King James grew up as a king. After Queen Elizabeth executed his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, when he was just one year old, he became King of Scotland and the heir to the English throne after Elizabeth’s death. He was raised by a team of Scottish Presbyterian ministers under the control of his regent but, upon his ascension to the English crown in 1603, he seemed more attuned to English religious politics.

Less than a year after his arrival in England, at a conference in Hampton Court Palace, James officially launched the translation project that would become the King James Bible. The complex’s status as a favorite dwelling of King Henry the VIII, the founder of the English church, would not have been lost on the attendees.

The new translation was intended to be a unifying factor, not between Scotland and England, but between the warring factions of the Church of England. In the oversight of the project, James favored the establishment bishops, but one-third or more of the 48 “Translators” (as they were known) had Puritan beliefs. Most were connected with Cambridge University, a hotbed of Puritan theology at the time.

The most popular Bible among English Christians at the time was the Geneva Bible, which Puritan scholars had composed in Geneva during their exile from the persecution of Queen Mary (“Bloody Mary”) in the 1550s. Its popularity had soared at the end of the 16th century because the Bishops Bible of 1568, the Church’s official Bible, had met with derision. As Adam Nicholson observes, it was “pompous, obscure and often laughable.” Instead of the well-known phrase “Caste thy bread upon the waters,” for instance, it gave “Lay thy bread upon wet faces.”

But James could not simply follow the people’s choice, for the Geneva Bible contained extensive interpretive footnotes, many of which were anti-monarchical, denying that kings and queens had the right to rule. Given that, in 1598, James had written a ringing defense of the “divine right of kings” to govern in his “True Law of Free Monarchies,” this was an anathema.

The new Bible translation would draw upon the best of these two works, while going back to the best Hebrew and Greek manuscripts then available. It would undergo several stages of review to ensure both accuracy and understandability. It would be both a pulpit Bible and a people’s Bible: pleasant to read aloud and to oneself.

The new translation did not immediately gain acceptance when it was published in 1611. Like the Greek Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate and many modern translations, people preferred the versions with which they were familiar. But, within a few decades, it had replaced the Bishops Bible and surpassed the Geneva Bible. It was brought across the Atlantic and became America’s Bible, both for English churches that came here and the churches that originated here, such as the Mormons.

The King James Version was the dominant English-language Bible for 350 years and had no significant rivals until the Revised Standard Version appeared in the 1950s. Since then, many new translations have been published, but the KJV remains the most popular book in the English language.

In celebration of the 400th anniversary of the KJV, the University of Wyoming will host an exhibition and series of six lectures during October. It will open Sunday afternoon, Oct. 7, with a talk by Dr. Philip Stine, a former translator and executive of the United Bible Societies, who will discuss the origins and impact of the KJV.

The exhibition, called “Manifold Greatness: The Creation and Afterlife of the King James Bible,” can be seen in Coe Library. It was created by the Folger Library for the National Endowment of the Humanities and the American Library Association.

To accompany this, the Toppan Library of the American Heritage Center will exhibit Bibles from its rare books collection, and the Albany County Public Library will host a display of Bible translations through the ages. For more information, go to http://www-lib.uwyo.edu/ and click on the Manifold Greatness link under “Dusty Shelves.” The events are co-sponsored by the Wyoming Humanities Council and UW’s Religious Studies Program.

Note: This article drew from Adam Nicolson's, God’s Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible, and Philip C. Stine, Four Hundred Years on the Best Seller List.