
The King James Bible at 400

Scripture, Statecraft,
and the American Founding



by Bernard M. Levinson and Joshua A. Berman

The King James Bible is about to celebrate its 400th anniversary. While millions have sought spiritual and literary inspiration in it, an overlooked aspect of its history is its ongoing connection to national politics. Born in the first decade of the 17th century amid a controversy in England over the relationship between church and state, the King James Bible came to prominence in the 1660s with the restoration of the monarchy after the English Civil War. More than a century later and an ocean away, its role in national politics continued in the genesis of the United States of America. The Founders employed its rhetoric in writings to support the Revolution and drew upon ideas going back to the Bible to design the Constitution. Politics brought the King James Bible into being and established its popularity, and it in turn was used to help spawn a political revolution.



he story begins with the ascension of James Stuart, King of Scotland and son of Mary, Queen of Scots, to the throne of England in 1603. He inherited a divided Church of England, with the reform-minded Puritans in one camp and the conservative church establishment in the other.

The Puritans rejected as idolatrous or unbiblical many of the practices cherished by the conservatives. In 1604 King James convened the Hampton Court Conference to resolve these conflicts, but despite the openness to reform implied in holding the conference, he refused nearly every suggestion made by the Puritan delegation. The problem was that King James associated the Puritans with the Church of

Scotland. As King of Scotland, James formerly had a contentious relationship with the Scottish church. Its leaders believed that a monarch is not the head of the church but subject to it, an opinion that King James, for obvious reasons, did not share. He therefore saw this challenge to his authority over the church as a potential threat to the throne itself, especially if church leaders should ever decide his actions as king were incompatible with the will of God.

Although King James wanted a unified Church of England, he wanted even more to avoid repeating the too familiar conflict in the new realm. Knowing the Puritans' views resembled those of the Scottish church made King James understandably wary of their proposals. The sole Puritan suggestion he championed was one that could serve his own agenda: the request that there be a single



George Washington is sworn in as the first president; the same Bible was used by President George H.W. Bush.

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The History of the King James Bible and Its Impact upon the Founding of the United States

1517

Protestant Reformation begins with Martin Luther posting his Ninety-Five Theses against the Catholic practice of selling indulgences.



1520

Luther publishes *The Appeal to the German Nobility*, arguing for church reform, including translating the Bible into the vernacular language. The resulting German *Lutherbibel* (1522/23) paves the way for translations into other European languages, including English.

1526

William Tyndale publishes his English translation of the New Testament.



1553

Mary Tudor succeeds Edward VI on the throne of England and implements policies to reinstate Roman Catholicism in England. Many Protestants flee England for other European cities.



1558

Mary Tudor is succeeded by Elizabeth I, who rejects Roman Catholicism and restores Protestantism to England.

1560

The Geneva Bible, an English translation, is published.

1568

The Bishop's Bible is published. It becomes the official Bible of the Church of England, but many continue to use the Geneva Bible.

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Quotes on the Bible

"It is impossible to rightly govern a nation without God and the Bible."

attributed to George Washington

"The Bible is a book of faith, and a book of doctrine, and a book of morals, and a book of religion, of especial revelation from God."

Daniel Webster

"The book called the Bible has been voted by men, and decreed by human laws to be the word of God, and the disbelief of this is called blasphemy."

Thomas Paine

"The Bible is worth all the other books which have ever been printed."

Patrick Henry

"The Bible must be considered as the great source of all the truth by which men are to be guided in government as well as in all social transactions."

Noah Webster

"I have examined all religions, as well as my narrow sphere, my straightened means, and my busy life would allow; and the result is, that the Bible is the best Book in the world. It contains more of my philosophy than all the libraries I have seen."

John Adams

"He who made all men bath made the truths necessary to human happiness obvious to all... Our forefathers...opened the Bible to all..."

Samuel Adams

Bible for the Church of England.

During the Reformation of the 16th and 17th centuries, Protestants declared Scripture to be the primary conduit through which to obtain knowledge of God. Christians were encouraged to study the Bible themselves, but they quickly realized that it is not an easy read. Thus, when a new English translation of the Bible was completed in Geneva in 1560, the translators added marginal notes to explain the text for readers. The usefulness of the marginal notes made the Geneva Bible very popular among the general population, but the content of the notes created a political concern for monarchs such as King James. They contained some interpretations that were sympathetic to the right of the oppressed to resist a tyrant, and that raised questions about "the divine right of kings," the doctrine that monarchs, as rulers anointed by God, should rule without accountability to any human institution, including the law and the church.

In 1583, in an attempt to limit the influence of the Geneva Bible, the Bishops' Bible of 1568, which had royalist leanings, was named the official Bible of the Church of England. Nevertheless, because the Geneva Bible was a clearer translation, many in the church continued to use that more popular edition. Championing the Puritans' request for a single, official Bible gave King James the opportunity to rid the church of the Geneva Bible. He made this intention clear by declaring, as noted by one witness, that "he could neuer, yet, see a Bible well translated in English; but the worst of all, his Maiestie thought the Geneva to be." A new translation was needed.

