

# Ten Fallacies about the King James Version

Leland Ryken

The King James Version of the Bible (KJV) has received well-deserved recognition for four hundred years of distinguished service. New books on the KJV, academic conferences on it, and exhibitions in museums, libraries, and bookstores have made 2011 the Year of the KJV. As the festivities have unfolded, this book of books has emerged more clearly than ever as a

book of superlatives. It is the best-selling book of all time. It is the most influential English-language book, the most often reprinted, the most quoted, and the most written about. Gordon Campbell offers the summary verdict the KJV is “the most important book in the English language.”<sup>1</sup>

A book with this much visibility naturally elicits a multitude of verdicts on it. Especially in this anniversary year, there has been no shortage of claims and counterclaims about the most famous

Bible in English and American history. Not all of the claims are true, and that is the subject of the article that follows. I will explore ten common claims about the KJV and explain why I think the claims are false.

## **FALLACY #1: WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE HELPED TO TRANSLATE THE KJV.**

This claim belongs especially (but not only) to internet sources, where a common formula is that Shakespeare “wrote” the KJV! But this is only the beginning of wonders. It is commonly claimed in some quarters that Shakespeare (or a fellow translator) in effect signed Shakespeare’s name right into the text to signal that he had helped with the translation. The claim for a “signature” rests on an alleged cryptogram in Psalm 46. According to the theory, Shakespeare was forty-six years-old as the work of translation reached closure. The forty-sixth word from the beginning of Psalm 46 is the word *shake*, and the forty-sixth word from the end is *spear*—Shakespeare.

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How can a theory that ingenious possibly be wrong? Let me count the ways. But before I show that Shakespeare was not in the running to be a member of the King James translation committee, I want to make sure that we understand that his ineligibility was not due to disinterest in the Bible. On the contrary, Shakespeare, whom I consider to be a Christian writer in the intellectual allegiance of his plays, was thoroughly conversant with the Bible.<sup>2</sup> There are approximately two thousand biblical allusions in Shakespeare's plays. Additionally, biblical passages often function as subtexts for episodes in the plays, as when Lady Macbeth washes her hands as Pontius Pilate did in a futile effort to clear herself of guilt. There are so many references to the first four chapters of Genesis in Shakespeare's plays that scholars regularly make statements to the effect that Shakespeare must have known these chapters by heart. The scholars and biographers who have studied the matter most thoroughly tend toward the opinion not only that Shakespeare was a reader of the English Bible during his adult years but also that he owned a copy.

This is entirely plausible (after all, Shakespeare was a thoroughly "bookish" person and must have had a personal library), but if true, it was not the KJV that Shakespeare read. Surprise of surprises, it was the Geneva Bible—the so-called Puritan translation—that Shakespeare primarily used in his plays starting in 1598, having used the Bishops' Bible before that point. One scholar finds a biographical cause for this shift, namely, Shakespeare's renting a room in a Huguenot household on Silver Street in London.<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless, in spite of Shakespeare's skill with the English language and interest in the English Bible, he was not in the running to serve on the translation committee of the KJV. If being the greatest master of the English language did not qualify a person to serve on the translation committee of the KJV, what did qualify a person? We can answer that question on the basis of what we know about the forty-seven men who served

on the committee.

Although the KJV was conceived in a moment of religious contentiousness (see below), when King James and Archbishop Richard Bancroft formulated the list of translators, they rose above sectarian spirit. The translators were selected solely on the basis of known scholarly ability. They were the best of the best that England possessed in regard to biblical knowledge and facility with the Hebrew and Greek texts of the Bible. All of the translators were ordained members of the Church of England, and within that parameter they were either ministers with a scholarly bent, like Lancelot Andrewes of London, or professors at Oxford University or Cambridge University. Obviously Shakespeare, even with his genius for language and familiarity with the Bible, did not qualify for serving on the translation committee, nor would he have had the time.

If Shakespeare did not help to produce the KJV or allude to it in his plays, did he have any contact with the new translation that came into existence during the last phase of his career as a playwright? We cannot know with certainty, but an intriguing possibility exists. When Shakespeare retired from his active career in London and moved home to his native Stratford around 1611 (note the year), he became a lay rector, also called lay reader, in Holy Trinity Church, the local Anglican church. The author of a literary pilgrim's guide to England waxes eloquent about how thrilling it must have been for Shakespeare to stand in church on Sunday mornings and read from the Bible in the English language that he himself had elevated and influenced. I was initially skeptical of this claim, but upon reflection I think it possible. When the KJV was published in 1611, it "immediately superseded the Bishops' Bible for use in [English] churches."<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare might, in fact, have read from it in church as a lay reader until his death in 1616.

