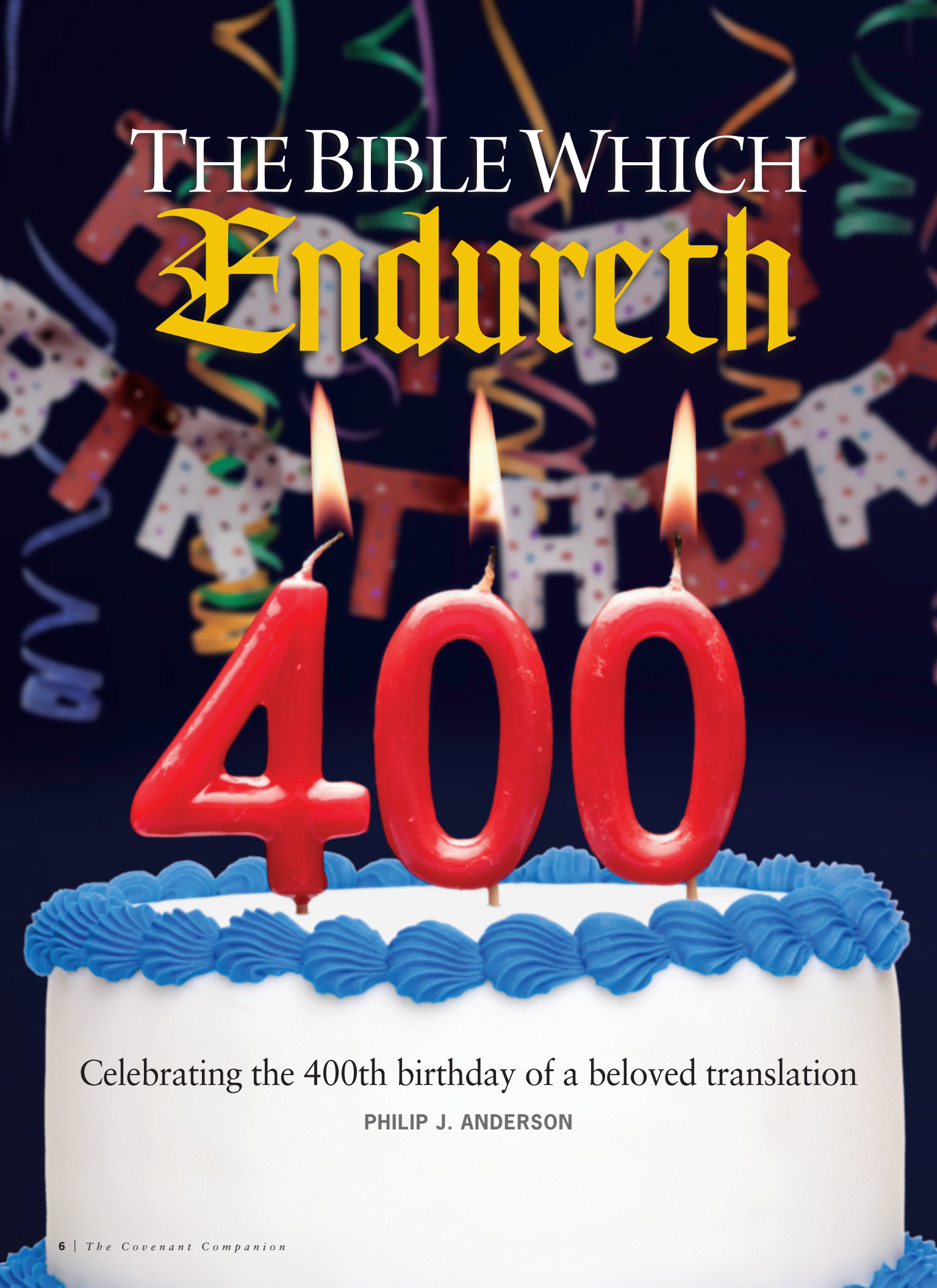
THE BIBLE WHICH Endureth



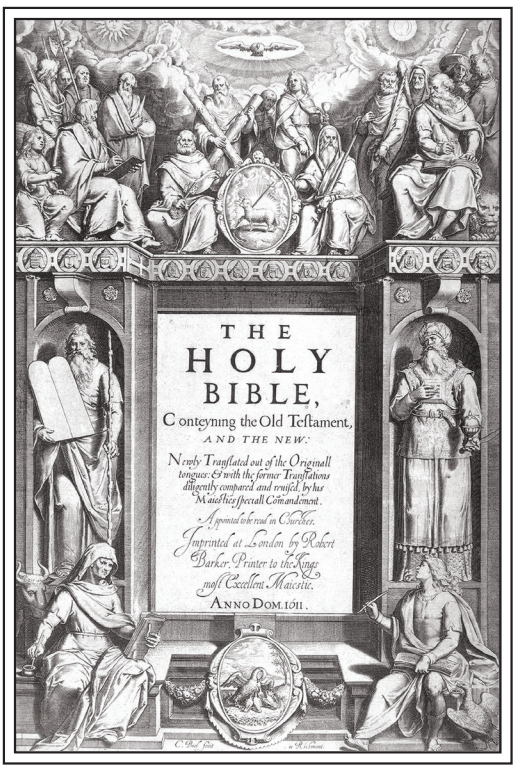
Celebrating the 400th birthday of a beloved translation

PHILIP J. ANDERSON

The time capsule inside the cornerstone of the old offices of the Evangelical Covenant Church at 5101 North Francisco Avenue in Chicago was opened on August 30, 2010, at a celebratory service of decommissioning. Since its solemn entombment on September 17, 1947, the contents had nestled in a long, narrow copper box, a mystery to virtually everyone in attendance and long since forgotten. Among the twenty items revealed that day was the pristine copy of a book—proclaimed by its salmon and light blue dust-jacket to be "the most important publication of 1946"—The Revised Standard Version of the New Testament.

Also included was a current printing of the Authorized King James Version, a Bible in continuous print since it first appeared in 1611, this time in the "Oxford Self-Pronouncing" edition, first published in 1897. This indicates, first of all, that the King James Bible was intended from the beginning to be read aloud (every title page included "appointed to be read in churches"); it first appeared during a rapidly unfolding era in the early modern English-speaking world where the rate of literacy among common people was only just beginning to rise with any significance. It also suggests that by the end of the nineteenth century biblical literacy was entering a long and steady decline, where many readers needed help with unfamiliar names and archaic words. Ironically, the added diacriticals, hyphens, and accents could be equally confusing to the reader.

