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The Enduring Significance of the King James Version[1]

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> No book has influenced English as profoundly as the King James Bible of 1611. Its phrases and rhythms have been as vital to the growth of the language as blood to the body. Even in the age of text-messaging and e-mail, its sonorities speak to mind and heart with a vigorous immediacy that takes the breath away.[2]

For four hundred years the King James Version (KJV) has held sway as the preferred Bible translation throughout the English-speaking world. Millions have used this Bible over the centuries and have found its phrases and rhythms resonant and comforting to the soul and spiritually nourishing to heart and mind. A host of other translations have appeared since the early 1900s, but the venerable KJV has remained a "best-seller" in the bookstores. Why is it that this particular English Bible translation, prepared so long ago when the Elizabethan Age was giving way to the Jacobean, has enjoyed such a vibrant record of endurance and such a deep and lasting impact on the English language, on the canon of English-language litera-

[1]A few parts of this article appeared earlier in David G. Burke, "Introduction," in *Translation That Openeth the Window: Reflections on the History and Legacy of the King James Bible*, ed. David G. Burke (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009) ix–xxiii.

[2]"The Language of Light," unsigned review of Adam Nicolson, *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible* (New York: Harper, 2003), in *The Economist*, April 19, 2003, 68.

That the King James Version of the Bible became an English literary masterpiece, as well as a well-crafted translation treasured by the churches, was more than the translators intended. They had aimed for the latter and would have been surprised by the former development, had they lived long enough.

ture, and on the preaching and theology of so much of the English-speaking churches? To answer these questions we must look first at the context from which the KJV emerged and then the carefully designed "rules" mandated for its production by the Hampton Court Conference of 1604, the meticulously careful process by which the translation work was done, and finally the product itself—the KJV, its innovative character and appealing qualities of elegant phrasing, straightforward diction, and resonant aurality.

Context and Background

The Necessity of Bible Translation

The wider context of the history of translating the Bible into English is the world of Western Christendom, dominated for more than a thousand years by the Latin language and the biblical text of Jerome's Latin Vulgate Bible. This fourth-century C.E. translation quickly displaced the earlier Old Latin versions and by the Carolingian era (751–987 C.E.) became the church's official text of the Bible. It was not uncommon to find people espousing the belief that Latin was the very language of God. In the fifteenth century—in the face of the Reformation and emerging new vernacular Bible translations—the Council of Trent (in 1546) declared the Latin text of Jerome to be *the* authoritative text of the Bible and gave it the name *Vulgata*, meaning "common" or the "common text."

It was entirely within the context of this lengthy Latin dominance in the British Isles, and over against an entrenched churchly resistance to change, that all the initial efforts to "English" the Bible began to emerge. Across Europe, all the reforming movements were insistent that, even though the Latin Bible was clearly the word of God, the vast numbers of people who understood no Latin would most readily and beneficially understand God's word if it could be communicated to them in the natural and familiar words of their everyday languages. The precedent encouraging the Reformers was the well-known fact that translations of the Bible had been made already in ancient times for both Jews and Christians who no longer were able to use the Bible's original languages. The Reformers, and the KJV committees in their time,[3] were determined that it would be by translation that English speakers would best be able to hear and read the Bible with understanding—without the need for interpretive "gatekeepers" who are always necessitated when the Bible is only accessible in a foreign tongue.

Medieval and Later Predecessors of the KJV

Already in Anglo-Saxon times parts of the Bible had been translated into English from the Latin, including, for example, translations of biblical psalms, such

[3]The Preface to the KJV thus declares: "Translation it is that openeth the window, to let in the light, that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most Holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water." Erroll F. Rhodes and Liana Lupas, eds., *The Translators to the Reader: The Original Preface of the King James Version of 1611 Revisited* (New York: American Bible Society, 1997) 34.

as those of Aldheim (d. 709 C.E.) and Alfred the Great (849–899 C.E.). The *Vespasian Psalter* (ninth century C.E.) represents the earliest surviving gloss in English on any part of the Bible. The *Lindesfarne Gospels* feature the Latin text copied by Eadfrith (ca. 700 C.E.) and a very legible interlinear glossed in a literal Northumbrian English by Aldred at Durham (ca. 950 C.E.). The *West Saxon Gospels* (ca. 1070 C.E.) constitute a complete English text of the Gospels. All of these, of course, were translations from the Latin Vulgate text.[4]

Tyndale's scholarly preparation and his brilliant gift for English phrasing would eventually make his translation a most significant influence on the later development of the KJV

The two most influential pre-KJV translators were John Wycliffe (ca. 1328–1384 C.E.) and William Tyndale (ca. 1492–1536 C.E.), both of whom were deeply committed to getting the Scriptures into English. Wycliffe and his Lollard confreres had to work from the Latin Bible, since none could use Greek or Hebrew. Oddly, Wycliffe's translation, in addition to its Latinate character, had a somewhat antiquated English style when it appeared, since he used Early Middle English at the very time when Late Middle English was vigorously blooming.[5] Although Wycliffe's Bible was strenuously suppressed by church authorities and many copies were burned as heretical, a significant number of copies have survived and many of his phrasings entered into the common stock of English biblical language: for example, "halewid be thi name" (Luke 11:2) and "I shal not dreden euelis, for thou art with me" (Ps 23:4). The survival of many Wycliffe manuscripts is evidence that many likely had been made and that the hunger for the Bible in English was vast.

