

The SBJT Forum

Editor's Note: Readers should be aware of the forum's format. Carl Trueman, Paul Wegner, Peter J. Gentry, and Vishal Mangalwadi have been asked specific questions to which they have provided written responses. These writers are not responding to one another. Their answers are presented in an order that hopefully makes the forum read as much like a unified presentation as possible.

SBJT: What was the role of James I in regard to the production of the KJV, and, even though contemporary translations are necessary, what has been lost with the rise of new translations?

Carl Trueman: When I became a Christian in the mid 1980s, the only Bible available in the family home was an old, pocket sized KJV that my father had been given many years before. As a complete neophyte to the Christian world, I was unaware

of how many translations there were then available, and so I used it as my devotional for some months. Finally, a friend steered me towards the NIV as a version which he thought I would find easier to understand.

I was also unaware of the fierce battles which were then raging in the British Christian context concerning Bible translations. The 1980s represented a major shift from the power of the inter-war generation, still very

much tied to the traditions of an earlier Britain, to that of those who had come of age in the 1960s and who had a more skeptical and iconoclastic attitude to the past. While the wider world sloughed off the staid manners and tired traditions of an earlier generation, the church's part in this was her movement from old Bible translations, liturgies, and hymnody to more contemporary versions.

The fierce battles I witnessed over the dropping of the KJV generally saw those who wanted to be "relevant" pitted against those who saw all such change as part of the slippery slope to apostasy. The latter group saw changing Bible translations not so much as a response to the decline of the church as one of its major causes. I remember one particularly egregious pamphlet which actually linked a rise in reported child sexual abuse to the availability of contemporary Bible translations.

The irony, of course, is that in its origin the KJV was the brainchild of one of England's most intellectually astute and politically wily monarchs who was motivated not so much by godliness as a desire to confound his enemies and secure his own power.

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James I of England (VI of Scotland) succeeded to the English throne in 1603. Immediately he was faced by the conflict within the church between those pushing for simpler forms of worship and more ecclesiastical independence from the state and those who were happy with the liturgical forms of the church and the power of the monarch relative to organization and discipline. Convening a conference at Hampton Court in 1603, James pulled off a master stroke of political strategy and management theory. He commissioned the production of a new Bible to replace, among other translations, the Geneva Bible. He hated the Geneva because of its marginal notes—which allowed for rebellion against a monarch. His Bible would have no such subversive marginalia. Further, it would be a team production: Puritans and Conformists would have to work together on the same committees as they translated the Bible into the vernacular.

The result was both a masterpiece of literary English and, ironically, the volume that supplanted the Geneva Bible as the translation of choice for those of Puritan leanings. There is surely an obvious irony to the fact that a book commissioned by a morally dubious monarch to undermine the Puritan cause should become such a shibboleth of latter day Puritan church life even down to the present day in some quarters.

Yet, for all of the fact that I myself use a modern Bible translation and see the use of the KJV as generally not serving the cause of making the word of God clear and plain today, the church has surely lost something here. One thing that is so striking about the KJV is the exalted, elegant nature of the language. For sure, we are Protestants, and Protestantism—at least in theory—is supposed to focus upon content, not aesthetics. Yet form is important. To read the soliloquy from *Macbeth* which begins “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow” and a bumper sticker which says “Life is meaningless, then you die” is to read the same content. And yet there is a difference: the poetic form of the former conveys a richness of

meaning which is lacking in the latter and which is not easy to express in any other way. In fact, were it easy to do so, it would not really be poetry.

Thus it is with the KJV. Anyone who has ever preached at a KJV-only church will know that there is a delightful beauty to the experience of reading the text, which is almost entirely lacking from most passages in most modern Bible translations. The exalted content is reflected in the finely honed and beautiful language that is used. True, some of this may be simple archaic aestheticism; and it is quite possible that, in its own day it did not have quite the same ring to it; but, while the Bible is to be made comprehensible, it is sad that so many modern Bible translations have also made it so prosaic.