Under the direction of Richard Bancroft, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the translation team, comprising 47 scholars distributed across six committees, was instructed to adhere closely to the Bishops' Bible. Other translations could be used only in cases in which they better agreed with the original Greek or Hebrew text. In reality, the finished product had significant parallels with the 16th-century Tyndale translation, from which both the Geneva and Bishops'

Bibles also descended. Marginal notes, like those of the Geneva Bible, were forbidden in the new translation, except as a means to clarify difficult words or to identify citations when one biblical text quoted another.

As each group completed its translation, they circulated their work to the other committees for comment. In 1610, more than six years and 31,000 verses later, an editorial team convened to finalize the manuscript. It was read aloud as scholars in the room listened and consulted other translations for comparison. The language of the translation attempted to mirror the syntax of the original Greek and Hebrew, and was deliberately archaized to impress upon its audience the holiness and majesty of the Word.

Disagreements were discussed, and variations proposed, until at last they had a manuscript on which all agreed.

The final manuscript was completed in the spring of 1611. Unfortunately, the printing process was not as meticulous as the translation process had been. The printed works were littered with typographical errors. In addition, it appears that pages from two editions were intermixed, so that in a single volume there were pages from each edition. The result? No two copies of the original King James Bible were alike. At one point during the 19th century, there were more than 24,000 variations among the editions in circulation. According to Adam Nicolson, in *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible*: "No one such thing as 'The King James Bible'—agreed, consistent and whole—has ever existed."

The King James Bible was not initially successful. It was criticized for its archaic language, for its apparent conservative bias, and for its numerous printing errors. Even some of the translators themselves preferred to use other translations, especially the Geneva Bible, in their ministry. Not even James' 1616 prohibition against printing the Geneva Bible in England could induce people to switch to the King James Version. Instead, they imported Geneva Bibles from the Netherlands. Only after the English Civil War and the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660 did the King James Bible finally achieve popularity. This belated popularity was driven by a sense of nostalgia for the pre-war monarchy, as the King James Version came to be regarded as a symbol of the nation's united commitment to its king and its church. The English of the King James Bible, once derided as archaic, began to have a significant impact on the development of the English language. Slowly but surely, it became the very model of "scriptural" language and polished rhetoric.

The Geneva Bible controversy is just one example of the intersection of faith and politics in the 16th and 17th centuries.

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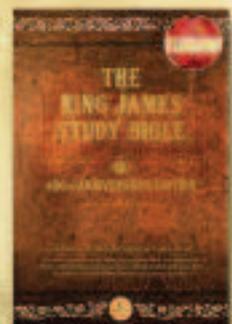
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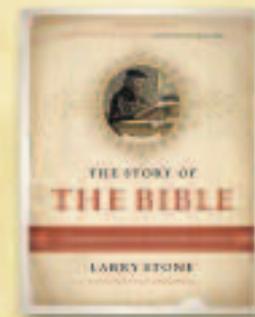
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rejection of God's kingship was sinful, so any contemporary civil disobedience or rebellion against God's divinely appointed monarch would be sinful.

Pointing to biblical models, the Dutch philosopher Benedict Spinoza, in

his *Theological-Political Treatise*

(1670), argued for a social contract requiring rule by the consent of the governed. He called equally for freedom of thought and expression as essential to any just social order.

A number of scholars have argued in recent years that the Pentateuch represents an important but neglected source for the origins of Western constitutional thought, including the ideas of the separation of powers, the rule of law, and the independence of the judiciary. They note, for example, that in the New World, Deuteronomy was the most frequently cited book in popular writings on the Constitution during the Revolutionary period, exceeding even Charles de Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws*.

Many writers also used the Bible—particularly the King James Version—to stir the spirit of dissent in various and surprising ways. Consider the use of the Bible in Thomas Paine's bestselling pamphlet, *Common Sense*, which appeared in January 1776. Paine did not believe in the divine authorship and authority

of the Bible. Like many others of his day, Paine was influenced by Deism, an Enlightenment belief system that emphasizes reason over revelation as the best guide for human progress.

"I believe in one God," asserted Paine. "I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church . . . nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church." The contours of his belief—and disbelief—are evident in his view of the Bible: "I cannot dishonour my Creator by calling it by his name." While Paine couldn't believe in the divine inspiration of the Bible, he did believe in the Bible's capacity to stir the masses. In *Common Sense* he referred to King George III as the "hardened, sullen tempered Pharaoh of England." His essay draws from many biblical passages critical of the idea of a monarchy, but it is also evident that Paine used the rhetorical tone of the King James Version to frame his own words as well. Paine cited the episode in Judges 8, in which the Israelites turn to the victorious general, Gideon, and offer him dynastic leadership. Paine quotes Gideon's response: "Gideon in the piety of his soul replied, 'I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you. THE LORD SHALL RULE OVER YOU.'" Paine then employs rhetorical flourish in his commentary on the passage: "Gideon doth not decline the honour, but denieth their right to give it." Paine enhances the stature of his own voice by employing the rhetoric of the King James Bible—the same Bible whose religious authority he deeply questioned.

