

**Chapter One:** The tool which brought the English translation of the Bible into being was the invention of the printing press. McGrath starts this chapter by telling of the importance of this new technology, which was invented in the 15th century by Johannes Gutenberg of Mainz. This technology helped generate a rise in literacy in Europe. McGrath introduces several social changes during this time period which were influenced by the Renaissance and which enhanced the peoples' desire to be literate, promoting the demand for books.

His account includes one of the first publications produced by Gutenberg, which was a Bible known as the "Thirty-Six-Line Bible." McGrath's reasons as to why the Bible was chosen as Gutenberg's first publication using the new technology are interesting to read.

Lastly, McGrath refers to John Wycliff (1330–84) as a forerunner for the translation of the Bible into English. He continues the narrative that explains several reasons why the translation's undertaking was strongly opposed and even prohibited in those days.

**Chapter Two:** In this chapter McGrath deals with the rise of the English language, which once was seen as the language of peasants. English was scorned as the barbarous language, incapable of expressing sophisticated matters such as philosophy or religion. French and Latin were reserved for that role. A decree in 1408 known as the "Constitution of Oxford" repressed any movement toward the rise of English and made the translation of the Bible into English illegal.

In the face of those adverse winds, McGrath tells the story of how English gradually rose from just a vernacular language to the national language, driving out French and Latin during the 16th and 17th centuries.

He concludes this chapter with the statement that a powerful amalgamation of religion and nationalism, in addition to the rise of English, made the translation of the Bible into English inevitable.

**Chapter Three:** The theme of this chapter is the movement known as "the Reformation".
McGrath emphasizes that this religious movement embraced massive social, political, and economic change. One of the factors underlying the Reformation was the rise of individualism during the Renaissance.

McGrath introduces some of the pioneers of reform across the continent of Europe, starting with Erasmus, through Martin Luther, to Huldrych Zwingli. He stresses the point that each of them shared one common thought: the importance of the vernacular being released in order to override Latin in the people's religious lives. That even the most humble plowman would read his New Testament as he worked the field was the vision shared by those leading reformers.

In addition to this shared vision, McGrath introduces the story of how the pressure for the translation of the Bible from the Vulgate into the vernacular increased. Lastly, the author speaks about the Reformation in England. Many figures became involved in the Reformation including Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn, Thomas Cranmer, Thomas More, John Fisher, William Tyndale, Thomas Cromwell, and such queens as Elizabeth Tudor, and Mary Tudor. The author weaves into the story how each figure played his or her role in preparing the ground for the translation of the Bible into English.

Chapter Four: In this chapter McGrath focuses on the life and work of William Tyndale, from Gloucestershire in England. Tyndale (1494-1536), a graduate from Magdalen Hall (now Hertford College, Oxford), is regarded as the first translator of the New Testament into English from the original text, Greek. According to McGrath, Tyndale is also widely acknowledged as the most formative influence on the text of the KJV.

The famous Wycliff translation of the Bible in the 14th century was not made from the original Greek, but from the Latin Vulgate. It is said that the Wycliff versions reproduced the translation mistakes of the Vulgate. In that sense, Tyndale was the pioneer of undertaking the English translation of the Bible from the original Greek text. In face of the 1408 Constitutions of Oxford, this undertaking proved to be at the cost of his own life. Although Tyndale fled from England and continued his translation as an expatriate in Belgium, he was arrested in 1536 and strangled in Belgium. His dead body was burned at the stake on the charge of heresy. (For details of Tyndale's engaging story and his biography, a complete biography by David Daniell has been successfully translated into Japanese for readers in Japan.)

McGrath continues his narrative by describing how Tyndale's New Testament and Pentateuch became precursors of the KJV. He mingle in some stories of Tyndale's successors, like Miles Coverdale and John Rogers, to name a few. McGrath points out the fact that Tyndale actually coined such words and phrases as "congregation" and "the salt of the earth." This triggered heated criticism from Thomas More.

Through this chapter, readers will learn that Tyndale's translations would prove to be of foundational importance in the shaping of later English translations such as the Coverdale Bible, the Matthews Bible, the Great Bible, and eventually the KJV. According to McGrath, many of the words and phrases chosen by Tyndale found their way into the English
Chapter Five: The author introduces the Geneva Bible, which was translated, compiled, and produced in 1560 by English religious refugees such as William Whittingham (1524-79) in Geneva. This English Bible is said to have been very popular in England. It contained the Apocrypha and comments (annotations) on the text with radical Protestant ideas. It was actually seen as a threat to the entire structure of church and state in England, as well as to the KJV.