With the plethora of translations, the English-speaking churches have also lost what we might call a common biblical language. Two hundred years ago, all such churches would almost certainly have used the same translation, a translation which connected them all not only to each other but also to a significant historic tradition. Today, we share common concepts, but the form varies from place to place. It is a kind of biblical Balkanisation. Perhaps we do not lose much because of this; but surely we lose something. And that is before we address the issue of the countless dollars spent on producing new English translations and editions while some language groups in the world still await their first taste of God’s word written.

I certainly do not intend to use the KJV as my personal Bible or my church Bible. But that does not mean that I do not regret in some way the lack of beauty and the weakening of linguistic unity with saints past and present that the multitude of modern translations represent. Today, with our ESVs and NIVs and NASBs etc., we do not enjoy an unequivocal embarrassment of riches; sometimes the deathly, dreary domesticity of modern translations, not to mention the consumerism to which their ever-increasing number witnesses, is really just an embarrassment.

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SBJT: How does the manuscript tradition behind the King James Version compare to what we have today?

Paul Wegner: The Authorized Version of 1611 (commonly called The King James Version [KJV]) was an extraordinary accomplishment at the beginning of the seventeenth century. It profited from the tremendous strides that had been made in

biblical scholarship, the previous Bible translations, and it began to help bridge the ever-widening gap between Anglicans and Puritans. The scholars who worked on the KJV compared and evaluated current foreign translations (English, Spanish, French, Italian, and Dutch) and ancient translations (Septuagint [hereafter LXX], Latin Vulgate, Aramaic Targumim, and Syriac Peshitta) against the current Greek and Hebrew texts of that day in order to render the most accurate English translation possible. Their motivation and plan was good, but they were severely limited by the number of manuscripts available in the early seventeenth century. The study of textual criticism has come a long way since the early seventeenth century for both the Old and New Testaments.

The primary question to address is whether God miraculously preserved one specific group of biblical manuscripts (now termed “the majority text”) or, as most scholars believe, is it best to evaluate all manuscripts available today, including those discovered after the KJV was developed, in order to determine the most plausible reading of the biblical text? We believe it is both reasonable and advantageous to use as many relevant manuscripts as possible to determine the text.

The Hebrew text for the KJV was based primarily on the Second Hebrew Rabbinic Bible, which was prepared by Jacob Ben Hayyim and published by Daniel Bomberg (1524-25). Ben Hayyim used a few medieval manuscripts that initially were thought to be a good representation of the Ben

Asher text, but it is now viewed as a mixture of various traditions from manuscripts shortly before the time it was written. This text was then compared to the Vulgate and LXX texts, and sometimes these texts were preferred over the Hebrew (compare the LXX’s reading of Psalm 22:16 “They pierced my hands and my feet” instead of the Masoretic Text [hereafter MT] “like a lion [they mauled] my hands and feet.” By contrast, today we have at least 2,700 Hebrew manuscripts dating from as early as 350 B.C. to 1540.¹ In addition we have nearly two thousand manuscripts of the LXX, over six thousand manuscripts of the Latin Vulgate, and multiple Jewish Targumim to help determine the most plausible reading of the original Hebrew text. Still the text of the Old Testament has been relatively stable and most of the changes make only minor differences to the Hebrew text.

The Greek text, however, is a significantly different story. The translators of the KJV primarily used Theodore Beza’s Greek texts and compared them to the Latin Vulgate in Beza’s and Stephanus’s editions. F. H. A. Scrivener notes about one hundred ninety places where the KJV departs from Beza’s text, approximately half of which follow the *Textus Receptus* text found in Stephanus’s version.² For several dozen of these differences Scrivener was not able to find any known printed Greek text, however, they appear to follow the Latin Vulgate text. All of the Greek texts printed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were mainly Erasmus’s Greek text. This text was based upon about a half a dozen minuscule manuscripts; the earliest manuscript was from the tenth century (Codex 1), but Erasmus used it the least because it disagreed so often with the other manuscripts. In later editions Erasmus corrected his earlier work by comparing it to the Complutensian Polyglot. Erasmus’s Greek text was reprinted so often in the following century that it became known as the *Textus Receptus* (lit. “the received text”), which simply means the commonly accepted text at that time. It was a fine Greek text for the seventeenth century, but today we have literally thousands

more Greek manuscripts (5,686), not to mention about twenty thousand manuscripts of the various versions and the approximately eight-six thousand biblical quotations from early church fathers. Most of these manuscripts are significantly closer in time to the originals; in fact, some of the earliest Greek manuscripts appear to have been made within fifty to one hundred fifty years after the autographs. It is generally assumed that the more times a text was copied the greater the possibility that errors may have crept in. As a result, the earlier Greek texts are likely much more accurate than the medieval manuscripts known in the early seventeenth century.