Amazingly, by the time of Tyndale, only 150 years later, a virtual sea change had taken place. Increased understanding of the biblical and cognate languages and of textual scholarship had been spurred by the Renaissance, and the technology of mechanical printing had since been established. In contrast to Wycliffe, Tyndale was greatly advantaged by knowing Greek and Hebrew. Tyndale's work is thus the first English example of a "primary" translation.[6] Tyndale's scholarly preparation and his brilliant gift for English phrasing would eventually make his translation a most significant influence on the later development of the KJV.[7] Tyn-

[4]See Derek Pearsall, "Language and Literature," in *The Oxford Illustrated History of Medieval England*, ed. Nigel Saul (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 253, 265.

[5]Regardless of Wycliffe's limitations, the work was done under dangerous conditions and constitutes "a bold demonstration of the growing power of the vernacular"; ibid., 268.

[6]A primary Bible translation is one made directly from the Bible's original language texts, and not a "secondary" Bible translation, a translation made from a translation, like that of Wycliffe, or that of the Catholic Douai-Rheims Version (1609), both made from the Latin.

[7]Tyndale's influence in the KJV can be seen often in the features of style, syntax, phrasings, and word selection. Unlike Wycliffe, Tyndale consistently avoided opaque Latinisms, as can be seen, for example, in his phrasing "our daily bread" for the obscure Greek term *epiousion* in the Matthean Lord's Prayer (Matt 6:11). By contrast, the Douai-Rheims translation, working from the Latin Vulgate text, rendered this as "our supersubstantial bread." No subsequent Bible translation has been able to improve on the Tyndale phrasing.

dale's professed aim was to make the Bible accessible to ordinary people in an English that was so direct and simple that it could be understood and recited by an untutored plowboy, as he put it.[8] It is most significant that, less than a century after Tyndale's death, the largely Oxford and Cambridge scholars assigned to the KJV translation committees were highly trained in all aspects of the biblical and cognate languages and in biblical scholarship, exceptionally well prepared to take on this translation task.

The Bible published in 1535 by Miles Coverdale, a former assistant of Tyndale's, is the first complete printed English Bible, appearing only a few years after Tyndale's Pentateuch (1530) and just a year after Luther's complete German Bible (1534).[9] Tyndale was caught and executed for treason in Flanders before completing his translation of the Old Testament, and that work was brought to completion by another assistant, John Rogers, essentially by conflating Tyndale and Coverdale. For safety's sake, Rogers published it in 1537 under the pseudonym Thomas Matthew. Known thus as Matthew's Bible, it received the approbation of Henry VIII and became the first English Bible that could be sold legally in England. In 1538, Henry VIII decreed that an English Bible be placed in every English church; to do this a revision was made of the Matthew's Bible under the direction of none other than Miles Coverdale. It is this English text, with its deep Tyndale-Coverdale legacy, that to a great extent underlies Henry VIII's Great Bible of 1539, and the Bishops' Bible soon to follow. In 1568, in the time of Elizabeth I, the Church of England commissioned a revision of the Great Bible to be done by a small group of scholars, mostly bishops, in the hope of having a "new" Bible that could compete with the Geneva Bible of 1560, a wildly popular Bible prepared by Puritan expatriates.[10] Their revision was not exceptional, but the Bishops' Bible,[11] as this revision became known, carried forward the same Tyndale-Coverdale legacy. While the Geneva Bi-

[8]Tyndale's work in the Old Testament is especially striking and has bequeathed to English many familiar words and phrases, a number of which are the direct result of incorporating Hebrew style and syntax. Especially notable is the common para(syn)tactic style that moves the narration by linking a series of clauses with the conjunctive "and," just as Hebrew does with its conjunctive *waw*. "Parataxis is the form of syntax that strings together parallel units joined by the connective 'and'….This is not a kind of sentence that is at home in early modern English…until the appearance of the King James Version, which generally, though not invariably, follows the syntactic pattern of the Hebrew." Robert Alter, *Pen of Iron* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) 47–48.

[9]The Coverdale New Testament is generally considered to be in essence Tyndale's first edition revised in light of Luther's German translation, though it relied on other sources as well.

