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The King James Version at 400: Assessing Its Genius as Bible Translation and Its Literary Influence

David G. Burke, John F. Kutsko, and Philip H. Towner, eds. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2013. xxv + 553 pp.

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An astute reader of this review might first note the publication date of the King James Version (1611), then the mention of the 400th anniversary (2011), then the year of this published review (2023), do the math, and ask, "Isn't your review a bit late?" Fair question. As I imagine that I share company with many, if not most, practitioners in the field of translation, I keep a stack of books waiting in the queue to read. I am very glad this one was in the stack, and that it worked its way to the top of my reading list. I learned and enjoyed from beginning to end. And even though this volume was published ten years ago by SBL, the analysis of the thirty-two authors and editors is enduring in regard to the all-time bestseller in the English language. The KJV has not yet gone out of style. The scholars who critique it from various angles have much to say that will find its place going forward in serious KJV studies.

The volume had its genesis with presentations of forty papers at three different meetings of the Society of Biblical Literature during the year of 2011. This publication begins with appropriate introductory essays, and these highlight the general impact of the legacy of the KJV, both as a model for Bible translation (BT), and the enrichment of the English language and literature. The editors also deal with such preliminary questions as how to refer to it in the volume, either as KJV/B (version or Bible), in addition to a discussion on the commonly used abbreviation and marker of "AV" (Authorized Version), though

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it was "never officially authorized by any legal or ecclesiastical body" (xxiii). The editors allowed the contributors to choose which designation was best.

Additionally, and importantly, the editors wrestled with which version of the KJV should the authors quote from. In the end, unless authors had a reason to quote a particular printing or edition, *The Bible: Authorized King James Version* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) was chosen as the one to which quotations would conform. I mention this decision because the very fact that the editors had to make this determination is an indication of the complexity of the KJV. This complexity goes far beyond the simple statement, "The KJV says..." The contributors survey the KJV timeline, which extends far beyond the original 1611 publication.

The scholarship is presented in three major parts to help the translation community and broader readership assess the impact and influence of the KJV:

- The King James Version in its Historical Context
- The King James Version in the History of Bible Translation
- The Impact of the King James Version: Its Reception and Influence

Without giving an annotation of each chapter, but with a few notes in parentheses for reference and comment of selected essays, I will mostly highlight the papers grouped according to their place under each heading.

First, regarding the KJV in its historical context, the contributors highlight:

- The place of the KJV within the political context of the reign of King James. (This essay tracks the Church of England's official position on Scripture during the reign of three monarchs.)
- How the KJV found its place within the rapid growth of English in the Elizabethan-Jacobean era (looking at the genesis of new words in English, borrowed words in the KJV, and the broad increase in actual numbers of words in the language during this period).
- How the KJV fit into the developing world of the printing of English Bibles (a fascinating look at the evolution of printing, including religious printing, during this era).
- The contributions of the KJV to liturgy (a challenging essay on the "archaic, clumsy translation open to misunderstanding", and how acknowledging that will "free us from the strange reverence of the KJV on both sides of the Atlantic" [70]. Author Robin Griffith-Jones details the ins and outs of the KJV in liturgy and its use alongside the Book of Common Prayer.)
- Translation renderings regarding women (an in-depth look at how the English translation at times skewed Hebrew and Greek renderings to be, in the author's estimation, anti-female and stereotypical. As a reviewer,

I found the essay to be challenging, but not unfair. I wonder if others will find the arguments reasonable.)
- And, how early editions of KJV with maps helped readers to mentally navigate their way around the Holy Land.

The KJV was richly and firmly embedded in these historical contexts, and all were influences both on its translation and cultural reception.

In part two, the editors collected ten papers on the KJV in the history of Bible Translation. These include:

- A look at Luther's approach to BT and how that affected the KJV. (Tyndale was highly influenced by Luther; by extension of influence, some estimate 76 percent of the KJV Old Testament and 84 percent of the New Testament derive from Tyndale.)
- Harold Scanlin's recap of KJV revisions from the 17th to 19th centuries (including calls for correction and revision that began as early as 1611).
- The use of metatexts to mediate conflicting theological views.
- An overview of the translation principles and priorities, and a look at the still-studied preface.
- The place of the KJV in the development of text criticism.
- Various Old Testament approaches taken by the KJV translators, examined from a case study in Job.
- Successful and not successful approaches taken by the translators. (The successes were built around the Renaissance and its "rediscovery of the classical world", drawing on use of source languages, and carrying out the work through six "companies" of translators. Not successful were the inadequate manuscript base and the antiquated language employed by the translators. I found this essay one of the most helpful in the volume.)
- Leonard Greenspoon on connections between the KJV and Anglo-Jewish translations.
- The Influence of the KJV in Protestant Chinese Bible work. (This reviewer confesses to having never considered how the KJV could possibly have influence in this area.)
- An in-depth essay from N.T. Wright on reflections of the motivation and reasons for translation from the 16th to the 21st centuries (and this serves as a significant apologetic by Wright for translation work going forward, and certainly worth studying).

The final eleven papers highlight the impact of the KJV. These include:

- Robert Alter's essay on the question of eloquence. (As some will say, "It just sounds so majestic!" Question: is that a legitimate reason for its

continued use? This is not a new question. Alter takes up the challenge of poetry renditions in light of this perceived eloquence.)

- The "missing" KJV Apocrypha. (Andrew Hill recounts how and why the KJV was first published without Apocrypha in 1619, leading up to statements against its inclusion as delineated in the Westminster Catechism.)
- Its enduring place, not just "of an age, but for all time". (Clifton Black recounts the "revolutionary convergence" of the publications of both Shakespeare and the KJV, and their effect on the English-speaking world.)
- The Word and the words as rendered in the KJV, and the impact on translation. (Malcolm Guite builds on the work of KJV translator Lancelot Andrewes and his younger contemporary John Donne.)
- Religious lyric in the 17th century.
- Messianic meditations (Deborah Rooke looks at the behind-the-scenes use of the KJV in the formation of Handel's *Messiah*, and concludes it is not as straightforward as one might assume.)
- The place of the KJV in American civil religion.
- Simon Crisp's fine essay on the KJV and Orthodox perspectives.
- Rodney Sadler Jr.'s contribution on African Americans and the KJV. (He takes up the use of the KJV "in early black literacy" (457), and the appropriation of the KJV through hermeneutical approaches, along with its continued impact on black Americans.)
- A lengthy study by Naomi Seidman on the impact of the KJV on the Jewish Publication Society and its English translation work.
- Post-colonial notes on the KJV. (As a reviewer, I confess, this essay was less helpful than others due to the author's approach. He concludes by stating that the KJV "should relinquish its association with the master class and move with the masses" (515). Four centuries on, I would say that KJV has surely been embraced by the masses, often much more so than more modern renderings.)

The volume concludes with a lengthy select bibliography, list of contributors, and a helpful index.

The contributions in this volume are detailed and well-documented, and do not in any way feel pedantic, pedestrian, or inaccessible. Each topic is focused on pinpoint contributions to the lasting scholarship and legacy of what is still a bestseller. It is highly relevant and recommended for scholars and BT practitioners as a place of connection with history and as a learning laboratory for ongoing BT work. And, with the breadth of scholarship, I predict it will stand tall among other critical examinations of the KJV.