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King James and His Bible
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King James grew up as a king, and doubly so. After Queen Elizabeth executed his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, when he was just 1 year old, he became King James VI of Scotland and the intended 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, having become King James I of England, he seemed suddenly more attuned to English religious politics than Scottish beliefs.

Less than a year after his arrival in England, he officially launched the translation project that would become the King James Bible at a conference in Hampton Court Palace. 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. For the oversight of the project, James favored the establishment bishops, but a 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 Nicolson 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. As when bibles such as the Greek Septuagint, the Latin Vulgate and many modern translations had been introduced, 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.

The King James Version (KJV) 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. Indeed, since copyright did not exist at the time, American printers copied and reprinted the book without compunction -- often introducing mistakes along the way.

Errors in typesetting were not unusual. In 1631, a British printer accidently left out the "not" in Exodus 20:14, thereby rendering one of the Ten Commandments as "Thou shalt commit adultery." (They were later fined and lost their printing license.)

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.