

God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible

by Adam Nicolson

(New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 2003), 281pp, hardback, \$24.95

Adam Nicolson (author of *Sea Room* which this reviewer is unfamiliar with) combines historical investigation with a novelist's flair to produce a book which attempts to take the reader back to the time of the making of the King James Bible and to provide a deeper understanding of the events, personalities, and historical developments which contributed to this literary and spiritual masterpiece.

The majority of the author's treatment concerns the social, political, and ecclesiastical fabric of Jacobean England within which the translation of the King James Version (KJV) was undertaken. This is perhaps the most valuable contribution of the book which deals relatively less with the issues and technical process of the translation itself. For those translators for which historical records are still available, he undertakes each personality in turn, reviewing their education, political and ecclesiastical position, and their station in 17<sup>th</sup> century England, as well as their contribution to the translation process itself.

A particularly valuable contribution of the text is the understanding that the KJV translation occupied a position of reconciliation and mediation—eschewing the influences of both Roman Catholicism and Separatist Puritanism. This was due, in large part, to the ecclesiastical middle-ground occupied by the King and to the translator's commitment to operating as a *committee*, something which seems most unlikely, to the modern mind, to produce an enduring work (p. 69):

*Everything in the modern frame of mind, trained up on centuries of individualism, and on the overriding importance of individual freedoms, rebels against the idea. Joint committees know nothing of genius. They do not produce works of art. It is surely lonely martyrs who struggle for unacknowledged truths. Committees thrive on compromise and compromise produces fudge and muddle. Isn't the beautiful, we now think, to be identified with what is original, the previously unsaid, the unique vision of the individual mind? How can a joint enterprise of this sort produce anything valuable?*

The author helps us to understand how far our present age has come from the historical position within which the translators performed their task—changes which help explain the uniqueness of the KJV and why a work of its kind is unlikely to be produced in our own age.

Although the book is a valuable contribution to the subject of historical translation, and the KJV in particular, this reviewer has several reservations concerning the author's treatment of the subject.

Although the author exhibits great respect and admiration for the KJV as a literary and historical work, it is evident that he himself has never come to terms with the central issue of the text itself: the claims and identity of Jesus Christ. The author writes from the perspective of an uncommitted agnostic, “I am no atheist but I am no churchgoer” (p.

241). This works itself out in several ways. An underlying theme seems to be the thesis that none of the translators could possibly have been motivated by genuine altruism. Like most skeptics, the author majors in digging up and highlighting inconsistencies and impugning motivations behind the lives and work of the divines assigned to the translation. This is a questionable process when so little in the way of hard historical evidence is available—leaving the author in a similar position to that of an historical novelist, reading much between the lines which may not be factual. In the end, one is left wondering how the translation work was ever accomplished since it seems, according to this treatment, as if politics, academic vanity, and ecclesiastical maneuvering were the prime movers behind the work.

The author also evidences a lack of familiarity with the essential message of the Bible. In an otherwise insightful exchange between one of the translators and a jailed Puritan Separatist, their discussion concerning the Holy Spirit, *Who only indwells believers*, is mistaken for the spirit of man, *common to all men* (p. 91).

Also typical of an unbeliever, he is highly critical of basic Calvinist teachings—as if they were the creation of Calvin when in fact they simply reflect teachings basic to the Biblical text (p. 229 cf. Romans 9; 13):

*Calvinist Christianity is inherently fissive. Its emphasis on the primacy of a vengeful God constantly throws into doubt the validity of worldly government, and its repeated emphasis on the difference between the elect, who would be saved, and the rest, who would be damned, is no basis on which to found a nation. These radically disruptive ideas are the repeated threnody of the Geneva Bible, . . .*

Yet such basic Biblical teaching *was* the basis for Calvin's Geneva *and* the Puritan experiment which resulted in one of the greatest nations in our own time (the United States).

Lastly, numerous comments throughout the text betray the author's disregard for the reliability of the Biblical text itself.

Assuming the reader is able to keep these biases of the author in mind, there is much valuable material to be found in the work—especially in relation to understanding the thought patterns and social influences of the 17<sup>th</sup> century which made the King James Version of the Bible the popular translation and cornerstone of western civilization that history has shown it to be.

We could not agree more with the author when he asserts that an English translation with the combined grandeur, literary beauty, accuracy, and enduring value of the KJV is no longer possible to produce—the historical factors which made it possible no longer exist.