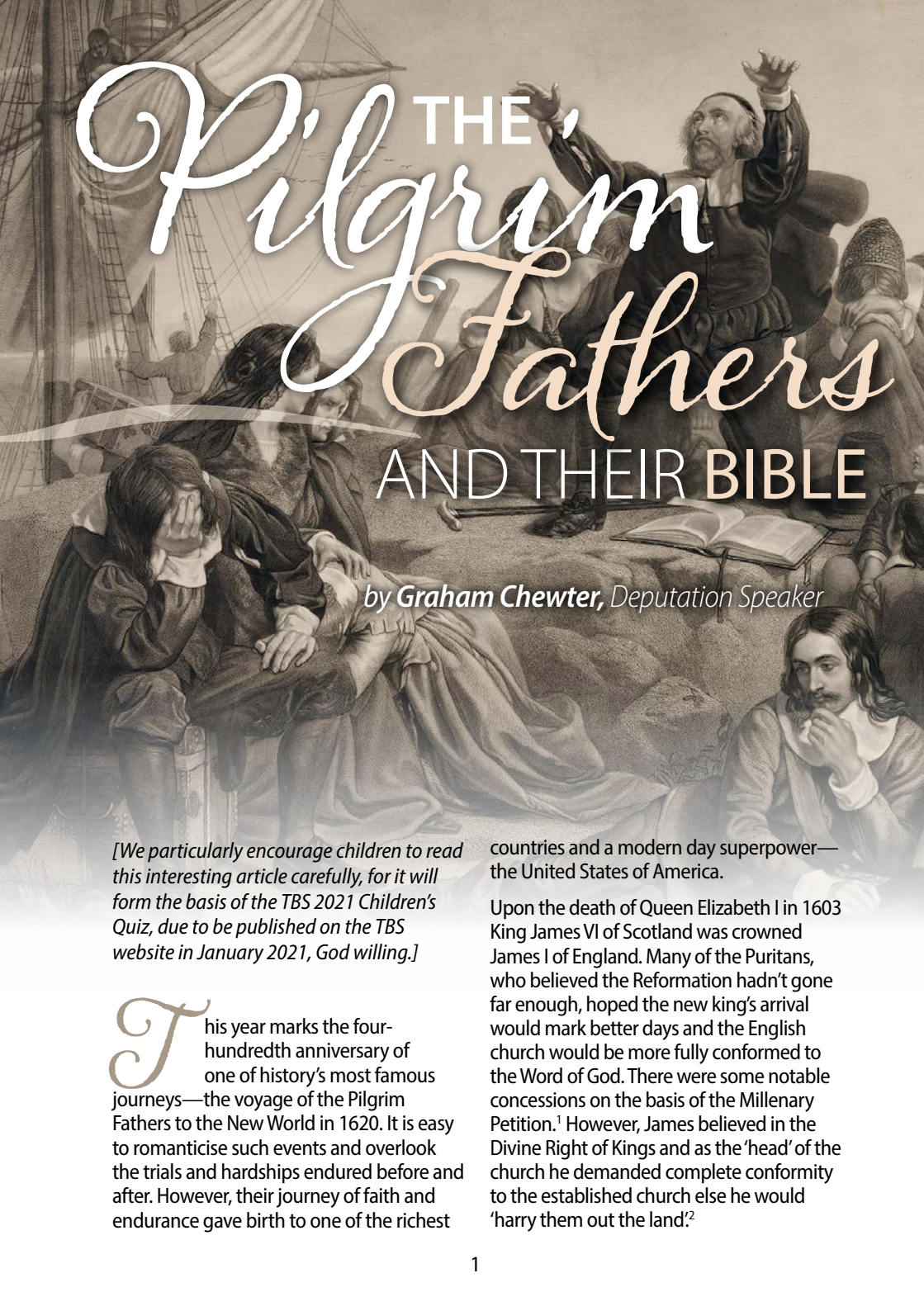




THE Pilgrim Fathers AND THEIR BIBLE

by **Graham Chewter**, *Deputation Speaker*

[We particularly encourage children to read this interesting article carefully, for it will form the basis of the TBS 2021 Children's Quiz, due to be published on the TBS website in January 2021, God willing.]

