

Standing on the Shoulders of Giants

By Reed Benson

We who have grown up in the twentieth century sometimes have a hard time grasping ideas from a bygone era. The prevailing thought patterns of our mass-media oriented society too often dictate how we look at every situation in life. But if we make a dedicated effort we might at least begin to understand how our forefathers of previous centuries looked at their world. So briefly set aside the dishes in the dishwasher, the lawnmower crying for repair, the unread e-mails, and the stack of bills on the counter. Turn off the television, shut down the CD player, and come away to a time when that which is *new* is *not* what men admired. Enter an era when people looked to the examples of the ancients as their role models. Imagine a society where the best and brightest did not aspire to be scientists and mathematicians, but were poets and writers. Slip away to that period in the English speaking world when the most ambitious were not in the banking and investment houses, but in the church. Enter an epoch when the most honest, noble, and brave did not become firemen who battle flames to save lives, but scholars wrestling with ideas that might cost them their lives amid flames. Greet the world of Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth, and Tyndale.

This is the era of English history that produced the King James Bible. The approximate 150 years that stretched from the beginning of the reign of Henry VIII (1509) to the beheading of Charles I (1649) were the defining years that crystallized English language and culture. Then, not now, was the defining period in which the English language was poured into its distinctive mold. Never was there a time for English speakers that was so important in making us what we are and always will be, as that era. These are strong statements, but I shall attempt to show them true. To aid in this endeavor, I will draw upon a number of sources including a recently published book, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language and a Culture*, by Dr. Alister McGrath. So please read on, and try to understand how men of that era thought. See if you can perceive how they produced a Bible that so permeated the English speaking world that it still today affects the speaking and thinking of every native English speaker, be they holy or heathen.

Looking Backward

The fifty-one translators who comprised the team of scholars who produced the King James Bible were among the moral and intellectual giants of all time. They would not say so, but in hindsight, we can see it is true. They were professionally expert at the languages with which they were working, many of them fluent in six or seven ancient tongues (Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Coptic Egyptian, etc.). They were men of excellent moral caliber—some were lifelong celibates. None of them had any major personal or professional blemishes (other scholars who aspired to be on this team were rejected for various character weaknesses). But considering their impeccable credentials, they were also men of humility. This is revealed in the attitude they displayed and the times in which they lived. The translators lived in an era that had a different perspective

on learning and knowledge. They had an attitude toward wisdom that has been lost to us. These men were aware of a stream of cultural and intellectual achievement from which they benefited and were called to contribute. The wisdom of the past was to be appropriated in the present for the future. The pressure for something *new* was absent. John Salisbury, an earlier writer, aptly describes the notion that prevailed in the minds of the translators: “*We are like dwarves sitting on the shoulders of giants. We see more, and things that are more distant, than they did, not because our sight is superior or because we are taller than they, but because they raise us up, and by their great stature add to ours.*”

Who, then, are these earlier giants on whose shoulders the translators believed they were perching? This is revealed in one of the rules by which all the translators agreed to work. They were to use earlier English translations, diligently compare them with the original ancient tongue, and revise only where they could be improved. They were to draw upon, in this order, the following English Bibles: Bishop’s, Tyndale’s, Matthew’s, Coverdale’s, Whitchurch’s, and the Geneva. But the King James Bible was not to be a mere tinkering of earlier versions, which is the foolish verdict of many modern Bible critics, but should be seen as the final embodiment of the linguistic achievement of Bible translation in English. Rather than seeking originality, novelty, and a new way of doing things, it must be seen in the light of this older approach to human wisdom, in which one generation is nourished and sustained by the intellectual achievements of its predecessors.

