

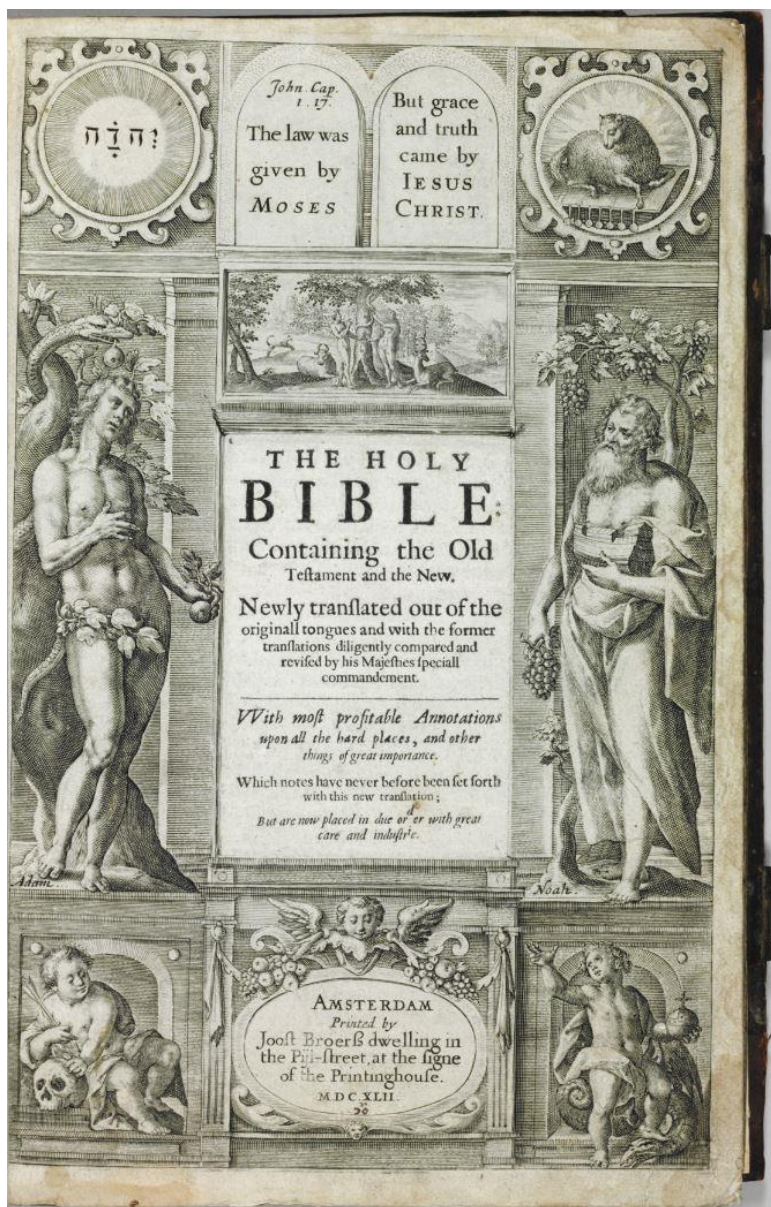
Sunday, March 10, 2024—Grace Life School of Theology—*From This Generation For Ever*  
Lesson 228 Triumph: The Final Acclamation of the AV (Final Acceptance & Literary Acclaim)

### Introduction

- In [Lesson 227](#) we began using Chapter 12 of Alister McGrath’s book *In The Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* to frame a discussion of the final acclamation of the AV. In doing so, we identified three points for consideration:
  - The Battle of the Bibles: Charles I and the War Against the Geneva Bible
  - Ambivalence: The Period of the Puritan Commonwealth
  - Restoration: The Final Acceptance of the King James Bible
- Only point three remains undiscussed from the previous Lesson. Before moving on, I would like to briefly follow up on a couple points made by McGrath in point two regarding the printed history of the Geneva Bible.
- According to A.S. Herbert’s *Historical Catalogue of Printed Editions of The English Bible 1526-1961*, there was one edition of a Geneva New Testament published in London by Norton & Bill in 1619. (Herbert, 149) The *Catalogue* lists Geneva editions published in Amsterdam in the following years 1633, 1640, and 1644. Also of interest is the 1643 “[Soldiers Pocket Bible](#)” printed in London “by G.B. and R.W. for G.C.” (Herbert, 191) Regarding this unique edition Herbert states the following:
  - “A selection of short passages (nearly all from the Geneva version), printed in pamphlet-form for the use of the Parliamentary soldier in the Civil War.