This year marks the four-hundredth anniversary of one of history's most famous journeys—the voyage of the Pilgrim Fathers to the New World in 1620. It is easy to romanticise such events and overlook the trials and hardships endured before and after. However, their journey of faith and endurance gave birth to one of the richest

countries and a modern day superpower—the United States of America.

Upon the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603 King James VI of Scotland was crowned James I of England. Many of the Puritans, who believed the Reformation hadn't gone far enough, hoped the new king's arrival would mark better days and the English church would be more fully conformed to the Word of God. There were some notable concessions on the basis of the Millenary Petition.¹ However, James believed in the Divine Right of Kings and as the 'head' of the church he demanded complete conformity to the established church else he would 'harry them out the land'.²

THE PILGRIM FATHERS AND THEIR BIBLE



*The Departure of the Pilgrim Fathers,
by Charles Lucy 1847*

Around the country, especially in London and the eastern counties of England, God-fearing men and women found they could not in good conscience conform. However, they were not permitted legally to meet outside the established church. Thus these 'separatists' secretly met for worship and, as they were accustomed to say, 'for the godly and comfortable exercise of prayer and hearing the Word of God'.

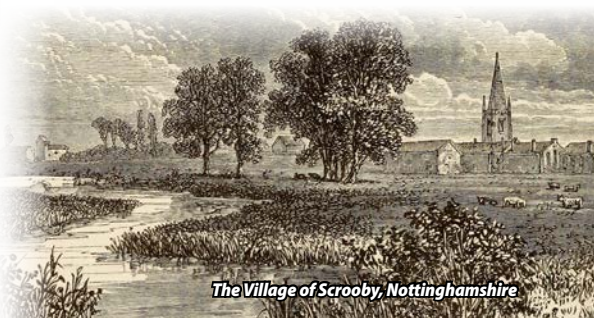
One of these Separatist groups met in the home of William Brewster (later regarded as 'the Father of New England') at Scrooby Manor, Nottinghamshire. The gathering was pastored by Richard Clyfton³ and John Robinson. Through their ministries

the people's hearts were touched with heavenly zeal for the truth.

Robinson had been educated at Cambridge and began his ministry at St Andrews, Norwich; he was later to describe the call to separate as a fire shut up in his bones. This led him with his people to make a covenant before God 'to walk in all God's ways made known, or to be made known unto them, according to their best endeavours, whatsoever it should cost them, the Lord assisting them'.⁴ Interestingly, sixteen-year-old William Bradford—in spite of the loud objections and scoffs of relatives and neighbours—joined them for worship. The two Williams—Brewster and Bradford—were later to play a key role in the settlement in New England both in a civic capacity and as ministers of the Gospel.

Scrooby Manor was now under close scrutiny, and government spies travelling the Great North Road soon learnt of the illegal meetings from local informers. Fines were imposed; some separatists were subjected to imprisonment and others even had their houses destroyed. Longing for freedom to worship and acting upon the Saviour's admonition that 'when they persecute you in one city, flee to another' (cf. Matthew 10.23), they set eyes upon the Netherlands and after much prayer agreed plans to depart England unnoticed.

In 1608 Robinson's members secretly packed their belongings and set out on foot



The Village of Scrooby, Nottinghamshire

for the sixty mile journey to the seaport town of Boston in Lincolnshire. Awaiting them was the sea captain who had agreed to smuggle them out of the country. But before they even arrived at Boston he had betrayed them to the authorities. They were searched, their money taken and their belongings ransacked. They were then put on display for the crowds and afterwards confined in cells in the Boston Guildhall. However, rather than deterring this group it aroused interest in their faith and the principles that motivated them.