Some of the more notable questionable readings of the KJV include: “the adulteress woman” (John 7:53-8:11) and the “Trinitarian comma” (1 John 5:7-8). Some of the lesser known variations are: Matthew 17:21; 18:11; Mark 7:16; 9:44/46; Luke 17:36; 23:17; John 5:3b-4; and Acts 24:6b-7. Today these texts are often left out or bracketed.

The difference between the texts of the Old and New Testaments is largely due to the transmissional history of each. Old Testament texts were largely reproduced by trained professional copyists, whereas the early church was often persecuted and did not have this advantage. Early Christians often hand-copied the New Testament texts, sometimes under very difficult and less than ideal conditions. It has been estimated that a copy of the Codex Alexandrinus would have cost a lifetime’s wages for an average person in the fourth century. William Foxwell Albright also notes that Greek and Roman texts were often not copied as carefully as earlier ancient Near Eastern works.³ This is not to say that the Greek text we have today is in large part corrupted, as some scholars have suggested. We have thousands of Greek manuscripts, ancient versions, and quotes from the early church fathers to help us determine plausible, reliable readings of the New Testament. Similar to finding a point on a line in geometry, when there are only a couple of points of reference it may be hard to determine an exact point; but when there are literally thousands

of points of reference, finding the exact point is almost certain. Textual criticism is the process of sifting through the literally thousands of pieces of information to determine the most plausible reading of the autograph.

The KJV was an excellent translation for its time. The reverent and poetic quality of its language continues to be favored by many people today, but its textual basis has been surpassed by the many high quality manuscripts that have been found since the time of its translation.

SBJT: “Why has the KJV been so influential and successful over the years as a Bible translation?”

Peter Gentry: 2011 marks the four hundredth anniversary of the King James Version (KJV)—a landmark for one of the most influential translations of the Bible. Probably only the Septuagint has been more influential as a translation. This anniversary is celebrated even by *National Geographic* as the cover story for its December Issue.

Several factors account for the influence and success of the KJV. Politics and religion went hand in hand in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. When King James VI of Scotland inherited the throne of England from his cousin, Elizabeth I, he was faced with the task of bringing some unity out of Protestant and anti-Protestant factions. The proposal of Dr. John Reynolds, president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, at the Hampton Court Conference in 1604 of a new translation of the Bible appealed to King James as a means of effecting uniformity. The King assembled an enormous group of translators—54 in all—chosen not only for their brilliance in the ancient languages, but also for their wide and varied experience in life. (For biographical sketches of all 54 of the translators, see *The Translators Revived: A Biographi-*

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cal Memoir of the Authors of the English Version of the Holy Bible by Alexander McClure.) Divided into groups of six, each member of a subcommittee translated an entire section of the Bible. When they met, they compared them and selected the best one which was then sent on to a general revising group.

While the translators made their translations directly from the original texts of the Greek New Testament and the Hebrew Old Testament, they also consulted the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament produced during the third and second centuries B.C. And as the subtitle states, their original work was diligently compared and revised with the former translations. In fact, the KJV is indebted to earlier English versions for about 60% of its structure and wording (19% from the beloved Geneva Bible and 18% from Tyndale's translations, including the Matthew Bible).

The translators sought not only accuracy in translation, but were concerned to communicate clearly and effectively in the language of the common man and gave great attention for how it *sounded*. After all, the author(s) of Holy Scripture never intended the Bible to be read silently—but rather aloud, and especially in public (1 Tim 4:13).

