

Editorial: Celebrating the 400th Anniversary of the King James Bible

Stephen J. Wellum

2011 marked the four hundredth anniversary of the King James Bible, the best-selling book of all time. Given its enormous impact and importance, around the world numerous remembrances and celebrations have taken place, academic conferences held, and books published marking this historic milestone. From England to America, from Canada to the Netherlands, from Ireland to Australia and New Zealand, people have commemorated and given thanks to God for the

production of the King James Bible. Even Brigham Young University and the Vatican sponsored exhibits marking this historic occasion. All of these celebrations are a vivid testimony to and reminder of the incredible impact the King James Bible has had on the church, the larger English cultures, and even the world.

Not wanting to let this important anniversary and historical occasion go unnoticed, we decided to devote an issue of *SBJT* to this

very subject. In our articles and forum pieces, our authors reflect on the impact the King James Bible has had on the church and the world from a variety of angles. Some authors set the historic context which resulted in the production of the translation in 1611, particularly its relation to William Tyndale's translation of the NT into English in 1525 and the Geneva Bible which was produced in 1560. Other authors, while building on this history, reflect more on some of the contemporary issues surrounding the King James Bible such as its role in fundamentalism, the ongoing debate over the textual superiority of the translation, various fallacies associated with the King James Bible, as well as the worldwide impact the translation has had, indeed more than this, the impact that the Bible in general has had on the world and beyond the borders of the church.

As one reflects on the historic circumstances in which the King James Bible was produced, as with most events in history, they are never neat and tidy. This is certainly true in regard to the production of the King James Bible. As the historical story is

STEPHEN J. WELLUM is Professor of Christian Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Dr. Wellum received his Ph.D. degree in theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and has also taught theology at the Associated Canadian Theological Schools and Northwest Baptist Theological College and Seminary in Canada. He has contributed to several publications and a collection of essays on theology and worldview issues.

recounted, it is beyond question that the translation was produced in the midst of controversy, turmoil, and political upheaval. Before its creation, the Tyndale and Geneva Bibles served the English-speaking world with Tyndale's Bible used more by the clergy and the Geneva Bible used more by the common people. Furthermore, in regard to the Geneva Bible, it was the translation that enjoyed great popularity among the Puritans; it was the first English Bible where the entire Bible was translated from the original Greek and Hebrew; it contained many helpful notes; it was the first in English to divide chapters into verses; and given its compact size and economical price, it served as the people's Bible.

Nonetheless when James was crowned King of England in 1603, within a year's time he summoned the religious leaders of England to produce a common English translation to replace the Tyndale and Geneva Bibles. Many of his reasons for doing so were political, even though he did not present them as such. He hoped that a common Bible would strengthen and unify the state church which, at this time, was deeply fractured. In addition, he was determined to replace the Geneva Bible because its notes both promoted a Presbyterian model of church governance and described specific circumstances in which subjects of the king were under moral obligation to disobey their monarchs! This was something that James could not allow to go unchecked. So what resulted in 1611 was the Authorized Version of the Bible, a literary masterpiece, accurate in its translation from the original Greek and Hebrew given the resources available at that time, and produced by a committee of excellent biblical scholars and theologians who had a high regard for Scripture as God's most holy word. It was also a Bible that fulfilled James's desire to have a common text that undergirded his authority while also unifying the English people.

Even though the Authorized Version was not an immediate success—it took at least fifty years for it to surpass the use and influence of the Geneva Bible—it has endured the test of time. Yet what is most significant about the King James Bible is

not its literary achievement nor is that it is a noble monument to the English language. Instead, its importance lies in that it is the word of the true and living God translated into the vernacular for men and women to read so that they may come to know the glorious God of sovereign grace and redemption. In truth, there are at least three things this 400th year celebration should produce in us.

First, it should produce thanksgiving to God for raising up faithful people in the past who had the conviction, ability, and sheer determination to translate God's word into the vernacular so that people could read the Bible for themselves. Where would any of us be today without faithful servants of the Lord who literally risked their lives to get God's word into the hands of the people? Second, it should remind us of the utter privilege which is ours to have the Bible in our language which certainly entails that we need to be diligent readers and doers of God's word. What a shame and judgment upon us that we have Scripture in our own language but too often it collects dust in our homes and goes unread and unheeded! Third, it should encourage us anew to complete the task of translating and getting Scripture into the hands of all peoples. What previous generations did for the English-speaking world, we must do for all peoples who do not have the word of God in their language. Gospel proclamation goes hand in hand with the translation and distribution of Scripture so people can read Scripture for themselves. Our task in this regard is still unfinished as it is daunting. May our triune God raise up workers to finish this life and death task. May we, as the church, not rest until it is finished and all peoples can read the Bible for themselves, as we, in the English-speaking world, have been able to do as a result of the production of such translations as the King James Bible.