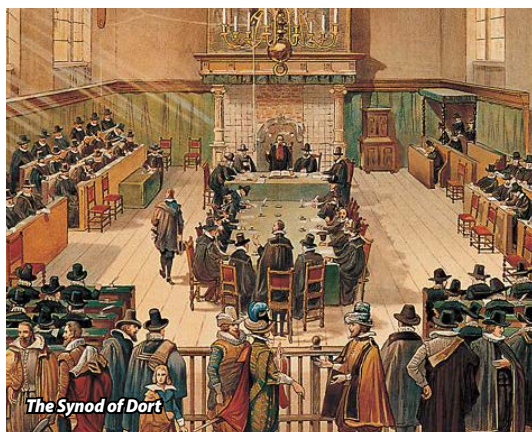
TO THE OLD WORLD

Distressingly a second attempt of departure also failed. But later successfully slipping away from Immingham, Lincolnshire, they settled briefly in the Dutch capital Amsterdam, proceeding some months later to the heavily populated city of Leiden. There they purchased a suitable building which provided upper-storey accommodation for their pastor, who could then freely minister to his people in the ground floor rooms. In time as many as three hundred gathered, delighting to hear the Word of truth from his lips. Years later William Bradford, looking back in affectionate remembrance of Robinson, could say,

It was hard to judge whether he delighted more in having such people, or they in having such a pastor. They continued many years in a comfortable condition, enjoying much sweet and delightful society and spiritual comfort together in the ways of God. So, as they grew in knowledge and other gifts and graces of the Spirit of God, and lived together in peace and love and holiness, many came from divers parts of England, so they grew a great congregation. If at any time

differences arose, as differences will arise, they were so met with and nipped in the head betimes, or otherwise so well composed that love, peace, and communion were still continued.⁵

But all was not easy: they were strangers in a strange land and obliged to learn a new language. And as many formerly had only known agricultural labour, new skills had to be learnt equipping them to become wool combers, hatmakers, tailors and glovers, as well as masons, carpenters, cabinet makers and stocking weavers.

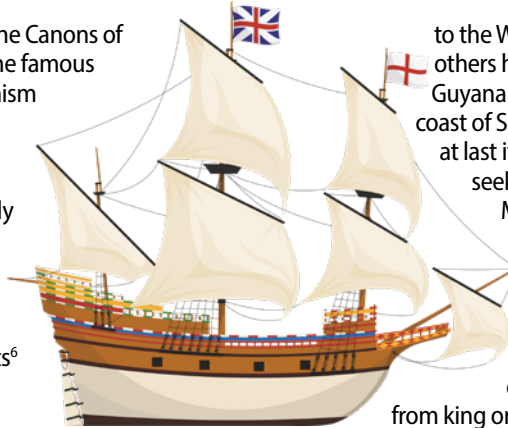


Now new concerns exercised their minds. Even here they were distressed by the King of England's attempts to interfere with their liberties. In addition, the city people showed scant regard for the sabbath, and to the grief of many some of their young people were drawn into sinful ways. Although they found fellowship among Dutch believers, the churches in the Netherlands were in a state of ferment.

The famous Synod of Dort (Dordrecht) sat in session for six months until May 1619. Such was the high regard for John Robinson he was invited to participate. The

THE PILGRIM FATHERS AND THEIR BIBLE

Synod articulated the Canons of Dort (from which the famous five points of Calvinism were later derived), believing that the Calvinistic viewpoint accurately reflected the teaching of Holy Scripture and provided a rebuttal to the Remonstrants⁶ who had swerved from the truth.



