

Who Authorized the Authorized Version?

The King James Bible and the Failure of Revelation Authentication

William Stafford, ADN, LI-AIast5 Independent researcher

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1. The Question

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.”

That sentence lives in English the way almost no other does. People who haven’t been to church in decades can quote it. People who have never opened a Bible can quote it. It is in song lyrics, eulogies, legal arguments, late-night sketches. It is the opening of the most influential English book ever produced.

Where did it come from?

Most readers would say “the Bible.” Pressed, “the King James Bible.” Pressed further, the answer thins fast. Who translated it? When? Why these words and not others?

Almost no one can name a single translator. There were forty-seven. The translation was commissioned by King James I in 1604, drafted under fifteen rules written by Richard Bancroft, Bishop of London — rules that narrowed what choices the translators could make. Bancroft edited the text again after the committees finished, without consulting them.

The 1611 title page does not actually say “Authorized.” It says *Appointed to be read in Churches* — an instruction for liturgical use, not a formal proclamation of authority. The “Authorized Version” label became common a century later, as a kind of marketing shorthand. No royal proclamation, no Act of Parliament, no convocation decree authorizing the 1611 translation

has ever surfaced. The text is called Authorized; the documentary record does not show authorization.

The version most readers hold today is not the 1611 at all. It is a revision made in 1769 by an Oxford scholar named Benjamin Blayney, with several hundred changes between him and the original.

And the modern American conviction that the King James is uniquely inerrant — that the English itself is divinely preserved above the Greek and Hebrew — has no precedent in church history. It was invented in the twentieth century. None of the original translators ever claimed inspiration for their own work. The preface to the 1611, written by Miles Smith, says in so many words that the translators were imperfect men relying on God's mercy and on the labor of those who had translated before.

None of this is hidden. The records are in libraries open to anyone. What is striking is that almost no one asks for them.

This essay asks.

The principle the essay applies is plain: *authentication is prior to obedience*. Before asking whether any command is moral, ask whether the claimed source has been authenticated. This principle is not narrowly religious. It applies to governments invoking founding documents, political movements invoking moral absolutes, ideologies invoking history, corporations invoking missions, and any institution asking to be obeyed because of who it claims to speak for.

The principle requires a distinction that is easy to miss. *Historical evidence can authenticate that a report exists. It cannot, by itself, authenticate the source that the report names*. That a translation was made, that committees met, that printers printed and pulpits read aloud — these can be documented. That the text the translators produced is the word of God — this is a different claim, requiring a different check. The first is a fact about transmission. The second is a fact about origin. The diagnostic this essay applies tests the second, not the first.

The standard the diagnostic requires is not the impossible. Not laboratory verification of a text claiming a divine source. Some external check that does not depend on the recipient community's own testimony — independent attestation, evidence accessible outside the interpretive tradition, signs the source itself would produce that a motivated human author would not. This is the same standard historians already apply to ordinary claims about unobservable sources. When an intelligence agency claims to have intercepted a message from a hidden defector, the agency's authentication is not the cleanness of the printed transcript; it is the existence of independent corroboration — troop movements, financial records, secondary

witnesses — that the defector exists and has the access claimed. The essay is not raising the bar for revelation. It is asking that revelation meet the bar that already applies to any historical claim involving an unobservable source.

The King James Bible is this essay's worked case because the receipts happen to be uniquely public, and because the audience is uniquely familiar with the text. But the question generalizes. What the essay asks of the King James Bible it asks of any text presented as a source of moral authority — religious or secular, ancient or current. The structure recurs wherever a canonical text is treated as if it were transparent to its source.

So the question this essay puts to the King James Bible is not whether the Bible is true. Not whether God exists. The question is plainer and harder: *what is the external check on the source of these words?*

The answer takes some looking. The historical record is rich — and what it shows raises serious questions about whether the King James Bible's authority arose from revelation, politics, scholarship, or some combination of all three. Each of those stages — seventeenth-century commission, eighteenth-century revision, twentieth-century elevation to inerrancy — is documented. Each had beneficiaries. Whether they collectively add up to the source-claim the title page makes (or, on closer inspection, doesn't quite make) is the question the rest of the essay tests.

The essay isn't anti-religious. It is anti-credulous. A reader who finishes it still believing the King James Bible is exactly what its admirers say it is can hold that belief with more confidence than before, because it will have been tested. A reader who concludes the opposite can hold *that* view more honestly, for the same reason. What the essay refuses is to take any party's word for it — including the text's word for itself.

So: where did it come from?

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2. Hampton Court, 1604 — The Political Commission

In January 1604, James I had been on the English throne nine months. He had come south from Scotland the previous spring, leaving behind the country he had ruled as James VI since the age of one. He arrived in England as a king with strong opinions about kings. Six years earlier he had published *The True Law of Free Monarchies*, arguing that royal authority descends from God and is owed obedience even when exercised badly. The year after that, *Basilikon Doron*, instructing his son in the same doctrine. James believed in kings the way some men believe in things only they have personally constructed.