[10]The Geneva Bible of 1560 was one of the two most widely used Bibles in England at the time of James's accession. The other was the officially approved Bishops' Bible. The Geneva Bible was the work of English Protestants who had taken refuge in Calvinist Geneva during the persecutions carried out during the Catholic ascendancy in the reign of Mary Tudor (1553–1558). Since this English translation was first published in Geneva, copies had to be imported into England. It was not printed in England until after 1675, when the ban on it was lifted. What distinguished the Geneva Bible was not the translation itself, but the massive number of annotations that consistently gave the reader interpretive explanations of a Calvinist and antiroyalist nature and proved very popular with British dissenters. Perhaps even more important to its popularity was the decision made by the Geneva printers to set its text in Roman type, so much more reader friendly than the standard Gothic type.

[11]The Bishops' Bible of 1568 was prepared during the first decade of the reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603) and was intended as a church- and royal-approved alternative to the tendentious Geneva Bible. It was in essence a revision of the 1530 Great Bible, but few Bible scholars of that era were satisfied with this revision, and it never achieved the popularity of the Geneva Bible.

ble, most cherished by the Puritans, was read in homes, the Bishops' Bible had the great advantage of being the Bible royally appointed to be read in the churches. And, as we shall see, it is the text of the Bishops' Bible that would later be mandated by order of James I to be used by the KJV translators as the base text for their work.[12]

The Hampton Court Conference and Its Mandate

The accession of James VI of Scotland to the throne of England in 1603 gave hope to the Puritans, whose discontent with the Church of England had been incrementally rising during the reign of Elizabeth I. They assumed that a Scot would have sympathies with their Reformation beliefs and goals, given the radical nature of the Reformation in Scotland.

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On James's stately journey southward from Edinburgh to London to be crowned king of England, he was met along the way by a delegation of Puritans and formally presented with a document called the Millenary Petition. It was said to have been signed by a thousand of the Church of England's clergy, who in this petition stress their faithfulness and loyalty, but also their desire for key changes in the language and practice of worship and in the English text of the Bible. To their chagrin, the Puritans would soon enough discover that James was not sympathetic to their reformist interests.[13] He was a royalist who staunchly believed in the divine right of kings and considered many of the Puritan aims to be antiroyalist and divisive of good order. James was sagacious enough to see that a new king in England, especially one coming to the throne from outside, needed to maintain stability and unity in the spheres of both church and state. With the Puritans agitating for reforms, finding a way quickly to assure religious peace was a must for James.[14]

[12]Rule 1 of the mandate articulated at the Hampton Court Conference was: "The ordinary Bible read in Church commonly called the Bishopps Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the Truth of the Originall will permit."

[13]James VI of Scotland was not well known in the south, and given the fiercely anti-Catholic character of the Reformation in Scotland in the latter half of the 1500s, culminating in the establishment of a Reformed Church with a Presbyterian form of governance, James was suspected by the Puritans to have reformist sympathies.

[14]James had taken as his motto the words from the Sermon on the Mount, *Beati Pacifici*, "Blessed are the peacemakers," and upon his accession sought to find some sort of religious-political synthesis that would help him keep his new nation from splitting apart in dissension. James would never give up the divine right of kings, but he did not want to be too heavy-handed with it. The translators' use in Rom 13:1 of the phrase "the powers that be" must have pleased James: "There is no authority but of God, and the powers that be are ordained of God." Christopher Hitchens, "Blessed are the Phrasemakers," review of Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, *New York Times Book Review,* May 18, 2003, 36.

On October 24, 1603, he issued a proclamation announcing his intent to hold a conference in the coming January at the Hampton Court Palace[15] at which religious differences in the church would be discussed. Those attending this conference included James, his Privy Council, and nine bishops and deans. Among the bishops were John Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Richard Bancroft, Bishop of London (who succeeded Whitgift as Archbishop of Canterbury a little later in 1604). Four Puritan leaders were present, most notably John Reynolds, Dean of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, and Laurence Chaderton, Master of Emanuel College, Cambridge. The king easily resisted the Puritan demands for changes in the church's liturgy, in vestments, and in the English text of the Bible

By royal decree there would be a new English Bible. This new "Authorized Version" would become the Bible read in the churches.

authorized for reading in worship, but sought a way to be conciliatory. He found that opportunity when John Reynolds proposed the authorization of a new translation of the Bible. The Puritan hope invested in that proposal was that their preferred English text, the 1560 Geneva Bible, would replace the 1568 Bishops' Bible as the approved text for use in worship. Their hope was in vain, however, given James's deep dislike of the Geneva Bible. He was not particularly opposed to the translation itself, but detested its abundance of contentiously interpretive annotations, so often espousing reformist and antiroyal views.[16] Instead, over against the counsel of his Church of England advisors, James counterproposed the commissioning of a new Bible translation in English. The Puritans had sought a new Bible translation and they would thus get one, but it would be one produced collaboratively and with the ultimate editorial controls safely in the hands of the king's bishops. By royal decree there would be a new English Bible, and the Puritans would participate in its making with their best scholars,[17] but it would not be another Geneva-type Bible. This new "Authorized Version" would become the Bible read in the churches, and the Geneva Bible would be limited to private use in homes.

