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Why the King James Bible Endures

By CHARLES McGRATH

The King James Bible, which was first published 400 years ago next month, may be the single best thing ever accomplished by a committee. The Bible was the work of 54 scholars and clergymen who met over seven years in six nine-man subcommittees, called "companies." In a preface to the new Bible, Miles Smith, one of the translators and a man so impatient that he once walked out of a boring sermon and went to the pub, wrote that anything new inevitably "endured many a storm of gainsaying, or opposition." So there must have been disputes — shouting; table pounding; high-ruffed, black-gowned clergymen folding their arms and stomping out of the room — but there is no record of them. And the finished text shows none of the PowerPoint insipidness we associate with committee-speak or with later group translations like the 1961 New English Bible, which T.S. Eliot said did not even rise to "dignified mediocrity." Far from bland, the King James Bible is one of the great masterpieces of English prose.

The issue of how, or even whether, to translate sacred texts was a fraught one in those days, often with political as well as religious overtones, and it still is. The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, recently decided to retranslate the missal used at Mass to make it more formal and less conversational. Critics have complained that the new text is awkward and archaic, while its defenders (some of whom probably still prefer the Mass in Latin) insist that's just the point — that language a little out of the ordinary is more devotional and inspiring. No one would ever say that the King James Bible is an easy read. And yet its very oddness is part of its power.

From the start, the King James Bible was intended to be not a literary creation but rather a political and theological compromise between the established church and the growing Puritan movement. What the king cared about was clarity, simplicity, doctrinal orthodoxy. The translators worked hard on that, going back to the original Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic, and yet they also spent a lot of time tweaking the English text in the interest of euphony and

musicality. Time and again the language seems to slip almost unconsciously into iambic pentameter — this was the age of Shakespeare, commentators are always reminding us — and right from the beginning the translators embraced the principles of repetition and the dramatic pause: “In the beginning God created the Heauen, and the Earth. And the earth was without forme, and voyd, and darkenesse was vpon the face of the deepe: and the Spirit of God mooued vpon the face of the waters.”

The influence of the King James Bible is so great that the list of idioms from it that have slipped into everyday speech, taking such deep root that we use them all the time without any awareness of their biblical origin, is practically endless: sour grapes; fatted calf; salt of the earth; drop in a bucket; skin of one’s teeth; apple of one’s eye; girded loins; feet of clay; whited sepulchers; filthy lucre; pearls before swine; fly in the ointment; fight the good fight; eat, drink and be merry.

But what we also love about this Bible is its strangeness — its weird punctuation, odd pronouns (as in “Our Father, which art in heaven”), all those verbs that end in “eth”: “In the morning it flourisheth, and groweth vp; in the euening it is cut downe, and withereth.” As Robert Alter has demonstrated in his startling and revealing translations of the Psalms and the Pentateuch, the Hebrew Bible is even stranger, and in ways that the King James translators may not have entirely comprehended, and yet their text performs the great trick of being at once recognizably English and also a little bit foreign. You can hear its distinctive cadences in the speeches of Lincoln, the poetry of Whitman, the novels of Cormac McCarthy.

Even in its time, the King James Bible was deliberately archaic in grammar and phraseology: an expression like “yea, verily,” for example, had gone out of fashion some 50 years before. The translators didn’t want their Bible to sound contemporary, because they knew that contemporaneity quickly goes out of fashion. In his very useful guide, “God’s Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible,” Adam Nicolson points out that when the Victorians came to revise the King James Bible in 1885, they embraced this principle wholeheartedly, and like those people who whack and scratch old furniture to make it look even more ancient, they threw in a lot of extra Jacobeanisms, like “howbeit,” “peradventure, “holden” and “behooved.”

This is the opposite, of course, of the procedure followed by most new translations, starting with Good News for Modern Man, a paperback Bible published by the American Bible Society in 1966, whose goal was to reflect not the language of the Bible but its ideas,

rendering them into current terms, so that Ezekiel 23:20, for example (“For she doted vpon their paramours, whose flesh is as the flesh of asses, and whose issue is like the issue of horses”) becomes “She was filled with lust for oversexed men who had all the lustfulness of donkeys or stallions.”

There are countless new Bibles available now, many of them specialized: a Bible for couples, for gays and lesbians, for recovering addicts, for surfers, for skaters and skateboarders, not to mention a superheroes Bible for children. They are all “accessible,” but most are a little tone-deaf, lacking in grandeur and majesty, replacing “through a glasse, darkly,” for instance, with something along the lines of “like a dim image in a mirror.” But what this modernizing ignores is that the most powerful religious language is often a little elevated and incantatory, even ambiguous or just plain hard to understand. The new Catholic missal, for instance, does not seem to fear the forbidding phrase, replacing the statement that Jesus is “one in being with the Father” with the more complicated idea that he is “consubstantial with the Father.”

Not everyone prefers a God who talks like a pal or a guidance counselor. Even some of us who are nonbelievers want a God who speaketh like — well, God. The great achievement of the King James translators is to have arrived at a language that is both ordinary and heightened, that rings in the ear and lingers in the mind. And that all 54 of them were able to agree on every phrase, every comma, without sounding as gassy and evasive as the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission, is little short of amazing, in itself proof of something like divine inspiration.