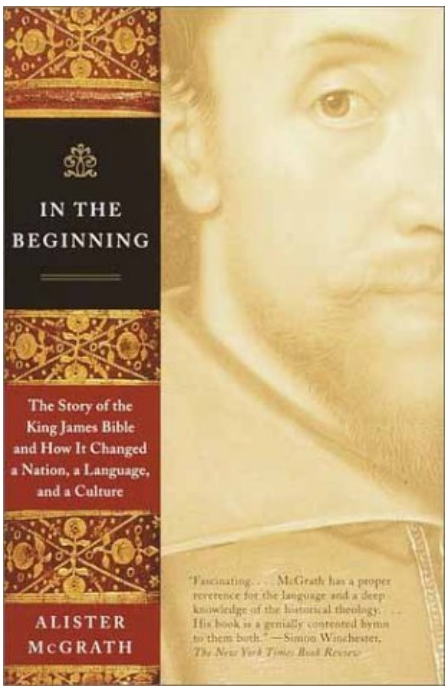

In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture

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In the sixteenth century, to attempt to translate the Bible into a common tongue wasn't just difficult, it was dangerous. A Bible in English threatened the power of the monarch and the Church. Early translators like Tyndale, whose work greatly influenced the King James, were hunted down and executed, but the demand for English Bibles continued to grow. Indeed it was the popularity of the Geneva Bible, with its anti-royalist content, that eventually forced James I to sanction his own, pro-monarchy, translation. Errors in early editions--one declared that "thou shalt commit adultery"--and Puritan preferences for the Geneva Bible initially hampered acceptance of the King James, but it went on to become the definitive English-language Bible.

This fascinating history of a literary and religious masterpiece explores the forces that led to the decision to create an authorized translation, the method of translation and printing, and the central role this version of the Bible played in the development of modern English. McGrath's history of the King James Bible’s creation and influence is a worthy tribute to a great work and a joy to read.

In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture Details

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From Reader Review In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture for online ebook

Mike Jensen says

This year is the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible, a good time to read McGrath’s history of that book. More than half the book is context setting from the reign of Henry VIII though the book's provisional acceptance in nineteenth century culture, with detailed stories about all previous English versions of the Bible. There is so much detail and context that the decision to make an authorized translation does not come until half-way through the book, and when it does McGrath suits the interest of our times by spending most of his on the politics that made the book desirable to some and unacceptable to others, and that shaped the translation decisions made by the King and his committee. The author does all of this wonderfully, so why not 5 stars? McGrath only scratches the surface of the celebrated elegance of this translation and its place in and influence on English letters. The book would be perfect if he had given another 50 or 100 pages to this.

Scott says

A very interesting history of the King James Bible. Not really a page turner but fascinating to learn about all the factors that influenced the translation and its strengths and weaknesses. A very interesting point I learned is the language it was written in was about 200 years old at the time of the translation and was outdated. The translators chose to use English as it was in a previous translation and only correct tranlsation errors.

Matt Simmons says

A wonderful primer on the history, technological changes, and politics of the late middle ages, the history, politics, and theology behind the Reformation, the debates that went into translating the Bible into English, the history of early-modern English translations and how these relate to the political struggle between Royalists, Parliamentarians, Puritans, and Anglicans, and how this all eventually results in the King James Bible. McGrath also does a fine job of describing the translation process, the various theories of scriptural translation, that informed all of the English translations of the Bible. As a popular, layman's history of these things, it doesn't go into a lot of depth, but does an admirable job of providing just enough information to give context for appropriate understanding. McGrath is highly readable, and the book present complex issues without ever sacrificing lucidity or moving towards inaccessibility.

Three things hold the book back, however:
1--McGrath focuses too much on perhaps unnecessary background information, and thus puts himself in a bind wherein he sacrifices how much focus he can put on the actual ostensible subject. The story of the KJB doesn't begin until about 2/3 in, and feels somewhat rushed. While the discussions of European politics and theology post-Gutenberg are intriguing and well done, for the purposes of this book, they felt as if they were largely superfluous. Better to give a quick summary and start with discussing the need for an English Bible post-Henry VIII much more quickly.

2--An odd repetitiveness haunts the book, suggesting some editorial issues.
3--One of the most interesting aspects of the KJB is its continuing popularity. McGrath recognizes this, but moves his discussion of the KJB as a literary masterpiece, a thing of enduring theological consideration, etc. to the last 25 or so pages. This is easily one of the most fascinating parts of the history of the work, and is too-lightly treated.