When the complete Revised Standard Version appeared in 1952 (as would other translations before and after), it not only had its critics but many in turn rallied to the King James Bible for various reasons as the only acceptable version of the English Bible. Such loyalty often seemed unmindful that it was one translation among many, predicated quite consciously on several from the sixteenth century and even earlier. It was as though God spoke English, or at least had divinely inspired this particular translation in a way that others were not. I can recall in my youth hearing the sometimes serious jest, "If the King James Bible was good enough for St. Paul, it is good enough for me!"



The four hundredth anniversary of the King James Bible is rightly being celebrated in many ways during 2011 through books and articles (scholarly and popular), televised documentaries, lectures, and new printings of the King James Bible. In true Elizabethan fashion, between Palm Sunday and Easter Monday twenty actors at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in London read the entire King James Bible cover-to-cover in teams of four—sixty-nine hours in eight days. It has been claimed that these contemporaries—William Shakespeare and the Bible's forty-seven translators—influenced the development of modern English and its linguistic beauty and form more than any other source.

The project that produced the translation in 1611 had been seven years in the making; its complex historical genesis stretching back to at least the 1380s in England is intriguing, comprising a very human and at times tragic process. The King James Bible was also a sacred labor, painstakingly undertaken by the dedicated biblical scholars and clergy known to their contemporaries as "God's secretaries." Oddly enough, they gave little thought to literary style but sought at every point to provide a faithful and accurate translation.

