"A very accessible and informed guide to this magisterial English translation of the Bible. Few will fail to benefit from its wisdom and learning."

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"An exemplary work—its research is extensive, its scholarship is impressive, its argument is reasonable, and its readability makes it accessible to scholar and layperson alike."

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DONALD L. BRAKE, Dean Emeritus, Multnomah Biblical Seminary; author, A Visual History of the King James Bible

"Drawing upon a lifetime of scholarship in both English literature and the Bible, Ryken has written a valuable volume celebrating the most important book in the English language."

DIANE LYNN SEVERANCE, Director, Dunham Bible Museum, Houston Baptist University

LELAND RYKEN is professor of English at Wheaton College and has written or edited numerous books, including The Word of God in English, Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, and A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible. Ryken served as literary stylist for The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®.
# Contents

Preface 11  
Abbreviations of Bible Translations 17

**Part One: The King James Bible in Its Own Day**  
1. In the Beginning 21  
2. From Tyndale to the King James Bible 31  
3. The Making of the King James Bible 43  
4. The King James Bible of 1611 55

**Part Two: The King James Bible in History**  
5. The Influence of the King James Bible on the History of Bible Translation 71  
6. The Influence of the King James Bible on Language, Education, and Religion 83  
7. The Influence of the King James Bible on Culture 99

**Part Three: The King James Bible as a Literary Masterpiece**  
8. What Makes an English Bible Literary? 117  
9. Prose Style in the King James Bible 129  
10. Poetic Effects in the King James Bible 143
## Contents

11. Acclaim for the King James Bible by the Literary Establishment 159

Part Four: The Literary Influence of the King James Bible

12. Literature and the Bible 169
13. Early Literary Influence of the King James Bible 181
14. The Nineteenth Century 195
15. The Modern Era 211

Afterword 229
Notes 235
Permissions 251
General Index 253
Scripture Index 261
Preface

The publication of the King James Bible in 1611 was a landmark event in the English-speaking world. In fact, I tell students in my English literature courses that it was the major event in English and American literature. Perhaps the importance is even greater than that: what has influenced the whole history of England and America more than the King James Bible?

The year 2011 marks the four hundredth anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Bible. It is customary to mark the anniversaries of public events with ceremonies and books. When a college or church reaches a milestone like a hundredth anniversary of its founding, we can confidently expect a book to accompany the event. In the realm of literature and the arts, every year sees the honoring of authors, composers, artists, or masterworks with performances, exhibits, and books.

The fanfare accompanying anniversaries like the ones I have mentioned is partly honorific, designed to praise what is praiseworthy and give honor where honor is due. But the impulse to commemorate anniversaries goes beyond that. When important people, places, or events are elevated in our consciousness, we naturally become curious to know the facts about them. When
Preface

I visit a literary or historical site in England or America, I not infrequently leave with a book or pamphlet in my hand. Numerous events, exhibits, and books are expected to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the King James Bible. It could hardly be otherwise. Inquiring minds want to know, and there is no good reason for cynicism about the attention that the King James Bible will receive around the time of its anniversary.

The book that you are holding in your hands has been occasioned by the four hundredth anniversary of the King James Bible. My primary purpose in writing the book is to provide information about the King James Bible and its influence. Alister McGrath, in the preface to his book *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture*, states that he wrote the book simply to answer the questions that arose over half a century of living with a King James Bible that he had received as a child (as did every other child in England in 1953 by command of Queen Elizabeth II upon her coronation). The impulse behind my book is similar: I want as many people as possible to know the story of the King James Bible and its influence.

I have not regarded it as a leading purpose to praise the King James Bible. Its nature and legacy speak for themselves. What is in danger of being lost (or has already been lost) is the story of what the King James Bible is and how it has influenced the English-speaking world. We do not need adulation of the KJV; we need knowledge of the things that have produced the adulation through the centuries.

