

The Book That Changed the World

By Rex Morgan

May 2, 2011 marked the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Version of the Bible (KJV). The anniversary was celebrated with a number of special events, including the production of a 90-minute movie, 'The Book That Changed the World', featuring acclaimed actor John Rhys-Davies. In April, Taranaki Cathedral Dean Jamie Allen read the entire KJV aloud non-stop (except for 5-minute breaks each hour), a marathon feat that took more than three days.

The KJV has been described as the most important and influential book of all time. More copies have been printed than of any other book in history—over a billion copies have been sold—and it has been translated into more languages than any other book. It has exerted unparalleled influence on English culture in nearly every sphere, including education, law, literature, government, art, science, and religion. It has served as a life-transforming source of inspiration and comfort for millions of people.

'No other book of any kind ever written in English, perhaps no other book ever written in any other tongue, has so affected the whole life of a whole people as this authorised version¹ of the Scriptures has affected the life of

the English-speaking peoples', said US President Theodore Roosevelt.

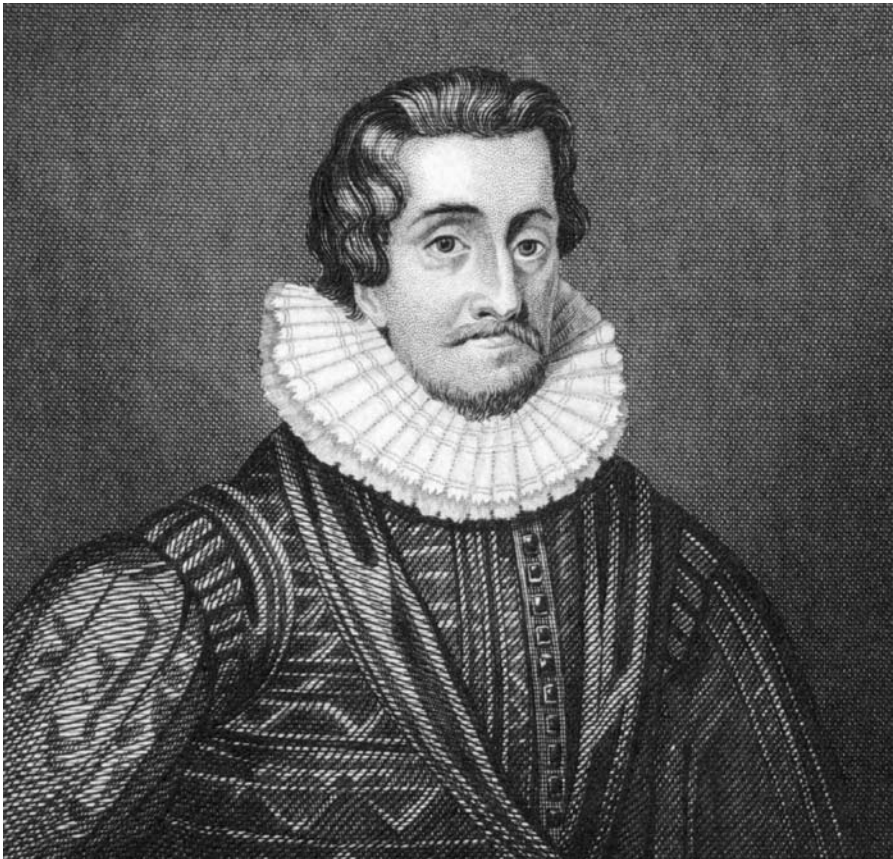
It is fascinating to look at the story behind the development of this extraordinary book.

Early Translations

Before the introduction of the KJV in 1611, there had been a few attempts to translate the Bible, or portions of it, into English. Until that time the Scriptures were only available in the original Hebrew or Greek, or a Latin translation (the Vulgate) made in AD 405. In medieval times, church services were conducted in Latin, and were unintelligible to most parishioners.

The first complete English translation of the Bible was completed by John Wycliffe, an Oxford master and theologian, in 1382. This was before the invention of printing, so copies had to be written out by hand. People would pay to be able to read it for an hour, and it is said that a load of hay was sometimes given for a few pages of it. The religious authorities of the day, however, didn't want the Scriptures to be publicly available, and forbade people from reading the Bible in English under penalty of death. Wycliffe died in 1384, and even 40 years later church officials showed their contempt for his work by digging up his bones and burning them!