A tradition has always existed that Cromwell’s troops were supplied with pocket-Bibles, and some have confidently asserted that a very small complete Bible, like the 24° printed by Field in 1653, served this purpose. The discovery of the real *Soldiers Pocket Bible* was due to George Livermore of Massachusetts, who described his own copy in 1854. A second copy was later found in the George Thompson collection in the British Museum; having Aug. 3d. (apparently the day of publication) written alongside the date on the title page.” (Herbert, 191)
- This publication data demonstrates the point made by McGrath in Lesson 227, namely that the fortunes of the English Bible were greatly impacted by politics. Also of note, published in Amsterdam, are seven printings of the King James Bible with Geneva marginal notes between 1642 and 1715. Herbert states the following in his *Catalogue* regarding first edition from 1642:
  - “The Holy Bible . . . With most Profitable Annotations . . . which notes have never before been set forth with this new translation; But are now placed in due order with great care and industry.

King James' version, with the notes of the Geneva Bible, and Junius' Annotations on Revelation . . . Apparently the first Bible of this version avowedly printed abroad."  
(Herbert, 189)



- According to Herbert, this edition was published in the following years: 1642, 1643, 1649, 1672, 1679, 1708, and finally 1715. These Amsterdam editions speak to both the general acceptability of the AV as a translation and enduring popularity of the Geneva marginalia as a study tool.
- Throughout the rest of this Lesson, we will conclude our discussion of the final acclamation of the AV by considering the following points:
  - Restoration: The Final Acceptance of the King James Bible

- Literary Acclaim: The King James Bible As Literature

### **Triumph: The Final Acclamation of the AV**

- What follows is the third section of Chapter 12 from Alister McGrath's book *In The Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* that we will be following.

#### *Restoration: The Final Acceptance of the King James Bible*

- In the following section, McGrath chronicles the final triumph of the King James Bible in English political and religious life.
  - “The Restoration of Charles II in 1660 put an end to any talk about revising the King James translation, or replacing it with any rival. Charles’s concern was to restore the church of England to its proper place in English society, and regain the stability that had been so painfully lacking in recent years. The publication of the book of Common Prayer in 1662 alongside the King James translation of the Bible was designed to ensure religious conformity and security, so that the problems of the past might be left behind. The King James Bible was now seen as a pillar of Restoration for society, holding together church, and state, the bishops and monarch, at a time when social cohesion was essential to England’s future as a nation. The Act of Uniformity (1662), which brought into being a new Book of Common Prayer, firmly upheld the establishment of the Church of England. Nobody wanted to return to the chaos of the Puritan commonwealth. . .

This was bad news for the Geneva Bible, which was now viewed as a seditious text, given theological support to a politically and religiously discredited section of English society. To praise or to possess the Geneva Bible could spell instant social death. It had become a potent symbol of a period in English history that was both feared and despised by leaders of the polite culture of the Restoration.

With the restoration of the monarchy, to popular acclaim, the “battle of the Bibles” had ended. The King James Bible had finally triumphed over its rival. The grounds of that triumph may partly rest in its eloquence, or in the excellence of its translation. Yet 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. In marked contrast, the Genevan Bible was marginalized, not on account of the quality of its translation or English prose, but because it had been the preferred translation of the detested Puritan faction, who had now been comprehensively routed, militarily, and politically.

The “new translation”—as the King James Bible was still termed even late in the seventeenth century—was still regarded with some misgivings at the opening of the eighteenth. Yet it was during this century that a decisive change in attitude toward the “new” translation developed. It was virtually impossible to point to any defining moment or event that crystallized the perception that this was indeed a great work of religious literature, but at some point during this century, perhaps around 1750, such a perception

settled over the work, and would remain in place until the end of the First World War. If the first 150 years of its history were encumbered with hints of discontent, criticism, and suspicion, its next 150 years were characterized by something at times approaching uncritical adulation.