While it is not my *purpose* to praise the King James Bible, I have made no effort to withhold my positive assessment of it. Its excellencies are part of the information that I want to make plain. I hope that my book will serve the same purpose as books that I have purchased after visiting Shakespeare’s Stratford or Lucy Maud Montgomery’s Prince Edward Island—to explain what makes them so famous and to share a legitimate enthusiasm about them.
Preface

We live in an era of revisionism and debunking. This has predictably infiltrated attitudes toward the KJV. If for no other reason than that it is the most influential and revered English Bible that has ever existed, the King James Bible is on the “hit list” of cultural revisionists. As I read the statements of debunkers of the KJV, I am at a loss to ascertain what it is that these writers have against the King James Bible, with the possible exception that the King James Bible is “sonorous.” I am reminded of a statement that C. S. Lewis made about the sixteenth-century humanists: they jeer but do not refute.

A favorite ploy of revisionists and debunkers is to label any positive statement about an author or book “hagiographic,” with the implication that hagiography is a criminal act. I was shocked to see a reviewer of McGrath’s book on the KJV dismiss it as hagiographic. An obvious feature of his book is its informational and objective approach to the material.

A brief history of my own contact with the KJV is as follows. I still have in my possession a King James Bible bearing this inscription in the front: “Presented to Leland Ryken by Father and Mother on December 25, 1951.” I was nine years old. The gold-embossed title “Holy Bible” is nearly illegible on the leather-bound cover, but my name at the very bottom is still easy to read. This was my Bible from grade school through my college years.

In graduate school I dabbled in a few modern translations, more out of novelty than conviction or heartfelt allegiance. When I came to teach at Wheaton College, I providentially came under the sway of people who used the Revised Standard Version in the form of the Harper Study Bible. It was one of the best things that ever happened to me. I used the Harper Study Bible with complete profit and delight until the appearance of the English Standard Version in 2001.

As my thumbnail autobiographical sketch implies, I do not believe that the King James Bible is the best translation for a reader today. One reason for this is that the KJV is not based on the best available knowledge about the Bible in its original Hebrew and Greek. Some parts of the KJV are based on ancient manuscripts.
Preface

that a majority of scholars today regard as inferior. I need to add, though, that in the past I have too glibly pronounced the KJV suspect in accuracy. It is not as accurate as modern translations that are based on the principle of essentially literal translation. But when set beside modern dynamic equivalent translations, the KJV is, on balance, more accurate as a rendition of what the original authors wrote.

The real case against the KJV for regular use today is the archaism of the language. For modern readers unfamiliar with the King James Bible, the language is an insurmountable barrier. Even for people who have always used the KJV, some of its words are a mystery.

But I need to say one more thing. Whenever I hear a modern colloquializing Bible read in public, I invariably feel the text to be flat and lacking in affective power. On such occasions I am dismayed that a segment of the Christian public has settled for something so inferior when better options exist. If I were forced to choose between the King James Bible and a modern colloquial translation, I would choose the KJV.

The history that I have just sketched would not by itself have equipped me to write a book on the King James Bible. The process that has eventuated in my present book began in 1978 with the appearance of the New International Version. I had been given an NIV New Testament when it appeared in advance of the complete Bible. It struck me as an insipid and lifeless translation, but I never analyzed why it struck me that way until I was asked to write the review of “the literary merits of the NIV” for Christianity Today. I subjected the NIV to literary analysis and came up with reasons why I think the NIV is an inferior translation. Having gone to that scholarly effort, I composed a lecture on the King James Bible for my course in sixteenth-century English literature. The principles that I articulated in that lecture form the basis for this book.

Why do we need another book on the King James Bible? The reasons are multiple. One is corrective in nature. In a day when debunking the Bible is common in academic circles, a lot
of what is disseminated is simply incorrect. Additionally, as I implied above, the “sneer factor” is very strong in some circles. Some people imply by name-calling that the KJV is ridiculous, but the case for its inferiority is never laid out. I hope that in making the case for the King James Bible I will prompt people to see that the allegations against the KJV are rarely supported by honest argument.