The next effort to translate the Bible into English was made by a gifted scholar, fluent in eight languages, William Tyndale. His work was also vehemently opposed by the church of the time. He was forced to flee the country and do most of his translation in hiding in Germany. He completed the New Testament in 1525. Printing from movable type had recently been invented² so Tyndale had a



King James the First of England, from an engraving done in 1830, and published in London by Thomas Kelly.

printer in Cologne produce 6,000 copies. The job was interrupted when opponents raided the print shop. Tyndale, however, heard of their plans, and escaped with the pages already printed. A printer in the city of Worms finished the job, and the copies were smuggled into England in barrels of flour and bales of cloth. Most of them were found by the religious authorities and burnt outside St Paul's cathedral.

Agents were sent to Europe to catch Tyndale, and he was imprisoned in Belgium in dreadful conditions for a year and a half before being tried for treason and heresy. While in jail he requested a Hebrew grammar book and dictionary so he could continue translating the Old Testament. In 1536 he was publicly strangled with a rope and burned at the stake. His last words were 'Lord, open the King of England's eyes'.

It wasn't long before Tyndale's dying prayer was answered. Within months of his death King Henry VIII encouraged the distribution of English Bibles. This resulted in the production of several other versions, including the Coverdale Bible, the Geneva Bible, and the Bishops' Bible.

Enter King James

In 1603, on the death of Elizabeth I, James VI of Scotland ascended the throne of England as James I, and became the first monarch to unite Scotland, England, and Ireland as Great Britain. He was also the founding monarch of the American colonies, giving his name to Jamestown, Virginia. He was a talented scholar and wrote several books and articles on poetry, law, politics, and religion. He became patron for one of his most famous subjects, William



Modern translations of the Bible that owe their existence to the King James version (centre): The Message, The New English Bible, The Revised Standard Version, and The New International Version.

Shakespeare, who wrote the play *Macbeth* specifically for King James.

King James was the victim of a number of assassination plots, including Guy Fawkes' infamous 'gunpowder plot', an attempt to kill the King and all of the ruling elite in one stroke by blowing up the House of Lords on 5 November 1605. The plot was exposed, and Fawkes, along with a number of co-conspirators, were brought to justice.

A year earlier King James had appointed around 50 leading scholars to a committee charged with preparing an official translation of the Bible into English to replace the current translations. Because some were considered to be inaccurate, and others biased, the foremost linguists and biblical experts in the country were carefully chosen to compare and draw on all of the extant translations, as well as the Hebrew and Greek originals. They were divided into six teams in three different cities.

Each group was given sections of the scriptures to tackle, with each eventually cross-checking the work of the others. Each committee included scholars with diverse religious views to ensure no doctrinal slant would dominate. Never before had such an amount of careful labour been expended on an English Bible.

After several years of meticulous editing work the scholars had completed a version that was accurate and beautiful in the resonant and dignified tones of its prose, and notable for the richness and majesty of its style. Its elegant and stately language and rhythmic prose made it a delight to read, and hear being read. It was dedicated to 'the most high and mighty prince James, by the grace of God King of Great Britain, France and Ireland, defender of the faith', as can be read in its preface.

Actor Charlton Heston wrote in his autobiography: 'the King James translation has been described as the

only great work of art ever created by a committee...Over the past several centuries it's been the single book in most households, an enormous force in shaping the development of the English language. Carried around the world by missionaries...Exploring it...was one of the most rewarding creative experiences of my life'.

The KJV didn't take long to gain popularity with the masses, becoming the Bible of the English-speaking people. As the British Empire spread around the world, the KJV went with it, playing a foundational part in the culture, education, and governmental systems of many nations. Art, literature, and music have been profoundly shaped by language and stories from the Bible.

The KJV provided the English language with hundreds of now well-known phrases such as 'let there be light', 'eat, drink and be merry', 'my cup runneth over', 'bring hither the fatted calf', 'a fly in the ointment', 'my brother's keeper', 'new wine in old bottles', 'fought the good fight', 'out of the mouth of babes', 'give up the ghost', 'salt of the earth', 'to set one's teeth on edge', 'the land of the living', 'from strength to strength', 'by the skin of one's teeth', 'lamb to the slaughter', 'chariots of fire', 'good Samaritan', 'how are the mighty fallen', 'an eye for an eye', 'turn the other cheek', and 'pride goes before a fall'.

David Crystal's 2010 book *Begat* posits that the KJV has contributed more to English than any other literary source.

Modern Translations

It was more than 250 years before a serious attempt was made to displace the long-lasting KJV with an updated translation, the English Revised Version in the 1880s. The English language is constantly changing, so there is a need to provide translations that take advantage of contemporary vocabulary and idiom. This has given rise to a flurry of other translations in recent years. But not until the

popularity of the New International Version (NIV) of 1978 did any other version seriously rival the KJV. Sales of the NIV began surpassing those of the KJV in 1988, but the KJV is still being published and sold a full four centuries after its origin.