The Mayflower

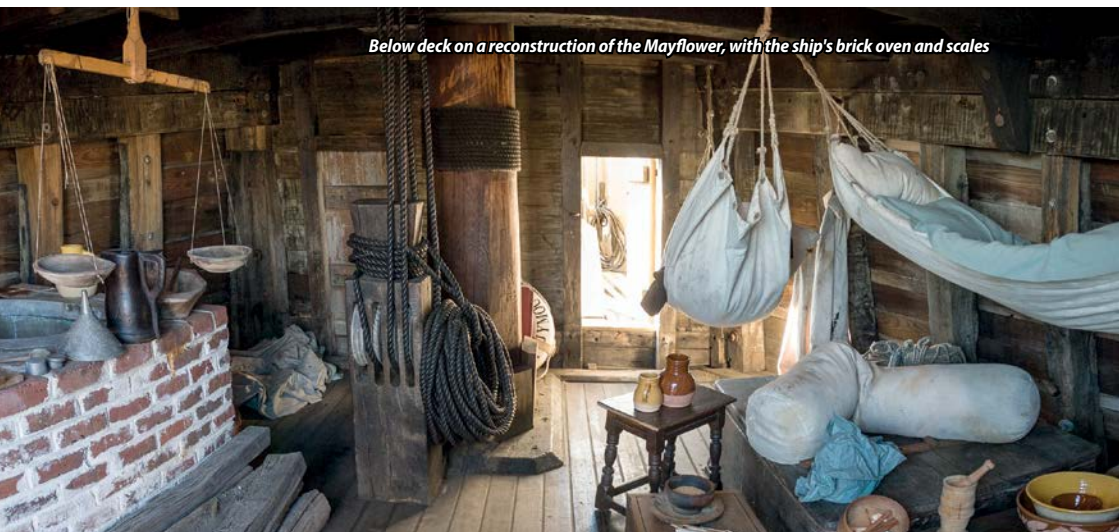
However, new dangers arose for the English Pilgrim Church. The emotion of theological controversy spilled into the streets. One day the sixty-three-year-old James Chilton⁷ and his daughter Isabella were mistaken for the resented Remonstrants because they failed to worship in any of the recognised churches. Being surrounded by twenty youths they were pelted with cobble stones. James was knocked to the ground and received a near fatal blow to the head.

Could it be the Lord had somewhere better for the English church, they wondered? With exercised hearts they prayed and fasted, earnestly seeking the Lord's guidance. Some were for starting anew

to the West Indies and others had thoughts of Guyana on the north-east coast of South America. But at last it was agreed to seek permission of His Majesty King James to establish a colony in the New World. No formal grant of liberty to worship could be obtained

from king or bishop but, reading between the lines, the Pilgrims concluded that if they conducted themselves peaceably the king would accommodate their going.

With the outbreak of another war between the Spanish and the Dutch in 1620 it was agreed that arrangements should be made at least for some to depart urgently and for others to follow later. William Bradford (to whom we owe an excellent firsthand account of events) states, 'So they left that goodly and pleasant city which had been their resting place near twelve years; but they knew they were pilgrims, and looked not much on those things, but lift up their eyes to the heavens, their dearest country, and quieted their spirits.'⁸



Below deck on a reconstruction of the Mayflower, with the ship's brick oven and scales



A LONG JOURNEY

With a fair wind they hoisted sail and crossed to Southampton in the *Speedwell*, a 60-ton pinnace which had been part of the English fleet sent to destroy the Spanish Armada thirty-two years earlier. They had purchased the ship intending to use it as a trading vessel once they had crossed the Atlantic. The *Mayflower* had preceded them to London carrying the English portion of the emigrants. Regrettably the *Speedwell* started to take on water and had to put into Dartmouth for repairs. Having set sail again the passengers were dismayed to discover another serious leak, obliging them all to wait at Plymouth for another repair. Was this sabotage they wondered? A few decided to remain in England; the rest reluctantly agreed to sell the *Speedwell* and some of their supplies, whilst those who were resolved to emigrate joined the *Mayflower* company, finally setting sail on 6 September 1620.