[15]See further A. Kenneth Curtis, "The Hampton Court Conference," in *Translation That Openeth the Window*, 57–71.

[16]A typical example of the antiroyalist annotations is one at Dan 6:22, which reports Daniel and his friends being tossed into a fiery furnace because they had disobeyed the orders of the king: "For he disobeyed the king's wicked commandment in order to obey God, and so he did no injury to the king, who ought to command nothing by which God would be dishonoured."

[17]Engaging the top Puritan scholars in this translation project turned out to be a brilliant strategy for James I. John Reynolds of Oxford and Laurence Chaderton of Cambridge had been the leading voices at Hampton Court, and both played major roles in their translation companies. "Between them, Reynolds and Chaderton had the responsibility for the whole of the Old Testament, apart from those books translated by [Lancelot] Andrewes's Westminster company. With them on board, no Puritan could claim this was not his Bible." Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, 121.

The Translation Committee: Structure and Process, Scope and Limitations

In issuing the mandate for the new translation, James I stated that he "wished that some special pains should be taken…for one uniform translation—professing that he could never yet see a Bible well translated in English—and this to be done by the best learned in both the Universities; after them to be reviewed by the bishops and the chief learned of the Church…and lastly to be ratified by his royal authority; and so this whole church be bound to it and none other."[18]

It was the king's hope that such a unifying Bible, around which both the established church and the dissenters could gladly gather, would be an *irenikon*, "something that would bring peace," as well as an achievement that would gain him great acclaim.[19]

The Translation Structure and Process

Very little is known about the actual day-to-day process of putting this Bible together, since very few documents or artifacts from the process have survived. The text of the Bible was sectioned into six parts and assigned to six "companies" of eight translators each, plus a "director" for each company. Two companies were assigned to Oxford University, two to Cambridge, and two to Westminster. The First Westminster Company was assigned the books Genesis through 2 Kings; First Cambridge, 1 Chronicles through Song of Songs; First Oxford, Isaiah through Malachi; Second Cambridge, the Apocrypha; Second Oxford, the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation; and Second Westminster, the New Testament Epistles. With nine scholars in each company there should have been a total of fifty-four working on the translation, but comparison of the surviving lists show that this number was probably never achieved.[20] The choice of terms such as "companies" and "directors" is significant and hardly accidental. It suggests thinking and planning that is coherent with the commercial and managerial world of this era in which, already in the time of Elizabeth I, England had been organizing commercial companies for trade and exploration, such as the East India Company.[21]

It was Richard Bancroft, London's Bishop and close advisor to the king, who worked with the king on the set of rules or guidelines for the project and the four-stage winnowing process that would assure a resultant "product" usable for

[18]Anna C. Paues, "Bible, English," *Enclyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed. (New York: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1910) 3:902.

[19]David G. Burke, "Introduction," in *Translation That Openeth the Window*, x. Curiously, for about eighty years after its publication the KJV struggled to be an instrument for peace and unity. Yet, after the chaos of the Cromwell years and with the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, the KJV rapidly became the Bible preferred by all, a symbol of the former unity and now a truly unifying factor.

[20]See the rosters of the six companies and the discussion of the matter of the elusive total numbers of translators in Alister McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Random House, 2001) 178–182. Unfortunately, the lives of many of the translators are only sketchily recorded, but Adam Nicolson has limned them to good effect throughout his book, *God's Secretaries*, and in an annotated appendix listing the members of the six companies (251–259).

[21]This carefully devised managerial structure is distinctive for Bible translation, because most translations

all churchly persuasions and that no particular passage would be "grinding an interpretive axe" for either the Puritans or the established church.[22] The actual process first called for translation drafts by the company members, and then a thorough review of these within the company. When the companies were finally satisfied with their drafts, a "super-committee" of two from each company (the director and one member) convened to review and revise the entire translation draft. Particularly intractable passages could also be sent to outside experts for their review and comments as needed. The final stage was a review by the bishops of Winchester and Gloucester, with Richard Bancroft (by this time Archbishop of Canterbury) holding the right to make any final revisions he saw as needed.

the set of rules for the project would assure a resultant "product" usable for all churchly persuasions and that no particular passage would be "grinding an interpretive axe" for either the Puritans or the established church

The set of rules laid down at Hampton Court[23] and the few very significant artifacts that have survived provide most of what we know about the translation process. The Hampton Court rules functioned as guidelines to provide direction and parameters for the work. Rules 1 and 14 mandate the use of the Bishops' Bible as the base text for their work, though at the same time allowing the use of the several recent English translations for possible wording improvements. Essentially, rule 1 instructed that, if in their view the text of the Bishops' Bible was acceptable as it stood, it was to be kept, but if it could be improved (in the light of the original language texts and other English Bible exemplars, as well as the still influential Latin Vulgate), they should then revise. Rules 2 through 5 set the parameters for maintaining traditional biblical wordings and understandings (for example, retaining the traditional names of prophets and holy writers, traditional ecclesiastical terms such as "church," and the traditional chapter divisions). Rules 6 and 7 defined how marginal notes were to be used, and rules 8 through 13 and 15 elaborate the rigorous and thorough text review process from draft stage to final approvals.

