

400 Years of the KJV

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Introduction

There is very little neutrality regarding the King James Bible.¹ Is the King James Version of the Bible the “noblest monument of English prose,” the “‘very greatest’ literary achievement in the English language”?²

Or is “The AV 1611 King James Bible ... God’s final authority for mankind today... the crowning work of the Holy Spirit insofar as Bible preservation goes”? Is it “a perfect Book that, though written with paper and ink, was inspired by the breath of God, preserved in perfection by the power of God”?³

Or was “the forcible replacement from 1611 of the remarkable, accurate, informative, forward-looking, very popular Geneva Bibles at the time of their greatest dissemination and power, with the backward-gazing, conservative KJV ... one of the tragedies of western culture”?⁴

¹ Actually the term “the King James Bible” needs clarification since there is no *one* King James Bible; there are many variations, all of which go by the same designation. I cannot catalog the diversity in this paper. In addition to the half dozen revisions in the 17th and 18th centuries, culminating in the 1769 edition by Blaney, there are at least five different *categories* of KJV editions in print today “all with the same general content, but none completely identical with the others in technical details” (Jack Lewis, “The King James Bible Editions: Their Character and Revision History,” ch. 7 of *Translation That Openeth the Window: Reflections on the History and Legacy of the King James Bible*, ed. David Burke, 87–119 (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 109, for the details of these five categories, see 110–13. The entire chapter discusses the history of the various editions since 1611.

² Sentiments cited, but not necessarily endorsed, by Alister E. McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 1.

³ The two preceding statements are simply random examples of what can be found on many web sites and in numerous tracts and (cheaply printed) books churned out by devotees of the KJVO cult. (Regarding the use of “cult” terminology, see n.83.) Both of these examples come from Kyle Stephens, “The Issue Is Final Authority,” <<http://www.biblebelievers.com/Stephens002.html>>. Stephens is no particular authority and is not, so far as I know, a leader among the Ruckmanites; he’s just one of the first that came up on a Google search. I will have a little bit to say about the KJVO mentality a bit later in the paper, but that is mostly a curious side note that I do not deem worthy of much attention. For more information and a careful critique about this perspective, see James White, *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust Modern Translations?* 2d ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2009).

⁴ David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2003), 442.

Personally, I would not endorse any of those opinions. Since, however, 2011 was the 400th anniversary of a widely used translation, it is worth assessing where the KJV fits in the history of God's work in our world.⁵

Historical Background

The King James occupies a unique place in history: the history of the English language, the political history of England and Scotland, and the history of the church in England.⁶ Too often translations in general and the KJV in particular are not considered in light of their historical, cultural context. Factors to which we may be inclined to give great significance may have arisen for very different reasons than we suspect from our viewpoint four centuries removed. Few today know much about the 16th and 17th centuries.

Development of English as a Language

The origins of English as a language may be traced to the mid-5th C. AD, though our earliest written sources date only to the late 7th C.⁷ The history of our language is generally cataloged as consisting of Old English (prior to 1100), Middle English (1100–1450), and Modern English (since 1450). Thus despite a common perception, the King James Version is not written in Old English, but is instead “Modern”—though that does not mean it is not archaic in many respects by contemporary standards.

During the early history of the language English was used only by the residents of England, at the time only a small nation with little foreign influence. In the 14th and 15th centuries

⁵ This paper is in no way exhaustive; entire books, some of them quite large, have been written on the subject. (A few such books will be referenced in the footnotes.) In particular, I will not include any discussion of the fascinating details of the printing of the KJV in its multiple editions, its unique editions (and errors), or its textual basis (generally known to reflect a very limited and late view of MS evidence in the NT—but that is all which was known at the time; see William W. Combs, “Erasmus and the Textus Receptus,” *DBSJ* 1 (1996): 35–53, and idem., “Errors in the King James Version?” *DBSJ* 4 (1999): 151–64 <<http://dbts.edu/journals/1999/Combs.pdf>>). Likewise the effects of KJV typography in various printings (e.g., the later omission of Preface, omission of the original textual notes, versification, etc.) are not discussed, though such considerations are important. I have not documented as much of this paper as I normally would since I am often rehearsing material that is widely known, though much of it may be new to some readers. The related bibliography is extensive and likely most sentences written here could be documented from many different sources. I have sometimes followed the general sketch of McGrath's history, other times Nicolson.

⁶ There seems to be no end of historical treatments, either of England and Europe in general or of English church history. A few of the more notable works that cover the relevant period include the following. Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Cambridge History of Europe: Early Modern Europe, 1450-1789* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006); Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (New York: Viking, 2010); idem., *The Reformation* (New York: Penguin, 2005); Kenneth Latourette, *The Thousand Years of Uncertainty: A.D. 500 to A.D. 1500*, vol. 2 of *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966) and vol. 3, *Three Centuries of Advance: A.D. 1500–A.D. 1800*; Leo Solt, *Church and State in Early Modern England, 1509–1640* (New York: Oxford, 1990); and Susan Doran, *Princes, Pastors, and People: The Church and Religion in England, 1500–1700* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁷ For one of many histories of the English Language, see Robert McCrum, William Cran, and Robert MacNeil, *The Story of English* (New York: Viking 1986).

the *lingua franca* of Europe was French. French language and culture were at the apogee of their influence. Even in England, the upper class spoke French by preference in contrast to the peasants and serfs who used English, a language viewed as adequate for everyday concerns, but lacking, it was thought, the sophistication necessary for diplomacy, philosophy, and religion. The late 15th and the 16th centuries were years of increasing nationalism across Europe, accompanied by the rise of regional languages. Both French and Latin (the language of church and academy) began to wane in importance. As a result, a significant development in English society took place in the late 16th C.: “the remarkable rise of confidence in the English language.... What was once scorned as the barbarous language of ploughmen became esteemed as the language of patriots and poets—a language fit for heroes on the one hand, and for the riches of the Bible on the other.”⁸ The end of the Hundred Years War (1453) between England and France and the rise of England’s maritime might under Queen Elizabeth (see below) established the respectability of English. This was the necessary prerequisite to an English translation of the Bible.

Theological Setting of Early 17th C. England

At this same time another revolution was sweeping Europe. This one was not linguistic, but theological. The Reformation is a diverse movement with multiple roots. To simplify considerably, the influence of Erasmus (1466–1536) was one of the key precursors. Though he remained within the Roman Catholic Church all his life, he wrote vigorously in support of reform. One of his basic premises was that Scripture must be accessible to ordinary people in their own language: “I would to God that the plowman would sing a text of the Scripture at his plow and that the weaver would hum them to the tune of his shuttle.”⁹

A slightly younger contemporary, Martin Luther (1483–1546) sparked the first break with Rome by nailing his famous *95 Theses* to the Wittenberg Castle Church door in 1517. Luther’s ideas spread rapidly, in part because he chose to write in German rather than only in Latin; he intended to address ordinary Christians and not just fellow scholars. Key to his reforms was giving the people the Bible in their own language. No longer would church services be conducted in Latin which was unintelligible to the masses, but in the German they could understand. Though best known for his proclamation of justification by grace alone, “the key to the reform and renewal of the Church was to put the Bible into the hands of lay people.”¹⁰ Luther practiced what he preached: he translated the Bible into German (1534). Calvin (1509–64) likewise wrote not only in Latin, but also in French to make his teaching accessible to common people.

⁸ McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 24–25.

⁹ Martin Luther, cited by Tony Lane, “A Man for All People: Introducing William Tyndale,” *Christian History* 6.4.16 (1987): 7. Tyndale would later echo Erasmus’ sentiment when he said to an English cleric, “If God spare my life, ere many years pass, I will cause a boy that driveth the plow shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost” (Lane, “Tyndale,” 7).

¹⁰ McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 55.

The Reformation spread across Europe, eventually reaching England, though the break from Rome was occasioned, not by theology and reform, but by the domestic and political problems of King Henry VIII. The details need not detain us here, but the Pope's refusal to grant Henry's divorce and the threat of excommunication if he did, resulted in the Church of England separating from Rome. The English Church did so only as a result of the political mandates dictated by the king. The exigencies of the split did, however, result in greater toleration of "Lutheran" ideas. "In the end, the English Reformation has to be recognized as an act of state.... Luther's Reformation was conducted on the basis of a theological foundation and platform. The fundamental impetus was religious ... and theological.... In England, the Reformation was primarily political and pragmatic."¹¹

Regardless of the nature or motives of this "reformation," it did establish the conditions necessary for the English translation of the Bible. The process was not as easy or direct as in Germany, but it eventually resulted in a common language Bible published with the permission and authorization of the church.