Summer was over. Now much later in the year than originally planned they were at greater risk from the elements. It has been reckoned that in those days their three-thousand-mile journey was as dangerous as flying to the moon! Terrific mid-Atlantic storms arose. On the merchant cargo ship the conditions were

not conducive to comfort, and for safety's sake the passengers had to remain in the cramped conditions below deck. One of their number, John Howland, ventured above deck and was immediately washed overboard. Desperately grasping a sail rope trailing in the water he was hauled back on board more dead than alive. Despite this ordeal he was to live on until 1673, rising to a high position both in the church and community. He was eventually the last man left of those that went over on the *Mayflower*. Today two and a half million people can claim descent from this godly man.

Such adverse conditions reduced their speed to an average of less than two miles per hour. The Pilgrims' original plan was to arrive in the New World by October but after sixty-six trying days land was sighted and on 11 November the anchor was dropped at Provincetown Harbour, Cape Cod (now in Massachusetts). Out of the one-hundred-and-two passengers one had died and one born—Oceanus Hopkins. Bradford tells us that 'they fell on their knees and blessed the God of heaven who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean and delivered them from all its perils and miseries'.⁹

TO NEW PLYMOUTH

The Pilgrims continued aboard ship for some time, as it provided shelter in the New World winter. Before leaving the Netherlands, John Robinson had wisely suggested the need for a written agreement. Being now in danger of mutiny from 'strangers'—probably hired labourers who were claiming an end of all authority—the leaders seeing the peril and seeking to quell the unrest called all the adult males into the ship's cabin. Here a solemn compact was drawn up which became the basis of the constitution for the

THE PILGRIM FATHERS AND THEIR BIBLE

infant colony and the first American charter of self-government.

In y^e name of God, Amen. We whose names are underwritten, the loyall subjects of our dread soveraigne Lord, King James, by y^e grace of God, of Great Britaine, France and Ireland, King, defender of y^e faith, having undertaken for y^e glory of God and advancement of y^e Christian faith, and honour of King and country, a voyage to plant y^e first colonie in y^e Northern parts of Virginia, doe by these presents solemnly and mutually in y^e presence of God, and of one another, covenant and combine our selves together into a civill body politick, for our better ordering and preservation and furtherance of y^e ends aforesaid; and by virtue hearof to enact, constitute and frame such just and equall lawes, ordinances, acts, constitutions and offices from time to time, as shall be thought most meete and convenient for y^e generall good of y^e Colonie, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience. In Witness whereof we have hereunder subscribed our names at Cap-Codd y^e 11 November, in y^e year of y^e raigne of our soveraigne Lord, King James of England, France and Ireland y^e eighteenth, and of Scotland y^e fiftie fourth, Ano. Dom, 1620.¹⁰

All forty-one men signed, indicating that each person would submit to majority rule. The first subscriber, John Carver, 'a man godly and well approved among them',¹¹ was appointed first colonial governor.

After Carver's much lamented death in 1621 William Bradford was elected governor. Reflecting in later days on their near-

desperate conditions he wrote that there were

no friends to welcome them, nor inns to entertain or refresh their weather-beaten bodies, no houses ... to repair to ... Whichever way they turned their eyes (save upwards to the heavens) they could have little solace ... For summer being done, all things stand upon them ... and the whole country, full of woods and thickets, represented a wild and savage hue. If they looked behind them, there was the mighty ocean ... What could now sustain them but the Spirit of God and His grace?¹²



The signing of the Mayflower Compact.

In bitterly cold weather, so cold that their clothes froze upon them, an exploration party of thirty-four men set out in a shallop¹³ and a long boat to 'spy out' the land, seeking to determine the most suitable place to settle. Upon their return the *Mayflower* crossed the bay where the Pilgrims disembarked. Old James Chilton had very recently died; tradition has it that his daughter Mary was the first female to set foot on Plymouth Rock.

