

Lost in translation

by [David R. Stewart](#) in the [November 29, 2003](#) issue

The upcoming 400th anniversary of the 1611 publication of the King James Bible has sparked a surge of interest in its origins. (Benson Bobrick's *Wide As the Waters* and Alister McGrath's *In the Beginning* both appeared last year.) Even taking into account the occasion's significance, the attention is a little puzzling. There have been plenty of other translations into English (e.g., the Geneva translation from the 1550s was the preferred version on the *Mayflower*), each with its own story. As a variety of other English versions and paraphrases have appeared, the King James Version has irreversibly been displaced.

Or has it? Adam Nicolson has no interest in mere nostalgia, nor in the desperate resistance movements still mounted by those who argue that the KJV draws from a superior manuscript tradition. But even if the clock can't be turned back, he wants us to recognize that the King James offered English readers, scholars and hearers something unique--and still does today.

Seventy years after the 1558 Act of Supremacy that helped codify the Anglican faith, the Church of England was still taking shape. There were deep rifts between those who wanted the church to retain an episcopacy and the loosely defined group known as Puritans who felt that the Reformation had not gone nearly far enough in taking the church back to an earlier, more authentic structure. And the dream of reunion with the Church of Rome was far from dead in some circles. Risky and tenacious efforts in that direction were more or less constantly under way.

In the hands of a less gifted writer the retelling of this not unfamiliar story could become tiresome. But Nicolson succeeds in making it fresh and interesting. He begins by crafting a portrait of the translation's initiator, James I, so that from the outset we are aware of what earthly concerns provided the impetus for this project.

Nicolson does the same with the other key players in the translation process: Lord Cecil, Lancelot Andrews, Robert Bancroft and others. Taking us inside the temper of the times, Nicolson strikes just the right balance in treating the political, social, ecclesiastical and theological tensions which played such a decisive role.

Only the Jacobean Age could have produced such a work, Nicolson argues. The period's richness of language (Shakespeare was working on *The Merchant of Venice* and *King Lear* around the time the company of translators began its labors), the competing concerns for accuracy between the factions represented among the translators, the determination of the monarch to have this work done and, above all, the period's embrace of the notion of majesty, its love of splendor--all these cast their light on the phraseology and pages of the King James Bible. This legacy explains why this version won't go away.

The author makes an impressive case that we have lost a great deal in the "democratization" of language. In Nicolson's phrase, for the translators "it was . . . more important to make English godly than to make the words of God into the sort of prose that any Englishman would have written."

In quoting from the original translation, Nicolson leaves the archaic spellings intact. ("Clense" instead of "cleanse," for example, from Psalm 51). At first I reacted to this with impatience. But as I read on I began to feel that it was a good thing to have to strain a little to understand the word of God. I wondered for the first time if our recent attempts at "keeping it simple" might be misguided.

That's certainly the opinion of the author: "The great questions are not the medium of modern religion. But they are there in the King James Bible, a text which embraces the polarities modern religion seems to steer past." This version, he says, rejects the pressure to choose between the richness of ceremony and the austere holiness of what is elemental and plain.

Nicolson is convinced that every attempt to offer an English translation in a more "vernacular" style has failed to hold the imagination of readers and hearers: "The flattening of language is a flattening of meaning. Language which is not taut with a sense of its own significance, which is apologetic in its desire to be acceptable to a modern consciousness, language, in other words, which submits to its audience, rather than instructing, informing, moving, challenging, and even entertaining them, is no longer a language which can carry the freight the Bible requires."

God's Secretaries both informs and delights. It brings back to life the genesis of the KJV and at the same time draws our attention to timeless questions: What language moves us, and why? What sort of language best holds our attention? How can mortal speech do justice to both the sacred and the profane? All this makes it a book well worth reading.