Political Setting of Early 17th C. England

The history of England is a component necessary to understand the origins of the English Bible, though the summary here is highly selective.¹²

Historical Summary

Following Henry VIII, the next British monarch was his son, Edward VI (1547), followed in 1553 by his half-sister Mary Tudor, best known as "Bloody Mary," the Catholic queen who attempted to reverse the reforms of her father and brother. Many Protestants fled to Europe for safety at this time. Mary died after only 5 years and was succeeded by her sister, Elizabeth, in 1558. This began one of the longest reigns in English history; Queen Elizabeth I was monarch of a golden age that lasted until 1603 when she died at age 69. Under her rule England emerged as a major world power, defeating the Spanish Armada in 1588. This not only established England's military and naval capabilities, but also confirmed England as a Protestant country. (The goal of Spain had been to invade England and restore Catholicism.)

Elizabeth brokered the "Elizabethan Settlement of Religion" in which Protestant and Catholic factions in the Church of England reached a compromise.¹³ The result was an uneasy peace in the church and many differences were only suppressed, not resolved.

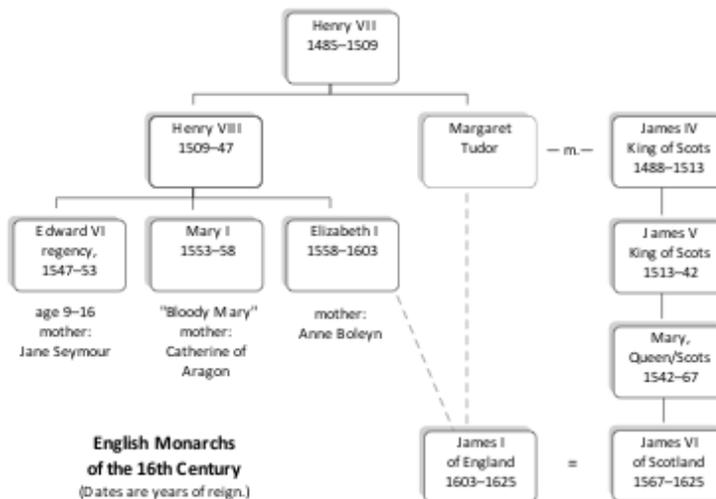
¹¹ McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 65.

¹² In addition to McGrath's useful summary of these events, see also Adam Nicolson, *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003). Nicolson's history is much more detailed and also more florid, written with less sympathy to theological matters, but providing an interesting historical/political perspective.

¹³ The Settlement was, to Elizabeth, a useful political tool. "In private, Elizabeth initially seems to have seen religion as a matter of no great importance, provided that it did not interfere with national life" (McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 125).

Though the church remained officially Protestant, many practices of Catholicism were retained including formal vestments and a prayer book containing Catholic elements such as kneeling for communion, the sign or the cross, etc. This was also the beginning of the Puritan movement which resolutely opposed such practices. “By the end of Elizabeth’s long reign, the most serious religious tensions within England no longer had anything to do with those between Protestants and Catholics. The new battles concerned two different styles of English Protestantism—Anglicanism and Puritanism.”¹⁴

Since Elizabeth never married, the question of succession was a vexing one. She chose not to announce her successor until hours before her death. Since the royal succession was familial, it was necessary to retreat up the family tree to find another branch with a worthy successor. Although there were several possibilities, Elizabeth settled on her cousin, James VI, King of Scots. James Stuart’s grandmother, Margaret Tudor, was the wife of James IV, King of Scots. She was also the sister of King Henry VIII (Elizabeth’s father). At the time of his ascension to the English throne in 1603 as James I at the age of twenty he had been king of Scotland in name for nearly sixteen years and had exercised his authority as king for three. (He had succeeded to the Scottish throne when he was not yet two, the government being conducted by regents until he was seventeen.)



In April 1603, while still enroute to London from Scotland, James was courted by many factions, each vying for preferential treatment from the new king.

The Puritan reformists within the Church of England saw the new reign as a chance for a new start. One of their secular leaders, Lewis Pickering, had already buttonholed the king in Edinburgh, and on James’s way south a petition had been presented to him, signed it was said by a thousand ministers, asking for a reformation of the English Church, to rid it of the last vestiges of Roman Catholicism and to bring to a conclusion the long rumbling agony of the

¹⁴ McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 134. It is this unique history that accounts for much of the diversity in Anglicanism today with both “high church” (those elements with Catholic roots) and “low church” (of Puritan origin) practice.

English Reformation.... It was clear to the reformists that a full Reformation had never occurred in England. Now, perhaps, at last, with a Scottish king, well versed in the ways of Presbyterianism..., there was an opportunity to turn the Church of England into a bona fide Protestant organization, as purified of Roman practices as those on the continent of Europe. This Millenary Petition, named after its thousand signatures, was the seed from which the new translation of the Bible would grow.¹⁵

James, however, had some ideas very different from the Puritan expectations. True, he had been king in Scotland where the Reformation had been extensive under John Knox. The Scottish Presbyterian Church had left no remnants of Catholicism and James had been tutored for his role as king by George Buchanan, one of the leading intellectuals of the Reformation. But James had been disenchanted with the Presbyterianism of Scotland. His major complaint was that it was a republican movement, not an monarchical one. The Divine Right of Kings was explicitly rejected by the new Scottish church and as a result, the king's position was a difficult one. The standard Bible in Scotland (and also, except among the church hierarchy, the most popular in England) was the Geneva Bible—a Bible filled with notes opposing “Tyrants” who claimed divine right. Sitting on the weakest throne in Europe without financial resources or military might and constantly afflicted by the Scottish Church, the English throne looked like Paradise. In England the king had real power and was backed by the powerful bishops of the Church of England.

The struggle between the reform-minded Puritans and the established church had been kept in check by the iron hand of Elizabeth who did not allow for any dissension. The goal was religious stability and anything that might result in an imbalance was opposed by the Queen and the church authorities. These issues, however, were bubbling just below the surface and burst forth when she died. Though there were many other issues that had been held in check by Elizabeth, it is the question of religion that is directly relevant to our present concerns.

James Stuart As a Person

Though some people assume that the KJV was translated by King James, that is not the case, though, interestingly, he might have been one of the few English monarchs who could have done so. Intellectually James was one of the most capable people who sat on the English throne and perhaps among the best of all Europe, “an intellectual of European standing,”¹⁶ and was known in his own lifetime as “a living library and a walking study.”¹⁷ He spoke and wrote at least Greek, Latin, French, and English and also knew Hebrew,

¹⁵ Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, 34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁷ Cited by Donald Brake, *A Visual History of the King James Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), 83.

Spanish, and Italian. He was a writer and is the only English monarch to have his collected works published (1616, ed. James Mountagu).¹⁸

He has been described as “ugly, restless, red-headed, pale-skinned, his tongue ... too big for his mouth, impatient, vulgar, clever, nervous.” He was a passionate huntsman, spending large portions of his time in the hunt.¹⁹

English Bibles Earlier Than KJV

There were many English translations that preceded the KJV.²⁰ This discussion can touch only on the three which were the most directly influential on the KJV which was explicitly intended to be a revision, not a new translation.

Tyndale

The first printed New Testament in English was the work of William Tyndale and published in 1526 in Germany. Tyndale had left England in 1524 for Europe since it was neither legal nor safe to print an English Bible in England. A second edition followed in 1534. He was a good scholar and his pioneering efforts had a lasting impact. Large portions of his work are included, word-for-word, in the KJV. He was betrayed in 1535 and imprisoned in Brussels. A year and a half later, on Oct 6, 1536, Tyndale was strangled at the stake and burned. Tradition records his famous last words: “Lord, open the King of England’s eyes!”

Even before Tyndale’s death a complete English Bible had been published in October 1535: Mile’s Coverdale’s revision of Tyndale’s NT and completion of the OT which Tyndale had begun. It was two years later before a Bible appeared with the “King’s most gracious licence”: Matthew’s Bible—a Tyndale/Coverdale text, also printed abroad, but legally imported, sold, and used in the English churches.²¹

¹⁸ James’ works includes *The Essayes of a Prentise in the Divine Art of Poesie*, (also called *Some Reulis and Cautelis*), 1584; *His Maiesties Poeticall Exercises at Vacant Houres*, 1591; *Lepanto*, poem; *Daemonologie*, 1597; *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, 1598 (his defense of the Divine Right of Kings doctrine); *Basilikon Doron*, 1599 (advice to his son on how to be king); *A Counterblaste to Tobacco*, 1604; *An Apologie for the Oath of Allegiance*, 1608; and *A Premonition to All Most Mightie Monarches*, 1609. He also wrote translations of some of the Psalms (I assume from Hebrew, but I have not been able to document that assumption), a paraphrase of some chapters of Revelation, and a meditation on sections of 1 Chronicles 15–25.

¹⁹ Nicolson, *God’s Secretaries*, 3.

²⁰ For the history of the Bible in English, see especially F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English: From the Earliest Versions* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978); Jack P. Lewis, *The English Bible from KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); S. L. Greenslade, ed., *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1963); and Daniell, *The Bible in English*.