There are only a few surviving artifacts of the process, but they provide most helpful glimpses into the translators' work. One of these is Lambeth Manuscript

since the Septuagint had been the works of individuals, lacking the built-in checks and balances of this kind of team structure, organization, and four-stage process for draft reviewing. This meant that the idiosyncrasies common in the work of individual translators, or the lexical preferences favored by Anglicans or Puritans would be subject to the checks and balances of the thorough review process. See Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, 71, 81.

[22]In the words of C. Clifton Black, "Revisiting the King James Bible," *Theology Today* 61/3 (Oct 2004) 353, this set of guidelines and review process "assured both self-abnegation for God and King and (in Nicolson's words) 'a peculiarly bureaucratic kind of holiness.'" See also Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, 149. Black's article is a review of Nicolson's book.

[23]For a listing of the fifteen rules see McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 173–175, and for the rules plus annotation, see Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, 73–83. That copies of these guidelines survived is most fortunate since so little else of the committees' documentation did.

98, a document that languished in the Lambeth Palace library until finally identified for what it was in the mid-twentieth century. Its title is *An English Translation of the Epistles of Paule the Apostle*, and it is a version of the New Testament Epistles, prepared by the second Westminster company. Ward Allen believes that this manuscript, with its left margin well annotated and the right one blank, was intended for circulation to the other companies and outside experts.[24] David Norton suggests it could also have been a "master copy" prepared for their annotation with final revision decisions.[25]

The second significant artifact is a letter requesting that just such a manuscript be returned for the final editing process. This is a letter from William Eyre,[26] written to Archbishop James Ussher of Armagh on December 5, 1608, referencing progress with the project and requesting the return of a copy of a part of the translation that had been lent to him "for D. Daniel, his use."[27]

Another document whose significance was only recognized in the mid-twentieth century is a 1602 edition of the Bishops' Bible found in the Bodleian Library in Oxford. At some point early in the process, forty unbound copies of the Bishops' Bible were made by the king's printer, Robert Barker, and distributed to the committees, since this was the base text with which they were to work. This Bodleian copy was undoubtedly one of those forty, later bound and catalogued somewhat opaquely as "a large Bible wherein is written down all the Alterations of the last translation."[28] In the view of David Norton, this "complete 1602 Bishops' Bible with annotations by the translators…is the most important evidence for the KJB text outside the first printings because it is the nearest we can get to the translators' master copy."[29]

The fourth surviving artifact is the document known as John Bois's Notes. This was "rediscovered" by Ward Allen in the late 1950s in the library of Corpus Christi College, Oxford. Bois's notes are the only known notes surviving from the intricate discussions of the general committee (the final review committee of two from each company). The process was oral exchange,[30] and in these notes one can

[24]Ward S. Allen, *Translating the New Testament Epistles 1604–1611: A Manuscript from King James's Westminster Company* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, for Vanderbilt University Press, 1977) xliiff., and Ward S. Allen, *Translating for King James: Notes Made by a Translator of the King James Bible* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969).

[25]David Norton, *A Textual History of the King James Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 15–17.

[26]Eyre, a fellow of Emmanuel College, Cambridge, is supposed by some to have been one of the translators whose name somehow never made the surviving lists. His actual connection to the translation process is uncertain, but it seems to have been close. He may have been a secretary or intermediary of some kind.

[27]This is probably a reference to William Daniel, D.D., known to have translated the New Testament and the Prayer Book into Irish, and a close colleague of Ussher. See further Norton, *A Textual History*, 13–15.

[28]Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, 151ff.

[29]Norton, *A Textual History*, 20.

[30]In the words of John Selden, "they met together, and one read the translation, the rest holding in their hands some Bible, either of the learned tongues, or French, Spanish, Italian, etc. If they found any fault, they spoke up; if not, he read on." Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, 209.

see "the whole scene: the scholars arguing, consulting, losing their tempers, bringing in learned evidence from church fathers and classical authors, testing variants on each other, seeing what previous translators had done, insisting on the right rhythm, looking for the unique King James amalgam of the rich-plain word, the clarity within a majestic phrase."[31]

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Some Factors Limiting the Translation's Overall Effectiveness

Two factors bringing limitations to their work must also be mentioned. The first they had no control over, but the second was of their own choosing. With all the enormously significant manuscript discoveries in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries—Greek codices from the fourth and fifth centuries C.E., Greek papyri, and Hebrew scrolls in the Dead Sea troves, some already from the second century B.C.E.—we can see by hindsight that the KJV translators were very limited by what biblical texts were available at that time, all very late copies.[32] A look at the text of Rev 1:5 illustrates this well: the Greek text used by the KJV translators was essentially that of the first edited Greek New Testament assembled in 1516 by the Dutch scholar Erasmus. Erasmus had used the six hand-copied Greek manuscripts of the New Testament that were then available to him (all six from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries C.E., and all but one of the six of the Byzantine text type).[33] In the text of Rev 1:5 the KJV translators found the Greek word *lousanti*, "washed," but the much older codices (unknown to them) had instead *lusanti*, "freed." We can now see that the Erasmus text contained a homophonic copyist error—both these Greek words sound the same, but their meaning is quite different. Where the KJV translators settled on "washed us from our sins by his blood" modern translations now read more accurately "freed us from our sins by his blood" (NRSV).

