

WSunday, October 3, 2021— Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*
Lesson 152 Majestie: The King Behind the King James Bible

Introduction

- Last week in [Lesson 151](#), we reviewed the Pre-Jamesian political and religious context that existed during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. As the successor of Elizabeth, James inherited these conditions when he became king of England in 1603.
- Today in Lesson 152 we want to look at the life of King James prior to ascending the throne of England.
- Queen Elizabeth I died on the morning of March 24, 1603. Later that same day, James VI of Scotland was declared King James I of England (Sir Robert Cecil, Elizabeth's chief minister, had been negotiating this move behind closed doors since 1601.).

A Short History of King James

*Please note that I am relying on David Teems' 2011 book *Majestie: The King Behind the King James Bible* for much of the information presented in this section. Teems' book was written as part of the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible. The purpose of this section is not to be an exhaustive biography of the life and times of King James as that is outside of the scope of this class. Our purpose is to focus on those aspects of James' life that impacted his decision to authorize a new translation of the Bible in 1604.

- James Charles Stuart was born on June 19, 1566, to Mary, Queen of Scots between nine and ten in the morning. James was great-great-grandson of Henry VII, King of England and Lord of Ireland, and thus a potential successor to all three thrones (Scotland, England, & Ireland). (Teems, 21)
- According to Teems, James was baptized as a child in the Catholic manner on Tuesday, December 17, 1566.
 - “The child was baptized Charles James, Prince and Stewart of Scotland, Duke of Rothesay, Earl of Kyle, Carrick, and Cunningham, Lord of the Islas, and Baron of Renfrew. . . It was a festive event, filled with all the usual pomp and ritual. At the insistence of the queen, the baptism was Catholic. His godparents were the king of France, the queen of England [Elizabeth], and the Duke of Savoy. Of course, they were not there.

. . . The Scottish lords, as a sign of soft protest, stood outside the chamber.” (Teems, 25)
- The situation with James' parents reads like a tabloid journal or soap opera. There are far too many twists and turns that, while interesting, are not necessary for our purposes in this class.

Suffice it to say that James never had a relationship with either of his biological parents and was essentially raised by nannies and tutors.

- “Mary more or less abandoned James. One writer summarizes it this way: “In the strange and unnatural relation of Mary and her son, it was Mary who committed the first great wrong.”” (Teems, 27)
- James was crowned James VI of Scotland at the ripe old age of thirteen months. Neither of his parents attended his coronation. In contrast to his baptism, James’ coronation was Protestant, overseen by a few members of the Scottish Kirk, a largely Presbyterian body.
 - “The little coronation took place at the Church of the Holy Rood, the parish Kirk at Stirling, on a craggy hillside that rose to the castle. A total of seven attended. John Knox preached the coronation sermon, and used the moment to throw more slime on the absent Mary, the beloved Jezebel. . . The Earl of Morton took the coronation oath on behalf of James. He was “to rule in the faith, fear, and love of God and maintain the religion then professed in Scotland.” The bishop Orkney crowned the king.” (Teems, 29-30)
- While the King’s coronation was celebrated by “fire works, shooting of canon, and feasting”, James was too young to rule which meant that Scotland would be ruled by appointed regents.
- According to Teems, having a baby on the throne was somewhat common practice in Scotland:
 - “Baby kings and baby queens had been the rule in Scotland since 1406. James V, the grandfather of our king, was crowned king at seventeen months old. His daughter, Mary, was Queen of Scots at six days old. That meant that the country was managed by regents appointed to rule in the name of the king or queen. These serial minorities were beneficial to the nobles, who gained both in power and autonomy, wearing the name of the king like a badge. It became the odd and yet unquestioned architecture of Scottish politics.” (Teems, 31)
- On pages 33-35 Teems chronicles the list of four regents who ruled Scotland in James’ stead while he was a minor.
 - “Like his mother, James provided bad luck to these men. The Earl of Moray, Mary’s half-brother, was the first to rule. Of course, rule is a bit misleading. Not having the name, pedigree, or divine right of kings, the regent, while not altogether powerless, was still subject to the Kirk and the nobles who were always scheming, always circumnavigating, always playing a bit of a shell game. If you need an image to capture the regent, you might think of substitute teachers you had in high school.