During this period, the King James Bible inspired a new genre of satire: biblical parody. The biblical *First Book of Chronicles* details ancient Israel's earliest history. This work inspired a Philadelphia silversmith named John Leacock to compose a satirical account of the earliest history of America—the New Israel. He titled his work—written in the wake of the December 1773 Boston Tea Party—*The First Book of the American Chronicles of the Times*. Parliament had enacted a series

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1603

James VI, King of Scotland becomes James I, King of England, succeeding Elizabeth.



1604

James commissions a new Bible translation at the Hampton Court Conference.

1610

The translation editors convene at the Stationers Hall in London to finalize the manuscript for the King James Bible.

1611

The King James Bible is published by Robert Barker, whose family in 1577 had purchased monopoly rights to print Bibles in England.

1616

Production of the Geneva Bible in England ceases.

1644

Printing of the Geneva Bible ceases as its popularity wanes.

1660

The English monarchy is restored after a brief period of Parliamentary rule following the English Civil War.

1670

Benedict Spinoza publishes (anonymously) his *Theological-Political Treatise*.

1675

Publication of the King James Bible by Cambridge University Press begins.

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of punitive measures, called the Coercive Acts, designed to restore British authority; the colonists promptly dubbed them the Intolerable Acts. Leacock's work first appeared in October 1774. Chapter 1 verse 1 of the satire details the Boston Tea Party, consciously adopting the style of the King James Bible:

And behold! When the tidings came to the great city that is afar off, the city that is in the land of Britain, how the men of Boston, even the Bostonites, had arose, a great multitude and destroyed the Tea, the abominable merchandize of the east, and cast it into the midst of the sea

Leacock's *First Book of the American Chronicles* was published in newspaper installments throughout New England and detailed events as they unfolded. It also included references to major characters of the revolution in biblical pseudonym, such as Mordecai the Benjaminite (i.e. Benjamin Franklin). It ran to six installments, or "chapters," until February 1775.

While Paine's *Common Sense* is widely studied today, more colonists, especially in outlying areas, were prepared for armed resistance by the clergy's Sunday sermons than by the pamphlets of a Locke or a Paine. The Massachusetts Supreme Court chief justice, a loyalist named Peter Oliver, saw these dissenting clergymen as a distinct threat and dubbed them "the Black Regiment."

Political sermons that drew from the verses of

the King James Bible continued to shape America's political development through the crisis that led to the ratification of the Constitution. Standing before the General Court of New Hampshire in early June 1788, Pastor Samuel Langdon prepared to speak to the weighty issue of the day. Only two weeks remained before he would serve as a representative to that state's constitutional convention. Eight states already had ratified the Constitution. If New Hampshire followed suit, the document would be formally adopted as the law of the land. Searching for a text that would buttress his ardent support of ratification, the former Harvard College president opened his King James Bible to Deuteronomy 4 and read aloud:

Behold I have taught you statutes and judgments Keep therefore and do them; for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the nations which shall hear all these statutes, and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people" What nation is there so great, that hath statutes and judgments so righteous as all this law, which I set before you this day? (Deut 4:5–8)

Langdon went on to explicate the virtue of Deuteronomy as the basis of a law-based society in which curbs on the corruptive influence of power were an integral part of its system. Bringing the lessons of Deuteronomy to bear on



Ronald Reagan takes the presidential oath as wife Nancy holds the Bible, given to him by his mother's family.

the momentous decision facing the nation, he remarked, "If I am not mistaken, instead of the twelve tribes of Israel we may substitute the thirteen States of the American union."

The King James Version first took shape to help address a political crisis in England and to consolidate the rule of the monarch. Its legacy was to play an important role in a remarkable revolution against the very idea of monarchy, and to nurture the founding of a new republican model of government.

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1774

Continental Congress meets in Philadelphia. Discussion focuses on American grievances against the British and a boycott of British and Irish products.

1775

British efforts to quell rebellion in the colonies result in the first battles between the colonists and British soldiers.

1776

In January Thomas Paine publishes his pamphlet *Common Sense* making the case for American independence. July 4, Congress adopts the document later known as the Declaration of Independence.



1782

The first English-language Bible is printed in America. The choice of the King James Version for this printing helped to establish it as the preferred translation in the U.S. in subsequent years.

1788

Samuel Langdon delivers his sermon in support of the Constitution. The document takes effect after New Hampshire ratifies it.

1789

On April 30 George Washington is inaugurated in New York as the first president. He takes the oath of office with his right hand on an open copy of the King James Bible (printed in London in 1767), obtained at the last minute from a nearby St. John's Lodge.



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