In this chapter, the author also explores the questions of "What conceivable reasons might there be for a Bible intended for distribution in England to be produced in the far-off French speaking city of Geneva?"

Chapter Six: McGrath depicts transitional periods in politics and religion from the end of Queen Elizabeth’s reign to the accession of King James I. During the reign of Elizabeth I (1558-1603), England managed to keep the country from returning to Roman Catholicism. Elizabeth’s most important task was to secure England’s Protestant identity and religious stability. But after her death, the new king, James I, who had previously reigned over Scotland as James VI, took over. He was a critic of Puritanism and an enemy of the Geneva Bible.

McGrath shows some marginal notes found in the Geneva Bible and explains why these annotations made King James I feel insecure.

Chapter Seven: This chapter is about the political and religious strife and tug-of-war between the English Puritans and the Church of England during the early 17th century. In other words, the battle which was between the Geneva Bible and a new translation of the Bible under James I. King James’ version was expected to create a cohesive English national identity against Roman Catholicism.

The author explains the process of development through a series of events leading up to the Hampton Court Conference. In 1604 this conference was attended by James I himself, as well as various bishops and learned men from across the country, to make the decision to bring the KJV into being by royal authority.

Chapter Eight: This chapter starts with the episode of the reluctant initiative taken by Richard Bancroft, bishop of London, toward the realization of a new English translation of the Bible (the KJV). Bancroft created a “translation guide” to try to direct the translators to base their work on the Bishops’ Bible and to limit the freedom of the translators. The author introduces Bancroft’s 15 translation rules and explains how the translators were chosen.

The entire received text (textus receptus) of the Bible was divided into six sections. Roughly equivalent numbers of men were allocated for the translation of each section. There were six companies (groups) of translators consisting of 7~9 members each, altogether 47 translators.

Through this chapter, readers will realize that the KJV is not an independent Bible from the other translations that preceded it. On the contrary, it stands in a long line of translations, and was particularly influenced by the earliest of William Tyndale’s translations from 1526. Tyndale paved the way for translating the Bible into English from the original text.

Lastly, McGrath introduces the translation
process and explains the content of the preface of the KJV. He also reminds readers of the fact that the KJV was built upon a substantial foundation laid by others, such as Tyndale.

Chapter Nine: This chapter mainly provides a collation of facts concerning the KJV, including the different sizes of printing paper like folio, quarto, octavo, and duodecimo editions. Other information includes the kinds of type (newly cast type), the form of printing materials (sheets), and the printing method used at Barker's printing house for the KJV.

It is amazing that King James I did not pay for the Bible's translation or production costs. The KJV had to be funded by venture capitalists.

Chapter Ten: In this chapter the author illustrates how the translators chosen for the KJV agonized terribly over the problems of Bible translation. They were the most learned men of the universities (Oxford and Cambridge), as well as learned bishops. The problem that tormented them was how the complexities of a text originally written in one language should be expressed in another. The author quotes a remark made by a French writer concerning translation, "If they are beautiful, they are not faithful; if they are faithful, they are not beautiful." This saying really pinpoints the difficulty of translation.

The last paragraph in this chapter is quite intriguing for those who are interested in translation. The theme is "What is translation anyway?" The concept of the receptor language and the donor language as it appears in this paragraph deserves to be considered.

Chapter Eleven: In this chapter the author explores the lexical aspect of the KJV and gives us an idea why its translators made a massive contribution to the development of the English language in general, citing many lexical patterns. For example, many of the Semitic turns of phrase that have gained an accepted place in modern English can be traced back to the KJV.

The author explains the reason why the KJV retains archaic forms such as "Thee", "Thou", "Thy", "Thine", and the verbal endings like "Thou sayest", "He sayeth", "Thou givest", "She giveth", "Thou hast", "He hath", and so forth.

McGrath compares Tyndale's 1525 translation with the 1611 KJV, citing a portion of the same Bible verses from Matthew 7:1–7. Readers will be surprised to find that the use of "ye", "thou", and so forth remains unchanged in the KJV. They were in general use in Tyndale's time, but around 1611 they were quite obsolete. According to McGrath, the vast bulk of Tyndale's translation was incorporated indirectly into the KJV.

Chapter Twelve: The author explores how the KJV, in the end, made its way to the place of victory in the battle against the Geneva Bible. That is called "the final acclamation." The Geneva Bible was seen as the Bible of the Puritans, and the KJV as the Bible of the establishment. The KJV had a long way to go before it became the Bible of the English people. In the 17th century, politics intervened in the matter of the Geneva Bible from 1616 onward. The printing of the Geneva Bible was prohibited in England by the authorities, and its import from abroad was banned. Supporting the Geneva Bible was regarded as unpatriotic.

