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COVER STORY

## A World Without the King James Version

*Where we would be without the most popular English Bible ever.*

Mark Noll | posted 5/06/2011 10:47AM

You are in church on Sunday morning, and it's time to say the Lord's Prayer. All goes smoothly through, "Give us this day our daily bread." But what comes next? The congregation hesitates. Should we ask forgiveness for "our debts" or for "our trespasses"? If you have ever been in this situation, you know something of what Protestant church life would be like in a world without the King James Version.

By contrast, we experience all the time what the world *with* the KJV has become, though we don't always realize it. The impact of the KJV on common English is tremendous, and it works on three levels. Many well-known words and phrases from the KJV still sound "biblical": "Alpha and Omega," "Ancient of Days," "graven image," "not live by bread alone," and "seventy times seven," to name a few.

A second level of vocabulary contains expressions that came into common usage because of the KJV, but whose biblical origin is now obscured: "apple of his eye," "city set on a hill," "a house divided," "propitiation," "the quick and the dead," "reap the whirlwind," "scapegoat," and "two-edged sword."

A third level includes words and phrases that most of us would be surprised to learn were fixed in our language because of the KJV—words as common as *adoption, advertise, beautiful, feel, fishermen, glory, horror, housetop, mortgaged, mystery, nurse* (as verb), *scrape*, and *suburbs*.

Almost all of these words and phrases were used in translations before the KJV. But because they appeared in that version, they were in the English language for keeps.

Hesitating during worship and perusing these vocabulary lists raise an intriguing question: What if there had never been a KJV? Or, consider a scenario that comes closer to reality: What would it have been like if the KJV had always been only one among several competing English-language versions of the Bible? What difference would it have made for Christians from 1611 onward? For local churches? For the influence of Christianity throughout the English-speaking world?

**Protestants would have continued memorizing Scripture even with several popular translations in existence. But they would have done so privately, as public recitation with several translations could be haphazard—much like it is today.**

For one, corporate worship would have been more awkward. The example from the Lord's Prayer shows what would have been even more confusing. The inclination to say, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," follows the KJV, which borrowed the wording from Miles Coverdale's 1535 translation, the first complete Bible printed in English. But if you instinctively say, "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who [or 'them that'] trespass against us," you are following William Tyndale's English translation from the 1520s. When Tyndale's rendering was modified by Thomas Cranmer for the 1549 Anglican Book of Common Prayer, "trespasses" came into common use as well.

The liturgical uncertainty from having more than one English translation is even more obvious in our ecumenical age. The Douay-

Rheims New Testament, published for Catholics in 1582, completely left out what the KJV would render, "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever." Rheims omitted the phrase because it is not in the Latin Vulgate, the source for its translation. Yet this confusion points to an irony: Most scholars today agree that in omitting these words, the Rheims translation came closer to the best-attested Greek manuscripts than did the English wording from the not-so-reliable Greek manuscripts the KJV's translators used.

Or consider Bible memorization, once a mainstay of Protestant devotional life and now enjoying a welcome comeback. From about 1650 to 1960, when Protestants memorized the Twenty-third Psalm, they would always recite the last verse this way: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." But if the KJV had not become the favored translation, the memorized words would have depended on translation preference.

For at least 50 years after the KJV's completion in 1611, various editions of the Geneva Bible, published in 1560, were just as popular. Geneva's adherents liked the down-home flavor of the translation and its helpful marginal notes. They would have memorized, "Doubtless kindness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall remain a long season in the house of the Lord." Protestants who wanted to connect with their Catholic neighbors would have memorized this, from the Douay-Rheims translation: "And thy mercy will follow me all the days of my life. And that I may dwell in the house of the Lord unto length of days."

But Bible readers who wanted to use an officially authorized text—which the KJV never was—would have memorized the Bishops' Bible of 1568: "Truly felicity and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of God for a long time."

Of course, Protestants would have continued memorizing Scripture even with several popular translations in existence. But they would have done so privately, since public recitation with several translations could be haphazard—much like it is today. And we would have lost some small sense of connectedness in the church and the broader culture.