Another interesting sidelight exists in regard to the connection between Shakespeare's plays and the KJV. According to oral history, when

American pioneers journeyed westward in their covered wagons, they sometimes carried two books—Shakespeare’s collected works and the King James Bible. What meaning can we extract from this pairing of books? Shakespeare represented human culture at its best, and the KJV represented the authoritative word of God. But the two books had something important in common: they were the greatest examples of the English language that existed, and the pioneers who carried them were guardians of a standard of language amidst circumstances that might seem to threaten it.

**FALLACY #2: THE KJV WAS AN ANTI-PURITAN BIBLE, DESIGNED TO DETHRONE THE GENEVA BIBLE.**

There is a kernel of truth in this claim, but the KJV is not an anti-Puritan Bible. It is true that the King James Bible was conceived in a moment of spite toward the Puritans. The background is as follows. Upon being named king to succeed Queen Elizabeth after her death in 1603, King James I of Scotland processed southward toward London. He was intercepted at one point by Puritans bearing the Millenary Petition, so-called because it had allegedly been signed by a thousand Anglican clerics with Puritan leanings. The petition was a list of Puritan grievances and requests. The Puritans had hopes that the new king might be sympathetic to their viewpoint. After all, King James had cast scorn on high-church Anglicanism with his verdict that the Church of England “is an ill-mumbled Mass in English.”<sup>5</sup>

The king responded to the Millenary Petition by granting the Puritans a hearing at the Hampton Court Conference of 1604. It turned out that the Puritans had been misguided in thinking that the king might be “one of them.” The king rejected all requests that the Puritans put on the table. He threatened to “harry them out of the land—or worse.” At the last minute, the Puritans requested that the king commission a new English Bible, and the king

surprised everyone by granting the request. But he granted the request with a sneering put-down of the Geneva Bible. He is reported to have said that he “could never yet see a Bible well translated in English, but the worst of all his Majesty thought the Geneva to be.”

Nonetheless, it is possible to make a case for there being an important Puritan component in the formation and reception history of the KJV. To begin, the event that initiated the new translation was a request from the Puritans, so in a sense the KJV owes its origin to the Puritans. Approximately a fourth of the forty-seven translators were men of Puritan sympathies.<sup>6</sup> One of the committee chairmen was the Puritan John Reynolds, who in a demoralized mood had made the request for a new translation at the Hampton Court Conference. Furthermore, we hear so much about how 80-90 percent of the King James Bible was carried over from William Tyndale’s translation that we have been lulled into believing it. Those figures are true for the parts of the Bible that Tyndale translated, but he translated no more than two-thirds of the Bible before his martyrdom. In the final analysis, the Geneva Bible contributed most to the KJV, with one source claiming that the Geneva Bible “is textually 95% the same as the King James Version.”<sup>7</sup>

If we turn from the origins of the KJV to its reception history, we again find that the Puritans played a role. The last edition of the Geneva Bible published in England appeared in 1616, just five years after the first publication of the KJV. Additionally, it might be expected that when the Puritans gained the ascendancy around 1642 they would have thrown their weight behind the Geneva Bible, but they did not do so. In another surprise, between 1642 and 1715 at least nine editions of the KJV were printed with the Geneva Bible notes.<sup>8</sup> Another interesting sidelight is that the language of the KJV appears in Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms.<sup>9</sup>

**FALLACY #3: THE KJV WAS THE FIRST GREAT ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE AND APPEARED ON THE SCENE LIKE A SUDDEN MIRACLE.**

The KJV came at the end of a whole century of English Bible translation. In fact, six translations preceded the KJV, and they were in effect a cooperative venture. The six translations and the dates of their appearance are as follows: Tyndale's New Testament of 1525, Coverdale's Bible of 1535 (by Miles Coverdale, who had been an assistant to Tyndale), Matthew's Bible of 1537 (by John Rogers, who had also been an assistant to Tyndale), the Great Bible of 1539, the Geneva Bible of 1560, the Bishops' Bible of 1568. The modern syndrome of translators's striving for originality and viewing others as competitors was foreign to the sixteenth century project of English Bible translation. Each of the translations built on its predecessors, and each contributed improvements to the ongoing process that climaxed in the KJV. Improvements occurred in format, for example, as chapter divisions were added and then verse divisions, as scholarly and interpretive notes became a standard part of an English Bible, as the hard-to-read gothic typeface gave way to the more legible roman typeface, and as the enormous size of the first Bibles was replaced by a more portable size.