In addition, we now have the wonderful modern world of the internet, and the Bible is now available on dozens of websites, on Facebook, and even on Twitter. A 'Twitter Bible' published in Germany summarises the over 30,000 verses of the Bible into around 4,000 short 'tweets'.

Interestingly, even the renowned atheist Christopher Hitchens in a recent article pointed to the importance of the KJV in our language and culture. 'It's near impossible to imagine our idiom and vernacular, let alone our liturgy, without it. Not many committees in history have come up with such crystalline prose... The translators' legacy remains...a giant step in the maturing of English literature.'³

Another notable atheist, Richard Dawkins, wrote in *The God Delusion*: 'The King James Bible of 1611 includes passages of outstanding

literary merit in its own right, for example the Song of Songs, and the sublime Ecclesiastes...But the main reason why the English Bible needs to be part of our education is that it is a major source book for literary culture...Surely ignorance of the Bible is bound to impoverish one's appreciation of English literature... [An] atheistic world-view provides no justification for cutting the Bible, and other sacred books, out of our education'⁴.

What about You?

You probably have a Bible somewhere in your home, but have you ever read it? The fact that so many versions have been printed, so many copies sold, and so many lives lost getting this book to us, indicates there is something very special about it.

Reading the Bible can appear to be a daunting task, in view of its large size and its apparently difficult language. But in fact it contains relevant and interesting information on such topics as friendship, sex and marriage, the use of money, habits and character traits, resolving interpersonal conflict, principles of health, and many practical questions of everyday living. It

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What Famous People Have Said about the Bible...

Abraham Lincoln: 'In regard to this Great Book, I have but to say, it is the best gift God has given to man... But for it we could not know right from wrong'. (Barack Obama took the oath of office on the same KJV that had been used by Abraham Lincoln in 1861.)

George Washington: 'It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible.'

Queen Victoria: 'That book is the secret of England's greatness.'

Charles Dickens: 'The New Testament is the very best book that ever was or ever will be known in the world.'

Theodore Roosevelt: 'A thorough knowledge of the Bible is worth more than a college education.'

William Gladstone: 'I have known ninety-five of the world's great men in my time, and of these, eighty-seven were followers of the Bible. The Bible is stamped with a Specialty of Origin, and an immeasurable distance separates it from all competitors.'

Napoleon Bonaparte: 'The Bible is far more than a book to me; it speaks to me as if it were a person. This book surpasses all others. I never omit to read it, and every day with some pleasure. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne and I myself have founded great empires... upon force. Jesus alone founded his empire upon love. None else is like him; Jesus was more than man.'

Sir William Herschel: 'All human discoveries seem to be made only for the purpose of confirming more and more the truths contained in the Sacred Scriptures.'

Jean Jacques Rousseau: 'The Gospel has marks of truth so great, so striking, so utterly inimitable, that the invention of it would be more astonishing than the hero.'

Lord Tennyson: 'Bible reading is an education in itself.'

Immanuel Kant: 'I believe that the existence of the Bible is the greatest benefit to the human race. Any attempt to belittle it, I believe, is a crime against humanity.'

Robert E. Lee: 'In all my perplexities and distresses, the Bible has never failed to give me light and strength.'

Victor Hugo: 'England has two books; the Bible and Shakespeare. England made Shakespeare, but the Bible made England.'

Cecil B. DeMille: 'After more than 60 years of almost daily reading of the Bible, I never fail to find it always new and marvellously in tune with the changing needs of every day.'