There were seventeen editions of the KJV in the first three years, and in the period 1611 to 1640, there were only fifteen editions of the Geneva against 182 for the KJV.⁴ We must not think of the KJV, then, as a single translation that remained unaltered. Some of the early printings contained gross errors. The so-called Wicked Bible of 1631 in Deuteronomy 5:24 printed "And ye said, Behold, the Lord our God hath shewed us his glory, and his great asse" where the last word should be greatness. It also left out the "not" in the command "Thou shalt not commit adultery." Not surprisingly, the printers were heavily fined. Indeed, more than 300 changes were made in the edition of 1613.

Ecclesiastical recognition came in 1662 when the fifth Prayer Book used citations for the Gospel and Epistles from the KJV instead of from the

Great Bible.⁵ Extensive modifications were introduced in editions published in the eighteenth century so that the KJV defended by many in debates during the twentieth century was a long way from the original printing of 1611.

It is sad that the KJV was the focus of many disputes and divisions among Christians in North America during the twentieth century. Few Christians are aware of the great range of approaches to translation entailed in the Greek translation, the Septuagint, made more than two thousand years earlier, amidst precisely the same arguments for and against. Yet all Christian theology up to the sixteenth century was based on the Septuagint and Latin Vulgate rather than the original text.

Yet God has blessed the translation of his word, both Septuagint and KJV, in spite of imperfections in the translations. The KJV was the means of the saving message through many generations. Beyond that, it affected an entire nation and culture.⁶ Many phrases in our everyday English as well as our literature come from the KJV, "the root of the matter," "as a lamb to the slaughter," "a thorn in the flesh," and "casting the first stone" as but a few examples. A survey done by *National Geographic* estimated that the first of these phrases occurs some 4.6 million times in literature. At the beginning of my ministry I met a man in a remote town in the Gaspé Peninsula of Quebec who told me that the Lord had taught him to read from the KJV. I imagine he was not the only one.

No doubt the language has needed to be updated, but it is sad to think of new generations growing up completely unaffected by the grace, charm, and power of its words.

SBJT: In your book, *The Book That Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization*, you reflect on how important the Bible was to western society. In broad strokes, summarize what you said there and reflect on how the KJB was at the center of that influence.

Vishal Mangalwadi: The four hundredth anniversary of the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible deserves celebration. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, it galvanized the English speaking world. It inspired a pursuit of knowledge, understanding, wisdom, and character. It profoundly nourished the West, as it developed the habits and institutions of the modern world—social, political, educational, scientific, economic, and legal.

The KJV's unique power did not come from its "literary beauty," however: it inherited that from William Tyndale's translation, eight decades earlier. Likewise, the Wycliffe and Geneva Bibles had already inspired political liberties. Centuries earlier the Catholic Latin Bible had planted the seeds of England's eventual success: confidence in rationality; the notion of human dignity; and the spiritual rationale for technology—all based on the Bible-inspired *key institutions* of modernity—the university, parliamentary government, and the legal advocate.

For three hundred years the English speaking world affirmed (even if it did not always follow) the KJV's biblical wisdom: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God." (Matt 4:4) and "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these (material) things shall be added unto you" (Matt 6:33).

The KJV harnessed all of this and became the most powerful culture-shaping book in modern history. Through the KJV, the Bible's word-picture of reality, (i.e., the biblical worldview) became the governing view of the English pulpit, the pew, monarchs, parliaments, universities, scientists, courts, commerce, musicians, and the media.

Commerce (including commercialization of

education and science) is still helping the English language and culture win the world, but for that very reason the core of Western culture is in decline. Take books of learning, as an example, of the ascent and decline of the English-speaking

world. A recent study revealed that the Arabic World (360 million people today) had translated fewer books into Arabic in a thousand years than even the Western influenced Spanish-speaking world does in one year!

Arabic writing began before Mohammad composed the Quran in the seventh century. By contrast, English literature began in the sixteenth century, when Wycliffe began translating the Bible and Chaucer followed. While England publishes well over two hundred thousand books each year, Saudi Arabia publishes less than four thousand.

How are we to understand America's decreasing interest in books? Reading the Bible daily used to be a common habit of American Protestants. That is disappearing. Why? One view is that Americans no longer read the Bible *because* they have stopped reading to gain understanding or to cultivate character. They prefer watching television. Those who still read, do so mostly for entertainment or to gather information needed for a specific hobby or career.

