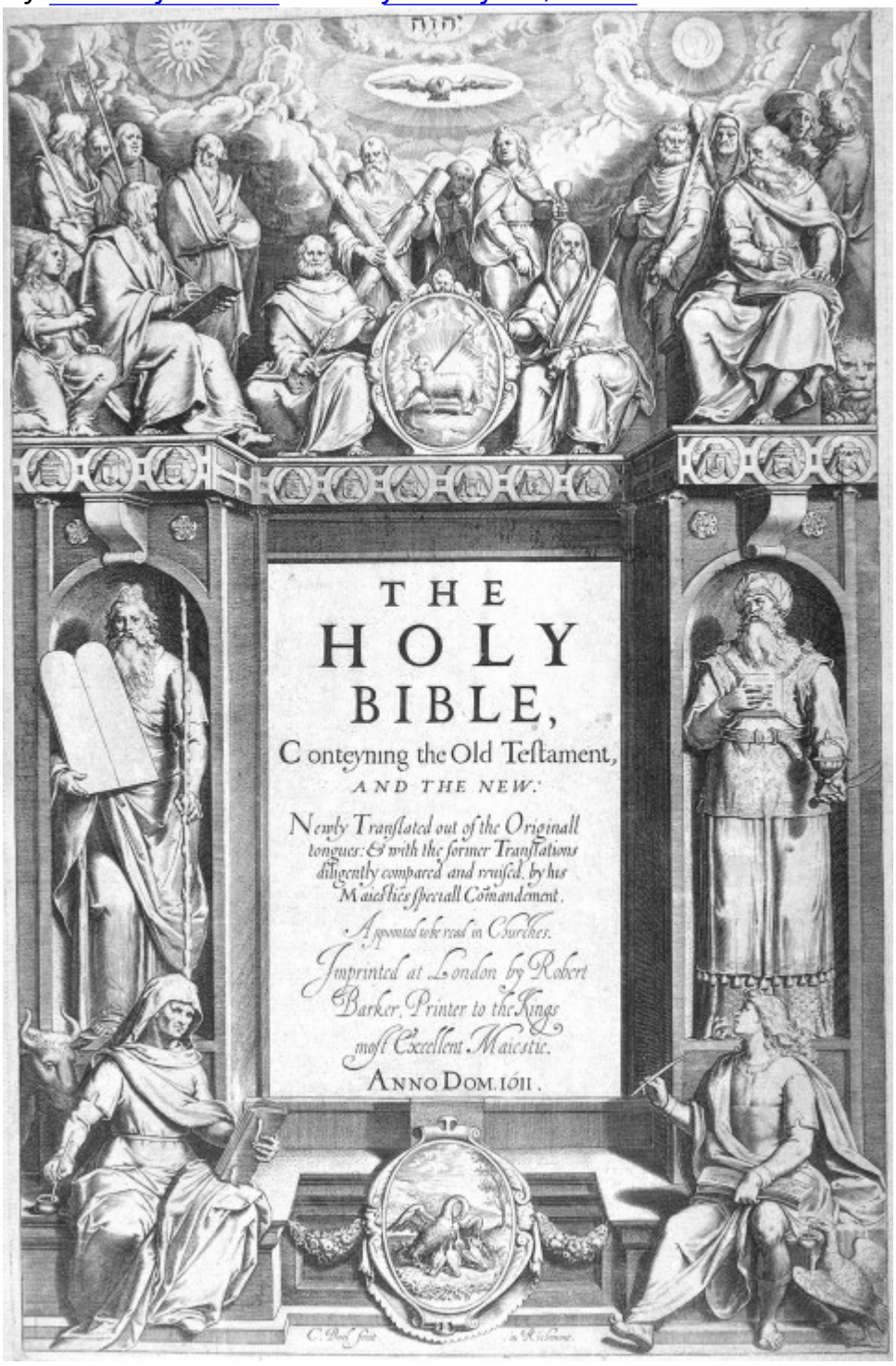
The KJV endureth: The 400th anniversary

by Timothy Larsen in the January 11, 2011 issue



Title page to the first edition of the King James Version of the Bible, 1611.

The King James Version—which marks its 400th birthday in 2011—was the Bible of my childhood. It was well past the halfway mark of its fourth century by that time. In other words, it has had quite an extraordinary run. For many people it is still the only translation they use of the most important book in their lives. Once its resonant words get into your blood they are there for life. This has often made people very reluctant to set it aside for something new.

The first major attempt to replace it was the Revised Version, which appeared for both testaments in 1885. It was so deferential to the KJV that the translators proudly declared in the preface that they had sometimes chosen to retain archaic words, occasionally even ones that were admittedly incomprehensible. Nevertheless, the mild tinkering that they did aroused passionate consternation. People apparently really were outraged that the "thief" on the cross was now a "robber." From a later perspective, however, the RV was deemed inadequate more for being too cautious than too cavalier. It simply would not do to present the word of God to the masses in an unintelligible vocabulary.

A year or so ago I heard a rebroadcast of a radio Christmas special that Bing Crosby had done in the mid-20th century. He read the story of the nativity from Luke 2 in the KJV. This is a text that runs deep in my veins, since at my private, Christian elementary school we were required to recite it from memory on an annual basis. Miss Dys emphasized that our faces should become suitably animated with awe when we declaimed that the shepherds were "sore afraid."

Crosby (or one of his scriptwriters) found this phrase baffling and assumed that his listeners would as well. Guessing at its meaning, he ended up inverting it, and thus the crooner informed listeners in his smooth, well-modulated tones that the shepherds "were not afraid."