When, why, and how did this take place? It is impossible to say. Perhaps an increasing distance from the origins of the translation began to allow the work to be endowed with the characteristics of a classic. Perhaps familiarity dulled the sense to the weaknesses of the translation or allowed well-known words to become embedded in the memory. Whatever the reasons—and these remain less than fully understood—there is no doubt that a decisive and irreversible change came about in the esteem in which the King James Bible was held in England and beyond.” (McGrath, 288-290)

- Professor David Norton concurs with McGrath when he states in his 2011 book *The King James Bible: A Short History From Tyndale to Today* that, by 1729, the KJB “was absolutely established as *the Bible*” in the English-speaking world. (Norton, 138)

### **Literary Acclaim: The King James Bible As Literature**

- Written for a popular audience, McGrath’s work is light when compared to David Norton’s monumental work *A History of the English Bible As Literature*. Norton’s 400 plus page work plunges the depths of how the King James Bible was perceived as a piece of English literature. Parties interested in a deep dive into the history of how the King James Bible transformed from a perceived literary ugly duckling into the pinnacle written work of the English language are encouraged to read Norton’s book.
- In 2011 in commemoration off the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the KJB, Norton wrote the smaller book referenced above, *The King James Bible: A Short History From Tyndale to Today*. This much smaller work is a popular level summary of Norton’s longer treatise. Beginning with Hugh Broughton’s early criticisms, Norton uses Chapter 7 titled “Reputation and Future” to summarize key stages of reception experienced by the AV in terms of literary perception. According to Norton, since the time of Broughton,
  - “The earliest reported comment on its language comes from a man famous for his knowledge of Hebrew and translations, John Selden. After averring that the KJB (together with the Bishops’ Bible) ‘is the best translation in the world and renders the sense of the original best’, he turns to its style:

There is no book so translated as the Bible for the purpose. If I translate a French book into English, I turn it into English phrase and not into French English. “Il fait froid”: I say tis cold, not it makes cold, but the Bible is rather translated into English words than into English phrase. The Hebraisms are kept and the phrase of that language is kept: as for example, ‘he uncovered her shame’, which is well enough so long as scholars have to do with it, but when it comes among the common people, Lord what gear [mockery] do they make of it.

Literal translations had used language for ‘for the purpose’, but the people mocked it for its unnaturalness. This negative view of the KJB as English writing prevailed for roughly a century and a half, absolutely at odds with later admiration for the KJB as great, in some eyes the greatest, work of English literature.” (Norton, 185-186)

- According to Norton, “for the half century until the Restoration [1611-1660], scholarship was the primary issue,” in terms of early criticism of the AV. As we saw in Lesson 227, during this timeframe “two attempts at revision, possibly connected, were made in Commonwealth times.”
  - “In 1652 and 1653 a group of revisers was appointed, led by the Baptist Henry Jessey: chief among his principles of translation was literalness leading to a version ‘as exactly agreeing with the original as we can attain’. Indicative of Jessey’s priorities is his preference for the KJB’s margin ‘which in above 800 places is righter than the line’, that is, more literal than the text. The work was nearly completed but, for reasons unknown, no commissioners were appointed to examine and approve it, and it disappeared without a trace. . . The KJB was admirable but improvable as an accurate translation, yet the failed attempts to improve it led to affirmations of its virtues as a translation.

The century’s last attack on the KJB’s accuracy was published in 1659 in Robert Gell’s *An Essay toward Amendment of the Last English Translation of the Bible*.” Or, a proof, by any instances that the last translation of the Bible may be improved. Gell too was an advocate of literal translation, but the will to revise passed with the Commonwealth, and the view that he wrote against, that the KJB is ‘so exact . . . that it needs no essay toward the amendment of it’ prevailed for a century.” (Norton, 186-187)

- In the next paragraph Norton discusses how perceptions of the KJB changed beginning with the Restoration in 1660 until the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
  - “From the Restoration into Augustan times [A style of British literature produced during the reigns of Queen Anne, King George I, and George II in the first half of the 18th century and ending in the 1740s, with the deaths of Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, in 1744 and 1745.], 1660 to the middle of the eighteenth century, discussion moved from scholarship to the literary merits of the bible, and was for much of this time especially concerned with the originals rather than the KJB. . . [Discusses Milton] . . . While the rhetorical idea of literary excellence dominated, they show how the bible contained flowers of eloquence—more prosaically, how all the figures of speech could be found excellently used in it—and then, as Longinian ideas of sublimity in literature became the new fashion around the beginning of the eighteenth century, how the bible possessed this affective power.