However their trials were not over. Although the work to build a meeting house and private dwellings began in real earnest, the unhealthy conditions they had been



The Colonnade in Plymouth, Massachusetts, that houses Plymouth Rock, the alleged spot on which the disembarking Pilgrims first stood.



subjected to on board ship began to take their toll. Over the next few months half of their number died, mainly through malnutrition. There was also fear of wolves, a plague of mosquitos and rattlesnakes, and the threat of massacre by members of the native Wampanoag tribe. Yet the Lord was with the Pilgrims as they sought to reproduce in the New World what was best in the Old.

Some of the tribe members were friendly, instructing the newcomers when and how to grow Indian corn and other crops using

fish as a fertiliser. With thankful hearts the Pilgrims praised the God of all grace for providing an excellent harvest, holding a day of thanksgiving in November 1621 at which the fifty Pilgrims were joined by ninety native people.

Here then were a people who loved God and His Word and had gone to great lengths to find freedom of worship.¹⁴ Believing in the priesthood of all believers every family had a copy of the Geneva Bible, which was read daily in family worship, fathers taking seriously their responsibility to minister to their own families. They had embraced the confidence of their pastor back in the Netherlands (who sadly died before being able to join them in the New World) that 'the Lord hath more truth yet to break forth out of His Holy Word'.¹⁵

THE BIBLE OF THE PILGRIMS

The Geneva translation was widely used by English Protestants. During Mary Tudor's cruel reign of 1553–1558 nearly one-thousand well-educated Protestant preachers fled from England to the Continent, some settling in the free city of Geneva—the 'holy city of the Alps' and the home of John Calvin. Here the Reformer encouraged his brother-in-law William Whittingham to unite with Miles Coverdale, John Knox and others to produce the first complete English Bible translated in its



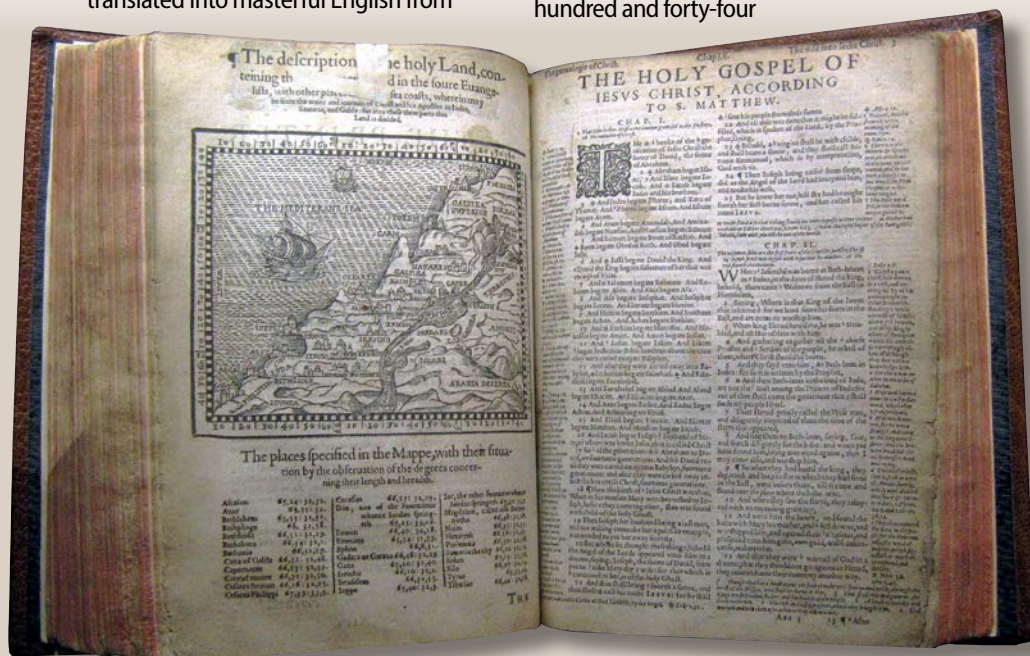
The first Thanksgiving.