²¹ “Thomas Matthew” was the pseudonym used on the title page; it was the work of John Rogers who later became the first of over 300 martyrs under Bloody Mary in 1555.

Geneva Bible

A translation of the Bible was published in Geneva in 1560 by religious refugees from the Marian persecutions. The NT was, once again, a revision of Tyndale's work. It is distinctive for using Roman type rather than the traditional black letter; it also introduced verse numbers for the first time in a printed Bible. Equally significant with the translation itself were the extensive marginal notes, prefaces, illustrations, and annotations; this was the first "study Bible." These notes reflected the theology of Geneva (i.e., John Calvin's) as well as very explicitly rejected the Divine Right of Kings. Notes such as these became the primary reason that the Bible was both so popular among ordinary Christians and also so hated by the hierarchy of the Church of England and by King James.

Bishop's Bible

The next significant Bible in the Tyndale line was the Bishop's Bible, published in 1568. The primary impetus for this translation was the dislike by the authorities of the Geneva Bible. Archbishop Matthew Parker's solution to the Geneva problem was to produce a translation which would have none of the objectionable features. The work was done by Church of England bishops, thus the name. It was a revision of the Great Bible of 1539.²²

The Bishop's Bible was acknowledged by everyone to be not as good as the Geneva Bible..., but the Bishop's Bible was the official Bible and as such had to be respected. Its language was heavy with latinisms and strange phraseology, loathed by the Puritans..., and avoided phrases ... which the bishops thought vulgar. But that was its problem. The Bishop's Bible was too elevated for its own good, cloth-eared and inaccessible.... Pompous, obscure and often laughable, it was never loved.²³

Since the Geneva Bible was prohibited from being printed in England at the time, all copies had to be imported from the Continent and were thus more expensive than the locally printed Bishop's Bible. That was part of the strategy to deprecate the Geneva edition. "But official opposition to the Geneva Bible could not prevent it from becoming the most widely read Bible of the Elizabethan, and subsequently, Jacobean, era." The reading public "obstinately kept on buying the Geneva Bible."²⁴ A decade later, due to shifting power in the Queen's court, permission was granted to English printers to produce Geneva Bibles. In the last twenty years of the 16th C. there were a total of 58 editions of the Bible published in England; 7 of the Bishop's Bible and 51 of the Geneva. "There was no doubt about which version had secured the loyalty of English Protestants, whatever

²² The Great Bible was also the work of Coverdale, this time a revision of the Tyndale/Coverdale text done at the request of King Henry VIII through the mediation of his chief adviser, Thomas Cromwell.

²³ Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, 73.

²⁴ McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 127, 125.

senior church figures had to say about it.... By 1600, the Geneva Bible had become the Bible of choice of English-speaking Protestants.”²⁵

The KJV As a Translation

Occasion of the KJV

As noted above, it was events related to the Millenary Petition that resulted in the King James Version.²⁶ To address the concerns of the Puritans, the newly crowned King James convened the Hampton Court Conference in January 1604.²⁷ The Puritan party had high hopes that James would prove responsive to their demands for reform, after all, he had been king of Scotland with her Presbyterian, reformed church. The Anglican bishops, however, were uneasy at the uncertain prospects of a new king with a Presbyterian background. The stage was thus set for a showdown at Hampton Court.

Both parties should have known the direction that James would take. He had previously published two books which clearly stated his convictions on the matter: *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1598) was his defense of the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, and *Basilikon Doron* (“The Gift That Belongs to a King,” 1599) set forth his theory of royal governance.

The simple fact of the matter is that James had not the slightest intention of promoting a Puritan or Presbyterian agenda in England. He thoroughly detested what he had seen in Scotland, and did not wish to encounter the same difficulties in England. He much preferred the Anglican system of church government, seeing the institution of episcopacy as a safeguard to the monarchy.²⁸

The conference consisted of the king and his privy council who would hear the arguments, more than a dozen bishops and deans on one side, and the four Puritans who were invited to represent their side. The proportions were obviously slanted toward the bishops and against the Puritans. The details that were discussed are largely irrelevant for our present purposes.²⁹ The bishops were rebuked by the king in some ways, but he largely sided with their perspective. The Puritans were slapped down in nearly all their appeals. The king realized, however, that he had to give them something so that the conference would not be considered a farce. His choice in this regard was to endorse a suggestion made by the

²⁵ Ibid., 129.

²⁶ I recommend the following video as an accurate depiction of these issues: *KJB: The Book That Changed the World, The Amazing Tale of Birth of The King James Bible*, presented by John Rhys-Davies (Lionsgate, 2010).

²⁷ In addition to the accounts given in McGrath and Nicolson, see also A. Kenneth Curtis, “The Hampton Court Conference,” ch. 5 of *Translation That Openeth the Window: Reflections on the History and Legacy of the King James Bible*, ed. David Burke, 57–71 (Atlanta: SBL, 2009).

²⁸ McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 140.

²⁹ For accounts of the proceedings, see McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 156–61 and Nicolson, *God’s Secretaries*, 44–61.

Puritans that “one only translation of ye byble to be authentically and read in ye church.”³⁰ Although the bishops immediately protested such an idea (as they did every Puritan proposal at the conference),³¹ the king seized on the idea. The Puritan suggestion is not specific; whether they hoped for a revision of the Geneva Bible (their preferred translation) or would be content with a revision of the Bishop’s Bible is not clear. At the least it was a criticism of the Bishop’s Bible. It mattered little. James’ response set the agenda: he had never seen, he said, a well-translated English Bible—and the Geneva was the worst. The result was the following directive:

A translation be made of the whole Bible, as consonant as can be to the original Hebrew and Greek, and this to be set out and printed, without any marginal notes, and only to be used in all churches of England in time of divine service.

Nature of the KJV

King James designed the process to be followed for the translation and working with Richard Bancroft (who shortly after became Archbishop of Canterbury), drew up a list of 15 translation principles.³² A few are worth noting here. The first rule specified that the Bishop’s Bible was to be followed and altered as little as possible. The third stipulated that traditional vocabulary was to be used (e.g., *church* and not *congregation*). The sixth forbid marginal notes except where necessary to explain Hebrew or Greek words. The fourteenth listed five translations whose wording was to be used if it was deemed more accurate than the Bishop’s Bible: Tyndale, Matthew, Coverdale, Whitchurch, and Geneva.

The important preface of the translation, “The Translators to the Readers,” describes the goal of the translators: “We never thought ... that we should need to make a new Translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one..., but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one.”³³ In order to “make a good one better,”

³⁰ Cited in slightly different forms by both McGrath (161) and Nicolson (57). The “ye” in the quote is an older English form of “the.”

³¹ “If every man’s humour might be followed, there would be no end of translating,” was the reply of Richard Bancroft, Bishop of London. As Nicolson points out, that was “the voice of the instinctive authoritarian, happier with the status quo than with any possible revision of it” (57).

³² There is a copy in the University Library, Cambridge with the title, “The rules to be observed in translation.” A transcription of the full list of fifteen rules can be found in McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 173–75.

³³ “The Translators to the Reader” has not been included in printings of the KJV in several centuries. That is a shame since it contains much helpful information. In addition to facsimile editions of the 1611, this preface can be found several places including an annotated edition with a modern translation in Erroll F. Rhodes and Liana Lupas, eds. *The Translators to the Reader: The Original Preface to the King James Version* (New York: American Bible Society, 2000); as an appendix to David Burke, ed., *Translation That Openeth the Window: Reflections on the History and Legacy of the King James Bible* (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 219–42; also as an appendix to Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 775–93; in print or ebook, “Original Epistle of the Translators to the Reader, with Notes” in F. H. A. Scrivener, *The Authorized Version of the English Bible (1611), Its Subsequent Reprints and Modern Representatives*, 265–304 (Cambridge University Press, print: 2010; digital, 2011). The text can also be found online at <<http://www.ccel.org/bible/kjv/preface/pref1.htm>>.

the fifty-four translators were divided into six “companies” which met beginning in the summer of 1604, two each at Oxford, Cambridge, and Westminster.³⁴ Three worked on the OT, two on the NT, and one on the Apocrypha. The actual work, of which we have only scraps of information regarding the actual process, was completed in the spring of 1611.

The result of the rules and process put in place by the king was to produce a very traditional translation.

