



The Greatest Book in the English Language

by Jonathan Aitken

IT IS RECEIVED Washington wisdom that nothing great was ever created by a committee. But the rule has one stunning exception—the King James Bible, which celebrates its 400th anniversary this year, with no end to its spiritual longevity or literary influence in sight.

The King James Version (KJV) was born out of political compromise and royal patronage. Church life in 16th-century England was characterized by high and often violent tensions over vernacular translations of the ancient Latin version of the Bible known as the vulgate. Early translators such as William Tyndale and John Rogers were burned at the stake. When the Reformation gathered momentum after Queen Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558, the Puritans popularized the Geneva Bible, which went through 70 editions selling more than half a million copies. But when James succeeded Elizabeth, the new and scholarly king (called “the wisest fool in Christendom”) identified footnotes in the Geneva Bible that he deemed to be subversive of royal authority.

At Hampton Court Palace in 1604, King James moved to end this subversion by convening a conference of established church bishops and moderate political Puritans. Keeping the latter on his side was one of James’s priorities, although he was theologically opposed to their low church governance, as he showed by his comment, “No bishops, no King.” Nevertheless James commissioned six committees drawn from both Puritan and Episcopalian scholars to translate a new English language version of the Bible dedicated to himself as “the principal mover and author” of the translation. So the KJV was conceived as a unifying production, endorsing the idea of a monarchical national church.

Although the scholars appointed to the translation committees were men of extraordinary erudition, some of the early printers of the King James Bible proved more fallible. Among their more amusing misprints was the omission of *not* from the Seventh Commandment, so making God’s instruction: “Thou shalt commit adultery!”

Aside from such typographical mistakes, a curious but calculated error was to leave much of the language of the KJV in forms that were dated, if not archaic by the time it was published in 1611. By that time “you” had replaced “ye” in common parlance. “Thee” and “thou” were also falling into disuse. The translators left such anachronisms in place because they were conservative in their scholarship. They preferred to keep alive the sonorous language that had been fundamental to the historic work of earlier translators like Tyndale and Coverdale. Such scholars had an ear for the rhythms and cadences of poetic utterance. An early clue to this resonance is to be found in the third chapter of Genesis when Adam says to God, “she gave me of the tree and I did eat” (Genesis 3:12). These KJV words are written in the classical form of iambic pentameter, the five-meter beat of Shakespeare’s plays.

The linguistic conservatism of the King James Version flourished in the new American colonies. It is not known whether the first Puritan settlers brought Geneva Bibles with them (the famous Mayflower Geneva Bible of 1588 displayed in the University of Texas is a fake), but they soon focused on the KJV, which was the only English-language Bible available in America for most of the 17th century. To this day the King James Version is far more popular in the United States than it is in the wider English-

speaking world. It crosses all denominational borders, is loved by black churches, and has considerable political as well as spiritual resonance.

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, the KJV's original and current publisher, has marked the 400th anniversary in part by releasing the entertaining new book *Bible: The Story of the King James Version 1611–2011*, by Gordon Campbell. It opens with this paragraph about U.S. presidents and the KJV:

On 20 January 2009 Barack Obama took the presidential oath of office on a copy of the King James Version of the Bible published by Oxford University Press in 1853; it was the same Bible that had been used by Abraham Lincoln in 1861. Similarly a series of twentieth century presidents (Warren Harding, Dwight Eisenhower, Jimmy Carter and George Bush Senior) chose to take their oath on the copy of the KJV published in London in 1789. The two Bibles are artefacts that represent turning points in American history.

History and the King James Version have been closely connected in American political oratory. The opening words of the Gettysburg Address, "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth," are based on a combination of the KJV rendering of Psalm 90:10, "The days of our years are three score years and ten," and its description of Christ's birth, "Mary brought forth a son." When Lincoln later in this address observed the tragic fact that in the Civil War both sides "read the same Bible," he was referring to the KJV.

A century later when Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, he based one of his most purple passages almost verbatim on Isaiah 40:45 as translated by the KJV:

I have a dream today. I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every mountain and hill made low. The rough places will be made plain, the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South.

More important than politicians plagiarizing the KJV for their speeches is the popular usage of

innumerable phrases from the 1611 text in everyday speech. The most original book published to celebrate the 400th anniversary is David Crystal's *Begat: The King James Bible and the English Language*. Also

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published by Oxford University Press, it traces hundreds of common expressions back to the KJV. They include:

Fly in the ointment; my brother's keeper; fight the good fight; finding the scapegoat; how are the mighty fallen; bricks without straw; new wine in old bottles; baptism of fire; blind leading the blind; root and branch; turning the other cheek; scales falling from eyes; holier than thou; going the second mile; reaping the whirlwind; fall by the wayside; sour grapes; two edged sword; old wives' tales and writing on the wall.

According to Crystal, the KJV has contributed more to the English language than any other source, creating double the number of familiar expressions that derive from Shakespeare.

The greatness of the KJV lies in a mysterious mixture of its historicity, familiarity, and spirituality. More than 2.6 billion copies of it have been published in the last four centuries, and sales continue strong as the Oxford University Press expects to sell around 250,000 this year. This is a most felicitous combination, to use yet another phrase coined by the 17th-century translators, of God and Mammon. The King James Bible deserves its label as "the most celebrated book in the English speaking world." ❧

Jonathan Aitken is most recently the author of *Nazarbayev and the Making of Kazakhstan: From Communism to Capitalism (Continuum)*. His biographies include *Nixon: A Life (Regnery)*, *Charles W. Colson: A Life Redeemed (Doubleday)*, and *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace (Crossway)*.