More subtly, each of the translations made refinements and contributed apt formulations and turns of phrase that were retained by subsequent translations. Tyndale gave us such famous formulations as *be not weary in well doing; my brother's keeper; the salt of the earth; the signs of the times; a law unto themselves; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak; fight the good fight; with God all things are possible; the patience of Job; an eye for an eye; O ye of little faith.*

To Coverdale we owe *the valley of the shadow of death; thou anointest my head with oil; baptized into his death; tender mercies; lovingkindness; respect of persons; even, neither, and yea* to introduce a Hebrew parallelism. The Geneva Bible contrib-

*uted smite them hip and thigh; vanity of vanities; my cup runneth over; except a man be born again; comfort ye, comfort ye my people; Solomon in all his glory; my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.*

The Bishops' Bible added the following touches to existing statements: *blessed are they that have been persecuted for righteousness' sake; made in the likeness of men; joint heirs with Christ; love worketh no ill to his neighbor; a more excellent sacrifice; the power of his resurrection. The KJV produced how are the mighty fallen; a still small voice; the root of the matter; beat their swords into plowshares; a thorn in the flesh.*

Literary scholar John Livingston Lowes once wrote that "The 'Authorized Version' represents a slow, almost impersonal evolution. For it is, in reality, itself a revision, resting upon earlier versions, and these, in turn, depend in varying degrees upon each other, so that through the gradual exercise of something which approaches natural selection, there has come about, in both diction and phraseology, a true survival of the fittest.... The long process of version upon version served (to use Dante's phrase) as 'a sieve for noble words.'"<sup>10</sup>

We can see this not only in the phrases that various translations added to the accumulating English Bible, but also in the small changes that were introduced into formulations of previous translations. Here are successive versions of Matthew 6:34b:

- "For the daye present hath ever ynough of his awne trouble" (Tyndale).
- "Every daye hath ynough of his owne travayll" (Coverdale).
- "Sufficient unto the daye is the travayle therof" (Great Bible).
- "The day hath ynough with his owne grief" (Geneva).
- "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" (King James).

"In a cumulative way," writes Benson Bobrick, "all the virtues of the various translations which preceded it were gathered up" in the KJV.<sup>11</sup> Craig Thompson writes similarly that the KJV "was no

sudden miracle but rather the harvesting or refining of the previous century's experience of translating the Bible into English."<sup>12</sup> And someone else writes, "It forms a mosaic of all that was best in the work of preceding translators."<sup>13</sup>

In a truly frivolous claim, Eugene Peterson accuses the King James translators of having plagiarized Tyndale.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, underlying the cooperative venture among successive translators is a whole theory of knowledge that the Renaissance accepted but that the modern era has rejected. Alister McGrath has written about it with his usual good sense:

The King James translators ... stood in a long line of translators, and were conscious that their task would be influenced ... by the English translations already in circulation.... Lying behind this is an attitude toward wisdom that has largely been lost in the modern period.... The King James Bible ... is to be seen in the light of the Renaissance approach to human wisdom, in which one generation is nourished and sustained by the intellectual achievements of its predecessors. Each era draws on the wisdom of the past, and builds upon it, before handing a greater wisdom on to its successors.<sup>15</sup>

The King James translators themselves asserted this philosophy in a famous statement in the prefatory document entitled "the translators to the reader." Here is the statement: "Truly (good Christian reader) we never thought from the beginning, that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one, ... but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one."

#### **FALLACY #4: THE KJV WAS OFFICIALLY AUTHORIZED BY THE KING WHOSE NAME IT BEARS.**

The KJV quickly became known as the Authorized Version. To this day many people studiously avoid the title King James Version and instead

call this Bible the Authorized Version or the A.V. But who authorized the KJV? If it bears the name of King James I of England, and if King James initiated the entire project and then remained involved as the translation process unfolded, and if King James envisioned the new Bible as something that would unify a religiously divided nation—then it stands to reason that King James reciprocated to the honor of having the translation named after him by authorizing it for his kingdom. Yes, it stands to reason, but to our surprise, King James did not authorize the Bible that bears his name.

Surely, then, Archbishop Bancroft and other bishops in the Church of England must have authorized the translation. After all, upon its publication it became the translation used in all Anglican churches, and additionally the original title page contains the line "appointed to be read in churches." But that phrase carries the force of "intended for public and oral reading in church services and the liturgy." There is no record of official church authorization of the KJV, even though precedent for such authorization existed in the form of the Great Bible and the Bishops' Bible.

Does this mean, then, that the KJV was never authorized? Surprise upon surprise: the King James Bible *was* authorized. As Geddes MacGregor astutely notes, the fact that the KJV did not receive official authorization allows us to see even more clearly the actual authority that the KJV commanded. Lacking official authorization, the King James Bible "made its own way as a book whose excellence was admitted on all sides," an authority "far greater than could have been conferred upon it by any legal instrument or official decree." The King James Bible "was authorized, not by an edict imposed upon the people, but by popular acclamation."<sup>16</sup>

**FALLACY #5: THE KJV FELL FLAT AND WAS IGNORED WHEN IT WAS FIRST PUBLISHED.**

This view is so widely accepted that I need to signal that the verdict I am about to assert is a distinctly minority opinion. Adam Nicolson, author of a book on the KJV entitled *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible*, a book that praises the KJV, said in an interview that the King James Bible was "a complete failure when it was produced, no one liked it."<sup>17</sup> Alister McGrath similarly claims that the reception history of the King James Bible is "the story of how an ugly duckling became a swan."<sup>18</sup>