During the rule of the Puritan Common-
wealth, serious opposition to the KJV arose and gathered momentum. But after the death of Oliver Cromwell, the Puritan government fell apart. The restoration of the monarch in 1660 occurred with Charles II. This political change put an end to any talk about opposing the KJV. This trend helped to establish the final acceptance of the KJV in England.

In the last portion of this chapter, the author tells about the impact of the KJV on the language and worship of Christians in Africa and Australia. He finalizes the book by telling the story of the historical process of how the KJV came to be accepted in North America.

Now let us consider the title of this book: In the Beginning. What does “In the Beginning” mean? It is apparently an excerpt from the famous Bible verse found in the New Testament, John 1:1. This verse says, according to the KJV, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

The capital letter form of Word stands for “God, the Son.” According to the famous Roget’s Thesaurus by C. O. Syvester Mawson, “God, the Son” (Jesus Christ) has 33 different titles expressed in English with equivalent meanings. The Word is one of them. As Romans 11:36 says, “All things are from God and through God and to God.” To put it another way, everything starts from “the Word”, or “the Word” is a foundation for everything.

Likewise, the reviewer presumes McGrath gives this title of “In the Beginning” to the book because The Word-symbolizing here the whole of the God’s Word, the Bible—should be the beginning. The Word (the Bible; and in this case, particularly the English KJV Bible) laid a foundation for England, the English language, and the English people. These ideas must surely have influenced McGrath as he was deciding what the title of this book should be.

In the Christian world, “the word” is regarded as an important foundation of faith. The Greek language (the original text in the New Testament) has two different expressions standing for “the word.” One is logos, and the other is rhema. Logos means God’s word that is applied in general to everyone, whereas rhema sounds more personal and is God’s word as applied personally in individual, specific cases. In this sense, the word is important, but the vernacular is more important. Everything starts from “the word.” Romans 10:17 says, “So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” (KJV) The interpretation of the incarnation given by Roget’s Thesaurus is expressed as follows: “The Word made Flesh.” These concepts reflect thoughts commonly shared by Bible translators during the English Reformation.

Before concluding, I would like to add a few final comments concerning In the Beginning. The focus of this book is not meant to be on the details of the lives and personalities of the Bible translators, as other books of similar themes offer. Rather it covers a broad outline of the history of the translation of the Bible into the English language. Therefore it is not a quick-paced, thrilling biography, and it may sometimes seem redundant because the author is laying a careful foundation of ideas that he is building upon. McGrath, however, does an impressive job of covering the events and causes leading up to the publication of the King James Version of the English Bible. It is very readable, and full of rich ideas that people may
have never considered.

For some serious scholars, the book appears to have failed to provide enough citations and reference sources. Other readers might have expected more depth of detailed syntax or lexical surveys of the history of the KJV. Consider though, that if this book had leaned more heavily toward scholastic or academic orientation, then the general reader who is not familiar with the fascinating story of translating the Bible into English would have found the reading of this text much too technical and heavy.

The volume of content In the Beginning is just right, not too long or too short. It is rather regrettable that the author does not mention anything about the modern translations such as the NIV, the New American Standard Bible, or the Living Bible, though he refers to the Revised Standard Version and the New King James Version in the closing pages.

For readers who would like to delve more deeply into the personalities and characters of Bible translators, other books such as God's Secretaries and Wild as the Waters are recommended. Along with these, Translating the Bible, From William Tyndale to King James may attract readers who want to study an exposition of the prefaces of various English Bibles from the time of the English Reformation. The King James Bible, A Short History from Tyndale to Today provides readers with in-depth information as to how each of the English Bibles that appeared during the 16th and 17th centuries differs.

I was born in 1953, the same year as the author of In the Beginning, which was also the year of the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. I learned that like every child born in Britain that year, the author was given a copy of the KJV published in 1611. Unlike the author, I obtained my first Japanese Bible in 1969 and the KJV for my personal use in 1972. Despite the passage of more than 400 years, the King James Version has stood the test of time and has never become obsolete.

Notes

(1) McGrath attracts quite a few Japanese Christian readers, including pastors and theologians, through the Japanese editions of his works. C. S. Lewis, A Life, Eccentric Genius, Reluctant Prophet; and Science and Religion are popular in Japan, along with his theology-related books.

(2) One of the colleges of Oxford University, founded in 1546.

(3) A constituent college of Oxford University, founded in 1438. It is named after All Soul's Day (Feast of All Souls) in Christianity which commemorates the faithful departed.

(4) A constituent college of Oxford University, founded in 1264. It is named after Walter de Merton, Bishop of Rochester (1205–27).