KJV was born archaic: it was intended as a step back.... The reasons for making KJV look back were three-fold: first, it was intended to reset the standard of the solid middle-of-the-road Anglican establishment.... Second, Latinity, rather than contemporary English, was thought to bring with it the great weight of the authority of the past.... There is a third, more fundamental, point. The world is divided into those who think that sacred Scripture should always be elevated above the common run—is not, indeed, sacred without some air of religiosity, of being remote from real life, with a whiff of the antiquarian: and on the other side those who say that the point of the Incarnation was that God became man, low experience and all, and if the Greek is ordinary Greek, then ordinary English words are essential.... In the earlier years of the seventeenth century, the weight of high Anglican politics was heavily on the side of increasing, as it was thought, a worshipful distance.³⁵

Since each of the five supplemental translations listed was a revision of a preceding one (except for Tyndale), this gave the earliest work the greatest weight: Tyndale’s where complete (the NT and part of the OT) and Coverdale where it was not. The voice most commonly heard in the KJV is not that of the seventeenth century translators or even of the Bishop’s Bible which was the formal basis of the revision, but that of a man who lived seventy years earlier who was considered a heretic and outlaw in his day. That is high commendation for the abilities of this pioneer whom C. S. Lewis judges to be “the best prose writer of his age.”³⁶ Though estimates have varied, one recent study concludes that 83% of the KJV text is Tyndale.³⁷ Much of the indebtedness is found in the vocabulary

³⁴ The number specified was 54, but there is some question if the full number was met. Others besides the official translators were probably also involved. See McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 178–82 for details. Biographical sketches (some none too flattering!) of many of the translators are scattered through Nicolson, *God’s Secretaries*, 99–104, 125–36, 154–72, 187–215.

³⁵ Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 441–42.

³⁶ C. S. Lewis, *The Literary Impact of the Authorized Version* (London: Athlone Press, 1950; reprint, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963), 13.

³⁷ John Nielson and Royal Skousen, “How Much of the King James Bible Is William Tyndale’s?” *Reformation* 3 (1998): 49–74, as summarized by Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 448. An older evaluation concluded that “approximately 60 per cent of the text of the English Bible had reached its final literary form before the King James version was produced” (Charles C. Butterworth, *The Literary Lineage of the King James Bible, 1340–1611* [Philadelphia: Univ. of Penn. Press, 1941], 230). Butterworth has estimated that of this 60 percent about 18 percent can be traced directly to Tyndale, 13 percent to Coverdale, and 19 percent to the Geneva Bible (231). “The chief place of honor is undoubtedly Tyndale’s. It was he who gave to our biblical speech its organic features, shaping it out of the language of his time. He not only put the English Scripture

used; the syntax is at times more heavily influenced by the Bishop's Bible—another factor which contributes to the “KJV's more subtle sense of distance.”³⁸ Some of these relationships may be seen in the following samples.

Matt 16:3

Tyndale: ye can discerne ye fassion of the skye: and *can ye not discerne ye signes of the tymes?*

Geneva: ye can discerne the face of the skie, and *can ye not discerne the signes of the times?*

Bishops: ye can discerne the outwarde apperaunce of the sky: but *can ye not discerne the signes of the tymes?*

KJV: ye can discern the face of the sky; but *can ye not discern the signs of the times?*

Rom 6:23

Tyndale: For the rewarde of synne is deeth: but *eternall lyfe is the gyfte of God* thorow Iesus Christ oure Lorde.

Geneva: For the wages of sinne is death: but *the gift of God is eternall life*, through Iesus Christ our Lord.

Bishops: For the rewarde of sinne is death: but *the gyft of God is eternall lyfe*, thorowe Iesus Christe our Lorde.

KJV: For the wages of sin is death; but *the gift of God is eternal life* through Iesus Christ our Lord.

1 Tim 3:3

Tyndale: not dronke no fighter *not geve to filthy lucre*: but gentle abhorrynge fightyng abhorrynge coveteousnes

Geneva: Not giuen to wine, no striker, *not giuen to filthy lucre*, but gentle, no fighter, not couetous,

Bishops: Not geuen to ouermuch wine, no striker, *not greedy of fylthy lucre*: but gentle, abhorryng fyghtyng, abhorryng couetousnesse:

KJV: Not given to wine, no striker, *not greedy of filthy lucre*; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous;

James 5:11

Tyndale: *Ye have hearde of the pacience of Iob* and have knowen what ende the lorde made.

Geneva: *Ye haue heard of the patience of Iob*, and haue knowen what ende the Lord made.

into print, but cast its translation into such a form of words that we can instantly recognize it as the basis of our own version, regardless of the changes it endured at the hands of subsequent translators.... To Tyndale we owe the tone of simple earnestness, the plainness of speech, and the economy of words, that characterize so much of our Bible. He set the general standard to which the later versions adhered. Had he lived longer, no doubt we should have owed him more, for he left his work unfinished” (Butterworth, *Literary Lineage*, 233).

³⁸ Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 447.

Bishops: *Ye haue hearde of the patience of Iob, and haue knowen what ende the Lorde made:*

KJV: *Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord;*

Although not listed as one of the versions to be used for comparison, it is evident that the translators also made considerable use of the Roman Catholic Douai-Reims version which had been completed in 1610. (The NT had previously appeared in 1582.) This was especially true of vocabulary and explains why the KJV has more Latinisms than its predecessors—another factor contributing to its archaic sound.³⁹ In contrast to the wide variety of styles in Scripture, “bending the English toward Latin can lead to a flattening a recognisable KJV tone, from Genesis 1:1 ... to Revelation 22:21.... It is sonorous, orotund, high-sounding, a general style that make it difficult to stoop to the commonplace.”⁴⁰

Another significant, archaizing element of the KJV was the use of grammatical forms that were already obsolete in 1611. This can be seen in the use of *thee/thou*, the old verb endings *-est/-eth*, and the lack of the word *its*.⁴¹

In early Middle English—long before 1611—*thee/thou* (nom/acc) was the singular form of the second person pronoun; the plural was *ye/you* (nom/acc). During the medieval period, however, the influence of French resulted in very different usage as *you* came to be used as equivalent to the French *vous*. This had significant ramifications since French practice at the time was to use the plural form only in address to social *superiors*. As a result, the English singular *thee/thou* became the normal forms for family use, to address children, or with social *inferiors*. “To address another as ‘thou’ was thus to claim social superiority over him or her. There is considerable evidence that, at least in certain circles, it was used as a form of studied insult.”⁴² However, this use had disappeared from English by 1575, *you* being the normal form of second person address regardless of to whom one was speaking. The only probable reason for the older *thee/thou* forms being retained is that the translators were instructed to change the Bishop’s Bible (and the older translations used for comparison) as little as possible. The result was the maintenance of obsolete forms and their retention in religious contexts even after the language at large had ceased to do so, “creating the impression that religious language was *necessarily* archaic.”⁴³ This also had an impact on related verb forms. Once English had standardized on an undifferentiated *you* (nom and acc, sing and plural), the verb forms *-est/-eth* (second and third person singular)

³⁹ S. L. Greenslade, “English Versions of the Bible, 1525–1611,” ch. 4 of *The Cambridge History of the Bible: The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, ed. S. L. Greenslade, 141–74 (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1963), 167; on the Douai-Reims translation see *idem.*, 161–63.

⁴⁰ Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 441. *Orotund*, in case you’re wondering, means “imposing, pompous, pretentious.”

⁴¹ MacGrath, *In the Beginning*, 265–76 discusses this at length with many examples. The brief summary above is based on McGrath.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 266.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 269.

also changed. The second person ending *-est* was dropped and the third person *-eth* changed to *-s*. The older forms were retained in the KJV for the same reason as the older pronouns: linguistic conservatism despite contemporary usage.

The situation with the word *its* is a bit different. In older forms of English the possessive pronoun *its* did not exist. Instead *his* was used for both forms that we know as *his* and *its*. That is, *his* was “semi-generic,” used for both masculine and neuter (*her* was feminine). At the beginning of the 17th C. *its* was beginning to come into common use, but had not yet become normative. This left the KJV translators with a quandary. Introducing *its* would violate the “don’t change it” mentality, but retaining *his* as a neuter would be confusing to many readers. Their solution (if a clumsy workaround is a solution!) was to rephrase the neuter possessive forms of *him* with *thereof*. The KJV uses *its* only once (Lev 25:5, “that which groweth of *its* own accord”). Instead we read such clumsy statements as “two cubits and a half shall be the length thereof” (Exod 25:10) where we might say “Two cubits and a half shall be *its* length” (ESV), or in even more natural English, “two and a half cubits long” (NIV), which, interestingly, was also the choice of the Geneva Bible: two cubites and an halfe long” (as well as Tyndale and Bishops). Occasionally, however, the neuter use of *his* was retained, resulting in very odd statements such as “if the salt have lost *his* savour” (Matt 5:13).

The effect of these decisions was that “the King James Bible would actually have been perceived to be slightly old-fashioned and dated even from the first day of its publication.”⁴⁴ Indeed, “its English was in fact a form that no one had ever spoken.”⁴⁵

Reception of the KJV

The publication of the KJV in 1611 was almost a non-event; it was hardly noticed. As Nicolson phrases it, “the book crept out into the public arena.”⁴⁶ It was not even registered as a new book; it was considered to be a revised edition of an existing one (the Bishop’s Bible), so it was not even listed on the official Stationers’ Register, the equivalent of a Library of Congress listing today. For thirty years it was largely ignored. The recorded responses that we do have are generally negative. It was said, e.g., that “many places which are not falsely may yet be better rendered.”⁴⁷

⁴⁴ McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 276.