My own research does not support the majority viewpoint. It is true that the release of the KJV was surrounded by misfortunes that could easily have subverted the entire publishing venture. The first printer of the KJV found himself in almost immediate financial difficulty, and the early years of printing were bound up in litigation. Furthermore, someone named Hugh Broughton, a person of known scholarly ability who had been bypassed for the translation committee because of his equally known cantankerous personality, published an attack in which he claimed that there were hundreds of mistranslated words. He also warned the translators that they would be judged for their misconduct at the last day. Finally, the new translation was in immediate competition with the entrenched best-selling Bible of the day, the Geneva Bible.

Despite this, the KJV did very well. In its first five years of existence, readers called for seventeen editions, compared with six editions of the Geneva Bible during those same years.<sup>19</sup> Expanding the time frame, in the first 35 years of its existence the KJV went through a whopping 182 editions. The KJV supplanted the Geneva Bible within fifty years of its publication, very good indeed. The last Geneva Bible published in England appeared in 1616, just five years after the publication of the KJV, and on the Continent in 1644.

**FALLACY #6: THE KING JAMES TRANSLATORS SPOILED A GOOD THING BY REVERSING THE TRANSLATION PHILOSOPHY AND STYLE THAT WILLIAM TYNDALE HAD ESTABLISHED AS THE NORM.**

The impetus for attempting to drive a wedge between Tyndale and the King James translators comes from people who advocate a colloquial English Bible based on the translation philosophy known as dynamic equivalence. Eugene Peterson can be taken as the spokesman for this group.<sup>20</sup> According to Peterson, the King James translators not only "plagiarized" Tyndale's translation but then also made a "violation" of it by putting "lace cuffs on Tyndale's sentences." They "desecrated language upward" and "skillfully and thoroughly shifted the tone of the language from the roughness of Tyndale's plowboy to the smooth speech of the royal court."

I submit that all of these claims are false and that William Tyndale would have thoroughly approved of the refinements that the King James translators made on his baseline. How can I be so bold as to make these claims? For five reasons. First, Tyndale himself expressed discontent with his own translation. In the preface to his 1526 New Testament, Tyndale stated a wish "that the rudeness of the work now at the first time offend not [my readers], but that they consider how that I had no man to [imitate], neither was [helped] with English of any that had interpreted the same or such like thing in the scripture before time.... Many things are lacking, which necessarily are required. Count it as a thing not having his full shape, but as it were born afore his time, even as a thing begun rather than finished."<sup>21</sup> Nothing could be clearer than this as a statement of Tyndale's discontent with what he had produced with his first New Testament. Tyndale did not regard his pioneering work as having established a norm.

Secondly, Tyndale was sufficiently dissatisfied with his New Testament that after its first publication he immediately spent time revising

it even though he was presumably eager to make progress on his translation of the Old Testament. Thirdly, during this process of revision, Tyndale introduced more than five thousand changes into his New Testament translation.<sup>22</sup> Fourthly and most importantly, the revisions that Tyndale made were of exactly the same type that the King James translators made with the material they inherited. For example, Tyndale changed “O ye endued with little faith” to “O ye of little faith.” He reversed the word order from “behold here is a greater than Solomon” to “and behold a greater than Solomon is here.” Tyndale had the same instinct for betterment that the King James translators possessed (and that all five intervening translations exhibit). If this constitutes putting lace cuffs on Tyndale’s initial New Testament translation, Tyndale himself started the process.

Finally, we should not exaggerate the differences between Tyndale and the KJV. Tyndale’s baseline, though needing refinement, is in the same stylistic register as the KJV. I will quote four passages, and I leave it to my readers to guess which is from Tyndale and which from the KJV.

*Exhibit A:* “Though I spake with the tongues of men and angels, and yet had no love, I were even as sounding brass: or as a tinkling cymbal. And though I could prophesy, and understood all secrets, and all knowledge: yea, if I had all faith so that I could move mountains out of their places, and yet had no love, I were nothing.”

*Exhibit B:* “When he saw the people, he went up into a mountain, and when he was set, his disciples came to him, and he opened his mouth, and taught them saying: Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which hunger and thirst for righteousness: for they shall be filled.”

*Exhibit C:* “In my father’s house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you

even unto myself, that where I am, there may ye be also.”

*Exhibit D:* “If ye be then risen again with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things that are above, and not on things which are on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ which is our life, shall show himself, then shall ye also appear with him in glory.”