Even when the words themselves are clear, they might not convey quite the same impression over time. I spent much of my childhood assuming that "study to shew thyself approved unto God" (2 Tim. 2:15) meant that whether or not I received divine favor hinged upon how diligently I mastered the times tables.

Abandoning obscurity for accessibility, I therefore gleefully switched to the New International Version when I was 13 years old. The ongoing work of its translators (who have another revision coming out in 2011 in honor of their KJV predecessors) has been my default Bible ever since. However, I have also worked my way through

a handful of other modern translations, including the New Living Translation. Perhaps playfully evoking the ghost of "study to shew thyself," I still have posted in front of my computer screen the NLT's blunt version of the advice given in 2 Thessalonians 3:12: "Settle down and get to work." (This imperative snaps me to attention much more effectively than the KJV's parallel admonition "that with quietness they work.")

I moved to the leafy western suburbs of Chicago at a time when tearing down a perfectly good, commodious house to build a McMansion on the same lot was all the rage. It was therefore haunting to hear the prophet inquire, "Why are you living in luxurious houses . . .?" (Hag. 1:3 NLT). This question packed a lot more punch than the KJV's rather cryptic "Is it time for you, O ye, to dwell in your cieled houses . . .?" (I had to look up *cieled* in the *Oxford English Dictionary.* It helpfully offers *wain-scoted* as a suitable synonym.)

In preparation for the KJV's 400th anniversary I decided to reread the translation so familiar from my youth. I found its power and grandeur unabated, though some of the language has an odd ring today—at least after my long sojourn in 20th-century iterations of these divinely inspired texts.

One particularly jarring element is a whole cluster of terms that sound like medievalisms. It makes one seasick to think about how anachronistic it was to import these terms back into biblical times and about how archaic they are for readers today, especially in America. For example, there are various references to castles (2 Chron. 17:12).

Then there are the aristocratic titles. The descendants of Esau, for instance, are given the rank of "dukes" (Gen. 36:15). One wonders if these are merely courtesy titles—and whether or not they could be found in *Debrett's Peerage*. Although sounding like a caricature of medieval times in a "Ye Olde Cheese Shoppe" sort of way, a woman might be described as a "damsel" or even, alas, a "wench" (2 Sam. 17:17). Ruth is a damsel—and suitably in distress (Ruth 2:5–6). Evoking fantasy role-playing games today, the natural world of the KJV includes unicorns (Job 39:9) and dragons (Ps. 148:7).

What is far eerier, however, is the ways in which the vocabulary of the KJV seems to reach into our 21st-century world. Dwelling in suburban Chicago, I was disconcerted to learn that *suburbs* is a KJV word (Num. 35:2). Our suburban life also leaps out in

other ways. Jesus accuses the money changers of making the temple into a "house of merchandise"—which sounds uncannily plausible for the name of a big-box chain store. House of Merchandise—were it to exist—would no doubt know how to "advertise" (Num. 24:14). Our cieled houses are, of course, heavily "mortgaged" (Neh. 5:3). And the apostles, like all the rest of us, spend their time "in conference" (Gal. 2:6).

Gen Xers like myself may be amused to know that Joshua more or less calls the Israelites slackers (Josh. 18:3). A famous member of our generational cohort, Keanu Reeves, might be interested to learn that the futuristic sounding phrase "the matrix" is already there in the KJV (Exod. 13:12). Another case of so-out-it's-in is "firkin" as a unit of liquid measurement (John 2:6), which is now dotted about our contiguous towns in the name of a chain of would-be trendy pubs. This is particularly fitting as the KJV Jesus is a friend of "publicans" (Matt. 11:19)—a category of acquaintances that drops out of recent translations.

My own location does not lend itself to noticing urban connections, but it was bracing to observe that what is sometimes decried as nonstandard speech has the imprimatur of the King's English—for example, grammatical constructions such as "we be" (John 8:33) and, from the mouth of our Lord himself, "they be" (Matt. 15:14). And a variant on at least one current vulgar term is fully authorized: as a kind of antieuphemism, sticking close to the original Hebrew, a common KJV term for men is "any that pisseth against the wall" (1 Sam. 25:22).

None of this, however, comes close to expressing my primary reactions while rereading the KJV. Far more often than being distracted by the vocabulary, I was drawn in by its haunting power. The majesty of the KJV's language has been celebrated often—and by the pens of writers more ready than I. Not least in the 400th anniversary year of 2011, however, everyone whose mother tongue is English ought to do so again.

It is hard for me to disentangle the familiarity of texts cherished in childhood from an objective assessment of the 17th-century translators' skills, but I suspect that as long as the words of the most familiar passages in Shakespeare's plays still have a unique capacity to speak to us, so will the language of the KJV for Psalm 23, the Sermon on the Mount, Ecclesiastes 3, Genesis 1, 1 Corinthians 13, John 1 and much more. Biblical scholarship and the English language have moved on considerably since 1611, so I would certainly not counsel anyone today to live by the KJV alone.

On the other hand, to those who have never encountered it, I extend an invitation to taste and see that it is good.

A living language is continually altering, and so translations must change as well. Ultimately, the resonant impact encountered in a biblical text in English is not the work of the translators, however felicitous, but rather the mark of a quality inherent in the source itself. Like a personally shallow actor articulating the prose of a profound playwright, even an inelegant rendering of the Bible carries the life-changing power of the Spirit of the Living God. Translations fade, but the scriptures themselves are incorruptible seed. "For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: But the word of the Lord endureth for ever" (1 Pet. 1:24–25 KJV).