Moray was assassinated (shot) in 1570, when James was four years old. The next to “rule” was James paternal grandfather, the Earl of Lennox. The somewhat nervous Lennox was the choice of Elizabeth as well. Elizabeth had strings and pulleys everywhere

in the Scottish government. Lennox was shot in 1571, and young James, five at this time, had the added horror of watching him die. James actually loved the old man, or was “fond” of him, as one source said, love was something that James had little experience with.

The third regent was his caretaker, the Earl of Mar. His regency lasted a whole year. It is assumed, and it would be nice to assume that Mar died of natural causes in 1572, when James was six. . .

The fourth and last regent was James Douglas, the Earl of Morton. His tenure actually began in 1573, when James was seven. Morton was tougher and more savvy than the other regents. Morton had both slither and brains. He also had Elizabeth’s backing. He lasted longer than the other regents but eventually lost his head, literally. . .

The Kirk and the nobles were always scheming and counter-scheming, watching, circumnavigating, always playing the game of dominance and advantage. And that is how headship was conducted in Scotland. It was the established order James was going to have to survive, and somehow beat.” (Teems, 33-35)

- As a young boy, there is a real sense in which James was the property of Scotland.
 - “When James was three, the parliament at Stirling commanded that there be no contact between the king and his mother, except through the council.

Now that the young king was Scotland’s alone, the going strategy was misdirection, keep him too busy to feel. Fill his day with industry and study, with the emblems of pious and worthy kingcraft. And shift his heart from its queen, his mother, for even there she must be dethroned. The Kirk and nobles had just the man for the job.” (Teems, 36)

- James’ education was overseen by the brilliant but tyrannical George Buchanan. Teems covers this point in Chapter 5 titled “Greek Before Breakfast, Latin Before Scots.”
 - “To waste no time, and not to let the royal mind go to spoil, the boy king was put to rigorous study under the harsh but brilliant tutelage of George Buchanan. Buchanan lobbied for the position before there was such a position. Philosopher, poet, Latinist, Buchanan was perhaps the best educator to be found, not only in Scotland, but he had an impressive reputation in the world at large. He had once been the teacher of the great Michel de Montaigne, the French essayist. . .

Sixty years older than James, Buchanan was an old man in the winter of life, set in his ways, and intolerant of large names or sapling princes. He was a brutal master with a biting wit. Other than his great intellect, he had the one particular quality the authorities admired most: he hated the King’s mother. Backed by the church he was more or less

father. Buchanan considered it part of the king's education to malign the Queen of Scots. He never missed an opportunity to wreck what small memory the boy had. . .

Buchanan was brilliant, original, unflinching, and unafraid, especially before a "nervous, excitable, overstrung boy" like James. It is amusing, and it reveals something about the boy, but as much as Buchanan tried to make James into his perfect king, James was inclined toward the exact opposite. Newton's law of reciprocal action applies. "To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction." Buchanan considered democratic nationalism the ideal form of government, which he said, "proved most conducive of human good." James thought no such thing.

. . . Buchanan created an adult-sized syllabus for his young charge, and a great part of the education of the king was a knowledge of the Scriptures, being intimate with the Bible. A chapter of the Bible was read and discussed at every meal. In 1588, a Jesuit, James Gordon, said, "[James] is naturally eloquent, had a keen intelligence, and a very powerful memory, for he knows a great part of the Bible by heart. He cites not only chapters, but even the verses in a perfectly marvelous way." (Teems, 39-44)

- In summation, while noting his tyrannical nature and propensity to strike James, Teems calls Buchanan an "effective educator of sovereigns, an architect of great minds." (Teems, 44)
- Teems notes that James "developed and exercised his academic prowess" as a means of compensating for his physical imperfections. (53)
 - "Being born a king doesn't always guarantee one will have the capacity or the necessary aptitude to be a king. James had capacity. His physical weakness was an advantage, because it belied an intellect that was not weak or stricken in the limbs. This will sound like a contradiction, but beneath his renowned cowardice was a somewhat courageous mind. James V, . . . had the goods to be a fine king. James VI had the proper instincts to rule, and those instincts were set at liberty not only by the severity of his education, but also by the deadly challenges, the Goliaths that stepped in his path. He survived, and that is an accomplishment in itself. Though he abandoned much of what he learned when he put on the English crown, in Scotland he learned when to keep his mouth shut and when to speak." (Teems, 48-49)
- On March 8, 1578, at the age of eleven, James' minority status was set aside, and he became the official ruler of Scotland though many would still try and control him and exert their own influence.
 - "Scotland suffered chronic identity crisis, a condition that made the nobles rich, made the church both powerful and pontifical, and made the throne just as they wanted it—impotent. A poor country with a poor self-image, run by pack animals." (Teems, 55)

- It would take James until 1583 to wrest supreme control over the government from his ravenous pack of rivals.
 - “It was called the *Sovereignty Act of 1584*, a timely little piece of legislation handed down by a king growing more and more into his power. The Sovereignty Act was “An act confirming the king’s majestic Royal power over all states and subjects within this realm.