I am sure that many of my readers will have picked up on the fact that all four passages are from Tyndale. However, that conclusion is based on utter familiarity with the KJV, not on a cleavage in lexical and syntactic register between the two translations. To use our own idiom, we can say that the King James translators tweaked Tyndale’s baseline. They smoothed out Tyndale’s infelicities and produced something more elegant, beautiful, and fluent. They changed Tyndale’s rendition “when Christ which is our life shall show himself” to read “when Christ who is our life shall appear.” Adam Nicolson summarizes the situation accurately when he writes, “Tyndale was working alone, in extraordinary isolation. His only audience was himself. And surely as a result there is a slightly bumpy, stripped straightforwardness about his matter and his rhythm.... [The King James translators] are memorable where Tyndale stumbles.”<sup>23</sup>

But doesn’t everyone know that Tyndale’s vocabulary was ninety percent Anglo-Saxon in origin, in contrast to the King James translators’s fondness for polysyllabic, Latinate words? Surprise: the percentage of Anglo-Saxon words is approximately the same for Tyndale and the KJV.<sup>24</sup>

### **FALLACY #7: THE KING JAMES STYLE IS UNIFORMLY EXALTED, ORNATE, AND EMBELLISHED.**

The King James style is one-of-a-kind, but it is hard to find the right terms by which to name its unique quality. Certainly we can use such designations as elegant, polished, beautiful, sonorous, and

dignified. But the King James style is not uniform, not usually eloquent, not predominantly embellished, and certainly not stilted, as debunkers today try to make us believe.

One reason the King James style is misinterpreted by people today as being a high style is that the archaic quality of Renaissance English automatically registers with modern readers as an exalted style. But for the most part such archaic features as the *thee* and *thou* pronouns and the inflected verb endings in such words as *walketh* and *goest* were how the person on the street spoke. They belonged to ordinary speech, not formalized discourse.

My own conclusion is that the King James style is as flexible and varied as what we find in the original text. This was virtually assured because the King James translators accepted an essentially literal translation philosophy that preserved the stylistic range of the original text of the Bible. When the original text of the Bible is exalted, the KJV naturally rises to that level. Consider some of the words that King Solomon uttered on the most solemn day of his life—the dedication of the temple (1 Kgs 8: 27-30):

But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, the heaven, and heaven of heavens, cannot contain thee: how much less this house that I have builded? Yet have thou respect unto the prayer of thy servant, and to his supplication, O Lord my God, to hearken unto the cry and to the prayer, which thy servant prayeth before thee to day. That thine eyes may be open toward this house, night and day, *even* toward the place of which thou hast said, My name shall be there: that thou mayest hearken unto the prayer which thy servant shall make towards this place. And hearken thou to the supplication of thy servant, and of thy people Israel, when they shall pray towards this place: and hear in heaven thy dwelling place, and when thou hearest, forgive.

That is the highest of the high style, confirming

the verdict of Greek playwright Aristophanes that “high thoughts must have high language.”

But the narrative parts of the KJV tend toward a straightforward and simple style—elegant, but simple. Here is an example (Luke 2:7-10):

And she brought forth her first born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

The prevailing style here is simple, though the *effect* is grand and awe-inspiring.

Often the King James style combines simplicity of form with majesty of effect. We can take Luke 11:9-10 as epitomizing the King James style: “Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you. For everyone that asketh, receiveth; and he that seeketh, findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened.” This does not stoop to the level of everyday colloquial conversation, but neither is it exalted or difficult to assimilate. It is simple in form, yet majestic in effect.

I want to stay with the quoted passage a moment longer. While the vocabulary is simple, the passage is so rhetorically embellished that I would call it a rhetorical *tour de force*. It is replete with antithesis, parallelism, and balance. It is artificial (“characterized by artifice”) and beautiful, and certainly not the way we speak at the corner coffee shop.

Advocates of colloquial translations are quick to say that the King James translators polished a passage like this to make it literary, thereby robbing it of an alleged (and illusory) rough vigor in the original text. But the King James translators



are not the ones who made the passage a small classic of rhetorical patterning. Jesus as speaker made it such. And to return to the cleavage between Tyndale and the KJV that is incorrectly claimed, in the quoted passage there is only one small discrepancy between Tyndale and the KJV: the King James translators reversed the word order of Tyndale's "shall it be opened" and made it read "it shall be opened."

The genius of the King James style is that it is elegant without being stilted, polished and at the same time infused with energy, and dignified instead of colloquial or demeaning to the Bible. Literary scholar Northrop Frye states it well: "The simplicity of the AV has often been praised, and this too is a quality that belongs to the original. But there are different kinds of simplicity.... The simplicity of the Bible is the simplicity of majesty, not of equality, must less of naiveté: its simplicity expressed the voice of authority."<sup>25</sup>

**FALLACY #8: FOR ALL PRACTICAL PURPOSES, THE KJV OF 1611 IS NOW OUT OF CIRCULATION AND HAS BEEN RELEGATED TO A SHELF IN THE MUSEUM OF THE PAST.**

To adapt a quip that Mark Twain uttered when he read an obituary of himself in a newspaper, the rumors of the death of the KJV have been greatly exaggerated. If we consult the current sales figures for English Bibles, year after year the KJV comes in either second or third on the list. A survey of websites reveals a whole segment of the evangelical world that never stopped using the KJV. Furthermore, among literary authors and literary scholars, the English Bible is still synonymous with the KJV.