The King James Bible was the last in the eighty year development of the English versions of the Bible from the Textus Receptus family of manuscripts. The Textus Receptus (or Received Text—a nickname) was the Greek text of the New Testament that was used exclusively in Western Christendom from the 1500s until the 1800s when “new” texts were discovered and the Textus Receptus cast aside. It was the fountainhead of the common language Bibles in English, German, Dutch, French, Swedish, etc. that launched and sustained the Protestant Reformation. The King James Bible stands as the final culmination of the work of such intellectual and moral giants as William Tyndale, who risked and finally gave his life in the martyr’s flame that English plowboys might have a Bible in their native tongue. The fifty-one translators of the King James saw themselves as dwarves seated on the shoulders of the giants who went before them. We can now see that they were unknowing giants in their own right, and we are the puny ones crouching on their broad backs, peering toward the distant shore.

The Ripening of the English Language

During this period (1509-1649), the English language reached full maturity. A number of related languages had all left their mark on the isle of Britain. The Old English language was Germanic in its base, giving us many of the most common nouns such as *summer*, *winter*, *mother*, *father*, *son*, *horse*, and *friend*. Some of the previous inhabitants, the Celts and Romans, were still around when these Germanic Angles took over (from whom we get *England*—*Angleland*), and elements of the Celtic and Latin vocabulary managed to survive. For example, the Celtic names of *Douglas* and *Megan* long ago passed into common English usage, while *justice*, *protest*, and *museum* are of Latin origin. Later, the

Vikings invaded and some of them stayed, giving us words like *knife*, *sky*, and *anger*. In 1066, William the Conqueror brought the Normans and the French language, from which are derived words such as *menagerie*, *foreign*, and *bureau*.

From these major source languages came modern English. All of these mother tongues were actually part of what is now called the Indo-European language family. The closeness in their relation allowed them to harmoniously blend, producing many near synonyms with varying shades of meaning. This provided for richness and depth that many languages lack. Many of the words added in the last two hundred years are a detriment to the English language, for they are primarily from language families outside of Western culture and the Indo-European language family. They therefore do not harmoniously blend and complement, but compete for supremacy.

The mixing of these closely related tongues ripened and solidified into a permanent mold in the 1500s, exactly the time frame when the English Bible was developing. Dr. McGrath had this to say regarding the development of English and the King James Bible: *“The Elizabethan and Jacobean periods [1558-1625] can now be seen to have been the periods in which modern English received its distinctive cast... The King James Bible was published within a window of opportunity, which allowed it to exercise a substantial and decisive influence over the shaping of the English language. It is no accident that the two literary sources most widely identified as defining influences over English—the King James Bible and the works of William Shakespeare—both date from this critical period”* (p 258).

It is well known by students of linguistics that languages evolve and change—they have a rough and tumble beginning where there are few rules, they gradually develop a unique character that lends itself to specific type of style and beauty, and then they move into a period of stagnation until finally they are overwhelmed by another language and culture. In 1755, Samuel Johnson, the author of the first formal English dictionary, wrote in the preface of that important work that *“every language has a time of rudeness antecedent to perfection, as well as false refinement and declension.”* Johnson had no trouble identifying this period of peak development. He looked backward at the Elizabethan and Jacobean era that produced the King James Bible and called it *“the golden age of our language.”* Considering his own significant contribution to English, this is no small praise.

For those who suggest the King James Bible should be discarded because it is archaic, certain points should be brought forth. First, let the idea be dismissed that something that is *new* is automatically superior to something old. Certainly, the translators of the King James knew better—any endeavor stands on its merits, not its age, old or new. Second, the King James Bible, surprisingly, was already slightly archaic at the time of publication in 1611. You see, English had already declined a bit from its cultural and linguistic peak. While the translators wanted the Bible to be available to all reading Englishmen, they still wished to produce that which would be as close to perfection as possible. Thus, they chose not to sink to the level of the poorest of readers, but rather encourage the unpracticed reader to accommodate himself to God’s Word. In respect to this point, Dr.

McGrath writes: "...the King James Bible would actually have been perceived to be slightly old-fashioned and dated even from the first day of its publication" (page 276). If you grow tomatoes in your garden, you know that it is important not to pick too soon or too late if you want the very best full-flavored tomato. The window for plucking that ultimate tomato from the vine may be as brief as one day. Similarly, the English language reached perfect ripeness for only a century and a half. The window for producing the ultimate Bible in English was that narrow.