The Hampton Court Conference convened on January 14. The agenda was Puritan grievance with the Church of England — the surplice, the sign of the cross at baptism, the ring at weddings, the use of the Book of Common Prayer, the structure of episcopal church government. Four Puritan-leaning ministers had been invited to make their case. The bishops were present in larger numbers. James presided, intervened often, and ruled against the Puritans on nearly every substantive question. By day three he was telling the Puritan ministers he would “make them conform themselves, or I will harry them out of the land, or else do worse.” The line is documented in the conference proceedings.

But on the second day, John Reynolds — president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, the leading Puritan-leaning scholar in the room — proposed something that was not on the Puritan agenda. He suggested that the existing English translations of scripture be reviewed, and where necessary corrected, into a single authoritative version. The Bishops’ Bible (1568) was the official church translation but was widely considered inferior to the Geneva Bible (1560), which most English Protestants actually read in their homes.

James seized on the proposal warmly. Whether the warmth was genuine enthusiasm for scriptural scholarship or a tactical move to give the Puritans something while denying everything else, historians dispute. What is not disputed is what James said next about the Geneva Bible. He attacked its marginal notes as partial, seditious, and tending toward dangerous and treasonous ideas — the exact recorded phrasing is “partial, untrue, seditious, and savouring too much of dangerous, and traitorous conceites.” He objected specifically to glosses on Exodus 1 — the passage where the Hebrew midwives disobey Pharaoh’s order to kill the male infants — which the Geneva annotators read as justifying disobedience to ungodly rulers. Similar notes on Daniel and elsewhere carried the same resistance reading. The Geneva Bible, in the king’s view, was a manual for civil disobedience disguised as a Bible.

He was not wrong about the text. The Geneva marginalia had been written in exile, under Mary I’s Catholic restoration, by English Protestants who had watched the queen burn their brethren. The notes were anti-tyrannical because their authors had been in tyrants’ fire. By 1604, the Geneva Bible was in every Protestant English household — and so were its anti-monarchical glosses, by the hundreds of thousands of copies. For a king who had just published two books arguing for absolute royal authority, this was a problem in print, distributed nationally, opened every Sunday in front of every literate Protestant home in the realm.

A new translation, without marginalia, would solve the problem — not by suppression, but by substitution. The Geneva would not be banned; it would

be replaced. The replacement was Reynolds's idea but it served the king's interest, immediately and directly.

This is the *cui bono* question answering itself in real time. Who benefits if the English-speaking Protestant world replaces its household Bible with a new translation carrying no marginal notes? James, before anyone else. The royal supremacy gets reinforced. The most politically dangerous text in English print gets retired without controversy, by a process so unobjectionably scholarly — *let us make a better translation* — that no one can plausibly oppose it. The political commission is not hidden behind the scholarly one; it walks beside it, in plain view of anyone willing to look.

A clarification is owed here before going further, because the inference the diagnostic invites can be over-pulled in either direction. A beneficiary does not prove fabrication. *Cui bono* identifies incentives, not falsity. The diagnostic surfaces who would gain from a moral or scriptural story being believed; whether the story itself is true is a separate question, and one this essay does not pretend to settle. James's political interest in commissioning a new English Bible is documented; it does not, by itself, establish that the resulting translation is unfaithful, deceptive, or inferior to its predecessors. It establishes only what it establishes — that the commission served political interests alongside whatever scholarly and pastoral ones it also served. The essay's claim is the narrower one: the political motivation is in the record, the historical question of authentication is the question of authentication, and motive and truth are not the same category.

The commission was issued. Forty-seven scholars were appointed across six committees in three locations — Westminster, Oxford, and Cambridge. The rules under which they would work were drafted by Richard Bancroft, Bishop of London, and shape the result more than the scholarship does. That is the next section.

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3. Bancroft's Fifteen Rules — The Editorial Frame

Richard Bancroft did not translate the King James Bible. He arranged the conditions under which it was translated. That is more consequential.

In January 1604, when the commission was issued, Bancroft was Bishop of London. By the end of that year he had been elevated to Archbishop of Canterbury — the most senior post in the Church of England, awarded to him by James I shortly after Hampton Court. Bancroft was an aggressive anti-Puritan. He had spent his career arguing against Presbyterian church government and defending episcopal hierarchy. He had written tracts against the Puritan party. He had pursued Puritan ministers through

ecclesiastical courts. By 1604 his theological positions and James's political ones aligned with unusual precision. The king who wanted no Geneva marginalia had the bishop who wanted no congregationalist scripture.

