

Priestley and a New Translation of the English Bible

by Tom Bresenhan, Friends of Joseph Priestley House

The Birmingham Riots of July 14-16, 1791 destroyed the homes and chapels of many dissenters. The painting of the burning of the home, lab and library of Joseph Priestley depicts objects thrown from upstairs windows. These include household items, books and loose papers. Among the papers were three years work by Priestley and others to produce a new English translation of the Old and New Testament. In October of that year Priestley wrote of, “lately receiving fourteen of sixty-four leaves of my translation. Though torn and trampled upon, they will be useful to me.”



“Rioters Burning Dr. Priestley's House at Birmingham, 14 July 1791,” by Johann Eckstein

Priestley wrote of a need for a new translation as early as 1772 in the preface of his *Familiar Illustrations of Scripture*. “To those who lived in the times in which these books were published, they were, no doubt, very intelligible; the language in which they are written, and the customs to which they allude, being perfectly known to them... It may puzzle the greatest scholar of the present age to make out the sense of a passage of Scripture, which could not but have been perfectly understood by the most illiterate person in that age....Our translators, ...not having had their minds sufficiently enlightened,...without any ill design,...have expressed their own sentiments, and not those of the apostles. In all these cases a **just translation** (emphasis added) is all that is necessary to remove the errors into which a wrong translation has led us.”

Priestley wrote a proposal, plan and rules for correcting the English translation in the *Theological Repository* IV in 1784. The translation Priestley proposed was to be by “learned friends of free inquiry.” The new translation was needed because no “steps are taken by authority to correct it, or to make a new one.” Its distinguishing feature was that it should “always be in a state of improvement” rather than being definitively improved. Priestley preferred to acknowledge ambiguities, and to avoid pedantry as “the language of these things must be popular.” Although secrecy was later decided on, the initial proposal was in favor of openness and free contribution.

The initial plan was that Priestley would take responsibility for the Hagiographa or Sacred Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations of Jeremiah, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles); Michael Dodson was engaged for the Prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) and the 12 Minor Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Zechariah, Malachi); Theophilus Lindsey for the New Testament and William Frend for 'the historical books' (Joshua, Judges, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings). These four would oversee the contributions of selected and cooperative acquaintances: Joshua Toulmin, William Turner, Thomas Belsham, Thomas Fyshe Palmer, Richard Gamham, Robert Tyrwhitt, John Moore and Newcome Cappe. Gilbert Wakefield was considered but found difficult to work with.

When Priestley asked Bretland for his assistance, he warned him that “we wish it not to be much talked of.” Lindsey was adamant that absolute secrecy in this business was necessary while practical Priestley considered this impossible, going so far as to think that “more good than harm will accrue from any reports as may be expected to get abroad on the subject.” He did agree that no names were to appear in the plans in order to minimize “any man's power to frustrate the scheme.”

Priestley's role was often to support flagging spirits and to deflect complaints. All concurred that the task could be eased by the incorporation of other translations although by 1790 Priestley had decided against reprinting other translations because, “we must keep much nearer to the phraseology of the present version than they do. We must content ourselves with departing from it, only for the sake of some real improvement.”

Priestley had suggested initially to Lindsey that a year would see the project's completion, although in December 1789 he confessed that, “I did not really expect that it would be dispatched so soon' and that another year will do very well.” By August 1790 he expected “all the parts” were to be “ready before the next April” and hoped this would “not be very difficult.”

By October, Priestley had almost finished his “proper part” and was about to “undertake” Jeremiah and Ezekiel, at the same time speculating whether Wakefield might, after all, be persuaded to help with these. Belsham was again given the diplomatic task to sound him out on the subject.

By the time of the Birmingham riots in July 1791 the translation was overdue but very near completion. Priestley had fled to London and after three years fearing imprisonment sailed for America arriving in June 1794. That August Priestley wrote Lindsey, “I read more of the Hebrew Bible than I almost ever did, and may possibly revise the whole translation, now that I have so much time upon my hands.” In October he added “I have already composed and transcribed, from Acts xvii, 18-20; but I want your cool judgment in this and all my other compositions. I feel myself as a ship without a rudder.”

With distances too great for collaboration the new translation was abandoned. Priestley continued to write religious works, especially his *Notes on Scripture*. The lasting impact of the Birmingham riot was the loss of the new English translation of the bible.

Sources

This insert is drawn largely from “Priestley’s Plan for a ‘Continually Improving’ Translation of the Bible,” by Marilyn Brooks, published in *Enlightenment and Dissent*, Vol. 14. 1995 and *The Enlightened Joseph Priestley* by Robert Schofield (2004) as well as Priestley’s documents mentioned in the article.