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A Translation Fit For A King

In the beginning, the King James Version was an attempt to thwart liberty. In the end, it promoted liberty.

By David Neff

The King James Version of the Bible was a failure—at least when measured against the purposes of King James himself. According to Alister McGrath, ***James wanted to "destroy, discredit, or displace" the most popular Bible of his time [the Geneva Bible] because it promoted anti-monarchist sentiments***. The Geneva Bible ... also betrayed the translators' hatred for hierarchical forms of church life, and James knew he needed England's bishops to stabilize his rule.

In one of history's great ironies, however, the rise of the King James Version would seriously undermine both kings and bishops and lay the foundation for modern constitutional democracies. Without your KJV, historically speaking, you probably wouldn't have your vote.

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When she lay dying in March 1603, England's Queen Elizabeth named her cousin, James VI of Scotland, as her successor. As he traveled south to claim the English crown, James was met by Puritan ministers who presented him with a petition bearing over a thousand signatures, demanding that he purge the Church of England of unbiblical practices ("human rites and ceremonies") and address their detailed concerns either in writing or in a "conference of the learned."

He granted them a "conference of the learned," which convened on Saturday, January 14, 1604, at Hampton Court.

James stacked the conference the way Franklin D. Roosevelt aimed to pack the Supreme Court: he invited 19 representatives of the establishment, but only 4 Puritan spokesmen. James himself was partial to some aspects of Puritan belief, which matched what he had often praised in his Scots Presbyterians. But he also believed firmly in the Divine Right of Kings, and before the conference Richard Bancroft, the wily bishop of London, persuaded him that only the bishops could be counted on to support him in his God-given prerogative.

... [I]n James's opening speech at the conference, the king "roundly criticized the corruption of the Church of England for five solid hours. Lancelot Andrewes, dean of Westminster, later noted that 'the king did wonderfully play the Puritan that day!'" But to keep everyone off balance, the king then brought in the Puritans and proceeded to deny all their requests.

Having affirmed the status quo, ***James needed to give the Puritans something to avoid the appearance of being completely one-sided.*** The breakthrough came when the Puritan spokesman suggested a new Bible translation. This was perhaps a sop to James, for the Puritans already favored the Geneva Bible which, though outlawed, was by far the most popular version in the realm.

Nevertheless, as McGrath writes, "Here was a major concession [James] could make without causing any pressing difficulties to anyone. A translation of this magnitude took time, so he was not committing himself to anything with major short-term implications." This decision bought him time.

Subversive Scriptures

Why should James need to defend himself against the existing English Bibles? The first English translations did not stop at trying to bring the Scriptures to the common people: they also offered translations and commentary that called in question both absolute monarchy and the hierarchical church establishment.

John Wycliffe (c. 1330-80) was the first to upset the establishment by making the Bible available in English. ... Wycliffe argued that every man had a right to examine the Bible for himself. Thus he not only challenged such medieval practices as Masses for the dead, indulgences, and a church organized along feudal lines, but he also encouraged all Christians to read the Bible and form their own opinions on these matters.

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Wycliffe's followers sharply criticized the clerical establishment, with its wealth and privilege. For example, shortly after Wycliffe's death, Nicholas Hereford ended one sermon by declaring it God's will for the Christian population to rise up and seize the church's wealth. The establishment panicked, and, as McGrath writes, "The mere possession of a vernacular Bible [became] presumptive evidence of heresy in fifteenth-century England."

William Tyndale (1494?-1536) made the next major effort at vernacular Bible translation into English. One day, in an argument with an ignorant priest, he lost his temper. "I defy the pope and all his laws," Tyndale said, "and if God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou doest."

Tyndale had to translate on the lam. The 1408 Constitutions of Oxford were still in force, making it technically illegal for a scholar even to possess an English vernacular Bible or to raise many of the questions he was eager to debate. And so in May 1524, Tyndale left England and sailed to Germany.

Because vernacular Bible-reading had been associated with the peasant uprisings in Europe during the very years Tyndale was doing his work, the fruits of his labors were outlawed in England. But the network of weavers and wool merchants who had financed his translation work helped also to smuggle more than 18,000 copies of his New Testament into England between 1525 and 1528. We may think of them as prototypes of Brother Andrew, "God's Smuggler." The English authorities, however, viewed them they way we regard Colombian cocaine smugglers. Many of those copies were seized and burned, but many got through to believers who loved God's Word.

