

Why the KJV is the only Bible with power to unite

by [Daniel Burke](#)

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(RNS) 1604. England. Rebellious Puritans, establishment Anglicans and Roman Catholics are (literally) at each other's throats. A new king fears his reign will combust in a powder keg of religious strife and anti-monarchical fervor.

So King James I does what any sensible monarch would do: He orders up a new translation of the Bible.

King James' Bible failed miserably as a peacekeeper -- civil war broke out in 1642 -- but enjoyed smashing success as a book. Published in 1611, the King James Version (KJV) reigned supreme over English translations for nearly three centuries, becoming the best-selling tome in history.

And there may never be another like it.

"The Bible was the cohesive framework for English and American society, and the King James Version was what people meant when they spoke of 'the Bible,'" said Leland Ryken, a professor of English at Wheaton College in Illinois.

Twentieth century advances in technology, language, biblical scholarship and niche marketing gradually dethroned the KJV, leading to a more democratic variety of competing translations.

But as the KJV marks its 400th birthday this year, some Christian scholars are hoping to spark interest in a new Bible translation capable of attaining the KJV's cultural authority, poetic power and theological depth.

Chief among them is David Lyle Jeffrey, a professor of literature and humanities at Baylor University in Waco, Texas, and an expert on the KJV.

"The celebration of the KJV has made us realize that there is a job to be done to create something of similar anchoring value for readers of the Bible in English," he said.

Most of the Bible translations crowding American bookstores lack the KJV's gravitas and spiritual substance, Jeffrey said, and their sheer variety fractures Christian unity.

The need for the KJV itself was prompted by a related situation, Jeffrey argues in a forthcoming book, "The King James Bible and the World It Made."

In King James' England, the Bishops' Bible, favored by Anglicans, prevailed in churches, while the Puritan-preferred Geneva Bible was read in homes. Dissonances between the two versions sowed theological doubts and divisions. Hoping to paper over those divides (and supersede the anti-monarchical Geneva Bible) King James seized on the idea of a new, unifying Bible.

"One could be forgiven for thinking that a similar case for a common Bible in English is far stronger now than it was then," Jeffrey writes.

Jeffrey and other scholars acknowledged, though, that such a task would be difficult.

"Another translation could be created, but it would never have the cultural uniqueness and authority that the KJV had," said Timothy Larsen, a Wheaton scholar and author of a book about the KJV's influence on the Victorian era. "Too many choices would have to be made."

Bible translation is inherently theological, Larsen said, and getting contemporary Christian camps on the same page, so to speak, would be next to impossible.

As a result, Bible use is more democratic today, with no one translation wearing the crown, which some experts say is a good thing.

"The variety of ways in which the Bible allows for different translations demonstrates that it is a living, amazingly enduring document," said Kristin Swenson, a religious studies scholar at Virginia Commonwealth University.

"It allows for people to engage with it in so many different ways," added Swenson, author of "Bible Babel: Making Sense of the Most Talked About Book of All Time."

The KJV is hardly lost in the thicket of translations, according to Robert Sanford, an executive at the Christian publishing giant Thomas Nelson. It annually ranks near the top of the company's sales.

"The KJV is still very much used by Americans today," Sanford said.

Still, some scholars lament the lack of an up-to-date English translation with the majesty and musicality of the KJV, said K. Sara-Jane Murray, a colleague of Jeffrey's at Baylor University.

If there's anyone who could pull that proposal off, it is Jeffrey, she said. "A lot of scholars and artists around the world are dying to collaborate on a project like this, and David is someone who could definitely pull those people together and help them take great joy in it," said Murray.