The primary function of language is to convey thoughts. The more refined and pure the language, the more refined and pure are the thoughts it can convey. Linguists and historians who understand this speak with one voice. The English language reached its perfect ripeness and refinement in the 150 year period under discussion. The King James Bible alone was produced as the culmination of English Bible translations in this window of time, at the moment of perfect linguistic ripeness.

Thus, it is clear that the value of regular use of the King James Bible in personal study and worship can hardly be over-emphasized. One noted public speaker, Reid Buckley (the brother of William F. Buckley, Jr.), had this to say: "*Any born English-speaking son or daughter of the Christian West, who has not savored, indeed soaked him- or herself in the King James Version of the Holy Bible, is irreparably ignorant and culturally deprived.*"

A Historic Intersection

Some critics of the King James Bible like to stress the point that the level of knowledge and scholarship of ancient biblical languages has advanced since its publication. They argue that greater technical skill in these ancient languages demands newer translations that will reflect this advancement. There are two responses that can be made to refute what at casual appearance seems to be a sound argument. First and foremost, there have been many reputable scholars who attest that there have been no significant advances in the study and understanding of ancient biblical languages. Alexander McClure, author of *The Translators Revised*, states that "*The first half of the seventeenth century, when the translation was completed, was the golden age of biblical and oriental learning in England. Never before, nor since, have those studies been pursued by scholars whose vernacular tongue is English with such zeal and success. This remarkable fact is a token of God's providential care of his Word as deserves most devout acknowledgement.*" Knowledge of biblical languages has probably not advanced much in the last four centuries. The fairest assessment would most likely reveal it has remained essentially static. However, there has been a huge decline in another vitally important area. All modern English translations of the last 120 years have been produced in an atmosphere of skepticism. The translators of these modern versions have been men with very fine intellects and excellent academic credentials, but whose personal faith is often lacking with respect to Jesus Christ being truly divine. By their own testimonies, the majority of these men (and some ladies in more recent years) do not believe in miracles, the virgin birth, the resurrection, and other key elements of the ancient Christian faith. They reflect the spirit of our age that only acknowledges Jesus as a great teacher. To them, the Bible is

an ancient and important document, but it is not the lively oracles of a fully sovereign God. In contrast, the great Christian scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth century did not swim in this sea of academic skepticism. They lived in an era where faith and belief in the ancient articles of the Christian faith were widely acclaimed in scholarly circles. A profession in Christ as the sinless lamb of God was the rule, not the exception.

Thus, the King James Bible was produced at the historic intersection when academic knowledge of biblical languages was reaching a high point that has since remained static while the common faith in Christ's divinity was near an all time peak before its subsequent decline into modern skepticism.

KJV's Impact on Modern English

One of the more interesting features of the King James Bible is the fact that it enriched our language with many Hebrew idioms. To refresh the reader's memory, an idiom is a brief expression that has a real meaning quite different from the literal sense of the words. For example, "to kick the bucket" means to die, but has nothing to do with a literal bucket. Every language is loaded with these expressions. What is interesting is this: many common idioms that are used by every native English speaker were originally introduced into the English language by the King James Bible. One biblical scholar, William Rosenau described this process: "*The [King James Bible] is an almost literal translation of the Masoretic Text, and is thus on every page replete with Hebrew idioms... Bible English has to a marvelous extent shaped our speech, giving peculiar connotations to many words... The [King James Bible] has been—it can be said without any fear of being charged with exaggeration—the most powerful factor in the history of English literature.*" Have a look at this brief list of familiar idioms. They were originally Hebrew, having been introduced to our language by the King James Bible.