(5) One of the Permanent Private Halls of Oxford University, founded in 1896. It is named after St. Edmund Campion, an English Roman Catholic Jesuit priest and martyr (1540–81).

(6) They include Anthony Gilby, Thomas Sampson, John Knox, and Laurence Tomson for the Geneva Bible; Matthew Parker for the Bishop's Bible; members of the English College, Douai, in France for the Douai-Rheims Bible; Lancelot Andrewes and other 46 translators for the KJV. McGrath, Alister; In the Beginning, The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture: p. 114, pp. 179–182, Anchor Books, 2001.

(7) Ibid., p. 1.

(8) They include Tyndale's New Testament (1526), the Pentateuch (1531), Coverdale Bible (the first complete English Bible (1535), Matthew's Bible (1537), Great Bible (1539), the Geneva Bible (1560), Bishop's Bible (1568), and Douai-Rheims Bible (1610). Ibid., pp. 315–316.

(9) They include the title pages of various Bibles in the 16th century. Ibid., pp. 96, 122, 208.

(10) This is known as the Bamberg Bible, printed in
Bamberg in Germany by Gutenberg in 1468. It has 36 lines of type in each column of print, and runs to 1768 pages of the Latin Vulgate translation. It is different from his “42-line Bible” printed in 1455.

The first Bible translation from Latin into English, not from the original text, Greek. His followers and his Christian view, labeled as the Lollards, were persecuted for a long time as a threat to the religious establishment in England.

A decree promulgated by Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Arundel, in 1408, banning the translation of the Bible into English.

The second wife of Henry VIII and the mother of Elizabeth I.

Archbishop of Canterbury. He helped the case of Henry’s divorce of Catherine of Aragon. He was the founding father of the Church of England.

An English Catholic bishop of Rochester in the 16th century. He sharply criticized Tyndale and Lutheranism with his works such as "Assertionis Lutheranae Confutatio" in 1526 and his own sermons in 1521.

An English lawyer and statesman, served as chief minister to Henry VIII. He supported the principle of Royal Supremacy over the Church in England.

Tyndale realized that no single place guaranteed the safety of translating the Bible into English and no printers would undertake its printing throughout England. So he left England for Germany in April, 1524.

The Japanese translation of the complete Tyndale biography with well-grounded and academic sources and references by David Daniell was released in 2001. It was translated by Kenzo Tagawa and published by Keiso Shobo publisher, Tokyo.

A noted Renaissance humanist and Lord High Chancellor of England in the 16th century. He was a strong defender for the Catholic Church and printed a series of his criticisms in English against Tyndale, titled "The Dialogue Concerning Heresies" in 1529 and "The Confutation of Tyndale's Answer" in 1532.

This was translated by William Whittingham, ex-fellow of All Soul’s College of Oxford University, and his fellow translators in Geneva, largely derivative, based primarily on Tyndale’s English translation. Its preface, annotations, and marginal notes are strongly Calvinism-oriented and were well received among Protestants in England, but at the same time they were detested by the authorities of the Church of England.

Meaning “hidden”, this consists of many different books written during the time of the Old Testament and the New Testament writings. The Roman Catholic Church canonized them at the Council of Trent in 1546. But most Protestant denominations do not see them as accepted books of the Bible.

In these 15 rules, Bancroft strongly ordered the panel of translators that they should retain the word, “church” and it should not be replaced by the word, “congregation” which was coined by Tyndale.

The lengthy preface expresses the message to the readers of the KJV from the translators, and recounts their motives and reasons why a new translation should be made.

This was located at Northumberland House in Aldersgate Street in London.

This saying of an unknown French writer illustrates the difficulty of translation using a question like, “How can one combine faithfulness to the text with elegance of translation?”

This was translated by Merrill Chapin Tenney and other translators, published with the help of the Lockman Foundation in 1971.

This English Bible was translated by Kenneth N. Taylor, published by Tyndale House publishers in 1971. Thirty-one percent of the translation is said not to be a word-for-word translation from the original text, rather a use of contemporary English.

This is an authorized revision of the American Standard Version, published in 1901, which was a revision of the King James Version of 1611. This was translated by the panel of American translators and published in 1952.

This was translated by 130 Bible scholars and translators and published by Thomas Nelson Publishers in 1982. It is a modern version of the KJV and retains the purity and stylistic beauty of the original KJV, although it receives some criticism that it changed many words and ruined valuable verses of the KJV.

Written by Adam Nicolson and published by Harper.
Perennial in 2005.


Written by Gerald Bray and published by the Latimer Trust in 2010.


References