THE PILGRIM FATHERS AND THEIR BIBLE

entirety from the Biblical tongues, Hebrew and Greek.

About twenty years earlier William Tyndale was cruelly put to death at Vilvoorde having persevered despite numerous difficulties in translating and publishing the New Testament and translating part of the Old (which his friend Coverdale completed—not being familiar with Hebrew he translated into masterful English from

Genesis 3.7 (the Authorised Version has 'aprons'), it was the first Bible printed in easy-to-read Roman type, and had not only chapter divisions but verses as well. It was supplemented with numerous marginal annotations, some carried forward from Tyndale, others supplied by Calvin and Beza and some from the translators themselves. This was a useful Bible, with maps and charts to help the diligent student. At least one hundred and forty-four



The Geneva Bible

Luther's German Bible). The Geneva scholars sought to make improvement on these great endeavours and provide a translation that conformed even more closely to the words in the Biblical languages in which the Holy Spirit had inspired the Word of God. The Geneva New Testament was issued in 1557 and the whole Bible rolled off the press just three years later.

It was an instant success. Nicknamed the 'Breeches Bible' for its translation of

printings were produced over the next several decades before it was eventually superseded by the increasingly popular Authorised Version of 1611. The language was terse and accurate but sometimes pedantic and lacking in musical flow, such as John 14.6, 'I am that way, and that trueth, and that life'. Being one of the many former translations diligently compared by the King James translators in 1604–1611 it nevertheless set a high standard of accuracy and faithfulness.¹⁶

Armed with their much-loved Geneva Bible each family would gather for public

worship whatever the weather. One visitor to Plymouth in 1627 penned the following description of the Pilgrims' place of worship and assembling:

Upon the hill they had a large square house [the Fort] . . . the lower part they use for their church, where they preach on Sundays and the usual holidays. They assemble by beat of a drum, each with his musket or firelock, in front of the captain's door; they have their cloaks on, and place themselves in order, three abreast and are led by a sergeant. Behind comes the Governor, in a long robe; beside him on the right hand comes the preacher with his cloak on, and on the left hand the captain with his side arms and cloak on, and with a small cane in his hand; and so they march in good order, and each sets his arms down near him. Thus they enter their place of worship, constantly on their guard night and day.¹⁷

Here they sat on rough-hewn log benches whilst Elder Brewster preached 'powerfully and profitably'. In the winter the women would bring their foot stoves—a receptacle in which hot coals were placed—providing at least a little

warmth. At times such were the conditions that the Communion bread froze and as it was broken dropped with a clatter onto the plates. Their services were some hours in length, and if any began to show signs of sleepiness they would be given a poke with the verger's wand.

One of the great ambitions of the Pilgrim Fathers in their bold adventure to the New World was the propagation of the Gospel, or least to be as a stepping-stone for others. This desire was indeed fulfilled. In 1631 John Eliot arrived from England with a deep, prayerful burden for the Native Americans, longing that they might be delivered from their superstitious darkness by the light of Christ. He learnt their language and gathered a church of converted tribesmen in 1651 and gave them the Bible in their own tongue. By 1687 there were no fewer than six churches of baptised Native Americans plus eighteen gatherings of those seeking instruction, ministered to by as many as twenty-four native preachers who helped four English missionaries.

In Britain Charles I, having succeeded his father King James in 1625, appointed the cruel and heartless Archbishop William Laud. Suspected by many of being a closet papist and seen as an evil genius he



A reconstruction of the Plymouth Plantation

relentlessly pursued those who could not in good conscience conform to practices of the Established Church. Many of those in the Puritan party emigrated and sought to establish a 'true English church'. In some cases whole churches emigrated, such as that of John Cotton, minister of the famous Boston Stump, St Botolph's, who thereby originated the city of Boston in what is now Massachusetts. Within twenty years some twenty-six-thousand immigrated, including in 1637 John Harvard, the original benefactor of Harvard University.

