This year constitutes the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible. Originally created by England’s Anglican Church, it became widely used by all Protestant denominations in America until the twentieth century, as both a pulpit and a personal Bible.

Despite the increasingly old-fashioned character of its language, it was not until the 1950s that a second translation, the Revised Standard Version, gained a foothold in American Protestantism.

Today, the King James Bible, or the KJV as it is often known (the “V” is for “Version”), still has a revered place among Evangelical Protestantism. The Scofield Reference Bible, widely used among Evangelicals, relies upon it. And although the New International Version has recently gained popularity as a personal Bible, the KJV remains the pulpit Bible for many churches.

Of course the Gideons continue to place a copy of the KJV in every hotel room in the United States. They believe that an individual alone can read the Bible and by themselves gain an understanding of God.

This attitude derives from the sixteenth-century declaration by the Reformer Martin Luther that the authority for true Christianity rested on “Scripture alone.” Since that time, Protestantism has envisioned each individual believer knowing the Bible. The ideal Christian became someone who read and studied their Bible extensively. Today, most devout Christians own a personal Bible, which they read regularly by themselves.

The achievement of this ideal within modern Evangelicalism has made us forget that for most of Christianity’s history, this ideal was impossible for all but a few. During 95% of its history, the overwhelming majority of Christians could not read.

Until the twentieth century, near universal literacy existed nowhere on earth. Only then, in Europe, did 90% of adults acquire the ability to read. In 1675, 64 years after the KJV’s publication, only about 45% of adult males in England could even sign their name at their marriage; for women the percentage was significantly lower. Even in 1850, the best estimates put adult literacy in Europe at no more than 50%. American literacy rates were similar.

During most of its history, then, the KJV functioned quite differently from the personal, private use so widespread today. When it was published, it was intended to be read aloud, and that was its primary use until the end of the nineteenth century.

People who can read the Bible gain a sense of its organization as a text and of its character as a physical object. They know how large it is, whether considered in number of words (lots), number of books (about 80), or just its size (fat). Those who become familiar with it learn the order of its books and develop a sense of the total amount of stories, moral tales, parables, law codes, admonitions and prophecies the book contains.

Those who only hear the Bible read and cannot read it for themselves learn about much of it contents, but they never gain a sense of the book as a written text. Because they always depend on a reader, they never acquire any direct access to the text itself.

They know its contents as the material is read to them over the years, in whatever order it is read and whatever passages are selected. They may develop a sense of organization from some of its longer stories, but most oral readings present shorter passages. Just reading a few chapters out loud can take nearly an hour. Hearers will not gain understanding of the Bible’s organization; it will seem an unorganized collection to them.

Moreover, hearers will rarely gain a sense that they know everything in the Bible. They can always be surprised by some passage they have not heard before. Although many churches have a liturgical calendar that guides regular scripture reading, such calendars present selected readings rather than the entire Bible.

Furthermore, liturgical calendars often feature different readings from different places in Scripture together. The Anglican approach for each Sunday includes an Old Testament passage, a reading from the New Testament letters, and a selection from the Gospels.

So until the twentieth century, the success of the King James Bible came much more from its use for oral presentation of Scripture, than from its use as a personal Bible. This is not surprising, for the poetic beauty of much of its language was intended to be heard. The oral hearing of the Bible gave Christians a different sense of Scripture than individual private reading. It is only by the mid-twentieth century, when most Christians can read the Bible by themselves, that a translation whose language is more up-to-date can make headway against the long-standing popularity of the KJV.

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