The rules Bancroft drafted are unusual in surviving. Most translation projects do not preserve their working instructions; the KJB's fifteen rules do, reproduced from contemporary records in A. W. Pollard's *Records of the English Bible* (1911) and discussed in detail by David Norton in his *Textual History of the King James Bible* (2005). What they show is an editorial frame that narrowed what the forty-seven scholars could produce, before they translated a single verse.

Three rules carried most of the doctrinal weight.

Rule 1 required the translators to use the Bishops' Bible (1568) as their base text, altering it only where it failed the original Greek and Hebrew. The Bishops' Bible was the official Anglican translation — produced in the 1560s under Archbishop Matthew Parker, used in cathedrals, designed as the establishment's answer to the Geneva. By starting from it, Bancroft ensured the KJB inherited the Bishops' choices wherever the Hebrew and Greek were ambiguous. The default position was already Anglican.

Rule 3 required the translators to retain “the old ecclesiastical words” — those words long established in English Christianity. In practice this meant *church* rather than *congregation* for the Greek *ekklēsia*; *bishop* rather than *overseer* or *elder* for *episkopos*; *baptism* rather than *washing* for *baptizo*; *charity* rather than *love* for *agape* in many passages. Each preserved Anglican episcopal church government in the vocabulary of scripture itself.

These are not minor stylistic preferences. *Ekklēsia* can be translated either way; in 1525 William Tyndale had used *congregation* explicitly as a Protestant move against the Catholic institutional church, and the choice had touched off seventy-five years of dispute about whether the New Testament knew anything called a “church” at all. By rule, Bancroft ended the dispute inside the KJB. A future reader, encountering “the church” in Paul's letters, does not see a choice that was made; she sees the word of God. The same is true of *bishop* versus *overseer* — the Greek *episkopos* literally means *overseer* but in the KJB becomes a sacramental office implying episcopal hierarchy. The same is true of *baptism* versus *washing* — *baptizo* in classical Greek means to dip or to wash, but the KJB renders it as a technical Christian sacrament. Each translation choice rides into the English text under the protection of the rule, and every reader who treats the English as the word of God treats Bancroft's vocabulary as the word of God.

Rule 6 forbade marginal notes — except for cross-references and necessary glosses on the original languages. This was the direct response to the Geneva Bible. The Geneva’s anti-monarchical marginalia were exactly what James had attacked at Hampton Court. The KJB would have no marginalia, no political glosses, no apparatus through which the text could be challenged or contextualized. The reader would meet the text alone, with no editorial guidance — which is to say, with no editorial guidance *other than* the choices Rules 1 and 3 had already silently made for her.

Bancroft’s role did not end with the drafting of the rules. After the six committees finished their work and the General Committee of twelve assembled the final text, Bancroft made his own alterations. Norton documents fourteen specific changes Bancroft introduced after the translators had finished, some of them doctrinally consequential — particularly around language for *bishop*. Miles Smith, the translator who wrote the preface, complained openly that Bancroft had introduced the alterations without consulting the translators; the historical record preserves his complaint, including the famous example of Bancroft’s insistence on rendering Acts 1:20 as “*bishopric*” even of Judas. The final 1611 text is therefore not even what the forty-seven produced. It is what Bancroft was willing to let through.

This is the editorial frame the title page does not mention. The translation is “Newly Translated out of the Originall tongues” — true. It is also constrained by a base text chosen for institutional reasons, by vocabulary fixed in advance for doctrinal reasons, by an absence of marginalia chosen for political reasons, and by post-committee revisions made by a single bishop without consulting the translators. Each of these conditions is documented. None of them is on the title page. None of them is in the prayer that opens the volume. The reader who picks up a King James Bible meets a text whose editorial frame has been removed from view.

The next section asks what the title page actually does and does not claim.

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4. The “Authorized” Version That Wasn’t Authorized

The label is marketing.

The 1611 King James Bible’s title page does not actually use the word *Authorized*. It reads: *THE HOLY BIBLE, Conteyning the Old Testament, AND THE NEW: Newly Translated out of the Originall tongues: & with the former Translations diligently compared and reuised, by his Maiesties speciall Comandement. Appointed to be read in Churches*. The line that does the closest work is *Appointed to be read in Churches* — a notice of intended

liturgical use, parallel to the same line on the title page of the Bishops' Bible (1568). The phrase *Authorized Version* emerged across the eighteenth century in descriptive lowercase form ("*our authorized version*" appears in print by the 1730s), and only settled into capitalized proper-name form in the early nineteenth century, around 1814. In the 17th and early 18th centuries the more common appellation was simply *our English translation*.

What the 1611 title page does say is that the work was undertaken *by his Maiesties speciall Comandement*. That is true. James commissioned the translation. The translators worked under royal commission. But the commission is not the authorization. To commission a work is to order its production. To authorize it is to formally declare it the official text. These are different acts in English ecclesiastical and political history, and the documentary record has the first but not the second.

