

Even among the sophisticated twenty-first century populace, the King James Version is still “king.” Children memorize it; pastors quote it at weddings and cite it at funerals; its words resound from pulpits on a global scale. Presidents swear their allegiance on it and courts use it as the standard for truth telling. Most agree its beauty of expression is unequaled.

Modern English speakers associate the beautiful language in the King James Bible with the very words of God. Some even speak of the seventeenth-century treasures as a time “when God spoke English.” The posting of biblical phrases on the walls at schools, public buildings, quoted by public officials in speeches, or sung in hymns are most likely from the King James Bible. At times, public quotes use the KJV but substitutes modern words for the more archaic speech to avoid expressions like *thee*, *thou* or verbs like *bringeth*, *thirsteth*, etc. Even in light of 400 years of Bible scholarship, new translations, and the discovery of hundreds of ancient Greek manuscripts hailed by scholars as better than the ones used in the King James Version, it is still an English-language bestseller. Four hundred years has entrenched it in modern English culture and language. In spite of modern scholarship that would relegate it to the dusty shelves of time, it is alive and well resting comfortably on many bookshelves or resting conveniently on night stands in hotels.

The KJV stands as a translation of unparalleled influence; it is the Crown Jewel of English literature and, as such, it is worthy of the value it holds in English history and culture.

Today, a version of this four-hundred-year-old icon can be purchased in shopping malls or over the Internet; selected in deluxe leather or recyclable bindings; or be read on Kindle, disc, iPhone, iPad, or simply as a conventional book.

The King James Version weaves its majestic speech into the fabric of our personal stories and the wider stories of faith communities. The cadence and rhythms of the King James Version have drawn the world to its sheer literary beauty. While many see it as an archaic book written four centuries ago with no relevance today, many cling to it as a standard among the plethora of Bible versions. The truth embodied in this ancient book has instilled courage in martyrs; brought comfort to the dying, graced victims with forgiveness; and guided prodigals home. It has counseled both commoners and kings with an unchanging message of grace and love through the ages.<sup>1</sup>

Scanning the pages of the 1611 King James Bible, one can see that the beauty of expressions have come to symbolize our language heritage. Many expressions share a beauty that so often is associated with the language of this golden age of literature: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures; he leadeth me beside the still waters” (Ps. 23:1)

or expressions like

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land where no water is. (Ps. 63:1)

As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. (Ps. 42:1)

Be still, and know that I am God. (Ps. 46:10)

Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path. (Ps 119:105).

Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts. (Ps. 139:23)

Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters. (Isa 55:1)

Many phrases are integrated into the language of our everyday speech: “to fall flat on his face” (Num. 22:31); “a man after his own heart” (1 Sam. 13:14); “the land of the living” (Job 28:13); “to pour out one’s heart” (Ps. 62:8); “sour grapes” (Ezek. 18:2); “pride goes before a fall” (Prov. 16:18); “like a lamb to the slaughter” (Isa. 53:7); “the salt of the earth” (Matt. 5:13); “a thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7); “to give up the ghost” (John 19:30); and “the powers that be” (Rom. 13:1).

The Hebrew language of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament are supremely translatable because of their simplicity, clarity, directness, and universal appeal. The English vocabulary possesses the same qualities and is capable of translating the Hebrew and Greek on equal terms. Seventeenth-century Jacobean English language was at its apex during the reign of King James I. The vivid, fresh, and flexible vocabulary saturated the language of the day. Its diction allowed for concreteness and picturesque expressions that made the language stately and *majestic*.

Modern linguistics tends to simplify language for the sake of clarity and readability for audiences with high school educational skills. As someone has said, it is amazing that such a wonderful product could come from a committee of fifty-four. The result is that modern Bible readers love its vibrant expressions and the air of authority behind its message.

The story and influence of the King James Version is not limited to the seventeenth-century nor did it give way to the first major revision in 1881-85 (English Revised Version) nor even to modern translations, arguably using better Greek manuscripts and sophisticated translation skills. The original printing of the 1611 King James Version still exists today in museums, libraries, and private collections.

These artifacts represent a period known today as the “golden

age of English literature.”