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July 26, 2003

Posted: 7/25/03

Author lauds literary lilt of King James Version's language

By Kevin Eckstrom

Religion News Service

WASHINGTON (RNS)—Their names are mostly lost to history now—Geoffrey King, Lancelot Andrewes, Miles Smith and dozens more—but the book that brought them all together, the King James Bible, remains “the greatest work of English prose” ever written.

So says British author Adam Nicolson, whose new book, “God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible,” explores the committee of about 50 scholars whose 1611 Bible remains one of the world's most authoritative religious texts.

With its “thees” and “thous,” the King James Bible has an immediate, almost impenetrable, air of authority and seriousness. If we could hear God talk, it's almost as if he would surely sound as he does in the King James Bible.

But Nicolson argues it is the translators' poetry—that kind of language that touches the heart as well as the head—that is its greatest strength. It's a type of divine discourse that has been lost in newer, more popular translations, he said.

“What people think they need now is hard, reliable information,” Nicolson said in an interview. “There's a concentration on the identifiable substance of the thing. Whereas (the translators) think what really matters is the mythos, the surrounding atmosphere of beauty and mystery and musicality. If religion loses all of those things, then it loses what actually matters about it.”

In other words, while the King James language may seem intimidating or even inaccessible, its 20th century competition is, in a word, boring.

According to a 2000 Gallup Poll for the American Bible Society, 41 percent of Americans who own a Bible have a King James Version. Yet 88 percent of Bible shoppers said they want something that is “easy to understand,” making the 1978 New International Version the No. 1 seller.

“If you read these 20th century translations, there is this tremendous sense of ordinariness,” Nicolson said. “The ordinary is not the Bible's subject. It is this very, very odd thing of a God being involved in the world.”

When King James I summoned the scholars from Oxford and Cambridge in 1604, he had political as well as divine intentions. James, a Scotsman who was new to the throne, wanted desperately to unite his kingdom by bringing together the high-church Anglicans who were loyal to the king and the Puritans who were suspicious of the monarchy and had “flirted” with Presbyterianism.

The loyalists embraced the 1568 Bishops' Bible, which was popular among the hierarchy but never was accepted by the people. The Puritans favored the Geneva Bible, produced in the 1550s by Calvinists who translated “king” as “tyrant.” The book's notations were brimming with anti-royalist sentiment.

The translators were divided into six “companies” of eight members, each with a supervising director. Each company was assigned a different portion

of the Bible, relying heavily on William Tyndale's translation from 1526.

The final revisions were done orally, to make sure the text has a consistent, almost musical, flow to it.

What emerged, Nicolson said, was a “kind of language that can reach up and down at the same time.” The text reflects the grandeur of God with equal parts clarity, simplicity and “that great sense of the huge.”

Take, for example, the Bible's opening verse in which God famously creates heaven and earth. Tyndale's version said “the earth was void and empty, and darkness was upon the deep, and the spirit of God moved upon the water.”

In the King James Version, “the earth was without form, and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.”

Nicolson concedes the difference is subtle, slight and easily overlooked. Yet he says the use of the word “face” is a stroke of genius.

“The Spirit of God moving on the face of the waters has a mysterious and ghostly humanity to it which neither the modern translations nor Tyndale's blankness can match,” Nicolson wrote. “The face of the waters' carries a subliminal suggestion that the face of God is reflected in them.”

Or consider the difference between the beloved 23rd Psalm in the King James Version-“Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over”-with the 1978 New International Version-“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.”

So what's the big deal about the King James Bible? Nicolson argues the language of 1611 has become the rhetorical benchmark for everything from

the Gettysburg Address to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. What Shakespeare did for drama, the King James Bible did for the spoken word.

"For generation after generation, it gave the English, and the English in America, a template against which to measure their own utterances," he wrote.

"The King James Bible ... gave the English, more than any other book, a sense of the possibilities of language, an extraordinary range of richness, more approachable than Shakespeare, more populist than Milton, a common text against which life itself could be read."

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