## Contentious Beginnings

Issues of even greater importance arise when we speculate what would have happened if the KJV had not come to dominate the English-speaking world.

The base-line Christian conviction is that widespread knowledge of Scripture is very good because the Bible singularly communicates the message of God's salvation. All the better if widespread knowledge of Scripture enriches the languages into which it is translated. But in many ways, having several competing translations (as is the case in the English-speaking world today) didn't create problems.

In fact, this was the case for at least a half-century after the KJV. The Geneva Bible long continued to be used in Scotland. It and the Bishops' Bible supplied the abundant scriptural material found in Shakespeare's plays. John Milton used the Geneva Bible as a main source for *Paradise Lost*, as did John Bunyan for *Pilgrim's Progress*. In the New World, Pilgrim leader William Bradford quoted from the Geneva Bible in his *History of Plymouth Plantation*, and Roger Williams drew scriptural proofs from it for his famous tracts on religious liberty.

At least until the mid-17th century, other English speakers continued to use the Bishops' Bible, the Douay-Rheims translation for Catholics, and several other versions.

Neither did having many translations adversely affect the character of Christianity in the first half of the 17th century. The English civil wars of the 1640s and '50s involved intense debate over doctrine and church practice, but they were not prompted by controversies over Bible translation. The New England colonies intentionally built a society around the Bible, but their efforts did not depend on using one translation.

Leading biblical scholars, including David Daniell and David Norton, have demonstrated that the KJV won

out in Britain and America not because popular opinion demanded it but because of machinations within the English printing trade—and some high-level political maneuvering. Since Bible printing was a potentially lucrative business, conflict over who would become "the king's printer" and obtain the Bible-printing license was intense. Eventually the prize to publish the KJV included the right to monopolize the market for all Bibles, which meant excluding competing translations.

On the political side, the Geneva Bible's great offense was not its translation but its notes. The Bible, with its clear Roman type, handy division of the text into verses, numerous woodcuts, pithy and direct prose, forceful annotations, and relative cheapness, had been the first widely popular English translation. At least 140 different editions (not just reprintings) appeared between 1560 and 1644. More extreme Protestant groups found it inspiring. Their marginal communities particularly liked its annotations, which stressed spiritual struggle oriented toward the believer's rewards in heaven and urged true believers to obey God rather than earthly monarchs when the two loyalties conflicted.

Those annotations made the version anathema to King James. His desire to commission a new translation came directly from his sharp dislike of the Geneva Bible. James was infuriated, for example, with the "argument" that the Geneva editors supplied for the Book of Exodus. They called it a narrative in which "the King and the countrey grudged and endeavored bothe by tyrannie and cruel slavery to suppress" God's people, against whom Moses and the Israelites resisted heroically. James's bishops objected just as much to Geneva notes that interpreted Scripture as attacking prelacy, church hierarchy, and the prerogatives of bishops. Norton has summarized the secret of the KJV's political triumph well: "The Church and the State were not so much for the [KJV], or even for a uniform Bible, as they were against the Geneva Bible."

Norton has also shown that for more than a century after its publication, the KJV was unremittingly criticized. Some criticism concerned its theological implications. Tyndale, for example, had translated the Greek word *ecclesia* as "congregation." Puritans and others who believed Anglican bishops regularly overstepped biblical bounds long continued to prefer Tyndale's rendering over the KJV's "church," a more formal word implying firm organizational structures. Likewise, while the Geneva Bible did translate *episcopos* as "bishop," it added a note to 1 Timothy 3:1 that Anglican bishops found offensive and reformers wanted to keep: "a bishophe"—"note: whether he be Pastor or Elder."

Surprisingly, in light of the now almost universal praise for the KJV's prose, the language was deemed too Latinate, too churchly, not churchly enough, too Hebraic, not Hebraic enough, and so on. Yet efforts to revise or replace the KJV never came to fruition—not because there were too few suggestions but rather too many. Not until 150 years after the KJV's arrival did English speakers begin the chorus of praise for its literary beauty. If continuous competition had existed with many versions available, it may have intensified Protestant theological controversies and encouraged more attempts at making new translations.