Something parallel can happen among enthusiasts for the King James Bible. They, too, are capable of asserting their attitude toward the KJV without providing arguments and proofs for what makes the King James Bible excellent. I believe that readers of my book will see reasons for the claims that are made in favor of the King James Bible. A lot of the adulation surrounding the KJV on its four hundredth anniversary can be labeled propagandistic. My book will put the claims on a sound footing.

For the most part, the material that I cover in this book has been familiar to me for a long time. I have written multiple books on the history and principles of Bible translation. In addition, my own education and professional expertise lie in English literature, especially of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. I have had a longstanding interest in the Bible as literature and as a literary influence on English and American authors.

From the beginning, this book was designed to fall into two halves. The first half deals with the King James Bible in its original context and as an influence on Bible translation and culture since then. The second half of the book is literary in emphasis. This includes the King James Bible as literature—an analysis of its literary qualities—and the influence of the KJV on English and American literature.

The organization of the book will be further clarified when I say that it explores four spheres in which we can see the stature of the KJV:

1. Its status as the climax of a whole century of English Bible translation
Preface

2. Its influence in the subsequent history of Bible translation and in English-speaking culture
3. The literary excellence of the King James Bible itself
4. The influence of the King James Bible on English and American literature

In composing this book, I have adopted the stance of telling the story of the King James Bible—the story of how it came to be, the story of what kind of book it is, the story of how it influenced subsequent Bible translation and English and American culture, and the story of its literary qualities and literary influence.

For my King James text, I have used a reprint of the 1611 King James Bible published by Hendrickson Publishers in 2008. I have modernized spelling and sometimes punctuation for the sake of readability but have preserved archaic pronouns and verb endings. When quoting extended passages of prose I have used a paragraph format instead of the verse-by-verse indentation of the KJV.

Credit for the idea of this book goes to Lane Dennis, president of Crossway. I also hereby record my heartfelt gratitude to the interlibrary loan staff of Buswell Library on the campus of Wheaton College; they were exemplary colleagues in being always helpful and never complaining, and I could not have written this book without their assistance.
In the Beginning

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 beforetime.

—William Tyndale, commenting on his task as translator of the Bible into English

WHAT IS THE ACTUAL ORIGIN of the King James Bible? Surely its lineage needs to be traced backward from the committee that assembled to begin its deliberations in 1604. But how far back must we go to find the origins of the King James Version?

Let us consider an analogy: what is the origin of modern jet air travel? We might trace it back to the first jet airplane. Or we might trace it back to propeller airplanes of the 1940s as representing the forerunner of improved jet engineering. But neither of those would represent the situation accurately. The origin of modern jet airplanes is ultimately the Wright brothers’ rudimentary aircraft flown at Kitty Hawk in 1903. Before the history of flight could unfold, someone needed to master the essential principles of flight and prove that flying could be done.
The King James Bible in Its Own Day

John Wycliffe

The ultimate origin of English Bible translation is the work of John Wycliffe (ca. 1320–1384) and his associates. A towering theologian of his day, the Oxford-educated Wycliffe is known as “the morning star of the Reformation.” Although Wycliffe began his clerical life within the Catholic Church, his outspoken criticism of corruption in the church and his radical political ideas eventually led church officials to pronounce his teachings heretical.

