

Updated KJV Conveys Message of Original Bible Texts

by

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Holy Bible, the 21st Century King James Version. Gary, South Dakota: 21st Century King James Bible Publishers, 1994. Hardcover, \$34.95, bonded leather, \$59.95.

On the front page of the *London Times* for September 5, 1996, there appeared a color poster designed by the Church of England intending to bring the world-weary sinner into the house of God during the advent season. It had a rather bizarre graphic with the accompanying text: "Bad hair day?! You're a virgin, you've just given birth and now three kings have shown up. Find out the happy ending at a church near you."

The Bishop-designate of Fulham was quoted as saying in response: "It is slick and supercilious. It is about time that trendy liberals realised the world is not interested in gimmicks." Indeed. Well, it would seem that Bible publishers who have invested millions in order to sensitize Christians to the need to read Holy Writ in the basest of the vernacular have also seen their day. In what must have been perceived as a very dark sign, indeed, Bible publishers awoke on October 28 in 1996 to read in the *New York Times*, the headline: "The Bible, a Perennial, Runs Into Sales Resistance." The article went on to explain how "the \$200 million market for bibles is as flat as a leather Bible cover." This is because, as Oxford University Press explained, "we've reached saturation point." In short, there is a glut in the market. Within the last twenty years "several hundred versions of the Bible, catering to every niche of reader" has resulted in "too many Bibles for too few faithful." Finally the modern Bible publishing blitz may now be finished. Thomas Nelson lost almost \$1.4 million in its fiscal first quarter ending in June 1996 and its Bible revenue was down 6 percent. So perhaps this, too, is a sign from this side of the Atlantic that we also have had our fill of religious gimmicks.

Add to this climate a recent response to the Jesus Seminar (which has been busy paving the way for a most abbreviated version of the Christ story for the next millennium), in the timely book by Professor Luke Timothy Johnson, of Emory University, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (HarperCollins, 1996) and we have a positively discernible pattern emerging. Folk have had it with abbreviated, culturally accommodating Bible translations and the theology that usually accompanies them.

What an ideal time, therefore, for the appearance of the old Anglican Bible in slightly modern dress. Originally a product of both the English Renaissance and that most moderate of all the European Reformations, this ever so conservative update of the 1611 may be just the answer for the present hunger for traditional substance over contemporary glitz. Called the *21st Century King James Version*, this edition has accomplished what the Church of England failed to do in the late Victorian era and produced instead that still-born, yet highly celebrated *Revised Version* (1881-83). This R.V. was intended to be the "20th" Century King James Version but because the committee was dominated by a few text critics who were intoxicated with the aroma of recently discovered uncials from

a Sinai desert monastery and the Vatican library, what resulted was not an updated English translation, but a new Bible based on hitherto unused Greek manuscripts.

Late in this century, Thomas Nelson, knowing a market when they saw one, also made an attempt to update the old work horse of both high church liturgists, as well as low church fundamentalists, but also gave way, this time in the Old Testament text, and by ditching the Tyndalian/Elizabethan second person singular/plural distinctions (i.e. the "thees" and "thous") in their *"New" King James Bible*. Dr. Mikre-Sellassie, a United Bible Societies translation consultant, rehearsed in an article he wrote for *The Bible Translator* in April of 1988 (pp. 230-237), why the "thees" and "thous" cannot be dispensed with in good conscience. Just because some marketing-type thinks these terms are the shibboleth by which consumers will judge whether a Bible is "modern" or not (while trying to make up their minds at the shelf of their local religious book store), it is no justification for erasing the important grammatical function these terms fulfill. I shall let him speak in his own voice:

Translators, and especially those in common language projects, may find it strange and surprising to hear a consultant recommending use of the King James Version for translation.....The archaic English pronouns of the KJV distinguish number in the second person pronoun in all cases, as shown in [the accompanying] table. Thus the KJV can certainly render an important service to those translators who do not have any knowledge of the source languages of the Bible and therefore work only from an English base, in easily distinguishing between "you singular" and "you plural."

	Singular	Plural
1st person	I	we
2nd person	thou/thee/thy/thine Masculine/Feminine/Neuter	ye/you/your
3rd person	He/she/it	They

What Dr. Mikre-Sellassie is telling us is that the old KJV reads just like the original Greek and Hebrew on this point while the *New King James* of Thomas Nelson does not. On this point then, the *21st Century King James Version* has a distinct advantage in that it has retained these forms throughout, just as the original KJV.

Furthermore, this KJ21 is the only attempted update that I have observed which *does not* alter the text of the old KJV in order to bring it up to date to some supposed superior modern Greek or Hebrew recension. It has sensibly left that ground to its fleeting modern contemporaries which currently glut the market with their dizzying variety -- ever in motion, never in rest.

Moreover, with the current emphasis in contemporary hermeneutical theory away from the fragmenting tendencies of Biblical criticism (a la Hans Frei's monumental critique, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, 1974), toward a greater emphasis on the importance of

Biblical narrative (see Mark I. Wallace's insightful *The Second Naiveté*, 1995), surely this updated edition of the Authorized Version is just the medium for rediscovering the magic of Biblical narrative and teaching, in its most classic form of English expression.

As for the updates themselves, they are indeed modest, but beneficial, as the following typical samples would indicate:

KJV	KJ21
minish	diminish
bewray	betray
wist	knew
prevent	precede
convince	convict
conversation	manner of living

It has also employed modern single-column lay-out with modern type. Less helpful, perhaps, are the various typefaces used to emphasize 1) familiar passages (always rather subjective and therefore a risky endeavor); 2) less familiar passages; and 3) the words of Christ (i.e. four type-styles in all). This no doubt will cause the most resistance from those attracted to this otherwise important update (although I must confess that through actual usage I found these distinctions helpful at times, particularly in finding most quoted passages). It also contains a double and single-diamond notation to mark the respective beginning and end of the *Revised Common Lectionary*.

Finally, the publishers have reprinted, howbeit in abbreviated form, most of *The Translators to the Reader* found in the original 1611 edition. How very beneficial it would have been if this historical and difficult to find document had been printed *in toto*.

Overall this is a most worthy endeavor bound to appeal both to those who never lost their devotion to this classic, as well as to those who stayed away because of its intrinsic difficulties. This edition will assure that the Bible produced via the genius of that Anglican *via media* will retain its place within religious usage well into the next millennium.

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