While flawed and perhaps lacking focus in places, McGrath does an excellent job of writing a readable, accessible, and generally fascinating history of the most vital period of Anglophone Christianity, and its most important production.

Lucynell says

To use the author's own words in a more generalized way this book is '....the story of how an ugly duckling became a swan; a translation that at first singularly failed to excite the popular imagination went on to be acclaimed as "the noblest monument of English prose." It is a long and fascinating story, which can here only be told in part.' Alister McGrath, Professor of Historical Theology at the University of Oxford, keeps it short and fascinating but unfortunately is not much of a writer, and this book is in serious need of some editing. It's messy, repetitive, and not at all measured. But its a truly, again, fascinating story that goes a long way beyond theology and philology. The King James Bible is perhaps the most influential text in the whole of the the English language and the work of the translators is duly appreciated and even revered. I assume there's better books on the subject out there, better written, but for now this will do just fine.

Marsha says

This book was wonderful in its history of the King James Bible. It also provided a history of changes in religion and the search for religious freedom; a history of book publishing; and a history of the English language.

King James was the British king who ordered this English “authorized version” of the Bible, which appeared in 1611, over four hundred years ago. The King James Bible has since become a landmark in the history of the English language and inspired poets, dramatists, artists and politicians.

Johannes Gutenberg established a new way of transferring ink to paper using the first printing press. Gutenberg felt challenged to produce the Bible, which was a popular book at the time. The Bible printed by Gutenberg had been in the Latin language, which at the time was the language of the church and diplomacy. However, the original Bible was not in Latin, but written in the language of the ancient world – the Old Testament in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. The Germans printed their first German version of the Bible in 1466, but there was not a hint of an interest in an English version.

In the fourteenth century, there had been opposition against translating the Bible to English and perhaps that was why the Bible hadn’t been translated earlier. There had been fear that an English translation might encourage English peasants to revolt against their misters. English was considered a barbarous language, lacking any real grammatical structure and could not express the truths of the Bible, or Christian faith. Religious establishments spoke Latin and French.

However, the Renaissance era put new emphasis on individuality, affecting European culture. One important change was in religion. People did not want to be told by their clergy what the Bible said. They no longer wanted to accept the views of the Bible by the clergy, but to be able to interpret and read the Bible for themselves. They wanted to own their own copies and to be able to read it for themselves.

There was a push for reform. Martin Luther, (1483 – 1546) was an activist, a German theologian and author. He questioned as to why people needed the church to interpret the Bible for them. Did the church have a vested interest in not allowing its public to read and interpret the Bible on their own? He felt what people needed was the ability to read the Bible in their own language. In September 1522, Luther translated the New Testament from the original Greek into German. In the summer of 1523, Luther also translated the first five books of the Old Testament.
After Luther's translations of the Bible were published, others wondered if they could translate the Bible into their own native language. William Tyndale (1494 – 1536) was widely acknowledged as having the most influence on the text of the King James Bible. Tyndale's concern as that the translation of the scripture required knowledge of the three languages of Greek, Hebrew and Latin. Tyndale's English edition was published at Worm, Germany in 1526. His translation would become a functional importance to the shaping of later English translations.

Many of the words and phrases used by Tyndale found their way into the English language. He coined such phrases as: "the powers that can be," "my brother's keeper," "the salt of the earth," and "a law unto themselves." He invented the English word "Passover" to refer to the Jewish festival known in Hebrew as "Petah." He created other words such as "scapegoat" and "atonement."

Tyndale produced an excellent English New Testament. However, the church and state did not wish to authorize Tyndale's Bible. Tyndale's New Testament was treated as a supporter of Lutheran ideas, rather than taken seriously as a responsible translation.

By 1530, copies of another English Bible were smuggled into England. This was Tyndale's translation of the Book of Genesis. In 1954, Tyndale released a revision of the New Testament, making about five thousand alternations. Tyndale was killed in October 1536, by strangulation and his dead body burned at the stake. He was a victim of the religious tensions of the period that he had helped create due to his commitment towards bringing biblical translations to England, and also due to his Protestant beliefs.