## Problems Across the Atlantic

American history might have skipped several dark chapters if the KJV had not become the dominant Protestant translation. Many of the worst chapters concern slavery. The KJV regularly rendered the Greek word *doulos* as "servant." "Servant" and the more accurate translation, "slave," were already differentiated in the 16th century and became even more so as time passed. Yet in America, the gentler word "servant" provided a cover for those who defended slavery as a biblical institution. They referred euphemistically to their "servants" long after "slave" had become the accurate word for a person held in chattel bondage.

African Americans and abolitionists had a bigger complaint against the KJV: Quoting verses from the KJV was often good for getting abolitionists labeled heretics. The KJV's unquestioned authority meant that those who could quote chapter and verse also gained great authority for their positions. Defenders of slavery were expert at quoting passages that showed Abraham holding slaves, Paul sending Onesimus back to his owner Philemon, and many more. These passages regularly trumped efforts to use biblical reasoning rather than straight biblical quotation: for example, that slavery in Bible times was usually of white people, or that broad

scriptural principles (like the Golden Rule) spoke against the slave system in the U.S.

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In 1899, Henry McNeal Turner, a bishop with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, called for a new translation. He charged that "the white man" had "colored the Bible in his translation to suit the white man, and made it, in many respects, objectionable to the Negro. And until a company of learned black men shall rise up and retranslate the Bible, it will not be wholly acceptable and in keeping with the higher conceptions of the black man .... We need a new translation of the Bible for colored churches."

Women made similar complaints throughout the 19th century. What we would call feminist objections were of two kinds. Some objected to

the whole character of biblical revelation, in whatever version. Many contributors to Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* of 1895 made such complaints. Others were more concerned with issues of translating the words for "man" and "mankind," issues that still incite debate.

In 1837, abolitionist and suffragist Sarah Grimké had these issues in mind when she professed her entire willingness to live by the Bible, but also her ardent desire for a new translation:

Almost every thing that has been written on this subject, has been the result of a misconception of the simple truths revealed in the Scriptures, in consequence of the false translation of many passages of Holy Writ .... King James's translators certainly were not inspired. I therefore claim the original as my standard, *believing that to have been inspired*. [emphasis in the original]

## Classroom Conflicts

The KJV's popularity as *the* Protestant Bible in a nation where Protestants organized most public institutions created a broad set of problems. When tax-funded public education began in the U.S., educators properly sought ways to teach morality as part of the ordinary school experience. In the Protestant minds of these pioneering educators, the Bible was by far the best source for encouraging morality, so they mandated Bible readings as part of daily instruction. But because the KJV was so instinctively their preferred Bible, they simply equated Bible reading with reading the KJV. Protest against use of the KJV in schools was therefore taken to be a protest against the Bible. When this confusion was joined with rising worries about the increasing waves of non-Protestant immigrants to the United States, violence ensued.

In the late spring and early summer of 1844, deadly riots left parts of Philadelphia in ruins, with several Catholic churches burned to the ground, more than a dozen people killed, scores wounded, and many millions of dollars in damage. The conflagration was sparked by a request from Philadelphia's Catholic Bishop Francis Kenrick that Catholic schoolchildren be excused from reading the KJV and be allowed to use the Douay-Rheims instead. When nativist groups twisted his request into a charge that the pope wanted Scripture removed from Philadelphia schools, rioting broke out and lasted off and on for almost two months.

In 1859, a similar situation erupted in Boston. The Eliot School Rebellion started when 10-year-old student Thomas Whall refused to recite the Ten Commandments from the KJV at a Boston public school. An assistant to the principal bloodied Whall's hands with a rattan stick. Whall's priest and parents did not object to reciting the Ten Commandments as such, but they did object to the mandatory use of the KJV. Great bitterness resulted. School authorities accused Catholic parents of subverting morality, while Catholic parents blamed school authorities for tyrannizing students.