⁴⁵ Nicolson, *God’s Secretaries*, 227. The English of the KJV was not as far removed from contemporary, 17th C. English as one of its more recent descendants, the NKJV, is to 20th/21st C. English. It has been said of the language of the NKJV that “the voice is Jacob’s voice, but the hands are the hands of Esau”! H. F. Peacock, “Review of *The New King James Bible New Testament*.” *Bible Translator* 31 (1980): 339. Likewise, “The NKJB is in a style never used naturally by English-writing people at any time or any place. It is a curious mixture of Jacobean style with glosses of twentieth-century vocabulary” (J. Lewis, *The English Bible*, 350).

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 276, apparently quoting Henry Jessey (mid 17th C.?) who was “noted for his competence in sacred languages.” Also the title of a 1659 work by Robert Gell is indicative of some scholarly

The most dramatic reaction was that of Hugh Broughton, perhaps the most capable Hebrew scholar of his day. He had a liability: it was well known that he couldn't work with anyone else. As a result he was not selected to serve on any of the OT translation companies. His response to the finished product was perhaps predictable, sour grapes from a scholar offended that his genius had been ignored:

The late Bible ...was sent to me to censure: which bred in me a sadness that will grieve me while I breathe, it is so ill done. Tell His Majesty that I had rather be rent in pieces with wild horses, than any such translation by my consent should be urged upon poor churches. ... The new edition crosseth me. I require it to be burnt.⁴⁸

Likewise the Pilgrims, who sailed to the New World less than ten years after the KJV was published, would have nothing to do with the new translation. They carried the Geneva Bible with them to Plymouth.⁴⁹

Despite yawns in 1611, eventually the KJV became *the* Bible of the English speaking world. The reason for its initial dominance was largely political and can be traced to the influence of one man: William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury (1633-45). Under James' successor, his son, King Charles I (r. 1625-49), the goal of the Church of England under Laud's leadership was to bring about conformity. The continued popularity of the Geneva Bible with its notes regarding the rights of kings was preventing the unity desired by crown and church. This and other issues would shortly precipitate the English Civil War (1642-1651) which pitted Royalist against Parliamentarian, Anglican against Puritan. On the excuse of patriotism and concern for the English printing industry, Laud managed to have the Geneva Bible declared unpatriotic and banned its import. (Its printing had been banned in England in 1616, so copies had all been imported.) Though the official reasons given for the ban were patriotic and economic, it was well known that the real reason was the dislike for the Geneva notes and the desire to establish the KJV. "Laud's action proved highly effective. The flow of the subversive text into England was staunch.... As a result, the King James Bible enjoyed a new commercial success—the word 'popularity' was not yet apposite."

With the English Civil War (1642-51) and the birth of the Commonwealth era of English history (1651-60) it appeared likely that the KJV would dwindle and the Geneva Bible would once again become dominant due to its preference by the Puritans. Surprisingly, that did not happen. Scholars are not sure why. One possible explanation is that King

opinion at the time (it was 800 pages long!): *An Essay toward the Amendment of the Last English Translation of the Bible: Or a Proof, by Many Instances That the Last Translation of the Bible May Be Improved.*

⁴⁸ *A Censure of the Late Translation*, 1612, cited by F. F. Bruce, *The English Bible: A History of Translations* (New York: OUP, 1961), 107.

⁴⁹ Many years ago I had my ears "scorched" on the horrors of the "new translation" by a young man role-playing a Puritan ordination candidate in the re-created Plymouth colony. He had studied his 17th C. counterpart very well and knew what the Puritans thought of the KJV. The Geneva Bible which lay on the kitchen table in front of him was the Word of God, not that high church production.

James Bibles were now available in editions that also contained the notes from the Geneva Bible—the best of both worlds.⁵⁰

The English Commonwealth, however, was short-lived. The Puritan experiment with political power was not successful and the backlash which followed the death of Oliver Cromwell restored the monarchy, bringing Charles II home from exile as the new king. That was the death knell for the Geneva Bible which was too closely associated with the Puritan party. The KJV experienced the opposite fate: “it was associated with the authority of the monarch at a time when such authority was viewed positively.”⁵¹ The Act of Uniformity of 1662 mandated the new edition of the Book of Common Prayer (1662) and required that all political officials and ministers subscribe to the doctrines and ceremonies in it.⁵² Since it was based on the KJV, the two books became the twin pillars of the newly established Restoration.

Since that time the KJV has been able to bask in the praises of nearly all English speaking Christians—and even nonchristians. The 18th and 19th centuries accepted this translation without serious question to the point where there was never any “competition” from rival translations.⁵³ It became *the* English Bible of poet and peasant alike. “The Bible [and particularly the KJV] had joined the Ancients, Homer, Virgil and Horace especially, as the educated man’s reasonable authority.”⁵⁴ Pastors, politicians, philosophers, poets, entrepreneurs, managers, workers, housewives, and children knew only the KJV. “Readers were increasingly from all classes: book buyers were less and less assumed to share an elitist classical education.”⁵⁵ It could be assumed that when anyone was quoting the Bible, it was the King James.⁵⁶ Not until the late 19th century was there any serious work toward a revision that was sufficiently different to warrant a new name: the (English) Revised Version (RV) of 1885 (and with minor modifications of the RV, the 1901 ASV in

⁵⁰ Perhaps printing Geneva notes with a KJV text did not run afoul of the prohibitions of printing or selling “the Geneva Bible” in England; after all, “it’s a KJV!” Entrepreneurs were as good at finding loopholes in the laws then as now!

⁵¹ McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 289.

⁵² For a summary of the political decisions and results at this time, see Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 487–88.

⁵³ There *were* other translations. In the 18th C. there were close to 50 translations of all or part of the Bible, but none of these ever gained any traction in the market. Some have estimated that since the time of Tyndale there have been about 3,000 new translations of all or some part of the Bible, 1,500 of them in the 20th C. For details, see Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 604 (18th C.), 769 (for the entire period).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 488.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 499.

⁵⁶ Roman Catholic versions never had this sort of influence that Protestant bibles had due in part to Roman views of vernacular translation and the quality of versions available at the time. This has changed somewhat in the last half century.

America).⁵⁷ The RV never really caught on; scholars appreciated the significant advances on several fronts, but it never became the Bible of church and people. Not until the mid-twentieth century did the flood gates of viable competition emerge,⁵⁸ but that is another story.⁵⁹

Influence of the KJV

One purpose for an “anniversary assessment” of a translation is to inquire regarding the significance of that work. What difference has it made? What value does it have for today? The KJV in particular has attracted some grandiose statements in that regard, ranging from those who consider it the only Word of God in English, to others who glory in its perceived poetic or literary qualities. Jeffrey, e.g., can gush that,

this is the sort of power that makes for poetry, and for inner music, clarity of phrasing, rhetorical repetition, parallel, and emphasis; there is nothing yet like unto it for a translation that *sounds* like the voice of God.... This, though its flower fades, is still the translation that moves a writerly heart to exaltation.⁶⁰

His words are not exceptional; it has been a frequent theme for several centuries.⁶¹ Even the translators of the RV of 1885 are careful to commend the version they revised (though some of this may have been intended to avoid offending KJV patrons):

We have had to study the great Version carefully and minutely, line by line; and the longer we have been engaged upon it the more we have learned to admire its simplicity, its dignity, its

⁵⁷ There had been a number of revisions of the KJV since 1611, but none of sufficient significance to be classified as new translations. There are several different forms of “the KJV” in circulation today. Most are the 1769 edition by Thomas Blaney.

⁵⁸ The reasons for the flood of commercially viable translations in the 20th C. are multiple. The technological ability to produce more copies (both in print and digitally) is in play along with the related commercial forces. Advances in our knowledge of the biblical languages and the biblical world certainly reached critical mass by that time. Social changes that encouraged diversity and individuality also blend into this picture. Although postmodern pluralists, at least of the “hard” variety, have little use for the Bible, the social ethos that has been spawned by their thought has rubbed off on many Christians with the resulting attitudes supporting the proliferation of both multiple new base translations and derivative “study Bibles.” (One expects to see the next catalog advertising *The Left-Handed Plumbers Study Bible for Gen-X Democrats in Arkansas!*)

⁵⁹ For an evaluation of some of the more significant new translations, see my reviews: “The English Standard Version New Testament: A Review Article,” *JMAT* 8.2 (2004): 5-56 and “An Evaluation of the 2011 Edition of the New International Version,” *Themelios* 36.3 (2011): 415-56. Earlier versions of both reviews can be found at <<http://www.ntresources.com/BibleVersions.htm>>.

⁶⁰ David Jeffrey, “Habitual Music: The King James Bible and English Literature,” ch. 11 of *Translation That Openeth the Window: Reflections on the History and Legacy of the King James Bible*, ed. D. Burke, 181-97 (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 194.