Many more, especially from the eastern counties of England, fled the Old World. It is of no surprise therefore that the first three counties in New England were named Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex. A brief glance at a map reveals numerous other place names carried over such as Haverhill, Braintree, Dedham, Cambridge and Chatham, as well as Chester, Leicester and Truro. Today as many as thirty-five million people worldwide claim descent from the Pilgrim Fathers. Among their descendants are six American Presidents (James Garfield, John Adams, Zachary Taylor, Franklin Roosevelt, George H. W. Bush and George W. Bush), George Eastman of Kodak fame, and of particular interest to Christians Fanny Crosby, the famous and prolific hymnwriter, author of 'Safe in the arms of Jesus' and 'Pass me not, O gracious Saviour'.

Over the years the light of the Gospel has spread to all parts of America, and from that vast country to all parts of the globe. We must let the highly esteemed William Bradford, Plymouth Governor from 1621 until his death in 1657, have the last word:

As one small candle may light a thousand, so the light here kindled hath shone unto many, yea in some sort to our whole nation; let the glorious name of Jehovah have all the praise.¹⁸

Endnotes

1. The list of Puritan requests given to King James in 1603.
2. Neil A. Hamilton, *Rebels and Renegades: A Chronology of Social and Political Dissent in the United States* (New York: Moschovitis Group, Inc., 2002), p. 10.
3. He was deprived of his living at Babworth, Nottinghamshire because of his nonconformist views.
4. Stephen Tomkins, *The Journey to the Mayflower* (Cambridge, England: Pegasus Books, 2020), p. 258.
5. Henry Johnson, *From Scrooby to Plymouth Rock* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1896), p. 39.
6. Remonstrants were Dutch Reformed Church followers of the theology of Arminius.
7. My wife's paternal grandmother was a Chilton before she married. There is a strong family tradition that she descended from James Chilton's son (also James) who appears to have remained in England.
8. "The Mayflower", *Eastman: the First Encounter*, easthamthefirstencounter.org/the-mayflower, accessed 12 October 2020.
9. Bradford, *History of the Plymouth Plantation* (1620-1647), www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/bdorsej1/41docs/14-bra.html.
10. "Mayflower Compact", michmayflower.org/compact.htm, accessed 12 October 2020.
11. Bradford, excerpts from *History of Plymouth Plantation, 1620*, "United States History 1", Lumen, courses. lumenlearning.com/ushistory10s/chapter/primary-source-bradford-history-of-plymouth-plantation-1620, accessed 12 October 2020.
12. "Excerpts from William Bradford's History of Plymouth Plantation", sageamericanhistory.net/colonial/docs/bradford.htm, accessed 12 October 2020.
13. A small sail boat used mainly for coastal fishing.
14. Most of those on the *Mayflower* had the Geneva Bible.
15. "King James, the Puritans, and the Colonizing of America", archive.openheaven.com/template/rtfield/popups/history/king_james_puritans_colonizing_america.htm, accessed 12 October 2020.
16. Interestingly, while most of the Pilgrims carried the Geneva, John Alden, the ship's carpenter on the *Mayflower*, had brought his brand new 1620 edition of the King James Bible with him. This Bible is now on display in the Pilgrim Hall Museum, Massachusetts.
17. Emma C. Brewster Jones, *The Brewster Genealogy* (New York, NY, USA: The Grafton Press, 1908), 1.ii.
18. "Illuminate 2019 was inspired by William Bradford's immortal words", *1620-2020 Mayflower 400*, www.mayflower400uk.org/education/who-were-the-pilgrims/2019/november/illuminate-2019-was-inspired-by-william-bradford-immortal-words, accessed 12 October 2020.