Jews also resented that their children were forced to hear readings from the KJV at tax-supported schools. Before the Civil War, Rabbi Isaac Wise of Cincinnati half-facetiously suggested that, if reading the Bible in school was judged necessary for the health of the republic, the most neutral solution was to read the original versions in Hebrew and Greek! A few years later, other Jewish and Catholic leaders joined Wise to support

the Cincinnati school board's decision to eliminate KJV Bible readings. His reasoning, however, went further than Catholic objections: "We are opposed to Bible reading in the schools. We want secular schools and nothing else .... [The state] cannot impose any religious instruction on the citizen."

Now for the thought experiment. If Protestants had been using multiple translations of the Bible, would school leaders have defended the use of any one translation so aggressively? Might Catholic parents have agreed to a rotation of readings from different translations? And would Jewish leaders have spoken up so strongly for a secular education?

## A Word for the People

Especially knotty questions arise regarding the public quotation of Scripture and scriptural allusions that for centuries enjoyed great power in Britain and North America—and that continue with considerable force to this day despite dwindling public Bible knowledge. The main question: Would the biblical material have been as widely recognized or worked as potently if Christian communities had used multiple translations instead of one?

For biblical allusions to work, an audience must have biblical knowledge in general, not the KJV in particular. For example, when Herman Melville opened *Moby Dick* with the sentence, "Call me Ishmael," and when more recent authors chose titles like *Absalom, Absalom* (William Faulkner) or *Gilead* (Marilynne Robinson), they were relying on general biblical knowledge for which the KJV was not indispensable.

But when *Moby Dick*'s Father Mapple delivers his riveting sermon on Jonah and the great fish, his text comes directly from the KJV, his diction is Hebraic in imitation of the KJV, and his sermon is filled with allusions to other KJV texts. *The Sun Also Rises*, Ernest Hemingway's title from Ecclesiastes 1:5, took a nearly exact quotation from the KJV (modernizing "riseth" to "rises") that would have lost much of its force had it come from the Geneva Bible (modernized: "The sun rises") or from the Jewish Publication Society's 1917 translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (modernized: "The sun arises").

Scriptural quotations in recent political rhetoric have drawn from modern translations instead of the KJV. On January 12, 2011, President Obama effectively quoted the Scriptures twice in his memorial speech for the victims of the Tucson shooting. The quotation from Psalm 46:4-5 ("There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God ...") came from the New International Version. The other, from Job 30:26b ("when I looked for light, then came darkness"), used words identical in the NIV and the New Revised Standard Version. Similarly, when President George W. Bush addressed the nation immediately after the Columbia Space Shuttle disaster on February 1, 2003, he made good use of Isaiah 40:26 ("Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens ..."), which he quoted in words from the NIV that again differ considerably from the KJV.

Yet before roughly 1970, the emotive power of public quotation from the Bible depended much more explicitly on the KJV. On August 26, 1963, in one of the most famous public moments in American history, Martin Luther King Jr. liberally wove Scripture into his "I Have a Dream" speech. His quotation from Amos 5:24 ("justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream") was from the Revised Standard Version, only slightly different from the KJV. His words from Isaiah 40:4-5 ("Every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low ...") came directly from the KJV, with a slight rearrangement of phrases.

Exact quotation from the KJV was at the center of the greatest public address in American history. In his Second Inaugural Address of March 4, 1865, Abraham Lincoln quoted or paraphrased the Scriptures four times. The most important of these quotations concluded his meditation on the sovereign rule of God over the desperate strife that had enveloped his country. For that purpose he used the exact words of the KJV's Psalm 19:9b:

Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of

unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with this lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."

Lincoln's text in the Geneva Bible is close to the words in the KJV: "the judgments of the Lord are truth; they are righteous altogether" (modernized). But if listeners had needed to pause to think about *which translation* Lincoln's words were coming from, it would have weakened the effect.