When Queen Elizabeth died childless in 1603, having reigned since 1558, the House of Tudor met its end, to be succeeded by the Stuart King of Scotland, James VI. His mother was Mary Queen of Scots, Elizabeth's cousin, whom the "Virgin Queen" had long imprisoned in the Tower of London and eventually beheaded in 1587. Upon arrival in England he became James I. Why does the Bible bear his name? Many Puritans had suffered for decades under the Tudors for their religious convictions and believed that James, a Scottish Presbyterian, would be sympathetic to their concerns in reforming the Church of England in a thoroughly Protestant fashion. They gathered a petition with about a thousand signatures (known as the Millenary Petition) and in 1604 met at Hampton Court, the residence of the English monarchs. They were severely disappointed in the king's opposition, who asserted divine right by the

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statement "No bishop, no king." The lasting result of the meeting, however, was the commissioning of a fresh English translation of Scripture, an idea presented by John Reynolds, a leading Puritan scholar and the president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

King James, a learned lay theologian, took a strong interest in organizing the work, though neither he nor Parliament appropriated much funding in support of the translators and the coordination of their daunting mandate. They comprised six teams with specific assignments—three to the Old Testament, two to the New Testament, and one to the Apocrypha, meeting respectively in Oxford, Cambridge, and Westminster. Were these the finest minds in Jacobean England? That continues to be debated, but they were surely among the most senior clergy and academics in the Church of England, and many were Puritan scholars, all deeply devoted to textual accuracy based upon the best available ancient manuscripts.

James also took a direct role in shaping the instructions, communicated officially through Archbishop Richard Bancroft, which were quite conservative and limiting. This was to be the third "authorized" (that is, officially sanctioned) version of the English Bible, the first being the Great Bible, authorized by Henry VIII in 1539, and the Bishops' Bible, approved by his daughter Elizabeth I in 1568. The translators of the King James Bible knew they were to remain largely faithful to the text of the Bishops' Bible, only making alterations if deemed necessary for greater accuracy or felicity of language. They were not to be linguistic innovators, but were rather told "to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one." Consequently, the 1611 Bible already at times reflected archaic English in the mind of the contemporary reader, the language being in progressive and creative flux. In their lengthy introduction to the reader, the translators expressed the "desire that the Scripture may speak like itself, as in the language of Canaan, that it may be understood even of the very vulgar."

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There were portions of Scripture in Old English as early as 700 with Bishop Aldhelm's translation of the Psalter. The Venerable Bede provided portions of the New Testament in his *Ecclesiastical History* and was translating the Gospel of John on his deathbed in 735. King Alfred the Great (d. 901) promoted many translations of documents for legal and literary purposes, including, for example, the Ten Commandments. After the Norman Conquest of 1066 Old English became more unintelligible and Middle English called for new translation efforts—Genesis and Exodus in rhyming verse, Richard Rolle's translation and commentary of the Psalms, which then was rendered in various English dialects during the thirteenth century. The real revolution in translation, however, came in the late fourteenth century with the Oxford scholar and pastor John Wycliffe, the foremost name still associated with the making of the English Bible and ongoing translation efforts around the globe to this day.

The need for a Bible in the vernacular language of the people (the English would have said "vulgar," an example of how English meanings change through time) is in relation to the Latin version of the text produced by St. Jerome in the early fifth century. It was known as the Vulgate. Most people did not know Latin, the language of worship where they most often heard Scripture read and imbedded in the liturgy, and this was a problem both in the emerging national identities of Europe and in the pastoral work of mission and care. Equally important, new manuscripts and earlier versions of the Hebrew and Greek texts had come to light and been applied by biblical scholars for centuries, often challenging long-held doctrinal interpretations.

Wycliffe had many grievances with the Roman Church but above all was deeply committed to a Bible in a people's own tongue. There is little evidence that he had a direct hand in translation; rather he promoted the work of others in what became known as the Wycliffite Bible in two versions, one before his death in 1384 and one after. Though he died of natural causes, he was condemned a heretic in 1415, and in 1427 his body was exhumed from sacred ground at Lutterworth, burned, and the ashes thrown into the River Swift. This would not be forgotten by translators who took up the cause of a vernacular Bible.

The popular household Bible of the English people in 1604 was not the Bishops' Bible but rather the Geneva Bible of 1560, especially treasured by Puritan reformers and despised by Church of England authorities. Yet it was an honored descendant of recent predecessors.