The second factor is the archaizing character of the English used by the KJV translators. Because they were mandated to use the Bishops' Bible as their baseline

[31]Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, 201.

[32]For the New Testament they had access only to copies from the thirteenth to sixteenth centuries C.E., and none of the oldest and most weighty of the New Testament majuscule manuscripts from the fourth and fifth centuries (codices Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, and Alexandrinus), which have since revolutionized study of the New Testament text. And, recent discoveries of the Dead Sea Scrolls and other manuscripts, more than a thousand years older than the copies available to the KJV translators, have similarly revolutionized Old Testament studies. See John R. Kohlenberger III, "The Textual Sources of the King James Bible," in *Translation That Openeth the Window*, 43–53.

[33]On the Byzantine text of the New Testament, see Roger L. Omanson, "The Text of the New Testament," in *Discover the Bible*, ed. Roger L. Omanson (Miami: United Bible Societies, 2001) 144. Over the century following Erasmus this printed Greek New Testament came to be known as the *Textus Receptus* (TR) or "received text." The subsequent history of New Testament scholarship over the next several centuries has revealed more of the shortcomings of the TR in comparison to non-Byzantine manuscripts and the ancient fourth and fifth century codices.

(with its abundance of older Tyndale phrasings), the KJV had a kind of built-in archaizing character. But they also made a choice themselves toward more conservative usage. The works of Shakespeare (1564–1616) and other important poets and writers of the Elizabethan era were already having a great impact on English usage, and the language was very swiftly evolving. An example may suffice: In the last quarter of the sixteenth century, use of the neuter possessive "its" had become commonplace, but was avoided in the KJV. They preferred the older practice of using "his" to cover the neuter possessive, as in Exod 30:28, "And the Altar of burnt offering with all his vessels," and also awkward circumlocutions, as in Exod 39:20, "toward the forepart of it, over against the other coupling thereof." The result is that in some parts like this the KJV can be quite dense.

They also made the curious decision to use a distinctive typeface (Roman) to mark English sentence elements they felt had to be supplied for good English usage; for example, Hebrew needs no copula in its printed form, so they rendered Gen 1:4, "And God saw the light, that *it was* good." When the printers of the KJV began printing the Bible in Roman type instead of Gothic, what had been in Roman type in the 1611 edition was put into italics. But the end result of this overly fastidious translation practice has been confusion, with many later readers assuming that the italics marked emphasis for reading.[34]

Innovative Features That Have Had Lasting Influence on Bible Translation

Translating by Committees or Teams

The first of these innovative features is the practice of translating by teams comprising expertise in the biblical languages and also in the "target" language. Tyndale had some assistants, and the Great Bible and Bishops' Bible were minimal revisions done by small groups of bishops, but the intensively "joint" and collaborative translation process laid out at Hampton Court has proved precedent setting for subsequent Bible translation work. No serious Bible translation project nowadays would be undertaken without a team structure to provide both the breadth of expertise and the "checks and balances" from the collegial interaction.[35]

Use of a Multistage Draft Review Process

The mandated review process called for critical review of drafts within each of

[34]See further, Norton, *A Textual History*, 162. It should also be noted that time catches up with a Bible translation done 400 years ago, essentially in Elizabethan English. Studies have identified more than 2,000 words or phrases that have changed meaning over time (e.g., "prevent" has the older Latin sense "go before" in Ps 119:147, but now this word only means "hinder" or "stop").

[35]The Septuagint is not only the first Bible translation, but one done by a large committee. But how that committee actually worked is hopelessly shrouded in myth. Norton, *A Textual History*, 10, notes astutely: "The idea of translations being done by large groups of scholars using a careful process of review is now quite familiar, and this makes it easy to forget just how innovative the scheme for the work was." It is also worth noting that the widespread use of the KJV as a model and base by the early English missionary translators (almost always done by individuals with few checks and balances applied to their work) has at least meant that the committee-produced KJV has had a significant influence well beyond the English language.

the six companies, then intracompany review of the others' work, review by outside experts, and, in the closing stage editorial review, by a "super-committee" made up of each director and one other from each company, with Bancroft having a final overview. This kind of intensive and careful winnowing process was truly precedent setting, and to this day no serious Bible translation project would fail to assure in this way that as many eyes as possible are brought to bear on the drafts, thereby minimizing inaccuracies, infelicities, insensitivities, and gaffes in the final text.