⁶¹ See also some of the statements quoted in the introduction of this paper. C. S. Lewis, *Literary Impact*, 14, says, with pointed understatement, that there has been “a little exaggeration” regarding the influence of the KJV.

power, its happy turns of expression, its general accuracy, and, we must not fail to add, the music of its cadences, and the felicities of its rhythm. To render a work that had reached this high standard of excellence still more excellent, to increase its fidelity without destroying its charm, was the task committed to us.⁶²

Claims of influence, however, need to be examined more closely. I say that *not* because I think that God has not used the KJV in a mighty way—he clearly has done just that—but because we too often confuse *use* with *influence*, the fruit with the root.

One of the most perceptive examinations of the question of influence comes from the pen of C. S. Lewis.⁶³ The most basic principle to establish in this regard is that the literary effect of any good translation must be more indebted to the original than to everything else.⁶⁴ That is, the major contributing factor in considering influence is the Bible, not to any one translation of it.⁶⁵ No translation, no matter how polished and poised, can have any significant impact unless it translates *something* that is worth translating.

A religion is a revelation or it is nothing. The King James Version, so praised since the eighteenth century for being wonderful literature, is that, certainly, but properly something different. It is the Word of God in English—not exclusively..., but as fine a piece of work as we shall find.... The great love it has received is justified by its mastery of the craft of the declaration of an incarnate God, who is at the same time sharing both ordinary life, an astoundingly strange.⁶⁶

Too often the KJV *as a translation* has been credited with various forms of influence when it is really the biblical message—Scripture—that deserves the credit.⁶⁷ The fact that there was no other commercially available translation for nearly three centuries and none that ever gained widespread use for another three-quarters of a century means that any impact that the Bible has had in our world has, of necessity, been the KJV. Had any other decent translation been designated by the political process (which is what brought the KJV to prominence—see above) as the “chosen” version, whether Tyndale or Bishops’ or Geneva, the result would likely have been very nearly the same. Granted, it was by God’s providence that the KJV was, indeed, the version used, but that does not logically result in the conclusion that it was inspired or the best possible translation or the only translation that

⁶² Introduction to the (English) Revised Version, 1885.

⁶³ C. S. Lewis, *Literary Impact*. I have generally followed Lewis in this section.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁵ I use “Bible” here of the text, the somewhat abstract (at least in English) entity which comprises the record of God’s revelation, in contrast to the multiple concrete representations of that text in any particular language.

⁶⁶ Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 428.

⁶⁷ Daniell is a refreshing exception to the general trend to credit influence to the KJV as such. He spends nearly 300 pages tracking the influence of the Bible on art, science, and literature over the past four centuries, but his theme is clearly the influence of *the Bible*, not the influence of the KJV (see *The Bible in English*, 461–733).

could have achieved the results that did flow from more than three centuries of nearly exclusive use. Were exclusive use the criteria of “God-blessedness,” then we would be forced to concede that position to the Latin Vulgate.

We should begin a consideration of influence by defining just what we mean by that word. Lewis proposes that it should be understood to mean that which “prompts us to write in a certain way.” He contrasts *influence* with *source* which is that which “gives us things to write about.” That the Bible (i.e., not the KJV *per se*, but the more fundamental category of Scripture as a text) “is a *source* of immense importance is obvious.” Although many discussions of the influence of the KJV endeavor to portray its impact in the field of literature, Lewis argues that “the huge mass of biblical material in our literature has no place in an account of the influence of the Authorized Version considered as a book.” That is, the content could come from any translation. Just because English literature abounds with quotations from the Bible does not say anything about the influence of the KJV, even if those quotations come from that translation. It was simply the standard version in use. Such quotations depend for their effectiveness on having a different “feel” from the author’s own words.⁶⁸

The real influence of the KJV is the use of that translation’s vocabulary that has become a natural part of our own language and writing (more on that below). Claims that the KJV has influences, e.g., the “rhythm” of English seem to Lewis “to be very hard to detect. Its rhythms are in fact extremely varied, and some of them are unavoidable in the English language.... The influence of rhythm, isolated from imagery and style, is perhaps” says Lewis, “an abstraction.” Imagery probably has had considerable influence on English, but it would be difficult to prove, “nor, in this sphere, would it be easy to distinguish the biblical influence from that generally Mediterranean and ancient influence which comes from the classics as well as the Bible.”⁶⁹

Even style is not as notably influenced as one might think. Bunyan is a good example in this regard. He is often treated as the classic example of the influence of the KJV, “but this impression is really due to the fact that [he is] to us rather rustic and rather simple in syntax. To that extent any unlearned author of Bunyan’s time would be bound to remind us of the Bible whether he had ever read it or not.” It is not the KJV that serves as the influence on Bunyan; “his prose comes to him ... from the fireside, the shop, and the lane.” As he uses various bits of biblical imagery, it appears to be at the level of word or phrase, “the rest of the sentence comes from Bedfordshire.” Of course, “without the Bible he would not have written *Pilgrim’s Progress* at all..., but its style might have been much the same without the Authorized Version.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Literary Impact*, 15–18, *passim*.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 18–21, *passim*.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 25–26.

Lewis suggests that the view of the KJV as having heavily influenced the English language is due to the Romantic movement which developed in the 18th century. Prior to this, the Bible was viewed as an integral part of life, not as a foreign book to be studied as literature. Only when more and more people have ceased to view the Bible as a sacred book has “the Bible as literature” become a popular approach, but “those who read the Bible as literature do not read the Bible.”⁷¹

What of the future? The more secular our culture becomes (a process that has accelerated since the mid-20th C.), the less popular will be the Bible as literature for the simple reason that fewer and fewer people ever read the Bible. To regress by a century and take a Romantic view of the Bible is not particularly helpful. If anything, we ought to be move back another century or two and attempt to re-emphasize Scripture as a sacred text that is integral to life. As Lewis says, if “the Bible, apart from its sacred character, appeals most easily to a Romantic taste, we must expect to find it neglected and even disliked in our own age.”⁷²

Lewis thinks that it is “very unlikely that the Bible will return as a book unless it returns as a sacred book.... Unless the religious claims of the Bible are again acknowledged, its literary claims will, I think, be given only ‘mouth honor’ and that decreasingly.” The Bible is “a book so remorselessly and continually sacred that it does not invite, it excludes or repels, the merely aesthetic approach. You can read it as literature only by a *tour de force*. You are cutting wood against the grain, using a tool for a purpose it was not intended to serve. It demands incessantly to be taken on its own terms: it will not continue to give literary delight very long except to those who go to it for something quite different.”⁷³

Having sketched a somewhat negative perspective on the literary influence of the KJV (or at least one considerably more restrained than more common views), it needs to be pointed out that Lewis has not argued for no influence, only for less influence than is often perceived. As noted above, the primary influence on English, whether in everyday usage or in literature, is at the level of word and phrase. We can document a number of distinctive terms and phrases that originated with the KJV. Were we to include the translations that preceded it, the list, of course, would be longer. Though the KJV may have been the vehicle through which some “Tyndalisms” and “Genevanisms” were popularized, credit should go to the origin rather than a later user.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid., 27-30, *passim*.

⁷² Ibid., 30.

⁷³ Ibid., 32-32, *passim*.

⁷⁴ The following phrases that have been attributed to the KJV by Brake, *Visual History*, 240, are actually from older translations: “fell flat on his face,” Num 22:31 (Tyndale, Geneva, Bishops); “a man after his own heart,” 1 Sam 13:14 (Geneva, Bishops); “the land of the living,” Job 28:13 (Geneva); “pour out one’s heart,” Psalm 62:8 (Geneva, Bishops); “Pride goes before a fall,” Prov 16:18 (Geneva, Bishops).

Phrases that have been attributed to KJV coinage include the following, arranged from those most frequently cited in later English to those less cited.⁷⁵ (*Citation* does not mean a conscious quotation from the Bible, but merely the use of the phrase.)

Job 19:28, the root of the matter	Josh 23:13, know for a certainty
Luke 18:16, suffer little children	Acts 12:18, no small stir
Luke 4:8, get thee behind me	Isa 2:4, beat their swords into plowshares
2 Cor 12:7, a thorn in the flesh	Eccl 12:12, much study is a weariness of the flesh
2 Sam 1:19, how are the mighty fallen	Eccl 3:1, to every thing there is a season
Acts 17:6, turned the world upside down	Jer 2:12, be horribly afraid
Gen 4:16, east of Eden	

Some of these seem ordinary enough that they could easily originate as independent creations, e.g., “the root of the matter,” “east of Eden,” “know for a certainty” (cf. the expression “know for a fact”), and “be horribly afraid.” Others appear to be sufficiently unique that the origin of the phrase may indeed be credited to the KJV. The more likely of these might include “suffer little children” (though at an earlier stage of English when *suffer* was more commonly used to mean “to permit,” this may not have been the case), “get thee behind me,” “turned the world upside down,” and “beat their swords into plowshares.” These are also sufficiently familiar and specific as to immediately associate the original context of the saying for anyone who has read the Bible with reasonable care.