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After Tyndale, the authorities knew they had to bow to the popular demand for a vernacular translation. In 1537, [King] Henry gave royal approval to "Matthew's Bible," which was largely Tyndale and contained aggressively Protestant marginal notes and therefore failed to gain the support of the clergy. In 1539, Grafton and Edward Whitchurch produced the Great Bible, a large Bible designed for public reading and intended to be placed in churches but not of convenient size for individual reading or family devotion.

After Henry's death, the crown passed to his son Edward and then to his daughter Mary. For Mary, Protestantism symbolized her father's disgraceful divorce of her mother, and she was committed to restoring Roman Catholic England. English Protestant leaders fled to the Continent, many of them settling in Geneva. There John Foxe began his *Book of Martyrs*, and

there William Whittingham (who it is thought married John Calvin's sister) and other exiles produced a Bible translation under the influence of Calvin, Theodore de Besze, and John Knox.

The Geneva Bible was everything the Great Bible was not. The 1560 edition was relatively compact and inexpensive, putting it within the reach of many families. And it was user-friendly, with illustrations and maps, explanatory prefaces, annotations, and marginal notes that, according to McGrath, made it "the market leader."

Those marginal notes not only explained obscure passages and taught doctrines such as free justification by faith; they also pointed out the limits of monarchy. For example, Daniel "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 dishonored." Notes on Exodus treat the Pharaoh as a tyrant and a note in 2 Chronicles criticizes King Asa for giving "place to foolish pity" when he merely removed his idol-worshiping mother as queen rather than executing her. Finally, Psalm 105:15—"Touch not mine anointed," a favorite prooftext for the Divine Right of Kings—was interpreted by the Geneva Bible to refer not to kings but to "those whom I have sanctified to be my people."

The English establishment did its best to supplant the Geneva Bible, with its pro-Protestant, anti-absolutist tilt, by sponsoring the Bishops' Bible (1568), but to no avail. At points, the Bishop's Bible was simply grotesque. Instead of the Geneva Bible's now familiar "Cast thy bread upon the waters," the Bishops' had "Lay thy bread upon wet faces." It is no wonder that, as McGrath notes, "between 1583 and 1603, 58 editions of the Bible were published in England—seven of the Bishops' Bible and 51 of the Geneva edition." The Geneva Bible had won the loyalty of the people.

So when it came to a new translation, Richard Bancroft, future Archbishop of Canterbury, gave the King James translators some rules. The first one insisted that they follow the Bishops' Bible "as little altered as the Truth of the original will permit." The third rule decreed that "the Old Ecclesiastical Words [were] to be kept, viz. the Word *Church* not to be translated *Congregation &c*." The sixth rule forbade all marginal notes. ***These rules were designed to ensure that the translation[] would not challenge the feudal trappings of church and state [e.g., the divine right of kings]***. The rest of the rules were mostly devoted to sketching out the way in which the translators would work in teams and achieve consensus. Eventually, Bancroft himself reviewed the text and introduced 14 changes just before he died. With rules like that in place, how could things go awry for the monarchy?

The KJV was published in 1611 to mixed reviews. It got some help in 1616, when authorities forbade the printing of the Geneva Bible in England, but people still bought copies, now imported from the Netherlands.

In 1625 James died and left the unresolved political tensions to his son, Charles I. More willful and less politically astute than his father, Charles married a French princess who was Roman Catholic. This alarmed the Puritans, and the nation became ever more unsettled. "High" Anglicans cast their lot with royalists and King James's Authorized Version, while the Puritan churchmen cast their lot with Parliament (as representatives of the people) and the Geneva Bible.

Puritans, Parliament, and the political pendulum

In 1642 the tensions erupted into Civil War, and soon a Puritan-dominated Parliament ruled. There was talk of a new Bible duly authorized by the people's representatives, but in one of history's great mysteries, the opponents of the KJV let their opportunity pass. The Puritans

overreached in many things and lost popular support. The people began to fear chaos, and when in 1660 the monarchy was restored, the King James Version was finally triumphant in the "battle of the Bibles."

Says McGrath: "The most significant factor in its final triumph appears to have been the fact that it was associated with the authority of the monarch at a time when such authority was viewed positively…. The Geneva Bible was marginalized…. because it had been the preferred translation of the detested Puritan faction."

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When the Bible is read and relished with hunger, it penetrates lives, reshapes cultures, and reforms institutions—often with ironic results. Hunger is the key. With our abundance of Bibles we can deceive ourselves into thinking we too hunger for the Word. But we do not dig into it like our ancestors did. What will it take to restore our appetite?

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