Such interest and ideas began to rub off on the KJB as the English representative of the admired originals: some writers simply generalized, some transcribed little bits from the original as examples, some paraphrased, but more and more used the KJB. They might not have thought that the KJB itself was good English writing, but the effect of seeing literary quality demonstrated through the KJB became inescapable. The earliest handbook of rhetoric to use the KJB, John Smith’s fairly popular *The Mystery of Rhetoric Unveiled* (1656: last printed in 1688), shows this effect beginning. Smith demonstrated

his Greek—driven figures of speech with Latin, English, and scriptural examples, these late ‘conducting very much to the right understanding of the sense of the letter of the Scripture’ (from the understanding of the sense to the letter of the Scripture’ (from the title). Characteristics is his treatment of ‘synonymia’, ‘a commodious heaping together of divers words of one signification’ that, as he nicely puts it ‘adorneth and garnisheth speech as a rich wardrobe, where in are many and sundry changes of garments to adorn one and same person’ (p. 160). The majority of the examples are scriptural, more often than not verbatim from the KJB, so the reader begins to learn to appreciate what we would call parallelism through this description of synonymy and verses such as ‘the Lord also thundered in the heavens, and the highest gave his voice, etc.’ (Ps. 18:13) Amidst the classical figures Smith includes a section on Hebraism. He finishes with ‘pathopoeia’, which designates not a drive but an effect, so looking forward to ideas of the sublime. It is ‘a form of speech whereby the speaker moves the mind of his hearers to some vehemency of affection, as love, hatred, gladness, sorrow, etc.’ (p. 266); he illustrates it only from the Bible, including this striking image: ‘can a woman forget her sucking child? Yes, they may forget, yet will I not forget thee: behold, I have graven thee upon the palms of my hands, etc.’ (Isa. 49:15-16). Thus he demonstrates and teaches literary appreciation of the KJB.

But it took time for this kind of awareness to take hold. . . In short, Augustan England was most unpropitious for appreciation of the KJB as a piece of English writing.

Yet the Augustans while belittling the KJB, were beginning to appreciate it. Here is the phrase, ‘all the disadvantages of an old prose translation’ in context: ‘yet how beautiful do the holy writings appear, under all the disadvantages of an old prose translation? So beautiful that, with a charming and elegant simplicity, they ravish and transport the learned reader, so intelligible that the most unlearned are capable of understanding the greater part of them.’ It is a curious combination of praise and dispraise that was much repeated between 1690 and 1731, . . .” (Norton, 187-189)

- In the next paragraph Norton explains how perception of the KJB changed from “genuine appreciation” to “explicit admiration.”
  - “The change needed to turn these ideas—and some genuine appreciation of the KJB—into explicit admiration was slow coming. The people got there more quickly than the intelligentsia. From the time of Tyndale onwards, the Bible and literacy went hand in hand. People learnt to read in order to read the Bible; in due course the bible became the chief book in teaching children to read. The KJB, as it became the only Bible in England, assumed a unique place not just in religious consciousness but in linguistic and literary consciousness. It was nursery story, primer, adolescent and adult reading, present from the alpha to the omega of verbal consciousness. Its faith, its language, imagery, story and poetry, heard, read and quoted, was the highest common factor in the mental environment of millions over many generations. It was part of home and loved (or occasionally reacted against) like home. Regardless of the literary standards of the intelligentsia, regardless of what they thought the best standards of writing, such love created a sentimental basis for admiration of the KJB, and it made the KJB the most familiar standard of English. Jonathan Swift made the point in 1712, responding to the

‘observation that if [it] were not for the Bible and Common Prayer Book in the vulgar tongue, we should hardly be able to understand anything that was written among us an hundred years ago: which is certainly true: for those books, being perpetually read in churches, have proved a kind of standard language, especially for the common people.

Besides creating that special form of English, religious English, the bible and the Prayer Book acted as a conservative force, keeping current—or even, over a long period, return to currency—older forms of English and older English words that otherwise probably would have disappeared.” (Norton, 189-190)

- Norton discusses a couple eighteenth century attempts to “improve” the KJB such as Daniel Mace’s diglot *Greek and English NT* (1729), Robert Lowth’s *Isaiah* (1778), and Edward Harwood’s *Liberal Translation of the New Testament* (1768). Most of these were “one-edition wonders” that were critically reviewed by the English intelligentsia and had no traction on the popular level. Yet the failure of these would be KJB replacements bolstered the popular perception of the AV.
  - “The general (but not universal) mediocrity of these versions made a strong contribution to the reputation of the KJB. The changing tone of reviews [of these new Bibles] tells the story as they swing away from sympathy and encouragement to outright admiration for the KJB. . . Instead of the achievement of a polished Bible being looked forward to, now the KJB is looked back to as the literary standard: it is not merely a relic but a ‘venerable relic’ that has beneficially influenced the language. Its age is still recognized but no longer disliked.