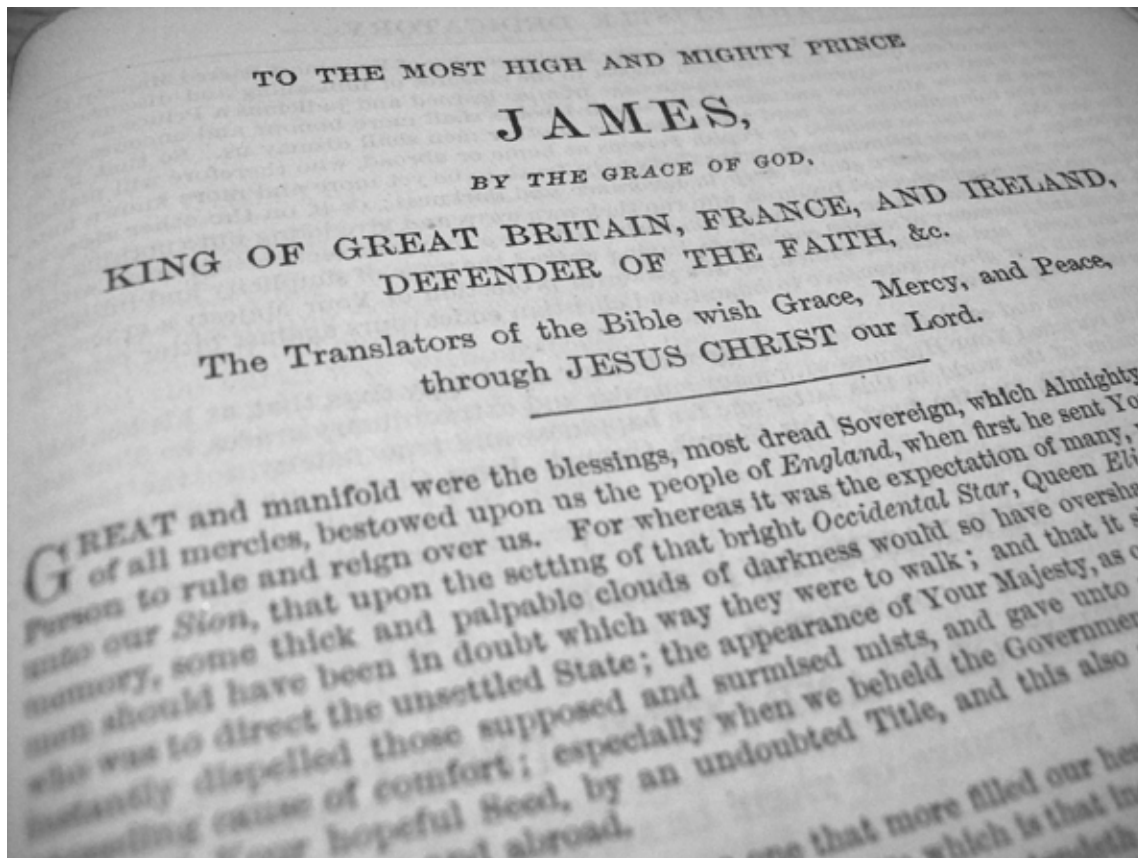
he preferred a more scholarly edition that was more literal and closer to the original Hebrew and Greek. The third said he liked *The Message Bible* because of its up-to-date vocabulary. The fourth minister was quiet for a moment and then said: 'I like my mother's translation best'.

Surprised, the other men said they didn't know his mother had translated the Bible. 'Yes', he replied, 'she translated it into life, and it was the most convincing translation I've ever seen'.

In that regard, one useful modern version worth noting is called *The Life Application Bible*¹¹. This includes helpful marginal notes guiding the reader to gain more from the reading, and focusing on how to put the words into practice in everyday life.

Why have so many—indeed, several millions over the past two millennia—been prepared to defend this book with their lives?¹² What ethics, teachings, lives, and narratives could possibly have motivated people to do this? In view of the amount of blood, sweat, and tears shed in order to get this once-forbidden book into our hands, and the witness of many famous people as to its value¹³, isn't it time you opened up a copy of the Bible?

If you start reading, and come across questions or need help, please feel free to contact us here at *Inside Life* and we'll do our best to assist. Or why not go to a local church, and see if they can be of help?



The translators' dedication of the King James Bible

Don't let this wonderful resource go begging! The Bible has transformed the lives and thinking of multiple thousands of people. The 'book that changed the world' can also change you!

Notes

- ¹ The KJV is also commonly called the 'Authorised Version' because of its royal commissioning.
- ² The printing press was invented in Germany by Johannes Gutenberg around 1440. His first printed book was the Bible, in Latin.
- ³ Christopher Hitchens, 'When the King Saved God', *Vanity Fair*, May 2011.
- ⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Houghton, Mifflin Co., pp. 340-344.
- ⁵ The Bible itself asks the reader to 'prove all things' (1 Thessalonians 5:21 [KJV]) and speaks of people who 'searched the scriptures' to establish the truth (Acts 17:11 [KJV]).
- ⁶ It is outside the scope of this article to address the accuracy of the Bible, but previous *Inside Life* articles have covered this issue. If this subject is of interest, please write to us for copies of our articles 'The Bible, Holy or Holey?' and 'Can We Trust the Bible?'

- ⁷ A top-selling translation prepared by a team of 115 scholars in 1978.
- ⁸ A revision of the KJV published in 1982.
- ⁹ An easy to read version using simple everyday language. Published by the American Bible Society in 1976.
- ¹⁰ A highly colloquial paraphrase reading like a novel, even omitting verse numbers. Translated by Eugene Peterson, and first published in 1993.
- ¹¹ A study Bible available in several versions, including the KJV, NKJV, and NIV. Each translation comes with over 10,000 study notes that help readers to understand the Bible and make it relevant to life in the 21st century.
- ¹² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Persecution_of_Christians.
- ¹³ See p. 7.



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