Articulation of Guidelines Prior to Inception of the Work

It is most fortunate that the KJV project guidelines or rules laid down at Hampton Court have survived to reveal how carefully this work was conceptualized and planned. So far as is known, earlier Bible translations, starting already with the Septuagint, did not so thoroughly articulate the aims, processes, and organization for the translation in such detail as for the KJV. This too is precedent setting and has been emulated by subsequent committee-based Bible translation projects.

Lexical Choice and Flexibility

As stated in their Preface, "The Translators to the Reader," the KJV translators (Anglican and Puritan together) were agreed on flexibility regarding lexical choice and that they "not be tied to uniformity of phrasing" (for example, a word such as Hebrew *'ish* should not, and would not, be translated woodenly in each occurrence by English "man"). This perspective enabled them to arrive at modest examples of non-gender-excluding locutions, such as translating *bene yisra'el* as "children of Israel," rather than the literal "sons of," since this phrase clearly referred to the Israelite people as a whole. Regarding the gift for phrasing that emerges from their collective process, Robert Alter has commented: "Against a trend in English prose from the Renaissance onward that cultivated lexical profusion, figurative ornamentation, and syntactic complication, the KJV offered a model of spare diction and of a syntactic simplicity that amounted to a kind of studied reticence which generated its own eloquence."[36]

Consideration of Audience Needs in Translating

The collegial process of translating in a large committee of companies assures that the final draft will not contain idiosyncrasies staunchly preferred by individuals, as happens in translations done as an individual tour de force, without the checks and balances assured by the team structure. With the KJV, audience needs were considered from the outset, as can be seen in the Preface. Their primary aim was not literary excellence or scrupulous literalism, or to show off examples of bril-

[36]Alter, *Pen of Iron*, 144. Nicolson has characterized the translators' product as a Bible with "a torque towards grandeur," "something two registers above the seventeenth century idiom—a form [of English] no one had ever spoken"; cited in Black, "Revisiting," 353, 351. See also Nicolson, 258, on the KJV's literary character of "majesty."

liant scholarship, but rather they aimed for the clear and accurate transfer of meaning from the ancient language texts of the Bible into what they deemed the best English of their day, always toward the goal that ordinary people be able to read and comprehend, or hearers hear with understanding.

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Providing Context with Textual Notes in the Margins

As the KJV project was thought out, it was clear that the translators would have to wrestle with those difficult passages where there are variant readings in the manuscripts or where a word in Hebrew or Greek is capable of several meanings and textual decisions had to be made. Rule 6 authorized them to locate textual notes in the margins to indicate the alternate readings or meanings that they had thoroughly examined in translating.[37] This innovative practice provides a contextual base for their translation decisions and is again precedent setting for later Bible translation work. There is a second important aspect to this feature, which arises initially from James's great dislike for the Geneva Bible with all its biased notes. Any kind of interpretive or polemical notes were absolutely proscribed for the KJV, and the effect of this decision in the long run was to give the KJV the high ground with this restraint from using the Bible as a weapon.

Providing a Preface to the Translation

The idea of developing a preface in which the translators explain their approach and aims to the reader is also innovative and precedent setting, and a practice now followed by all serious Bible translations. The KJV Preface makes clear that Bible translation is ever a human process, and that the KJV companies saw themselves as part of a long chain of Bible translators. Taking the "high view" of all earlier Bible translations, their Preface notes candidly that, while fault can always be found with earlier translations (and with their own), they preferred to see all the earlier English translations as "ice-breakers" or way-preparers from which they have been able to learn and benefit (and not as inferior efforts).[38] Rather, they saw themselves as building upon the foundations these earlier efforts had laid down. And the reader of the Preface can see that they saw themselves as no more exceptionally gifted or guided than those earlier translators had been, though they clearly did believe that God's Holy Spirit guided their work, just as the work of the

[37]The original KJV margins contained 8,422 notes of three types: (1) more literal translations, prefixed by "Heb," or "Gr"; (2) alternative translations or readings in the original, prefixed by "Or"; (3) miscellaneous information regarding names, currency, and readings. These notes are "a constant reminder both that translation is an inexact process and that the original texts are sometimes uncertain or obscure." Norton, *A Textual History*, 163.

[38]Burke, "Introduction," xiv.

translators before them. As admirable as their movement toward transparency was, it is most unfortunate that the English of their Preface is densely academic and abstruse, in stark contrast to the translation itself, and similarly that publishers made the decision after a time to drop the Preface from published editions.[39]