Even if all copies of the KJV suddenly vanished, the King James Bible would live on as a pervasive cultural presence. People who pass through the gate of Harvard University would still read the inscription, "Open ye the gates that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in" (Isa 26:2). Students entering the library of the University of Oregon could still look up and read, "Ye

shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). The two million visitors who file past the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia each year would still read Leviticus 25:10 in its King James form: "Proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants thereof." Every Christmas thousands and probably millions of people would continue to hear Gospel passages from the KJV while listening to Handel's *Messiah*. The KJV is not on the verge of extinction in American society.

**FALLACY #9: THE PROLIFERATION OF MODERN TRANSLATIONS AND CORRESPONDING ECLIPSE OF THE KJV AS THE COMMON ENGLISH BIBLE HAS BEEN A GREAT ADVANTAGE TO THE CHURCH.**

In order to assess this claim, we need to get a picture of what life was like in England and America during the three and half centuries when the KJV was the only major English Bible on the scene. Former Yale University professor George Lindbeck paints the following picture:

Until recently, most people in traditionally Christian countries lived in the linguistic and imaginative world of the Bible. It was not the only world in which they dwelt.... Yet the text above all texts was the Bible. Its stories, images, conceptual patterns, and turns of phrase permeated the culture from top to bottom. This was true even for illiterates and those who did not go to church, for knowledge of the Bible was transmitted not only directly by its reading, hearing, and ritual enactment, but also indirectly by an interwoven net of intellectual, literary, artistic, folkloric, and proverbial traditions.... There was a time when every educated person, no matter how professedly unbelieving or secular, knew the actual text from Genesis to Revelation.... [The Bible came] to supply the conceptual and imaginative vocabularies ... with which we construe and construct reality.... So pervasive is this scriptural idiom

that much of western literature consists of sub-texts of the biblical text.... Thus all of experience, including sacred texts from other religions, such as the classics of Greece and Rome, was absorbed into the scriptural framework.... Christendom dwelt imaginatively in the biblical world.<sup>26</sup>

The picture that Lindbeck paints came to an end in the middle of the twentieth century. It coincided with two other developments: the essentially literal translation philosophy on which the KJV was based was replaced by dynamic equivalence, and the phenomenon of a single or common English Bible that virtually everyone in England and the United States used was replaced by a proliferation of English Bible translations.

All of this was accompanied by an unstated assumption that still prevails, namely, that the proliferation of English Bible translations has been a great liberation from the dominance of the magisterial KJV. I believe this assumption to be wrong. The proliferation of English Bible translations has not ushered in a golden age of biblical literacy but the opposite—a well-documented biblical illiteracy not only in society but in the evangelical church. In the very essay in which George Lindbeck describes the effects of a common Bible, he observes that when he came to Yale in the mid-fifties even students from nonreligious backgrounds knew the Bible better than students from churchgoing families knew it when he retired in the mid-nineties.

When the KJV went into eclipse, the Bible went into eclipse. Twenty years ago, a majority of evangelical young people would have said that the small group inductive Bible study had been a major ingredient in their high school religious experience. Today virtually none of them would say that. Evangelical pulpits from which the Sunday morning sermon is an exposition of a Bible passage are, if not statistically insignificant, not far from that.

Surely most of my readers are familiar with the following scenario. A group of Christians come to

a Bible study or Sunday school class carrying four or five or six different versions of the Bible. A vast democracy sets in. “What does *your* translation say?” “That’s interesting.” “I had never thought of the passage like that before.” The result is a thoroughgoing skepticism about our ability to know that the Bible says. After all, who is to say which translation is correct? Furthermore, a look at dynamic equivalent translations shows a bewildering multiplicity and contradiction in the translation of the same passage.

I am not proposing a return to the KJV as our common Bible. I am sounding an alarm about an unquestioned assumption that our current situation of a proliferation of English Bible translations is a good thing. Instead of celebrating our supposed liberation from the dominance of the KJV, we should be addressing the problem of neglect of the Bible that set in when the KJV ceased to be the common English Bible.

**FALLACY #10: THE BEST WAY TO APPROPRIATE THE GREATNESS OF THE KJV IS TO USE IT AS OUR PRIMARY ENGLISH BIBLE.**

I need to anticipate where my discussion will end. I am an advocate of appropriating the greatness of the KJV, not of abandoning it in favor of modern translations that repudiate the King James tradition or lineage. But this does not require use of the KJV itself. (I will explain myself later.)