A “fact sheet” on what is the Wycliffite version of the Bible (so-called because it was the product of Wycliffe’s associates more than of him) is as follows:

- The English of the translation is Middle English (the language of Chaucer), not modern English.
- Over 150 copies of the Wycliffite Bible still exist, and they are all in handwritten form because the Wycliffite Bible predated the invention of the printing press.
- The text of the Bible from which the translation was made is the Latin Vulgate.
- The Wycliffite Bible exists in two versions. The first is a literal translation of the Latin Vulgate text. The second has an eye on the English “receptor language” and is accordingly more understandable by an English audience.
- The first complete Bibles in the two translations appeared around 1380–1384. There were no printed versions of the Wycliffite Bible until 1731 (New Testament), and the standard printed edition was published in Oxford in 1850.
- Even though the Wycliffite Bible circulated in handwritten manuscripts, only the rich could afford to own a copy, with the result that the greatest circulation consisted of oral readings from the Bible by traveling preachers known as Lollards (many of whom were burned as heretics by the church establishment).
“The Wycliffe Bible was . . . not merely a book but an event. There attaches to it . . . a historical as well as a literary importance. For while it announces that a new stage has been reached in the evolution of our native tongue, it marks . . . a momentous epoch in our religious development.” —H. W. Hamilton-Hoare, The Evolution of the English Bible

What the King James Bible Owes to Wycliffe

In what sense can the Wycliffite Bible be considered the ultimate origin of the KJV? First, whoever does something first is in some sense the originator of that thing. Someone had to have the vision for an English translation of the Bible before it could become an established institution in the English-speaking world. Wycliffe and his associates had that vision and proved that the vision could be put into practice.

Second, from the beginning, the impetus behind English Bible translation has been spiritual and evangelical. To translate the Bible is qualitatively different in its purpose from translating Homer or Plato. Further, the goal is that laypeople might understand the message of the Bible and obey it in their lives. Wycliffe’s associate John Purvey wrote that the goal of his translation was that through it God might “grant to us all grace to know well and to keep well holy writ.” Elsewhere we read that the purpose was “to save all men in our realm whom God will have saved.” This will be a theme through the whole subsequent history of English Bible translation, including the King James Bible.

Finally, the Wycliffite translators eventually evolved the principle that the language and syntax of an English translation must be clear and understandable to an English reader. In the words of the prologue to the second Wycliffite translation, the translators aimed “to translate after the meaning and not only after the words.” This is not an endorsement of the practice of modern dynamic equivalence to change details of the original biblical text into something equivalent in modern life. Instead it is a comment against transposing Latin syntax and vocabulary into English.
William Tyndale

Important as John Wycliffe is to the early history of English Bible translation, William Tyndale (1494–1536) is the person who deserves highest homage as the fountainhead of English Bible translation. I have told his story in multiple places elsewhere, but my emphasis this time is different. In keeping with the focus of this book, I am interested in what Tyndale contributed to the King James Bible.

Tyndale shares something important with Wycliffe and the Lollards that he does not share with the King James translators: he translated the Bible under threat to his life. Eventually he died a martyr because of his translation of the Bible. Educated at Oxford as Wycliffe was, Tyndale was a linguistic genius whose expertise in seven languages dazzled the scholarly world of his

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**Important Dates in William Tyndale’s Life as a Translator**

1512 Tyndale graduates from Oxford University with a BA (MA in 1515).

1516 Erasmus’s improved Greek New Testament is published, providing a superior original text from which Tyndale can work.

1521 Tyndale is ordained to the priesthood, the same year in which Cardinal Wolsey oversees the burning of “heretical” Reformation books at St. Paul’s Cathedral.

1524 Tyndale relocates to Germany to translate the New Testament in hiding.

1525 Tyndale’s New Testament is published.

1526 Copies of the New Testament arrive in England, smuggled in bales of wool and bags of wheat. Catholic bishops burn as many copies as they can confiscate.

1530 Tyndale’s English translation of the Pentateuch is published.

1534 Tyndale’s revised New Testament is printed.

1535 Tyndale is lured out of hiding by a Catholic sympathizer, imprisoned, and declared a heretic.

1536 Tyndale is strangled and burned at the stake near Brussels in Belgium.
In the Beginning
day. Early in his scholarly and clerical life he came to view the
translation of the Bible into English as his life calling, and since
he shared Wycliffe’s Reformation ideas regarding the church, he
quickly found himself an opposed and then hunted man.