Insofar as one can locate this change in the reputation of the KJB, it belongs to the 1760s. . . The change in the KJB’s reputation was part of a more general change in taste, a change that now seems inevitable given the achievement of pre-Augustan literature and the effete excess of the later Augustans, and the history sketched here shows that the KJB played a significant role in creating the change.” (Norton, 191-193)

- According to Professor Norton after, 1760 it became the “dominant opinion” regarding the KJB:
  - “The KJB’s scholarship could and should be improved, but its language could not and should not be tampered with. . .

Moreover, as admiration became customary so the trails of the KJB and even the persistent criticism of it through the first half of the century were forgotten, and people began to believe that the KJB’s merits were immediately perceived and caused it to be an instant success; in the words of another advocate of revision, ‘it was a happy consequent of this acknowledged excellence [of the KJB] that the other versions fell immediately into disrepute, are no longer known to the generality of the people, and are only sought after by the curious’. All these ideas have proved tenacious, and sometimes the argument that the KJB was a literary revision has been powerfully made.” (Norton, 194-195)

- In order to capture the “reputation” of the KJB after 1760 Norton coined the following term, “AVolatry.” While I understand Professor Norton’s use of the term, I do not particularly care for it.

- “Much of the story of the KJB’s reputation after the 1760s is taken up with praise, sometimes judicious, sometimes taken to rhetorical excess. Along with bardolatry which I have called AVolatry (Authorized Version-olatry) became the norm. . . [Quotes a lengthy piece by Father Fredrick William Faber]. . . The unique place of the KJB in the hearts of many over more than 200 years is well captured.

A chorus of claims and phrases expressed faith in the excellence of the KJB. Thomas Babington Macaulay proclaimed of ‘that stupendous work’ that it was ‘a book which, if everything else in our language should perish, would alone suffice to show the whole extent of its beauty and power. Among many others, Richard Chenevix Trench, Archbishop, philologist and one of the makers of the Revised Version and the American scholar George P. Marsh thought it ‘the first English classic’, Marsh adding that it was ‘the highest exemplar of purity and beauty of language existing in our speech’. J.G. Frazer, author of the *The Golden Bough*, recognized how much this had become a cliché: ‘that our English version of the Bible is one of the greatest classics in the language is admitted by all in theory, but few people appear to treat it as such in practice.’ Others including three of the makers of the Revised Version like the phrase from Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen*, ‘well of English undefiled.’ Another favorite with a lengthy history was Lowes’s essay title, ‘the noblest monument of English prose.’” (Norton, 195-196)

- Toward the end of this section, Professor Norton addresses the extent of AVolatry in addressing the idea that emerged in some quarters that the KJB was inspired. In doing so, he quotes books that are popular among modern King James only advocates; *The Translators Revived* by Alexander McClure and *The King James Version Defended* by Edward F. Hills.
  - “Inevitably some thought of the KJB as inspired. The first biographer of the KJB translators, the American evangelist Alexander McClure, held ‘that the translators enjoyed the highest degree of that special guidance which is ever granted to God’s true servants in exigencies of deep concernment to his kingdom on earth’. Eventually, enlisting the historical position of the KJB that Faber described too well, this became the fundamentalist position that Edward F. Hills put this way:

the King James Version is the historical Bible of English-speaking Protestants. Upon it God, working providentially, has placed the stamp of His approval through the usage of many generations of Bible-believing Christians. Hence, if we believe in God’s providential preservation of the Scriptures, we will retain the King James Version, for in so doing we will be following the clear leading of the Almighty.

To some, like Benjamin Jowett, Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford, reflecting on the Revised Version NT, it seemed ‘that, in a certain sense, the Authorized Version is more inspired than the original.’” (Norton, 196)

- Norton concludes this section of Chapter 7 by discussing how the fortunes of the KJB were reversed after WWII as the translation gradually fell out of favor in much of the English-speaking world. The argument for this was made largely on the back of the archaisms of the language. The



KJB, being once praised for its majesty and eloquence, was deemed archaic and unintelligible. Consequently, the later half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was witness to publication of many different Modern Version all trying to supplant the KJB as “the Bible of the English-speaking world”.

#### **Works Cited**

McGrath, Alister. *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture*. New York, NY: Doubleday, 2001.

Norton, David. *The King James Bible: A Short History From Tyndale To Today*. Cambridge University Press, 2011.