Biblical translations at that time were more than a scholarly challenge. It was also illegal and dangerous. However, Tyndale's translations had opened floodgates that could no longer be ignored. It was merely a matter of time before an English Bible would be published again, but this time, Royal authority was urged. The first complete English Bible appeared in 1535 by Miles Coverdale (1488 – 1569) who based his work on existing translations. Published in 1537, another English Bible was released, often known as "Matthew's Bible" from a pseudonym used by John Rogers who had associated with Tyndale. He used the pseudonym to protect himself.
Pressure now began to develop for an English Bible to be placed in every parish church in England. The most effective way was to distribute reliable and safe translations and insist that it be read out loud during public worship. Matthew's Bible was chosen for this purpose. By 1560, another translation was released as the Geneva Bible, which had been produced in the city of Geneva. It set new standards for biblical translation, illustration, and layout. It included marginal comments. The Geneva Bible is the work of William Whittingham (1524 – 1579) who had the assistance of a few others. Whittingham fled England because of his Protestant views. In Geneva, Protestants were provided a safe place for their theological studies.

The Geneva Bible had popular appeal when it came out. It would become a market leader.

By 1600, the Geneva Bible had become the Bible of choice of English speaking Protestants and became the most widely read Bible of the Elizabethan period.

However, when King James succeeded Elizabeth, he did not like the Geneva Bible. He disliked the marginal notes, which offered political comments in the text. The Geneva Bible often used the word “tyrant” to refer to kings. It taught that kings were not to be respected. It suggested that it is lawful to disobey or deceive kings. This suggestion worried King James.

King James wanted to rid England of the Geneva Bible, but the question was how. He knew it might be difficult because the Geneva Bible was popular.

A proposal was made by an archbishop for a new Bible translation. James directed that the “best learned” at Oxford and Cambridge should begin work on a new translation of the Bible. It would have to be reviewed by bishops, and then presented to the Privy Council, and finally to be ratified by royal authority. The translation was to be made of the whole Bible “as consonant as can be to the original Hebrew, Greek, and this is to be set out and printed, without marginal notes….” This new Bible would be sympathetic to the position of the Church of England.

Rules of translation were drawn up by Richard Bancroft, the new archbishop of Canterbury in 1604, and approved by James to limit the freedom of the translators. The rules took into account earlier English translations. The task would be influenced by English translations already available, thus allowing the achievements of others to be valued. Thus, alternations were to be made on earlier translations.

The King James Bible was designed to be read publicly in Church, so the translators’ goal was to ensure that the reader and the listener could understand their translations.

The translators felt free to use a variety of English terms. They also tried to avoid repetition and use variety in the text. The translators used the standard orthography of the time. Examples “foorth” instead of “forth,” “shee” instead of “she,” “sonne” instead of “son,” “neighbours” instead of “neighbors,” “passe” instead of “pass,” “childe” instead of “child,” and so much more.

The final text was brought to the King’s Printer, Robert Barker. The production of the King James Bible was a massive undertaking, both on account of the length of the work itself, and to the considerable number of copies that were demanded of the first printing. As the King was also not paying the costs, it would need to be funded by venture capitalists.

The first printing of the King James Bible in 1611 at Barker’s printing house located close to the center of London used high quality linen and rag paper. The process of producing the printed books was still quite time consuming and labor intensive. The early printings of the King James Bible had many errors. Some of these errors were due to the complexity of the text. Some were due to the cost savings in reducing the number of proofreaders used to check the text for errors. When a second reprint came out in 1613, some of the errors noted in the first edition were duly corrected.
The King James Bible also had some errors in translation. For instance, in the Hebrew, many idioms were used and sometimes the translators did not know where to interpret the Hebrew idioms as an expression or in the literal sense. An idiom is a distinctive way of saying something which does not mean what it literary suggests. For example, the idiom “to be hot under the collar,” if taken in the literal sense might imply a sudden rise in temperature at the base of the neck. However, it actually means to get angry.

Occasionally, the translators translated the Hebrew idioms in the literal sense and were incorrect in their

interpretations, thus changing the meaning of the text. The translators of the King James Bible were also occasionally faced with rare Hebrew words whose meanings were obscure. Interpreting these words were a challenge for the translators as often these words were only used once or twice throughout the Bible, and so it was difficult to use the context to try and determine their meaning.

The understanding of the Hebrew language has developed considerably since 1600 as a wealth of knowledge has been accumulated. Thus, translators have since had a better understanding of the characteristics of Hebrew and can see the errors made in the translation of the King James Bible.

