

Book Review

Leland Ryken, *The Legacy of the King James Bible: Celebrating 400 Years of the Most Influential English Translation* (Crossway, 2011): 265 pp.

Leland Ryken is an English Professor at Wheaton College who has been part of the “Bible as literature” movement among evangelicals (e.g., serving as editor with his son Philip Ryken of the ESV Literary Study Bible). Most significantly, Ryken served as the “literary stylist” for Crossway’s English Standard Version. This book was written to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the King James Version (1611-2011).

The Preface: Contradictions

In the Preface, Ryken lays out his approach. He writes to praise the KJV as a distinct literary and cultural achievement in the English language. He also acknowledges that in this “era of revisionism and debunking” there has been no small effort to undermine and debunk the KJV. The KJV is on “the ‘hit list’ of cultural revisionists” (p. 13).

The irony here is that Ryken himself has to some degree contributed to this debunking through his promotion of modern translations, like the ESV. He even engages in such debunking within this book. He notes, “I do not believe that the King James Bible is the best translation for a reader today” (p. 13). He then lays out several reasons for this assumption:

First, he states that “the KJV is not based on the best available knowledge about the Bible in its original Hebrew and Greek. Some parts of the KJV are based on ancient manuscripts that a majority of scholars today regard as inferior” (p. 14). Ryken here assumes the superiority of the modern critical text over against the traditional text of Scripture without providing any in depth rationale for this conclusion, other than the fact that it is the majority consensus of modern scholars.

Next, he accuses the KJV of not being “as accurate as modern translations that are based on the principle of essentially literal translations” without providing any supporting examples or evidence (p. 14). Interestingly enough, however, he also adds, “that in the past I have too glibly pronounced the KJV suspect in accuracy” (p. 14).

Finally, he states that “The real case against the KJV for regular use today is the archaism of the language. For modern readers unfamiliar with the King James Bible, the language is an insurmountable barrier. Even for people who have always used the KJV, some of its words are a mystery” (p. 14). Again, Ryken presents this argument as a *prima facie* fact, without offering any supporting evidence. As with his comments on accuracy, however, he then backpedals by noting, “If I were forced to choose between the King James Bible and a modern colloquial translation, I would choose the KJV” (p. 14). Wait, which is it? Is the KJV an often inaccurate

translation based on an inferior text that is unintelligible to modern English speakers? If so, why then would one prefer it to “a modern colloquial translation”?

As he closes his Preface, Ryken notes that there is a strong “sneer factor” in some circles against the KJV, adding, “[s]ome people imply by name-calling that the KJV is ridiculous, but the case for its inferiority is never laid out. I hope that in making the case for the King James Bible I will prompt some people to see that the allegations against the KJV are rarely supported by honest argument” (p. 15). Hmm? Would such allegations include saying that the KJV is an inaccurate translation based on flawed texts in an indecipherable archaic language?

As the citations from the preface make clear, Ryken reflects the tension of attempting to hold two contradictory impulses as he approaches the 400th anniversary of the KJV. On one hand, he wants to praise the KJV as a literary and cultural achievement of the English language, even defending it against its harshest critics. On the other hand, he shares the essential modern critical perspective that has resulted in the undermining of the KJV and the attempt to exclude it from modern usage.

The Content:

Here is a summary of the book’s four major sections with some analysis of each section:

Part One: The King James Bible in Its Own Day

This section offers a historical overview of how the KJV came into existence. It begins with the work of John Wycliffe and William Tyndale that paved the way for and deeply influenced the style and language of the KJV. It proceeds to discuss the English translations that preceded the KJV (Coverdale’s Bible, Matthew’s Bible, Great Bible, Geneva Bible, Bishop’s Bible). Finally, Ryken discusses the making of the KJV itself from its origins at the Hampton Court Conference in 1604, to the forming and work of the translation team, to its final editing at Stationer’s Hall in 1609, and its publication in 1611. Of note is the description of how the KJV soon came to dominate the market and supplant all other translations, including the popular Geneva Bible as the translation of choice in English.

There are some points with which one might take issue:

First, Ryken stresses that the translators were “a very human lot—approximately the same as the committees that have produced our familiar modern translations” (p. 49). Is this true? Adam Nicolson, for example, would contradict this point. In *God’s Secretaries* (Harper Collins, 2003), his celebrated book on the making of the KJV, Adams describes the Puritan translator Lancelot Andrewes: “The man was a library, the repository of sixteen centuries of Christian culture, he could speak fifteen modern languages and six ancients, but the heart and bulk of his existence was his sense of himself as a worm... People like Lancelot Andrewes no longer exist.... It is because people like Lancelot Andrewes flourished in the first decade of the seventeenth

century—and do not now—that the greatest translation of the Bible could be made then, and cannot now” (p. 33). Have there really been a Lancelot Andrewes (or fifty four of them!) on the committees of any modern translations?