Could the cause/effect relationship be the reverse? In other words, is it possible that not reading the Bible is the cause that has resulted in a loss of appetite for great books and new ideas? That was the counter-intuitive insight in Allan Bloom's best-selling book, *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987).

Toward the end of his long career as a professor, Bloom noted that American universities had stopped teaching the great classics of western civilization because students and parents had lost interest in them. Bloom—a Jewish man—connected this fact with another observation: when he began teaching, every high school graduate

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knew the Bible. At the end of his career American students were ignorant of the Bible and, *therefore*, no longer interested in the literary, artistic, and musical works of the West. Most of these treasures are related to the Bible and cannot be understood apart from a working knowledge of the Bible. What saddened Bloom was that after rejecting the Bible, American universities also lost interest even in pre-Christian classics!

The loss of popular interest in great works of the West should not be a surprise. Even the Greeks and Romans did not care much for their philosophers. Their works were preserved not by themselves, but by Christian monks. Likewise, Islam acquired the Greco-Roman intellectual treasure when it conquered the Eastern Church and obtained its libraries. Islamic scholars translated Greek works into Arabic as well as Latin. However, Arabic translations of Greek classics didn't interest the Islamic world in the same way as Latin translations of pagan philosophy interested the Western Church. Ironically, the church valued pagan wisdom and taught it to Christian clergy. The Protestant reformer Martin Luther taught Aristotle himself, even while complaining that the Roman Catholic Church valued Aristotle too much. Why was the church interested in pagan learning? This is not hard to understand, but perhaps hard to accept, but the Bible—not climate or sociology—opened the European mind.

Imagine a minimum wage worker is digging the foundation for a new hotel in Jerusalem. He hits upon a ton of what appears to be “rubble,” like broken pottery. While he is on his way to dump it, an archeologist stops him because, to him, this “rubbish” is a priceless treasure – it could shed light upon David's rule. The archeologist is able to reconstruct many details of ancient Jerusalem because the Bible paints a detailed word-picture of David's time, three thousand years ago. The reconstructed archeological find, in turn, helps us understand the Bible better.

Conversely, in Calcutta, no one would have stopped a laborer in the 1780s if he was dumping

similar rubble. Though in the 1800s, one can imagine a British Indologist, William Jones, or a cobbler-turned-Baptist missionary, William Carey, stopping such a laborer, if they thought that the rubbish might contain valuable information about Buddhism's impact in ancient Bengal. Jones eventually founded The Asiatic Society and the Baptist evangelist, Carey, volunteered as its longest serving Board Member. The Society was committed to “studying everything” that man does and all that happens in nature.

On August, 17, 2011, we celebrated the two hundred fiftieth anniversary of William Carey, who went to India in 1793 to translate the Bible. Just as the Bible inspires archeologists in Israel, it inspired Carey to study rocks and forests, agriculture and the social customs of India. Along with his colleagues he went on to establish the first vernacular college in Bengal that grew into a great university.

Academic myth-makers ridicule the sociological fact that the Bible aroused Europe's intellectual curiosity. But, that curiosity drove Galileo to look deep into the sky and Charles Darwin, a former Bible student, to research birds on far-away islands.

These scientists were produced by a culture that obeyed the divine mandate that had been given to Adam and Eve in the Bible. But, had Galileo and Darwin been born in my native India they would have worshipped stars and birds instead of learning from them. India had great builders and wealthy temples, but no Hindu sage or ruler ever built a university to seek truth about the world. Hinduism had scriptures, but we did not view them as pictures of reality. We treated them as mantras—a source, not of information, but of magical powers and social control. However, now, thanks to Western education, India is producing great scientists.

Indeed, the ancient Greeks were virtually alone in believing that the human mind could study all the many aspects of observable facts and assemble the information together to construct a true

picture of reality. After trying for a few centuries and developing many philosophies, the Greeks gave up the rational effort of finding truth. They resigned themselves to myth-making, exactly as Joseph Campbell proposed the post-rational West must do, today.