Tyndale’s goal was the same as Wycliffe’s—to see the Bible
infiltrate the whole cross section of his country. In particular,
Tyndale wanted laypeople to have access to the Bible in their own
language. He famously told a Catholic that he aspired to “cause a
boy that driveth the plough” to “know more of the Scripture than
thou dost.” The reference to the plowboy has been extravagantly
misinterpreted. It is not a comment on Tyndale’s preferred En-
glish style but rather a statement about (a) how widely Tyndale
wanted the Bible distributed across the English social strata and
(b) the large quantity of the Bible that Tyndale wanted people
to know—“more of the Scripture” than just the passages doled
out in mass and church services.

How Tyndale Started a Social Climate That Paved the Way
for the KJV

Early translators and disseminators of the English Bible were
opposed and sometimes murdered by Catholic Church officials
and their henchmen. But by the time the King James transla-
tors did their work, the situation was completely reversed. That
translation was actually instigated by the monarch, King James I.
The teams of translators met in the three most prestigious loca-
tions imaginable—Oxford and Cambridge Universities and the
Jerusalem room just off the entrance to Westminster Abbey in
London. The work of the committee was accompanied by fanfare
and had full sanction of the Church of England. How could this
have happened?

The answer is that the work of Wycliffe and Tyndale started
a grassroots revolution in England. The Bible, by its own testi-
mony, is “living and active” (Heb. 4:12, ESV). Once laypeople
in England had their appetite for the Bible whetted, there was no
stopping the movement of English Bible translation. In Wycliffe’s
day, when the Bible was available only in handwritten form,
towners flocked to hear parts of the Bible read orally by traveling preachers known as Lollards. Even though this was an underground movement, it flourished. Only the rich could afford to buy the expensive volumes, but farmers were willing to rent a copy by the day for the price of a load of hay.4

The populist hunger for the Word was even more evident once Tyndale’s New Testament made it from the Continent to England. Just at the time of the printing of Tyndale’s New Testament, governmental officials had banned ships from Germany from entering English ports. But catastrophic rains so devastated the sowing season in England that the ban was lifted. Copies of Tyndale’s New Testament were smuggled into England in sacks of flour and bales of cloth. Even though an act of synod known as the Constitutions of Oxford (1409) had long since made it illegal for anyone to translate or even read any part of the Bible in the English vernacular, copies nonetheless flooded England. At one point Cuthbert Tunstall, Bishop of London, bought a large stock of copies of Tyndale’s New Testament and burned them at St. Paul’s Cathedral, but the whole enterprise was a trick orchestrated by a sympathizer of Tyndale. The money gained from the sale of the Bibles actually gave Tyndale the capital he needed to pay off printing debts and begin a new round of publication.

“There is no shortage of evidence of the gatherings of people of all ages, all over the country, to read and hear these English Scriptures [as translated by Tyndale]—and reading meant, so often, reading aloud. . . . The corner that English readers turned in the 1530s, stepping into direct access to the whole Bible, did not lead to one or two curious Bible effects. . . . On the contrary: turning that corner was suddenly to be faced with a vast, rich, sunlit territory.” —David Daniell, *The Bible in English*

There is another aspect of the social revolution that Tyndale effected that is often overlooked. Up to the time of Tyndale, virtually all important scholarly and ecclesiastical discourse in Europe was conducted in Latin. Even the official church Bible, the
In the Beginning

Vulgate, was a Latin document. It was just assumed that the really important intellectual matters would be conducted in Latin.

If the idea of an English Bible had become mainstream by the time the King James translators sat around the table to begin translating the Bible, it was a result of what Tyndale had accomplished nearly a century earlier. Tyndale’s Bible ended the hegemony that Latin had enjoyed in the church and academy for centuries, and it struck a blow for the vernacular in all spheres of English society. One scholar theorizes that “the real horror” of Tyndale’s New Testament to the church officials “was not so much the words in themselves . . . but that they were English words.”