Second, Ryken again introduces contradictory notions (as in the Preface) regarding the “accuracy” of the KJV, offering both criticism and defense. He notes:

Two things make it hard to get a fair hearing for the accuracy of the King James Bible today. One is the fact that the archaic language of the KJV is so acute for people unfamiliar with it that it is easy to conclude that it cannot be an accurate rendering of the original biblical text. The second is that the King James New Testament is based on original manuscripts that are today considered inferior (p. 62).

With regard to archaisms, Ryken notes three levels of difficulty for moderns: inflected verbs (the –eth endings), unfamiliar vocabulary, and words with changed meanings. Once again, however, Ryken raises these objections but then provides his own rebuttals to them!:

This is not to deny that a modern reader can be educated into what words meant for the translators and their contemporary audience....

I find myself looking far and wide to find examples in the King James Bible of words whose meanings have changed so drastically that the translation can be called inaccurate. Perhaps the number of these is statistically insignificant. But for readers unfamiliar with the King James Bible, the mere presence of archaic language and constructions is usually interpreted as evidence that the King James Bible is inaccurate. This is a false impression (p. 63).

With regard to “the second strike” against the text, Ryken again expresses his preference for the modern critical text, but he softens his critique of the KJV’s text:

We need to tread cautiously here: to say that the King James New Testament is based on manuscripts that are today considered less than the best can superficially sound more sinister than in fact it is. If the Received Text is considered by most (not all) modern scholars as second-best, that does not mean that it is bad (pp. 63-64).

Ryken even offers “a caution against a facile dismissal of the possibility that the King James Bible might represent accuracy (even a superior accuracy) in our day” (p. 66)

Part Two: The King James Bible in History

Ryken begins by noting the influence of the KJV in subsequent English Bible translations. He then discusses the influence of the KJV on language, education, and religion. Of interest here is Ryken’s discussion of the “non-Western influence” of the KJV, including anecdotal accounts of non-native speakers who learned English by reading the KJV (pp. 86-89). Aside: If this is so,

why is it that modern Americans supposedly cannot understand it? He also notes how the KJV provided a standard for everything from tombstone inscriptions, to Bible quotations, to Bible commentary texts (e. g., in Matthew Henry) for generations. Finally, he looks at the influence of the KJV on culture in everything from great speeches (e. g., Lincoln, M. L. King, Jr.), to music (e.g., Handel's Messiah), to visual arts (e.g, in the works of painter Holman Hunt). He concludes this section: "Claims that the King James Bible was the most important influence on English and American culture for over three centuries are accurate" (p. 114).

The most intriguing aspect of this section, in my view, is Ryken's discussion of subsequent modern translations. Ryken notes the influence of the KJV even "on the Bible translators who rejected it" (p. 72). For modern translators, the KJV "was a father figure who needed to be slain" (p. 72).

Ryken then proclaims, "There are three modern translations that are indisputably in the procession of the King James Bible" (p. 72). According to Ryken, these are the RSV, the NKJV, and the ESV. He is particularly keen to exclude the NASB and the NIV from inclusion in the procession (as rivals to the ESV?). Despite his claim that this is "indisputably" the case, I would dispute it. The RSV and ESV (and the NASB, coming from the AV 1901, for that matter) have their roots in the Revised Version of 1881 more than the KJV of 1611. Neither makes use of the traditional text upon which the KJV was based. Therefore, it can certainly be disputed that they follow "in the procession" of the KJV. Ryken appears driven here more by his personal association with the ESV (which Crossway, the publisher of this book produces) than by the facts.

Part Three: The King James Bible as a Literary Masterpiece

Ryken begins by asking "What makes an English Bible literary?" He notes that KJV debunkers often take issue with its "literary excellence" (p. 117). The "ultimate touchstone" of literature "is that it devitates positively from everyday discourse" (p. 121). He concludes that the KJV is "the gold standard for a literary Bible" (p. 122). His discussion of the literary excellence here almost takes on the hagiographic overtones of a KJV-Only-ist! Ryken notes that the "literary excellence of the KJV is nothing short of miraculous" (p. 123). It is "the only literary masterpiece ever to have been produced by committee," though completed by men who were not "literary scholars" and who had no conception of producing a "literary Bible" (p. 123)! Ryken speculates that this greatness came from the unique Renaissance time period. He even suggests that the translators were inspired by the great university buildings at Oxford, Cambridge, and the Westminster Abbey where they labored: "One is not likely to produce a cheap and tawdry Bible translation when walking to committee meetings amid such sublimity" (p. 125). He also praises the timing of the KJV's production at a strategic moment in the development of the English language. This was a unique "window of opportunity" at "a moment of great energy and expansiveness" (p. 125).