The Enduring KJV Legacy of Literary Excellence

The English Renaissance (ca. 1485–1660) was a time when the English language was rapidly evolving. It is very significant that, at its height, just as the Elizabethan Age (1558–1603) was segueing into the Jacobean (1603–1625), the two greatest literary achievements of the English language appear—the works of Shakespeare and the KJV. Both of these illustrious literary works were carefully aimed at aural engagement of hearers, a large proportion of their audiences being then illiterate. Shakespeare had a gift for elegant phrasing, but his most significant contribution was likely the enormous new vocabulary he introduced into English. The KJV by comparison uses far fewer words, but uses them judiciously and skillfully; the translators spent hours listening to their drafts to be sure that the phrasings, cadences, and rhythms were right for hearers. Nicolson has stressed the importance of a translation process that was so densely social and consultative, one tested not by sight but by ear. "This Bible was appointed to be read in churches…and so its meaning had to be carried on a heard rhythm, it had to appeal to what T. S. Eliot later called 'the auditory imagination,' that 'feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word.'"[40]

Already by the nineteenth century there was wide agreement that the KJV was the "noblest monument of English prose…[and] of decisive importance in the molding of English. Yet there is no evidence that the translators…had any great interest in matters of literature or linguistic development."[41] Their goal was simply to prepare an accurate and understandable English translation. "Paradoxically, the king's translators achieved literary distinction precisely because they were not deliberately pursuing it. Aiming at truth, they achieved what later generations recognized as beauty and elegance."[42]

That the KJV became an English literary masterpiece, as well as a well-crafted

[39]Sadly, the loss of this contextualizing window into their work, together with the publishers' early decision to drop the textual notes, has been disastrous over time, leaving an English Bible that (unlike all modern Bible translations) gives the impression that the translators were more absolute and unequivocal in their decision-making than they understood themselves to be, or worse, that this Bible had no human role in its production.

[40]Nicolson, *God's Secretaries*, 223. Arguing that "secretaryship" is a key KJV virtue and shaping force, and not "authorship," Nicolson also makes the point that the translators' English is subservient to the Bible's original languages and this hierarchy is also one of the sources of the KJV style. "The English is there to serve the original not to replace it" (210–211).

[41]McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 254.

[42]Ibid. See also Black, "Revisiting," 352. It is notable that the KJV Preface says nothing about striving for literary elegance. As McGrath has put it: "The achievement of prosaic and poetic elegance that resulted was, so to speak, a most happy accident of history" (*In the Beginning*, 255).

Bible translation treasured by the churches, was more than the translators had intended. They had aimed for the latter, and would have been surprised by the former development, had they lived long enough. Commenting on the enduring influence of the KJV on English prose and poetry, David Lyle Jeffrey has noted that "the cadences, rhythms, and syntax of the most beloved of English Bibles still shape a considerable amount of poetic language."[43] For large numbers of poets and writers over the centuries, the KJV has been what Jeffrey has called "a well-stocked, rich reservoir" for story development and for "choice phrasing."[44] A key factor in the KJV's lasting influence is that it was "famously eloquent and a beautiful instrument for conveying the vision of the biblical writers to the English-speaking populace." For many major writers, already in the seventeenth century, this Bible would "give literary English a new and memorable coloration."[45]

> ***the translators spent hours listening to their drafts to be sure that the phrasings, cadences, and rhythms were right for hearers***

In the words of Robert Alter, the KJV translators also "shaped an English version that introduced a new model of stylistic power to the language," to the extent that the KJV in American culture represents "a rich repertoire of language out of which many of the forms of the national consciousness were formed."[46] Examples can be seen in Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and the oratory of Martin Luther King, which are steeped in the powerful language and rhetoric of the KJV.

The power of the KJV to influence so widely oratory, literature, and poetry results from its design to be read aloud with hearer understanding. This is, of course, the power of the KJV also for the churches over the centuries—the distinctive aural sonority of its English, in the shaping of which the translators gave the highest value to oratorical register.[47] McGrath notes,"This Bible conveyed religious teachings using language that inspired its readers to meditation and worship, rather than dulling them by the wooden communication of doctrines and demands." He continues, the "glory of the King James Bible was that the English language was raised to new heights by being put to service of this supreme goal—the rendering in English of the words and deeds of God."[48]

There is probably no more eloquent conclusion for an essay such as this on the enduring significance of the KJV than that penned by Alister McGrath:

[43]David Lyle Jeffrey, "Habitual Music: The King James Bible and English Literature," in *Translation That Openeth the Window*, 182.

[44]Ibid., 184.

[45]Alter, *Pen of Iron*, 1. Alter adds: "[T]he fact that it is often inaccurate and that the eloquence is not entirely so unflagging as most readers remember, scarcely diminishes this broad impact."

[46]Ibid., 32–33, 145.

[47]Jeffrey, "Habitual Music," 193.

[48]McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 305.

> Ordinary people were to be given a pathway into the text, which its translators believed to be the doorway to salvation, and the only hope and consolation for the world of their day. Without actually intending to, those translators produced a literary milestone. We can still celebrate both their achievements—the superb translation of the Bible that they intended to create, and the classic work of English literature that was an accidental, yet most welcome, outcome. Our [English-speaking] culture has been enriched by both aspects of the King James Bible.[49]

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[49]Ibid., 310. McGrath adds a final line of personal lament: "Sadly, we shall never see its equal—or even its like—again."