They found some challenges in translating from the Greek as well. The entire New Testament was written in Greek with the exception of a few words drawn from the Aramaic. The Greek appeared to have little relation to the classic Greek of Plato, Aristotle or Homer. Even as late as 1852, the form of Greek found in the New Testament continued to puzzle scholars. It wasn’t until the late nineteenth century that significant advances were made to understand the everyday Greek of the eastern Mediterranean world.

The King James Bible has had a significant impact on the development of the English language.

One of the unintended goals of the King James Bible was to provide norms in written and spoken English. Continued use of the King James Bible for personal use would become a major force in the shaping of Standard English. For instance, Hebraic phrases became accepted parts of the English language due to their usage in the King James Bible.

When the King James Bible first was published, it initially was regarded with polite disinterest. Many preferred to continue to use the Geneva Bible. The King James Bible had a long way to go before it became the Bible of the English people, before it became recognized as one of the high points of English literary achievements.

The King James Bible allowed its reader to forget that what they were reading was a translation originally written in foreign languages. The Bible used language that inspired its readers, rather than dull them.

However, there were demands for revisions, since the English language has changed considerably since 1611, causing some difficulty in interpretation. The King James Bible can be viewed as an historical landmark of the development of the English language.

The English of 1611 is not the English of today. The King James Bible has been since revised to bring it up to date.

For still more details on this topic, I highly recommend this book.

Jen says

Yes, I just fractal-ed myself--I read a book about a book.

Admittedly, the King James Bible is the arguably the most important book in the English language, so if you're going to read a book about a book, that's the book to read a book about.

In the Beginning is not only just about the King James Bible, but about the translation of the Bible into English. For most people today, the idea that you wouldn't be able to read the Bible in your own language is almost crazy talk. But that there is radical thinking for the Middle Ages. Wycliffe is usually given credit for providing the first translation of the bible. What makes this more crazy is that the Bible that no one wanted translated was itself a translation--into Latin. So yeah, for most of us...it's just weird that anyone would tell anyone not to translate a Bible. So once you wrap your head around the idea that this was an outrageous idea, you can move on.

This book also discusses the influence of movable type on the mass production of, and thus need of, a mass translation of the Bible. Admittedly when the only copies of the Bible were done in monasteries where everyone spoke Latin, there simply wasn't a whole lot of "we need a Bible in English" even beyond the "then everyone could read it...oohhhhhhssss noooooessss" effect. It's again slightly weird for most people to imagine paying the price of a small farm for a book, but that's what people did. And I must admit, I wish people treated books a lot better than they do now. If monks had to copy out every word by hand, I bet no one would own a copy of *Fifty Shades of Grey* and that's a good thing.

Then we get into all the translations (there were a lot of them) and how they differed and then we FINALLY get to the King James Bible (the length of time it took to get to the actual subject of the book may explain a loss of star). And lastly the author describes the influence, which is pretty substantial. I especially enjoyed all the Hebrew idioms that we think of as "English" such as "salt of the earth" and "to fall flat on his face." I like to think I'm being just as snarky as someone 2000+ years ago.

The second loss of star (and potentially more) comes from my intense dislike of the author's writing style. He repeats words ad nauseum--sometimes in just one sentence. He describes the same event, thought, process repeatedly again and again. He sometimes just doesn't really make sense. And then he also repeats himself again. Reading the section on Gutenberg was akin to the scene in "European Vacation"--"Look readers, it's movable type." He also seems to love the idea he's doing a lecture "we'll get to that later," "we'll discuss that further on," and "we'll address this in the next chapter." All of which made me want to not read the book simply of of spite "NO WE WON'T DISCUSS THIS...YOU CAN'T TELL ME WHAT TO DO!!!!"

This book is full of really really good information and the subject matter is wonderfully interesting--especially how it was generally forgotten at times that the King James Bible wasn't actually "THE BIBLE" but a translation. We English speakers sometimes like to forget that there were once other languages. If you can get past the awkward repetitiveness and the "I'm teaching a class on this," then you'll probably really enjoy it. However, I do think there might be a better book on this interesting subject out there.

Steve C says

A great book and a good resource. The last pages show a comparrision between the different versions of the King James Bible. That realization prompted me to ask an anti-Mormon friend of mine, "now which version of the KJB do you subscribe to?" After a long pause on the phone and the sound of pages turning he answered, "you know, the one we all read." People don't realize there were several versions, including the first which include the apocrypha. It took a while for me to get through this short book, thus the 4 not 5 stars.