Ryken next devotes a chapter to the prose style of the KJV praising its “variety and flexibility” (p. 130). The vocabulary is simple (preponderously monosyllabic) and Anglo-Saxon (rather than Latin). The “prose rhythm” of the KJV is “matchless” (p. 139). It is a majestic “oral book whose excellence shines brightest when we hear it read aloud” (p. 140).

Next comes a chapter on the KJV’s poetic effects. Ryken praises the poetic idiom and rhythm of the KJV. Though he claims “it was criminal of the King James translators to print poetry as prose” (referring to the KJV practice, unlike modern translations, to set even poetic sections of scripture in block verses just as the prose sections), Ryken acknowledges that the “the poetry of the King James Bible is rhythmically the best among English translations” (p. 146). In the end he admits that it is not possible fully to explain “the King James magic” (p. 149). The KJV is both simple and majestic. It is “the most aphoristic book in the English language” (p. 155).

Finally, Ryken concludes this section by noting “the virtually unanimous preference of the literary establishment for the King James Bible over the other Bible translations” (p. 159). Even Ryken appears to have been taken aback by what he discovered in composing this chapter:

It will come as no surprise that English and American authors as well as literary critics, prefer the King James Version. I suspect, though, that the vehemence with which they prefer the KJV will come as a mild shock. The problem that I faced in composing this chapter was avoiding overkill. I have accordingly kept the chapter brief. I will note in passing that I do not remember ever having encountered a member of the literary establishment who preferred any English Bible other than the KJV (p. 160).

Also of note here is the citation from T. S. Eliot who famously described modern Bible translations as “an active agent of decadence” (p. 166).

Part Four: The Literary Influence of the King James Bible

This final section explores the influence of the KJV on English and American literature. Ryken traces the influence of the KJV on the literary imagination through great authors like Milton, Bunyan, Blake, Wordsworth, Joyce, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Eliot, et al. His conclusion: Even though the Bible no longer elicits the religious belief of most authors, the King James Bible has remained a pervasive literary presence” (p. 227).

Afterward

Ryken ends his book suggesting that on the 400th anniversary of the KJV “we should celebrate a victory, lament a loss, and resolve to hold on to what is excellent” (p. 229). The victory celebrated is the amazing success and influence of the KJV. The lamented loss includes four things: (1) the loss of a common English Bible; (2) the eclipse of the Bible’s authority concurrent with the loss of a common English Bible; (3) the decline of Biblical literacy

concurrent with the decline of the KJB; and (4) “the affective and literary power” of the KJV (pp. 229-231).

Ryken’s conclusion offers a striking apology for the value of the KJV over modern translations:

Claims by modern translators and Bible scholars that the Christian public is fortunate to have been delivered from the archaisms and occasional inaccuracies of the KJV turn out to be hollow. If Bible knowledge in our day has declined across the board, where is the alleged gain from modern translations? (p. 230).

Finally, Ryken suggests we should hold on to what is excellent. This includes remembering: (1) KJV sales remain strong and its use remains unabated in many Christian circles; (2) the influence of the KJV endures in some modern translations; (3) we should use the KJV when interacting with literature impacted by it; (4) lastly, Ryken says, “even if we use a modern translation *most* of the time, there are good reasons to read the King James Bible *some* of the time” (p. 232). He concludes, “We should not relegate the King James Bible to the status of a relic in the museum of the past” (p. 232).

Concluding Analysis:

Ryken has done an admirable job of commemorating the 400th anniversary of the venerable King James Version of the Bible. At times, his discussion even borders on being hagiographic! As noted in my review, however, the book often reflects a contradictory tension. On one hand, Ryken wants to praise and defend the KJV from those who would dismiss it as outdated and irrelevant. One almost gets the sense that he is doing literary “penance” for his promotion of the ESV. On the other hand, however, he repeats the same kinds of viewpoints that have resulted in the “debunking” and marginalization of the KJV (e.g., “...I do not believe that the King James Bible is the best translation for a reader today” (p. 13). Oddly enough, admiration of the KJV and promotion of its continued usefulness, is less likely to come from Protestant evangelicals (who have been most blessed by it) and more likely to come from the unbelieving literary elite!

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