Parliament declared James head of the Church of Scotland. He and his Privy Council were given jurisdiction over ecclesiastical cases. The courts and assemblies of the Kirk were dissolved and could not reconvene without royal sanction.

. . . The Kirk referred to these acts as the “black acts.” Many ministers took flight to England, and quickly. This flight concerned James. He was still young enough to feel the sting of their backbiting and the gnashing of their teeth. They had been nipping at him all his life. And a novice king makes an easy target for slander.” (Teems, 75-77)

- It was during these days that James’ political and religious views began to solidify.
 - “According to the young king’s vision, government and church were harmoniously joined, and in himself. This was the monarch’s birthright. The share of divinity he was given at birth was for this very reason, to unite all the warring tribes, spiritual and temporal, into one person. It was a theme he would not depart from. All the schism within his own psychology worked within him and by such a powerful algorithm that union became the driving force in his theory of government.

. . . The issue was that of bishops or no bishops. It was either episcopacy or Presbyterianism. After all the smoke cleared, a compromise was reached. The bishops remained. James had his way. Not, fully but sufficiently. He was eighteen at the time.” (Teems, 78-79)

- James’ mother Mary Queen of Scots was executed in England on February 8, 1587.
 - “Following the death of his mother, James had another sixteen years to occupy the Scottish throne, but those years proved him an effective king. A dissembling king, a player, a neurotic, canny, private, smutty, somewhat paranoid king, but a capable king, a king who had long learned to keep and attend his own counsel, who might nod yes and think no, but a king nonetheless. Remembering, too, that his young mind, in spite of the forceful schooling, was like a sponge, and he learned from all of them, if no more from Elizabeth, his southern master. Like her, he had learned to vacillate, to say one thing and mean or do another. Still, and for many reasons he would never be an Elizabeth. Who cares? He was James. He, too was one of a kind.” (Teems, 92)

- The summer of 1588 saw the Armada Crisis threaten England's autonomy. While hindsight tends to view England's victory as inevitable, that was not the case by any means at the time. England and her Queen were more vulnerable than people might realize. Instead of using the Crisis as an opportunity to challenge Elizabeth's power, James remained loyal to the Queen.
 - "James, instead of taking advantage of her vulnerability, offered himself to Elizabeth as a son. He kept the Scots Catholics quiet and would not allow Scotland to be a port of entry for the Spanish or anyone else." (Teems, 93-94)
- A decade later, in 1598, being a much more seasoned monarch, James set forth his views on divine right and politics with a pair of books: *The Trew Lawe of Free Monarchies* and *Basilikon Doron*.
 - "A fine first sample of kingly spin, this document, along with its successor, *Basilikon Doron* (1589 or 1599 dates vary), expressed and amplified his beliefs in divine right and absolute monarchy. To James it was a matter of doctrine. It was an order established by God himself." (Teems, 123)
- Among other things, James believed that during a monarch's coronation ceremony the individual is transformed or becomes "possessed of those sacred powers of majesty that God alone could bestow or call into account." Thus, coronation was a type of baptism and epiphany rolled into one. (Teems, 122)
- While objectionable to modern minds, the notion of divine right did not originate with James.
 - "... There was nothing new about his beliefs. Indeed, for centuries dynastic rulers had been led by these precepts, acting and judging as 'little gods' on earth. Nor was this notion just some idle fancy of monarchs, some device to monitor and control life beneath them. It was the "faith" of the commoner as well. In a culture that mingled religious faith and civil headship, it was unquestioned. There was as much spectacle about the throne of a king as there was at the altar of God.