Although I believe that the KJV is demonstrably the greatest English Bible ever, I myself do not regard it as the best English Bible to use today. Why not? For two reasons. First, scholarship has advanced beyond what prevailed at the time of the translation of the KJV. The technicalities of this are beyond my expertise, but the consensus among biblical scholars is that the case for the superiority of the *Textus Receptus* is a lost cause. For me personally, this is not a major issue. The passages affected by the textual preferences of the King James translators are so few, and modern scholarly editions and commentaries are so

plentiful, that I do not worry that people will be misled by the KJV. In fact, I trust the KJV more than I trust translations in which the translators feel free to add commentary to the biblical text, omit material that is in the biblical text, and substitute something in place of what is in the original text.

I believe that the major stricture against the KJV is the extreme archaism of vocabulary and grammar, archaism that baffles most modern readers. I myself find this archaism to be an obstacle even though I am a teacher of English Renaissance literature. During this anniversary year I have been using the KJV for my devotional reading. For the most part it has been exhilarating and uplifting, a welcome change of pace.

But there are also times when I find the devotional effect undermined by the difficulty of the language and grammar. “By thee have I been holden up from the womb: thou art he that took me out of my mother’s bowels” (Ps 71:6). “The works of his hands are verity and judgment” (Ps 111:7). “What ailed thee, O sea, that that thou fleddest? thou Jordan, that thou wast driven back?” (Ps 114:5). “How amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of hosts” (Psalm 84:1). “Through desire a man, having separated himself, seeketh and intermeddeth with all wisdom” (Prov 18:1). “for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things” (Rom 2:1). It is not an impossible task to understand such verses, but the archaism is an unnecessary barrier. Better options exist, and this leads to my concluding observation.

I grew up in a world in which the KJV was the only version that people used. I used the KJV through my college years, but not beyond that. Nonetheless, even though I have not used the KJV as my primary Bible for nearly half a century, I have never ceased to appropriate the greatness of the KJV. How can that be?

In addition to the KJV itself, there is something called the King James tradition or lineage. In fact, the KJV itself was the product of such a

tradition—a century of English Bible translation that took on the shape of a natural evolution toward the culminating KJV. There is a tradition continuing right to the present day of modern translations that consciously perpetuate the essentially literal translation philosophy coupled with the stylistic excellence and even the cadences of the KJV. I find a comment by Alister McGrath particularly insightful on how a modern translation can perpetuate the qualities of the KJV while being a genuinely modern version. “There is no doubt that the King James Bible is a model English text,” writes McGrath, but all translations “eventually require revision, not necessarily because they are defective, but because the language ... itself changes over time.”<sup>27</sup> To remain overly tied to the KJV, according to McGrath, is to “betray the intentions and goals of those who conceived and translated it—namely, to translate the Bible into living English.”<sup>28</sup>

On the logic of this, McGrath offers his opinion that “the true heirs of the King James translators are those who continue their task today.”<sup>29</sup> For me, this is preeminently true of the New King James Version and the English Standard Version. Anyone who uses either of these translations can be said to appropriate the excellence of the KJV.

The KJV rendition of Psalm 21:3 is, “For thou preventest him with the blessings of goodness: thou settest a crown of pure gold on his head.” In the English Standard Version it reads, “You meet him with rich blessings; you set a crown of fine gold upon his head.” The archaisms have been removed, but the beauty of language and fluency of cadence remain. Again, Psalm 24:1 in the KJV reads, “The earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof; the world, and they that dwell therein.” Here is the same verse in the English Standard Version: “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.” Only one word has been changed. We can read a Bible that is up-to-date in scholarship and language without selling the birthright of excellence represented by the KJV.

## CONCLUSION

I have slanted my remarks in this article around the principle of debunking fallacies that circulate in regard to the KJV. I will end by stating in positive form the ideas that I have phrased in negative form as I have challenged misconceptions about the KJV. First, although Shakespeare did not help translate the KJV, the writings of Shakespeare and the King James Bible share the distinction of being the high point of English language excellence and a standard of what constitutes good English. Second, although King James disliked the Puritans, God overruled the designs of an impious king and caused it to happen that the most influential book in the history of the English-speaking world is a book that embodies the very principles of the evangelical faith. Third, the KJV was the climax of a whole century of English Bible translation in which successive individuals and committees built upon the triumphs of the past.

Fourth, the KJV was not authorized by the king with his royal pomp, nor Anglican clerics in their vestments, but by ordinary people who knew a good thing when they read and heard it. Fifth, building on the experience of a whole century of English Bible translation, the King James translators saw the possibility of producing an over-the-top, best-of-the-best translation that within fifty years of its publication became what the English-speaking world would mean when it spoke of “the Bible.” Sixth, the King James translators possessed what one scholar calls “a sure instinct for betterment”<sup>30</sup> as they introduced only minor changes and refinements into the baseline that Tyndale and five other English translations bequeathed to them. Seventh, the style of the KJV is matchless, a blend of the simple and the majestic—often parodied, sometimes imitated, but never duplicated.