"to fall flat on his face" (Num. 22:31)

"to pour out one's heart" (Ps. 62:8)

"the land of the living" (Job 28:13)

"sour grapes" (Ezek. 18:2)

"from time to time" (Ezek. 4:10)

"the skin of my teeth" (Job 19:20)

"to see the writing on the wall" (Dan. 5:5)

"a fly in the ointment" (Eccl. 10:1)

"a drop in the bucket" (Is. 40:15)

"the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13)

"to give up the ghost" (Mark 15:37)

"and it came to pass" (Mark 1:9 and numerous other passages)

It is interesting that the English colonies established in North America in the seventeenth century retained much longer the form and style of the English language from this peak period while the mother country's style continued to evolve. The reason is because the colonies were, until well into the 1800s, cut off from extensive literary influences from England. America's single major literary compass was the Bible—first the Geneva

translation, but quickly superseded by the King James. Regarding this situation in America, Dr. McGrath writes: *“Both their faith and their language was nourished and governed by the King James translation”* (p. 294). The author of the first American English dictionary, Noah Webster, concurred: *“the language of the [King James] Bible has had no inconsiderable influence in forming and preserving our national language.”*

God’s Providential Choice

For nearly 300 years, the King James translation stood alone as the Bible for English speakers in every corner of the world. When modern translations finally began to erode the King James’ supremacy, many people eschewed them because they did not “sound biblical.” While this seemingly un scholarly remark draws snickers from stuffy academics, there is a ring of truth. All other translations truly are less connected to the original Hebrew text than the King James because *“...the king’s translators were much more likely to retain the Hebrew word order or structure, even when this resulted in a reading that did not sound quite right to the English ears at the time. The passage of time, and increased exposure to their translation, has eliminated any awareness of its initial ‘strangeness,’ and led to its phrases being accepted as ‘normal’ or ‘standard’ English”* (McGrath, p. 264).

In God’s providence, He stimulated one translation alone to become the standard English Bible. Even the very popular Geneva translation was rapidly eclipsed within a few decades after the King James Bible’s publication. This is somewhat of a mystery to biblical historians. As Dr. McGrath puts it, *“...we simply do not know with any certainty the true reasons for the waning in popularity of the Geneva Bible at a time when it might have been expected to enjoy a surge in popularity”* (p. 287).

Did the King James Bible overwhelm the competition because it was authorized by the English monarchy, thus giving it an unfair advantage? Not at all. In 1868, B.F. Westcott, who actually worked diligently to unseat the King James Bible, in a rare lucid moment, conceded this: *“From the middle of the seventeenth century, the King’s Bible has been the acknowledged Bible of the English-speaking nations throughout the world simply because it is the best. A revision which embodied the ripe fruits of nearly a century of labour, and appealed to the religious instinct of a great Christian people, gained by its own internal character a vital authority which could never have been secured by an edict of sovereign rulers.”*

When we, standing on the cusp of the twenty-first century, gaze forward toward an unknown horizon, it is only just and proper to acknowledge the monumental debt we owe to those who have lifted us up that our vision might be expanded. Whether or not we wish to admit it, our language and culture have been enriched beyond measure by the work of the King James translators, who brought to us the ideally ripened fruit of the English language’s apex. It was the single key factor in making us a great Christian society. Indeed, when we choose to use the King James Bible as our Bible of personal meditation, study, and worship, we stand on the shoulders of giants. As Dr. McGrath concludes, *“Sadly, we shall never see its equal—or even its like—again”* (p. 310).

It is for these reasons, among others, that we who worship at the Church of Israel in Schell City have made a commitment to the King James Bible. It is our exclusive choice in our worship services, our school and youth programs, and all aspects of our corporate fellowship. If English is your language, we encourage you to clasp tightly your old King James Bible. The most rabid enemies of Christianity are now raising their heads to rail against this version of the Bible, calling people who use it “cultists,” and other terms of PC acrimony. Of course, first century Christians bore a similar stigma. The fact that the King James Bible is now being singled out for particularly vitriolic attacks by the PC crowd should clue us in to this fact: there is something, or many things, in the King James Bible that the enemies of God loathe and fear. It would, therefore, behoove us to redouble our steadfastness to the King James Bible. Quite possibly, it is our best and most deadly weapon in the cultural warfare swirling about us on every side.