Yet another detail that we need to note is that whereas Wycliffe had translated the Bible into Middle English, by Tyndale’s time modern English had begun. In this way, too, Tyndale is the fountain from which all subsequent English Bible translation flowed. Additionally, the specific kind of English that Tyndale helped to establish and then perpetuate as his translation continued to be read is important. David Daniell calls it an English plain style. This should not be construed to mean colloquial, as in everyday conversation or in the mode of modern colloquial Bible translations. It means Anglo-Saxon words as opposed to Latin-derived words—plain in the sense of clear. This is a plain style in the mode of Shakespeare’s plays, as articulated in the cliché “without Tyndale, no Shakespeare.”

The Principles of Translation That Tyndale Bequeathed to the KJV

In addition to initiating a hunger for the vernacular Bible among English laypeople, Tyndale formulated and then put into practice the principles of English Bible translation that the King James translators also followed. Tyndale knew that he was a pioneer and that what he was doing would be influential to posterity (as in fact it has been). Despite that, Tyndale left no detailed explanation of his philosophy of translation, not even in his preface to the New Testament, which is instead a statement of evangelical doctrine and of Tyndale’s desire that people be saved. Nonetheless
it is relatively easy to infer Tyndale’s philosophy of translation, which was fully embraced by the King James translators.

“The accuracy and easy-to-read-style of the King James Version of 1611 dwarfed the work of all previous translations. And yet, the work of William Tyndale should be valued as the greatest influence on English translations and its language. . . . Even the famous translators of the 1611 King James Version relied heavily upon the work of Tyndale.” —Donald L. Brake, *A Visual History of the English Bible*

Tyndale’s first principle was that an English translation of the Bible needs to start with the words of the original Hebrew and Greek of the Old and New Testaments, respectively. This may seem obvious to us, but it was not obvious before Tyndale’s time. The Latin Vulgate had been the assumed starting point for serious Bible study and translation for centuries. Even Wycliffe and his associates had no viable alternative but to start with the Latin translation of the original Hebrew and Greek texts. So far as professional expertise was concerned, Tyndale was above all a linguist, though of course he was secondarily a theologian.

A second principle that we can discern in Tyndale is fidelity to the actual words of the original text. In fact, Tyndale’s commitment to preserving the very words of the original was so strong that he actually invented new English words to reproduce the very words of the Hebrew and Greek original—words like *intercession*, *atonement*, and *passover*. We will see that the King James translators went even further than Tyndale in making sure that they translated exactly what was in the original, but the essential pattern had been laid by Tyndale.

A third principle that we can discern in Tyndale’s actual translation is that Tyndale expected his readers to rise to what is called standard formal English. Two things have obscured this and skewed modern thinking on the subject. One is Tyndale’s famous comment about the plowboy, which is a comment not on style (as it is commonly misinterpreted to be) but on how widely
and deeply Tyndale wanted biblical knowledge to permeate the minds of individual people. Second, there are a few famous colloquialisms in Tyndale, as when the Serpent tells Eve, “Tush, ye shall not die,” or when Joseph is called “a luckie felowe.” But these are anomalies in Tyndale’s Bible. As much as 80 percent of Tyndale’s translation was carried over into the comparable parts of the King James Bible. The KJV, in turn, is often considered the very touchstone of eloquence, so the claim of modern colloquial Bible translators that Tyndale is their model cannot possibly be true.

Summary
The King James Bible did not suddenly appear in 1611. In a significant way it had been in the making for over two centuries. Furthermore, William Tyndale is not the head of the river of Renaissance Bible translation. Some of the famous phrases that found their way into the KJV first appeared in the Wycliffite Bible. Nonetheless, William Tyndale is the forerunner to whom the King James Bible owes the most.

Further Reading
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