After Pyrrho, the Greek philosopher and adviser to Alexander, became a skeptic, the Greeks effectively agreed with the Buddha's belief that the intellect was the source of ignorance. Therefore, enlightenment could only come from killing the mind through non-rational, mystical meditation, or occult practices.

Greek science died because the objective data of the world did not fit their myths. What reignited the Western pursuit of knowledge was the Bible's teaching that God gave us our minds and his word so that we may seek and know truth. Now, the West is losing its edge in science because the distinction between "theory" and "myth" is once again being challenged by observation. Is the West's passion for power now superseding the quest for truth?

What happened after the Greek's gave up their pursuit of knowledge? Useful discoveries kept happening here and there, but it took two thousand years for Europe to return to the challenge of studying facts—those pieces of the puzzle, from distant stars to differing soils, from birds and rocks to history, geography, politics, and economics. Medieval monks began the pursuit of knowledge, which became a popular movement in the sixteenth century, because the Bible informed the common man that the puzzle piece facts, that we all see around us, did not occur by accident. Nor did they believe in a "multiverse" governed by myriads of deities working at cross purposes. No, to the western scientific mind, the universe was what it is because one creator planned an orderly cosmos.

Reality appeared chaotic like a heap of separate puzzle pieces because, without the knowledge offered in the Bible, the world was one of confusion, evil, suffering, pain, and death. But

when the puzzle was completed, with the help of a Biblical worldview, early western reformers built Western Civilization upon Biblical hope and the pursuit of progress.

The KJV, though, made the Bible the soul of the English-speaking world. Its power came from the fact that it became the Bible of the establishment, as well as the common man. It provided the metanarrative into which the English-speaking world could fit every aspect of reality. It helped the both simple and the sophisticated connect the dots of *knowledge* (including geography, history, law and science) and *practice* (including family, government, and business) to form an interrelated, coherent, God-honoring view of the universe. Intellectual dynamism, cultural creativity, and politico-economic liberties flourished because the church, university, kings, courts, writers, musicians, and playwrights all functioned under the common intellectual and cultural authority of the Bible.

In *The Book That Made Your World: How the Bible Created the Soul of Western Civilization*, I explore how the Bible generated the West's culture of hopeful music, rationality, justice, human rights, technology, self-sacrificing heroism, language and literature, universities, science, compassionate medicine, families that empower women, economic prosperity, modern liberties, and much more. The book also explores how Bible-translators globalized the modern world, created by the West's use and submission to the Bible, as God's gift.

Currently, the postmodern West has the same geography and history that it had at the dawn of western civilization and it has much more knowledge, wealth, and power than ever. So, why is it declining in understanding, character, and motivation?

Western universities and churches have gradually discarded the Bible. These institutions once founded on the Bible, now increasingly reject it. What the West is losing is its soul. Without the Creator's word-picture, the West cannot under-

stand the meaning and purpose of existence. It cannot comprehend basic things such as sex and love. Nor can it define or sustain marriage.

Europe can see its population declining, yet it prefers to think it is “progressive” to abort its own babies. Neither its universities, nor its financial sector knows if greed is good or if the wisdom, “Thou shalt not covet”, makes sound economic sense. One of the West’s greatest achievements, the Rule of Law, is being perceived as an oppressive and stifling bondage because most lawyers serve money, not law.

The West contains the same biology and climate that it did as it was emerging, in the seventeenth century. It is declining now because it has lost its very foundation that can sustain life and provide hope in the face of failure, evil, suffering, pain, and death.

ENDNOTES

¹Malachi Beit-Arie, *Hebrew Codicology: Tentative Typology of Technical Practices Employed in Hebrew Dated Medieval Manuscripts* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1981), 11.

²Scrivner, *Authorized Edition of the English Bible (1611): Its Subsequent Reprints and Modern Representatives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1884), 243-63

³William Foxwell Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), 79.

⁴F. G. Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts* (5th ed.; rev. A. W. Adams; London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1958), 305.

⁵Jack P. Lewis, “Versions, English (PRE-1960),” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 6:824.

⁶On this, see Alister McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Anchor, 2001).