The Jacobean age was preliberal, meaning that the rights of an individual, personal freedom, the right to question were not considered at the time. Today we demand a separate church and state. They did not. One did not exist without the other. The claims of divine right were not a shock to the Jacobethan. It was not the hard sell that we imagine." (Teems, 123-124)

- *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* is a simple and straightforward presentation of divine right and absolute monarchy. Teems states the following regarding this important book.
 - "It was basically a primer, a practical guide to teach his subjects their obligation to their sovereign and his obligation to them. Obedience to the king, that is, himself, was therefore a religious obligation, and any revolt was wickedness, a transgression against

God. *Trew Law* is brief, and it is written in very plain speech, with few ambiguities. “My purpose is to instruct, not to irritate,” the king said. Kingship is scriptural, and all the laws that determined kingship are written in the Scripture. Even bad kings are sent among us as a kind of judgement sent of God. The following excerpts serve to highlight James’s thought on the matter. James is utterly sincere.

Kings are called gods by the prophetic king David because they sit upon God his throne in earth and have the count of the administration to give unto him.

King, father, judge, lawmaker, minister of God, peacemaker, pastor, James leaves little room for any other interpretation of his office, nor will he suffer any. The king is *Dominus omnium bonorum* (the Lord of all good). He is *Dominus directus totius Domini* (direct Lord of the entire dominion). And again, this is not an innovation, but a recapitulation, a clarification of an old order.

But there is more to it than that. His writing, much more than a display of erudition or craftsmanship was a shepherd’s staff. His whole intention is imperial. He sees himself “a loving nourish-Father.”

. . . A subject’s service to the king is their service to God. Any resistance or opposition to the king is opposition to God himself. It is a very tight order. *The king is appointed by God. He is responsible only to God. And the king is accountable to no law but God.* This is the real key to understanding King James. This is heart central, the underpinning of all he believes. His belief is profound, incompatible with a world tending toward the individual, but if there is greatness to be discerned about him, it is on this wise. This is where he is most grounded.” (Teems, 128-130)

- Prudence dictates that we also note the contribution of *Basilikon Doron* to the corpus of James’s writings.
 - “Any search for James will bring you to Solomon, the Abraham, and the Jacob in him—that is, the wise, the fatherly, the canny. In his book *Basilikon Doron* (Greek for “a Kingly Gift”), he engages all of them.

Divided into three “books,” the text is at once personal, then formal, but always instructing. It is difficult at times for modern tastes, and stalls in places. The Solomon is lucid and generous. The Abraham is warm and nurturing. The Jacob is the one doing the writing itself. Still, James is not selling as much as he is stating his belief. He is more Israel than Jacob. The text is translucent, bright with instruction and command.

But James, as clear and as wise and as fatherly as he expresses himself, simply does not live by what he preaches, at least not completely. But being James, he believes what he is saying and he is utterly sincere. It was meant to be a private publication, a gift from father to son. Prince Henry was five. . .

By the time James was king of England, just four years later, it was a runaway bestseller. Is it shameless self-promotion? Did he plan it this way all along? Is it a message to the Kirk, to those who tried to hold him down or beat the monarch out of him? Is it a clever piece of princely propaganda? He is king. He is James.

Basilikon Doron is an amplification on *Trew Lawe*, in which James forwards the notion of divine right a bit further still. An opening sonnet acts as prologue to the body of the work, and a glimpse of its spirit:

God gives not King the style of Gods in vain,
 For on his throne his scepter do they swey:
 And as their subjects ought them to obey,
 So Kings should fear and serve their God again.
 If then ye would enjoy a happy reign,
 Observe the statues of your heavenly King,
 And from his Law, make all your Laws to spring:
 Since his Lieutenant here ye shall remain,
 Reward the just, be steadfast, true, and plain,
 Repress the proud, maintaining aye the right,
 Walk always so, and ever in his sight,
 Who guards the godly, plaguing the profane:
 And so ye shall in Princely virtue shine,
 Resembling right your mighty King Divine.

Considered the best prose James ever wrote, *Basilikon Doron* is an instruction manual, a code of kingship. In a dream, James had a presentiment that his life would be cut short. He felt it necessary to write the book in response.

... I am not sure just how harshly we should judge the king for his *Trew Lawe of Free Monarchie's* or *Basilikon Doron*. He gives us something of himself. In particular, he lets us know just how deep his belief is." (Teems, 130-132)

- Noting the contents of these chief works of King James is critical to understanding his decision to authorize a new translation of the Bible in 1604. For James, the decision was largely a political one as we shall see in future lessons.
- Much more could be said about the personal life of King James that is beyond the scope of our purposes in this class. Our goal has been to focus in on those aspects of James' early life that most impacted his decision to authorize a new translation of the English Bible in 1604.

Works Cited

Teems, David. *Majestie: The King Behand the King James Bible*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010