

God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible. By Adam Nicolson. New York: HarperCollins, 2003. xvi + 281 pages.
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One of the first orders of business embarked upon by James I after ascending the British throne in 1603 was to convene an all-embracing conference of divines from all sects of Protestant England. The conference took place in January of 1604, presided over by the king himself, who brilliantly out-manuevered severally the conservatives, moderates, and reformers, bullying and humiliating them with his theological brilliance, and crafty, bawdy tongue. Its avowed purpose of mending the tattered fabric of English religious life was an unmitigated disaster, but a recommendation by a Puritan named John Reynolds that a new translation of the Bible be made, one that would be read by everyone, effecting a large-scale redefinition of England, caught the ear of the king, who immediately proclaimed that it should be done.

What ensued is the subject of Adam Nicolson's *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible*. This engaging and adventuresome study is of interest not only for lovers of the Word of God, recalling 'Abdu'l-Bahá's inscription in the old Bible in the City Temple in London in 1911, in which He called it the "Holy Book of God, of celestial Inspiration. It is the Bible of Salvation, the Noble Gospel. It is the mystery of the Kingdom and its light. It is the Divine Bounty, the sign of the guidance of God" (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 17).

Nicolson's book will be intriguing to Bahá'ís for other reasons: first, because Shoghi Effendi chose the style of the King James Bible of 1611 as his model for the translation of the Bahá'í Writings from the original Persian and Arabic to English; second, because the developmental process of translating the Sacred Writings of the Bahá'í Faith into the many languages of the world is one which continues to engage scholars in many fields; and third, because the very manner and spirit in which the King James translation of the Bible was carried out is a historic precursor—however unintended—of the process of consultation.

James himself gave a systematic set of rules as to how the new translation was to be accomplished. What he wanted above all else was an "irenicon," a word coined at the time, meaning "a talisman of peace," a method whereby all divisions, political and religious, could be encompassed by one harmonized whole—under the authority of the king. He gave specific orders as to the process to be undertaken, including the prerequisites of its participants, the stages it would pass through, and how it was to be authorized. Far from being the result of a brilliant individual, or even several, it was carried out through the collaboration of some fifty of the most learned men from both Oxford and Cambridge universities and Westminster Abbey, divided into six "companies." Each person would work individually, following which the company would meet and subject each individual's submission to intense scrutiny and revision until all the members were satisfied. Next, each company would submit its work to every other company for further refinement. Upon completion of this step, they were to submit the whole document for further review by the bishops and the chief learned of the church, and present it to the Privy Council. Only then would it receive the final imprimatur of the King.

Every passage was subjected to at least four winnowing processes, as James encouraged them to refer especially recalcitrant passages to other especially competent scholars who could assist in elucidating them. Moreover, "ancient and grave divines" from the two universities were to ensure that passages from the Old and New Testaments that referred to each other were to be translated concordantly.

How this “gaggle of black-gowned divines” (xi) actually worked, however, is shrouded in obscurity, since many of their notes were destroyed or thrown away. Whatever records there might have been went up in the flames of the great Whitehall Fire of September 1666, along with all documents of the Privy Council from 1600 to 1630.

Though it would be intriguing to know more about how the sessions were conducted, the remaining records indicate that they were, nevertheless, characterized by some of the most salient features of Bahá’í consultation: all the participants, vastly different from one another in origin, skill, and position, were selected for their competence and devotion; they pooled their best ideas and submitted to the consensus of the group, referring their decisions to higher authorities; the ultimate aim of their sacred mission was unity, if not for all of humanity, then for the greatest form of unity that could be conceived at that point in history; whatever role the various individual translators played in the interpretation of those words, they did not think of themselves as creators of the Word of God, that is, as authors. Rather they saw themselves as “secretaries” who would remain faithful to the divine words, making their accomplishment “one of the greatest of all monuments to the suppression of the ego” (xii).

There are, nonetheless, two surviving documents that give us a glimpse of the process, both of them discovered by American researchers in the 1950s. The first is a snapshot of the work in progress: a version of the Epistles of Saint Paul, prepared by one of the companies, complete with neatly lined columns of corrections and suggestions before being circulated to the others and referred to other learned men. In Nicholson’s words, it reads like an accountant’s ledger, having an “air of carefulness, efficiency, good government, not of inspiration: it exudes a particularly bureaucratic kind of holiness” (149).