Eighth, the KJV remains a pervasive presence in our own culture and in the Christian world, living on not only in the cultural forms from the past but also in modern translations that perpetuate its translation philosophy and stylistic preferences.

Ninth, although the loss of the KJV as the common English Bible in the middle of the twentieth century has been a tragedy in our culture and in the church, individuals, families, churches, and schools can still make the Bible central within their own spheres. Tenth, although the archaic quality of the KJV makes it a problematical Bible for primary use today, it is nonetheless possible to choose a modern translation that retains the qualities that made the King James Bible the greatest English Bible ever.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Gordon Campbell, *Bible: The Story of the King James Version 1611-2011* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>2</sup>For a fully-documented overview on the subject of Shakespeare and the Bible, see Leland Ryken, “Shakespeare and the Bible,” in *Word and Rite: The Bible and Ceremony in Selected Shakespearean Works*, (ed. Beatrice Batson; Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2010), 1-21. For a preliminary foray into the Christian allegiance of Shakespeare’s plays, see the same author’s article “Shakespeare as a Christian Writer,” [cited 16 January 2012]. Online: <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/shakespeare-as-a-christian-writer.php>.

<sup>3</sup>John Velz, “Shakespeare and the Geneva Bible: The Circumstances,” in *Shakespeare, Marlowe, Jonson: New Directions in Biography* (ed. Takashi Kozuka and J. R. Mulryne; Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 115-16.

<sup>4</sup>Alec Gilmore, *A Dictionary of the English Bible and its Origins* (Sheffield: Academic, 2000), 26.

<sup>5</sup>James Baikie, *The English Bible and Its Story* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1959), 258.

<sup>6</sup>Benson Bobrick, *Wide as the Waters: The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution It Inspired* (New York: Penguin, 2001), 218.

<sup>7</sup>Craig H. Lampe, “English Bible History,” [cited 12 January 2012]. Online: <http://greatsite.com/timeline-english-bible-history/>. David Daniell claims that when the King James preface states the translators’s aim to make a good [translation] better, they “were referring to the Geneva Bible,” and in fact in

- the rest of the preface entitled “The Translators to the Reader” Miles Smith “quoted Scripture almost always from” the Geneva Bible. David Daniell, *The Bible in English: Its History and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 294.
- <sup>8</sup>Alister McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Anchor, 2001), 284.
- <sup>9</sup>*The [Westminster] Confession of Faith and Catechisms* (Willow Grove, PA: The Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2005), x.
- <sup>10</sup>John Livingston Lowes, “The Noblest Monument of English Prose,” in *Essays in Appreciation* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1936), 22-23.
- <sup>11</sup>Bobrick, *Wide as the Waters*, 258.
- <sup>12</sup>Craig R. Thompson, *The Bible in English, 1525-1611* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1958), 27.
- <sup>13</sup>Samuel McComb, *The Making of the English Bible* (New York: Moffat, Yard, 1909), 94, 97.
- <sup>14</sup>Eugene H. Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 162.
- <sup>15</sup>McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 176-78.
- <sup>16</sup>Geddes MacGregor, *The Bible in the Making* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1959), 181.
- <sup>17</sup>Adam Nicolson, BBC interview on December 24, 2003 [cited 12 January 2012]. Online: [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec03/nicolson\\_12-24.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/july-dec03/nicolson_12-24.html).
- <sup>18</sup>McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 778.
- <sup>19</sup>My information about numbers of editions in this paragraph come from MacGregor, *The Bible in the Making*, 284.
- <sup>20</sup>All quotations in this paragraph are from Peterson, *Eat This Book*, 162.
- <sup>21</sup>William Tyndale, “Preface to 1526 New Testament,” as quoted in David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 145-46.
- <sup>22</sup>David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 330.
- <sup>23</sup>Nicolson, *God’s Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible* (New York: Harper Collins, 2003), 223.
- <sup>24</sup>Bobrick, *Wide as the Waters*, 254; McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 262.
- <sup>25</sup>Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 211.
- <sup>26</sup>George A. Lindbeck, “The Church’s Mission to a Postmodern Culture,” in *Postmodern Theology: Christian Faith in a Pluralist World* (ed. Frederic B. Burnham; New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 38-42.
- <sup>27</sup>Alister McGrath, *In the Beginning*, 308-09.
- <sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 309.
- <sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 310.
- <sup>30</sup>Charles C. Butterworth, *The Literary Lineage of the King James Bible, 1340-1611* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1941), 242.