## Mixed Blessings

On other uses of Scripture, assessment is complicated. A strong case can be made that the predominance of the KJV made this one translation singularly powerful for those in dire times who desperately needed to hear from the Lord. Despite the use of the KJV to support slavery, the translation was often—and remains—the favored Bible version for many African American communities. The reason is because it was often indispensable, as it was for Julia A. J. Foote, an evangelist in the latter half of the 19th century, who was converted while reading the KJV and found strength in it throughout her life. Her autobiography recounts a sad day on which her husband left for a long sea-voyage: "While under this apparent cloud, I took the Bible to my closet, asking Divine aid. As I opened the book, my eyes fell on these words: 'For thy Maker is thine husband.' I then read the fifty-fourth chapter of Isaiah over and over again. It seemed to me that I had never seen it before. I went forth glorifying God."

Albert Raboteau recounts a similar story from about the same time that concerns a freed slave in Beaufort, North Carolina. The still-illiterate woman "carried a big Bible about with her through the woods and swamps"; her former mistress had helped her by turning "down the leaves at the verses she knew by heart, and often she would sit down in the woods and open the big Bible at these verses, and repeat them aloud, and find strength and consolation."

Just as obviously, the widespread Bible knowledge that the KJV's predominance stimulated could work to undermine Christian norms. William Jennings Bryan, for example, came to the attention of the American public after his memorable speech at the Democratic National Convention in 1896. The speech ended with this famous declaration: "Having behind us the producing masses of this nation and the world, supported by the commercial interests, the laboring interests, and the toilers everywhere, we will answer their demand for a gold standard by saying to them: You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold."

In the same way, Theodore Roosevelt electrified his supporters in 1912 at the founding convention of the Progressive Party with a rousing peroration almost as well-known as Bryan's: "Our cause is based on the eternal principles of righteousness; and even though we who now lead may for the time fail, in the end the cause itself shall triumph .... To you men who ... gird yourselves for the great new fight in the never-ending warfare for the good of humankind, I say in closing ...: We stand at Armageddon, and we battle for the Lord."

**I thank God that I was raised on the KJV. Part of my gratitude is aesthetic. In my ears, none of the modern translations sound nearly so good as, 'The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.'**

Clearly the fact that one translation enjoyed near universal currency strengthened the effectiveness of these speeches. But just as clearly, Bryan and Roosevelt were trespassing on holy scriptural ground. In a strict sense of the term, they prostituted powerful images that gained their power from the Scriptures that were given to all people of all political persuasions at all times and in all places.

What would have been the difference for allusions to Scripture if there had never been a dominant KJV? What did it mean for an entire people to mostly encounter the Scriptures in only one translation for such a long period of time? How best to summarize the unfathomable

imponderable of "what might have been"?

In the history that really did take place, both immense good and some significant evil came from the three

centuries of predominance by the KJV. Especially in 2011, when so many voices are so loudly praising the KJV on its 400th anniversary, it is good to remember the darker side.

When the KJV became the cultural and literary standard for the entire English-speaking world, it was easier to focus on the literary excellence of the translation without stopping to face the divine imperatives and promises that are any Bible's primary reason for existence. The pervasive cultural presence of this Bible also made it easy to exploit scriptural words, phrases, images, and allusions for their evocative power, even when those uses contradicted the Bible's basic spiritual meaning.

Yet even soberly considered, the immense good accomplished in and through the KJV is a marvel. When the KJV became the cultural and literary standard for the entire English-speaking world, the spiritual impact of the Bible was certainly enhanced because the scriptural message was carried far and wide via an all-pervasive cultural standard. The substance of divine revelation that lay immediately beneath the words of the KJV could also exert a dramatic public impact for good, precisely because this translation so dominated the English-speaking world.

For myself, I thank God that I was raised on the KJV. Part of my gratitude is aesthetic. In my ears, none of the modern translations sound nearly so good as, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want"; "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven"; "There was a man sent from God whose name was John"; or even, "and called the name of it Eben-ezer, saying, Hitherto hath the Lord helped us." The economy, balance, and force of such language deserve great respect, whatever the message.

But, of course, the message is the most important thing. No one who grew up with the KJV can separate the aesthetic from the *kerygmatic* (Greek for "aiming to preach the gospel"). Yet Christian believers who had that privilege should always be grateful for how the translation communicated the message so powerfully: "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:21); "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

These are translated words. But for centuries and for millions, they have also been the words of life.

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