Dianne Oliver says

An interesting and pretty thorough (if a bit dry and sophomoric in places) telling of the politics, religion, and language development of the king james version of the bible. some really interesting factoids scattered throughout kept me involved til the end- which is where I finally found reference but no true answer to what I was most curious about! (that being, the reason it has such a fanatical following as the one true version for many). On a personal note, being a fan of the Thee/Thou school, I was disheartened to learn the truth regarding that. A good read.

Jesse says

A good historical account of the King James Version of the Bible. Thorough and well written. It was helpful in setting the stage for the translation, the broader reformational context, giving the background of other translations around that same time, e.g. the Geneva Bible, as well as digging into the various issues with translation work: how to be faithful to the text and so on. Several things that I came away with.

First, the style KJV is known for (Thee, thou, etc.) was something that was going out of style even in the early 1600s and the main reason it had these older forms was because the translation work was based on an older text called the Bishops Bible which was based on other texts including Tyndale's work from 1525. Thus, the KJV sounded old even at its release date.

Second, many Protestants fled to Geneva during the reign of Bloody Mary, around 1550s-1560s, where John Calvin was busy at work until his death in 1564. This helps connect the dots between Calvin and much of the English side of the Reformation, particulary the Puritans, a connection I was not aware of until I read this work.

Third, some great quotes:

"Translations are like women: if they are beautiful, they are not faithful; if they are faithful, they are not beautiful." The author quickly called this an outrageous statement, which I agree with, but it is a great way to express issues with translations.

"If the King James Bible was good enough for St. Paul, it's good enough for me." This illustrates how many people thought of the KJV as an original text, not a translation.

Fun facts: There was a version printed which read: "Thou shalt commit adultery." One of the the printing presses left out "not". They called it the wicked Bible.

Overall, it was a great read: insightful, lucid, and entertaining.

Anna says

I read this right after reading Tolstoy, and the sophistication of the writing suffered by comparison.

Especially in the opening chapters about the development of the printing press and the Reformation, it’s prone to rather dumb sentences like “Gutenberg’s real breakthrough was the invention of movable type--that is, letters that could be reused after printing one book” or “Martin Luther (1483-1546) is widely regarded as one of the most significant of the reformers.” But the information about translations preceding the King James Bible and the translation process of the KJV itself is fairly interesting. Although “changed a nation, a language, and a culture” is a bit much for my tastes (so many subtitles include some kind of “this topic changed the world!” claim that now I’m jaded), the KJV’s cultural influence is certainly important.

Jess says

This book is a great narrative on the events surrounding and the impact of the printing of the King James Bible. McGrath is well organized and has a great tone. I thoroughly enjoyed reading through this history. Knowing the background of this translation of the Bible (which is the one I use for personal study) gave me a greater appreciation of its worth and of the great men who fought to have it in English. I am grateful to those men.

Brian says

This book follows the economic, political and theological events that transpired in the 1300-1800 AD time period that produced the King James Bible.

I thought the political stuff was interesting. The reformation, Tynsdale, Martin Luther, Gutenberg and other starring actors were fascinating to follow in a broader narrative. I've read about all of them separately, but seeing them all together was faith-promoting.

The book also takes the time to carefully talk through each of the translators and editors of the different English (and German) translations of the Bible. Learning about some of the motivations and methodologies for the various translations was eye opening.

The King James Bible is the most important and influential book of the last 2,000 years. It was fun to learn more about it.

Leandro Guimarães says

Very entertaining and informative; I ended up wishing for more information.

Daniel Klawitter says

"Without the King James Bible, there would have been no Paradise Lost, no Pilgrim's Progress, no Handel's Messiah."

Diane says

Alister McGrath tells the story of the making of the King James Bible and its impact. The book exhibits a sensitivity to its subject matter that is relatively rare in theological works. The book begins with an overview of the printing revolution, continues with information about the Reformation and its impact in Britain, and concludes with the writing of the King James Bible. A final chapter assesses the impact of the translation, explaining how it went from an "ugly duckling" to a classic.

The book is well-researched and well-written. It is an excellent introduction to the making of this edition of the Bible. Much of the introductory information about the development of printing and its impact is available elsewhere, but McGrath delves deeply into the political climate of 17th century Britain, and explains how it impacted the making of the King James translation.