The other document comes from near the end of the process, in the form of notes taken by one John Bois, which paint a momentous, breathtaking, unrepeatable tableau, as the almost finished product is being read aloud to twelve scholars at Stationer’s Hall. This may not have been the first time that the words had been tested orally, for the main function of the Bible was that it be recited to the congregation in church on Sundays. So, over and above its correctness and scholarly accuracy, the paramount criteria were to be euphony, poetry, and declamatory splendor. Bois records the scholars “arguing, consulting, losing their tempers, bringing in learned evidence from church fathers and classical authors, testing variants on each other, seeing what previous translators had done, insisting on the right rhythm, looking for the unique King James amalgam of the rich-plain word, the clarity within a majestic phrase, the court-Puritan perfection” (201). Thus, the language and style the committee set out to achieve was spoken by no Englishman, then or ever, but was one which was intended to ingeniously wed the archaic-sounding mode of the world of Biblical antiquity with that of Jacobean England.

Nicolson’s book holds many fascinations: first, the historical context, with its lively portraits of Jacobean England, culture, and aesthetics; its backdrop of the plague, the sectarian divisions of the English Church, the attempted explosion of the parliament buildings, the Mayflower setting sail for America, a clandestine attempt on the king’s life, etc. Second, the characterization of the extraordinary main players, from James himself to the chief ecclesiasts and politicians of the day—with all the drama and intrigue surrounding their lives and careers—but also the cooperation which they ultimately achieved. There is even a complete list of all participants in the six Westminster, Oxford, and Cambridge “companies.” Not least is the author’s own passion for the English language that drives the adventure of the book and to which he gives full rein in passages of brilliant prose.

The King James translators were instructed to make full use of existing English translations, of which there were at least five from the sixteenth century in circulation in the early seventeenth. The most popular was the Geneva (or “pocket”) Bible, produced in the 1550s by several Calvinists. Others included the Elizabethan or “Bishops” Bible, a royalist and anti-Puritan document, made in 1568 by fourteen bishops, appointed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, and finally three versions of the Great Bible, produced for Henry VIII and Edward VI by various scholars, and bearing the stamp of the work of William Tyndale. An extant Catholic Bible produced by a small team of men was ignored by King James’ heavily Protestant company. This clearly anglocentric focus led to one of the weaknesses which has haunted the otherwise magnificent King James Version: the Greek, Latin, and Hebrew originals used by the company were by no means the best available, even by the standards of the time.

Nicolson offers his personal assessment of the results of the translator’s work:

The words of this translation, then, could embrace both gorgeousness and ambiguity, did not have to settle into a single doctrinal mode but could embrace different meanings . . . one of immense lexical subtlety, a deliberate carrying of multiple meanings beneath the surface of a single text. This single rule lies behind the feeling which the King James Bible has always given its readers that the words are somehow extraordinarily freighted, with a richness that few other texts have ever equalled. (77)

This work of distinguished linguistic scholarship offers many delights in the plethora of examples the author gives of various translations from different periods, comparing the styles, commenting on the use of words, on how well one version or another captures the “sense of the possibilities of language,” the “extraordinary range of richness,” “the sense of the many threads by which the real physical world is bound to a magnificence which goes beyond the physical,” “all those treasured qualities of Englishness [which] can be seen to stem from the habits of mind which the Jacobean Translators bequeathed to their country” (237).

Not content with this effusive praise for the King James Version, Nicolson also makes several comparisons of passages with other translations to highlight his point about its linguistic brilliance. In several places, he reviles the New English Bible of 1970, echoing T. S. Eliot’s sentiment that it “astonishes in its combination of the vulgar, the trivial and the pedantic” (234). He asserts that “the flattening of language is a flattening of meaning” (153), that in this loss of meaning the New English Bible has “lost all authority” (154). Nicolson laments that, by abandoning “archaisms” and “hallowed associations,” the modern translators produced the “language of the memo,” that they had “lost all feeling for the extraordinary and overpowering strangeness of the Bible,” and “forgotten that ordinariness is not the Bible’s subject” (234).

Following is a version of Psalm 8, from the Contemporary English Version, to give the reader a sense of the kind of flat language Nicolson calls “inert,” “tensionless and mystery-free” (236):

I often think of the heavens your hands have made,
and of the moon and stars you put in place.
Then I ask, “Why do you care about us humans?
Why are you concerned for us weaklings?”

You made us a little lower than you yourself,
and you have crowned us with glory and honor.

And to conclude, here are two well-loved examples of the same excerpt, most effective if read aloud. The first comes from the poet John Milton from the 1640s:

When I behold thy heavens, thy Fingers art,
The Moon and Starrs which thou so bright has set
In the pure firmament, then saith my heart,
O what is man that thou remembrest yet,

And think'st upon him, or of man begot
That him thou visit'st and of him art found:
Scarce to be less than Gods, thou mad'st his lot,
With honour and with state thou hast him crown'd.
(231)

The second, from the King James version:

When I consider thy heauens, the worke of Thy fingers, the moone
and the starres which thou hast ordained;
What is man, that thou art mindfull of him? And the sonne of man,
that thou visitest him?
For thou hast made him a little lower than the Angels; and hast
crowned him with glory and honour. (230)

Works Cited

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