Ministry Considerations Involving the KJV Today

Perhaps one of the more important topics when considering the significance of the KJV after four centuries is the impact of continuing to use a translation that is now quite long in the tooth. Closely related is the need, still encountered far more frequently than one might expect, to minister in a context where the KJV has been the only translation used and continues to be used by choice, despite the alternatives that are available. (In this section I often use second person to speak directly to seminary students and the concerns they face in their future ministry.)

⁷⁵ This list is given in Adam Nicolson, “The Bible of King James,” *National Geographic* (Nov. 2011): 49–51 as an Ngram constructed with a Google Books Ngram data set of 2.4 million words from English language books published over the last 200 years. The list of 18 phrases that originate with the KJV is apparently from David Crystal, *Begat: The King James Bible and the English Language* (New York, OUP, 2010), though I have not been able to verify that. Several others are included in the list, but there are only very minor differences from either the Geneva Bible or the Bishops’ Bible. These include 1 Kgs 19:12, “a still small voice”; Matt 6:20, “But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven”; Titus 1:15, “Unto the pure all things are pure.” One included is identical with the Bishops’ Bible: Isa 38:1, “Set thine house in order.”

Ministering in a Traditional, KJV Setting

It is still, surprisingly to some, fairly common for seminary grads to find their first ministry in a church which has a tradition of using the KJV. These are not “KJV Only” churches who are convinced that the KJV is the only choice that God allows (churches holding that position rarely call seminary grads as their pastor!). Rather these are churches who have simply always used the KJV. In many such cases a young pastor who finds himself in that sort of setting is following a much older pastor who has had a long, faithful ministry in the same church—a pastor who received his training (whether seminary, Bible college, or institute) when there were no viable alternatives to the KJV.⁷⁶ Such men have merely continued to use the translation they know best and the one that their people used. One might wonder how much consideration has been given to the wisdom of this choice and the advantages of using a translation that is both easier to understand (by an order of magnitude!) as well as more accurate and reliable. But second-guessing one’s predecessor is not productive; you will have to begin with what you find and build from there.

Should you find yourself in this sort of situation, you will need to proceed carefully and (most importantly) slowly. I am assuming that in almost every case a church would be better off with a modern translation, but no pastor, especially a young one, dare impose their choice on a church by fiat. The pastor does not have that sort of authority (1 Pet 5:3). He must rather lead the church to understand the need for and the wisdom of a change.⁷⁷ This requires careful teaching and preparation. The teaching needs to unpack the biblical absolutes in regard to bibliology as well as their implications as it relates to translation.⁷⁸ Once that framework is in place, then the rudimentary aspects of textual criticism need to be addressed focusing primarily on the history of the biblical manuscripts. (The technical aspects of the discipline are not necessary for most people, though the pastor needs to have some familiarity with the issues.) At that point the “KJV debate” will also need to be

⁷⁶ Pastors now reaching retirement, in their late 60s or early 70s, were largely trained in the early 1960s. At that time *none* of the modern translations were available. The only translation of significance other than the KJV was the 1901 ASV, but that translation never had a following of any size due primarily to the exceedingly awkward English found in it. Scattered individuals used it, but I am not aware of any church that adopted it as their standard (though there may have been a few) or of any reference materials or curricular options based on the ASV. There were a few commentaries that used the ASV (or RV) as their base text.

⁷⁷ By “lead” I emphatically do *not* mean, “announce the change and then convince them that they should get on board.” That is dictatorship, not leadership.

⁷⁸ Most Americans have zero knowledge of what is involved in translation. As a result they are often snookered by well-intentioned, but poorly informed advocates of certain rigid approaches to translation. It is often claimed, for example, that verbal plenary inspiration demands a formal equivalent translation method. I have addressed that in some detail in “Verbal-Plenary Inspiration and Translation,” *DBSJ* 11 (2006): 25-61. For helpful resources regarding translation theory, see first of all Gordon Fee and Mark Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007) which is accessible to the average reader; more technical resources important for the pastor include G. Scorgie, M. Strauss, and S. Voth, eds. *The Challenge of Bible Translation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003); and Moisés Silva, *God, Language and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).

addressed.⁷⁹ Likewise, the history of the Bible in English should be explored; most church folk have no idea of how the Bible came to be in English and some even think that the KJV was the form in which God originally gave it to Moses and Paul!

A key part of the preparation that goes beyond teaching is familiarity. Many people who have only ever used one translation, especially if that is an old translation like the KJV, tend to react to a modern translation because “it doesn’t sound like the Bible.” Teaching alone will not adequately address this perception. People need to be exposed to a new translation, hearing it read orally, having the opportunity to read it for themselves (without having to spend money to buy a new translation). This can be done over a period of a year or two through consistent, extensive, systematic Scripture reading in the regular services of the church. Initially a pastor might well announce that the Scripture readings for the next month will be from “translation x,” even though the regular preaching series remains based on the KJV. If the selected Scripture is also provided in printed form, hearers can follow along and compare with their KJV.⁸⁰ In due time a short message series might be announced as using a new translation (and provided a printed edition of the text for that series), then reverting to the KJV for the next. When preaching from the KJV it will also prove helpful to explain some verses by saying something to the effect, “The way we’d say this today is...,” and then giving the same verse from, say, the NIV. (Whether it is explicitly identified as being from the NIV may depend on the setting! In some contexts that might not be helpful in the early stages.) Gradually increasing exposure to a new translation in this way will do much to smooth a transition.

In the interval, a young pastor, especially one who has not grown up with the KJV and has little exposure to its cadences, will likely need to practice reading the KJV text orally so that he is not an embarrassment in the pulpit. By that recommendation I am, of course, assuming that the pastor *will* adapt to his new setting and continue using the translation that has been in use for many years. In a new pastorate, preaching and Scripture reading must initially be done from the KJV (or whatever translation is in common use).⁸¹ The

⁷⁹ For the average reader some of the more helpful works include Paul Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999) which deals with both OT and NT issues; for the KJV debate, the best starting point is D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

⁸⁰ Ideally, make inexpensive editions of entire Bible books available. Some publishers have such editions available; others will grant permission to reproduce portions, especially if it is in connection with a church making a decision regarding the use of a particular translation. Printing just the Scripture reading for the day in a bulletin or other handout is not as effective, and projecting in on screen could even be counter productive since in that format there is nothing for people to take home with them. They need to have access to larger chunks of text that they can read and study on their own.

⁸¹ There are occasionally (but rarely!) situations in which a church has been dealing with the translation question before calling a new pastor, either on their own, or under the direction of an interim pastor. That scenario, of course, would substantially modify some of the advice offered here. In such situations the most important thing for the new pastor to figure out is what the course of that discussion has been and where the church presently is in terms of their decision process—and their preparedness to make a wise decision.

most egregious error a new pastor can make is to assume that he can continue using his own preferred translation with no consideration for those to whom he ministers. It is not the place of this paper to address the question of how to help a church decide which translation is best; the pastor should not assume that his personal preference during seminary will be the best choice for every church in which he might minister.⁸² The pastor is always in a better position to adapt to a church than the reverse.

Through the entire process, whether that be two years or five, the pastor must be careful in how he handles the authority question. The last thing one wants to do is to create an atmosphere in which people think that they can no longer trust their Bible. Running roughshod over the KJV, speaking of it in denigrating terms, or mocking its obscure passages is neither appropriate nor wise. It is the Word of God. It was a very fine piece of work for the early 17th C. and it has been used as an effective vehicle of God's revelatory message for centuries. A pastor's goal ought to be helping his flock discover a Bible that is *more* helpful to them, which communicates God's truth more clearly and effectively, not running down the precious book they have known and used for many years. The "Word of God" is that which says in words what God wants said; it does not establish strict parameters in which only one translation is privileged to carry that moniker. Any translation which faithfully communicates God's revelation should be respected as authoritative.

Ministering to Extreme, KJVO Cult Followers

I will say less about the KJVO cult than could be said,⁸³ partly because that is not the purpose of this paper, but also because there is little that can be said, that is, little that can be said to such people since they are generally not interested in listening to any perspective other than their own. They have adopted an absolutist, black and white, "my way or the highway" mentality that books no variation. The desire is likely (at least in many cases) a positive one: the identification of one, invariant final authority. Failing to understand the nature of Scripture and indeed the very nature of language or the historical process by which God's revelation has been given and transmitted, they lock into a simplistic, absolutist authority claim. Misguided? Yes, but at least they have a commitment to God's

⁸² A great many seminarians seem to prefer NASB since it sounds so much like the first-year-level translation that they have learned to produce in Greek and Hebrew classes!