When William Tyndale's New Testament appeared in 1526—its translator in exile on the continent, where it was printed and smuggled into England—under threat of excommunication copies were collected and burned publicly by the bishop of London at St. Paul's Cross. Tyndale then turned his attention to the Old Testament and a revision of the New. In 1536, only seventy-five years before the printing of the King James Bible and whose

translators were feted to great acclaim, William Tyndale was strangled to death and his body burned. His work was carried on in the Coverdale Bible of 1535 and the Matthew's Bible of 1537. The Geneva Bible was clearly dependent on these three predecessors but also reflected the religious persecution endured under Queen Mary ("Bloody Mary") between 1553 and 1558, when many Protestants were martyred, went underground, or fled into exile. It was especially valued for its extensive annotations and explanations, which so irritated James I that his authorized Bible was to have none of that.

Despite the ongoing need for better translations based on older codices and changing language, the King James Bible over time found its way into the hearts, minds, and memories of a biblically literate people. During the first fifty years it received no singularly special notice but rather was in competition with the Geneva Bible (a 1602 revision) as a symbol of the religious and political conflict that led to the English civil wars and the beheading of Charles I in January 1649. Its true official status was not cemented until the Restoration in 1660 of Charles II, and more importantly the revision of the Book of Common Prayer in 1662—the first to incorporate the King James Bible. Now it became the standard text wherever English was the *lingua franca* in religious instruction, confessions, hymnody, worship, and literature. The reason for this was that before the era of several more modern translations, there was a *common* Bible in the English-speaking world, expanding throughout the Commonwealth as a colonial power until relatively recent times. It gave voice both to power and privilege as well as oppression and marginalization.

It was not until the middle of the nineteenth century, however, that the King James Bible acquired a kind of univocal ascendancy, particularly in the United States, partly because of contested doctrinal issues swirling about in those days (the emergence of higher textual criticism and literal interpretations of history, the views of Darwin in relation to science, etc.), but especially because of its profound literary influence within the broader culture. The English literary canon embodies a trajectory of its use from Milton to Blake to Wordsworth to Coleridge to Hawthorne to Melville to Eliot to Tennyson to Lewis, fiercely embraced more out of a love of language than arguments defending verbal accuracy. A leading British historian at the time, Thomas Babington Macaulay, called it "a book which, if everything else in our language should perish, would alone suffice to show extent of its beauty and power."

As familiar as many may be with the King James Bible (and for some it is the only English-language text worthy of interpretation), most people today are quite unaware of how daily patterns of speech continue to be shaped by idioms in Elizabethan and Jacobean English. In his book *Begat: The King James Bible and the English Language*, David Crystal has identified 257 common expressions, among them: "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Genesis 4:9); "fly in the ointment" (Ecclesiastes 10:1); "the apple of his eye" (Deuteronomy 32:10); "sour grapes" (Ezekiel 18:2); "skin of my teeth" (Job 19:20); "a drop in the bucket" (Isaiah 40:15); "a thorn in the flesh" (2 Corinthians 12:7)—the list goes on and on. Many, if not most, can be found already in the English Bibles that preceded that of King James. And that which is so memorable is not necessarily idiomatic but poetic, especially in music—whether hymns and spiritual songs or anthems, cantatas, and oratorios (such as Handel's *Messiah*: "I know that my Redeemer liveth"), as well as the visual arts.

From George Washington to Barack Obama, American presidents have taken the oath of office by laying their hand on the King James Bible. In the religious oratory of the nation, from Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King Jr. to today, the words of the King James Bible are recalled with familiarity, comfort, and challenge. Often what comes to memory—in Psalm 23, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, John 3:16, and other cherished verses, in times of grief, loss, joy, and peace—is in the beautiful and strangely elegant English more than four centuries old, the fruit of memorization and repetition. The language is to be found in the church's hymnody and songs of children, prayer and worship books, cadences of preaching, and devotional life, as well. The legacy of the King James Bible will continue and the translation be loved by many, even at a time when highly literate people are more biblically illiterate than the generations that have come before.

A recent writer has feared that this four-hundredth anniversary could be "a funeral notation for biblical literacy culture." It need not be. Though there is no longer a common English Bible, to which the King James Version held claim for a long time, whatever the translation, version, or paraphrase—and the dedicated scholarship that produces them—it is wise to follow the words of St. Augustine, "Take up and read." ■

For further reading

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

Adam Nicolson, *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

Leland Ryken, *The Legacy of the King James Bible: Celebrating 400 Years of the Most Influential English Translation* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).