⁸³ I use the term *cult* advisedly to describe the extreme position of "KJV Onlyism" which adamantly refuses to countenance even the possibility of any other English translation being the Word of God, viewing all other versions as perversions. The most rabid fringes of this cult argue for the direct inspiration of the KJV to the point that it is used to correct the Greek and/or Hebrew originals since the KJV represents "advanced revelation." But even those who do not follow Peter Ruckman's extremes in this regard may well belong to a cultish version of the position. I *do not* include under the cult label those who argue for a Majority Text position (that position is, I think, faulty, but it can be argued in an academically credible way) or even those who attempt to defend a TR-only position so long as they acknowledge that other English versions are credible. Nor do I include those who are "KJV only" (note the small "s"!) by preference or tradition. Many such people "use only the KJV," but do not base it on theological arguments for the superiority of the translation and may even acknowledge that modern translations are acceptable; it's just not their preference.

authority. The likelihood that many can be led out of their (often innocent) delusion is, unfortunately, very very low. They have been taught that there can be no variation, so even considering factual matters which suggest that their confidence might be misplaced is too threatening for many such people to handle.

In more than forty years I have encountered many such folks, but only once have I met someone convinced of a KJVO position who was willing to consider the possibility that he was wrong. The first time I met this young engineer, a recent university graduate, he was busily “correcting” the *New Scofield* he had received for Christmas, crossing out all the changes from the KJV and writing in the correct words that had been relegated to the margin. Over the course of the next year as we talked though the issues a rather remarkable transformation took place, as remarkable as it is rare. He later went to seminary and today has been a (non-KJVO) pastor for many years.

More often (thankfully!) I have met people who have always used the KJV and have been leery of new translations, not because they have been caught in the cultic approach, but simply from lack of information. These are usually sincere Christians who need to be taught. For these folks, the approach described above is often liberating. Whether in my pastoral years, teaching in a local church on a regular basis, or conducting weekend seminars on the English Bible, I have had many, many appreciative comments and even gotten thank-you cards and letters afterward. Perhaps surprisingly, in twenty years of occasional weekend seminars I have never had one “blow up in my face.” That is not to say that there haven’t been some interesting discussions at the door or across the dinner table afterward, but I’ve never suffered verbal abuse in local churches. If presented carefully, the subject *can* be handled profitably and productively.

When encountering someone who has been caught up in the cultic version of “KJV Onlyism,” often as visitors to your church, you need to be honest and firm. Such people are either church tramps, constantly seeking the perfect church which “really believes the Word of God,” or have just moved into the area and are seeking a hospitable church home. They can become the source of dissention in a church if they attempt to “evangelize” others. No pastor likes to discourage visitors, but when the KJVO canker is diagnosed, better to be blunt and advise them that their aberrant view is just that, aberrant in the history of the church, and that they are not welcome to spread such views in the church. Some will stay, especially if they find a good, solid Bible-teaching ministry. So long as they don’t become troublemakers, hope and pray that they will eventually come to understand the issues. If it happens (as it may), it will not be a quick transition. The biblical advice that is appropriate here is 2 Tim 2:14–26. “Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen.” Always remember that the pastor, as “the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth.”

Ministering to Those “Who Knew Not King James”

At the other end of the spectrum are younger folks who did not grow up with the KJV as did most of those in my generation. This has become an increasingly common phenomenon as the KJV has been receding into the background of (at least American) church life.⁸⁴ This raises several issues. For one, seminary grads are less likely to have any familiarity with the KJV than in the past.⁸⁵ The implications of the foreignness of a translation that is the preferred translation of many of the older folks to whom they will minister, indeed of some entire churches where they may minister, is significant. As noted above, this may well require young pastors to spend studied time gaining the familiarity which many of their flock will take for granted. It may seem awkward to preach from an archaic translation, but if you are concerned to minister to people where they are, then it requires a willingness to adapt if necessary. Whatever you do, don't make an issue of it or comment disparagingly regarding that with which you are unfamiliar.

A different situation involves ministering to younger members of the church family who either struggle understanding the KJV (if that is still the standard translation in the church) or who are baffled by older folks who still use the KJV. The first is trickier to handle since you do not want to undermine the church's standard Bible. It will hopefully be possible to encourage younger folks to use a more suitable Bible for their own reading and study, but that could prove volatile in some churches. If there is sufficient liberty, then it might be feasible for younger adult classes to use a different translation. Shifting a children's Sunday School program to a different translation could be more challenging simply because that often involves curriculum issues with broader implications. In any event encourage the younger generations not to be critical of older folks who are committed to their familiar “Bible of the heart.” Help them understand the history behind Bible translations, the long legacy of the KJV, and the need to respect their seniors' choices. Do not allow well-intentioned younger members to stampede a simple majority of the church family into demanding that the KJV be abandoned. This must be an “all-church” decision and those older folks must be as involved in a decision to change as the “young bucks.” That will take time and patience.

Part of the pastor's teaching ministry should involve more than Bible exposition. Although exposition is the heart of biblical ministry, the pastor should also help his people

⁸⁴ The NIV has been the best selling English translation since the late 1980s and other translations (e.g., NLT, ESV, and HCSB) have become very popular in recent years. As of the Dec. 2011 listing of the Christian Booksellers Association, the top 10 Bibles in units sales in the US are as follows (in order): NIV, KJV, NKJV, NLT, ESV, HCSB, NIV, NASB, Message, and CEB. The list is available online at <www.cbaonline.org/nm/documents/BSLs/Bible_Translations.pdf>.

⁸⁵ In teaching first year Greek over the past twenty years I have often used the phrase, “I hear the King's voice ringing in my ears” when a student was explaining a verse based on what they had memorized (almost always, in years past, from KJV) rather than demonstrating that he understood the grammar and syntax before him. In more recent years my comment has often received blank looks since very few seminary students have ever read the KJV.

understand the bigger picture of just what church is. Too often contemporary culture views itself as “the final word” and the ultimate paragon of theological and churchly wisdom, failing to realize that the church was not invented yesterday. We may think that our way of doing church is the obvious right way—a “no brainer.” Yet without a knowledge of church history many mistakes will be made that have already been made (at least once!) during earlier centuries. Though church history lectures ought not replace biblical exposition on Sunday mornings, a wise pastor will strategize how he will weave church history into the ongoing ministry of the church, both from the pulpit and in other venues. That might mean that the pastor will need to plan some study of the subject into his weekly schedule since too often church history is given short shrift in seminary curricula or by students who do not appreciate its importance.⁸⁶ There are many possible options, whether planning to observe Reformation Day in the fall, using bulletin inserts, including sermon illustrations from church history, using the many DVDs available which dramatize key figures and events in the history of the church, including vignettes from church history as short “extra” features in church services, or offering classes in a training hour.⁸⁷

Conclusion

We ought to be thankful for the King James Version. It was a good piece of work that God has used for many centuries. Though it is no longer as effective in communicating the message of divine revelation, that is not due to its deficiencies, but to the changes in our own language over the course of 400 years. No translation can serve forever. Some are effective for relatively short periods of time, some for longer. Thus far no other English translation has had the longevity of the KJV, but then most of the current versions are not yet a half century old and several of the most popular have less than a decade of use. Whether any of these will still be in use in future centuries is unknown. At least at the present no one of them has displaced all others as did the KJV in the 17th C.; that may or may not ever happen again. A single-version situation is not necessarily ideal in any event. Though churches are wise to have a standard translation, Christians need to learn to use several complementary translations for study purposes.

⁸⁶ Even those of us whose seminary training may have included eight or more hours of church history (as BBS used to require) find that there is much that we do not know. Balancing a curriculum is a constant struggle and students need to realize that there will still be a great deal to learn after they graduate. The very word *seminary* implies that conclusion. If I may engage in a bit of diachronic trivia (yes, I know, that’s dangerous!), a seminary is a place where seeds are planted, not where fully mature, fruit-producing plants are grown. (The English word *seminary* comes from late Middle English, “denoting a seed plot,” ultimately from Latin *seminarium*, “seed plot.”)

⁸⁷ As an example, I once taught a four week short course for the young adult class in my church. The occasion was a controversy that developed in that class regarding some aspects of ecclesiology—aspects that necessitated understanding a wide span of church history to understand the issues. I was recruited and granted a short sabbatical from my regular class to walk the class through the theological *and historical* field into which the class had wandered. The entire class agreed that they knew nothing about the church earlier than their lifetime. The cause for their original consternation over doctrine was obvious.

Though I have spoken of the limits of the KJV in the pages above and have also commended modern translations, that should not be taken as speaking against the KJV. As one of my respected seminary professors said many years ago, to speak against the KJV is like speaking against God. That is not to say the King James is divine or divinely authorized. It is neither. When we discuss the benefits of the newer translations, we need not denigrate the old. We can be thankful for the work and fruits of the 1611 revisers just as we can for the work of Jerome or Wycliffe or Tyndale or Casiodoro de Reina (the 16th C. “Father of the Spanish Bible”), even though none of their translations are well suited or in some cases even intelligible in America today. Thank God for the men and women who have devoted their lives (and in some cases, *given* their lives) to making the Word of God available in English.