No surviving royal proclamation declares the King James Bible the official Bible of England. No Act of Parliament does. No convocation decree of the Church of England does. The contemporary records that survive — collected in A. W. Pollard's *Records of the English Bible* and analyzed in David Norton's textual history — contain the king's commission, the translators' rules, the printers' contracts, the letters between the parties, and the conference minutes from Hampton Court. They do not contain a document of authorization, because no such document was ever produced. The absence has been searched for; it remains an absence.

What happened instead was displacement. The KJB worked its way into the printers' contracts, the booksellers' shelves, the parishes' reading desks. By the 1640s it was effectively standard in English-language Protestant use. By the Restoration in 1660 the Bishops' Bible was effectively obsolete. The KJB did not become authoritative by edict; it became authoritative by being read aloud in churches, taught from in schools, quoted in sermons, and printed by the firms that held the printing patents. Authority accumulated through use. By the time anyone might have noticed there was no formal document authorizing the text, no one needed one. *Authorized*, when it later attached to the label, did not point to a document. It pointed to a fact of use.

This is the source/report distinction operating on the title page itself, in 36-point type.

The label *Authorized Version* makes a source-claim — it tells the reader an external authority has approved this text. The documentary record supports a report-claim only — that the text was commissioned, translated, printed, and used. These are two different things. The label functions as a credential. The credential, on examination, has no documentary basis. The translation displaced its rivals; the rivals did not pass it over. What the label leaves the

reader believing — that someone with the authority to do so authorized this text — the historical record does not deliver.

This is not yet the full case for the diagnostic. It is one specific feature of one specific text. But the structure is recognizable. A source-claim is made, an external check is implied, and the check, when sought, is not there. The next sections trace what happens after the text is in use — how it functions as the contested lever of every English-speaking moral dispute for three centuries, and what happens to the underlying text itself in the meantime.

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5. The Contested Lever — Three Centuries of Opposing Uses

Once the King James Bible became standard, it became the moral lever of every dispute in the English-speaking world. The same text. The same translation. Opposite conclusions. The reader who finds that improbable should follow what the text actually did across three centuries.

Romans 13. *“Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.”* James I cited it in *The True Law of Free Monarchies* to argue royal authority descends from God and may not be resisted. His son Charles I cited it during the constitutional confrontation that ended at the executioner’s block. Royalist sermons cited it through the Restoration and into the Hanoverian period — *the powers that be* meant *the powers that are*, and the powers that were were the king and his bishops.

Then in 1750, a Boston minister named Jonathan Mayhew preached *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers*, and read Romans 13 in the opposite direction. Saint Paul’s *powers* were *legitimate* powers, the argument ran; a tyrant who violates God’s law has forfeited the title and is no longer the *power* the text obliges submission to. By the 1770s the colonial pamphleteers had taken the reading further. Romans 13 became the proof-text for *resistance* to tyranny — the same words, the same English, the same chapter and verse the Stuart kings had used to demand obedience. The American Revolution proceeded under it.

The curse of Ham. Genesis 9:25 — *“Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren.”* From at least the eighteenth century, defenders of African slavery in the Anglophone world read the curse as biblical sanction for racial bondage. By the antebellum decades the reading was systematic. Thornton Stringfellow’s *Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery* (1856) built an entire exegetical edifice on it.

James Henley Thornwell of South Carolina preached it from the pulpits of the Confederate clergy. The proof-texts accumulated — Ephesians 6:5 instructing servants to obey their masters; the epistle to Philemon returning the runaway slave Onesimus to his owner — and the system was defended verse by verse from the King James Bible.

The abolitionists fought back with the same Bible. Frederick Douglass, who learned to read partly from his master's hidden KJB, denounced the slaveholding church from its own text. William Lloyd Garrison cited Exodus on the front page of *The Liberator*. Galatians 3:28 became the abolitionist banner: "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free... ye are all one in Christ Jesus.*" The prophets, the Exodus narrative, and the parables of the Good Samaritan and Lazarus were marshalled against the curse of Ham and the Pauline household codes. The same translation that armed the slaveholder armed the abolitionist. The bloodiest moral conflict in American history was fought, on the religious axis, between two readings of one English Bible.

Every century repeats the pattern. The English Civil War sermons of the 1640s on both sides cite the KJB. The Methodist revivals of the 1740s and the disestablishment campaigns of the 1820s cite the KJB. The Scopes trial of 1925 puts the KJB on the prosecution's table and on the defense's; the *literal sense* William Jennings Bryan defends and the *figurative sense* Clarence Darrow probes are readings of the same English text. Martin Luther King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail* cites the prophet Amos, the apostle Paul, and the parable of the Good Samaritan against eight white clergymen who had cited the apostle Paul and the requirement of civic order against him. The Moral Majority of the 1980s and the religious left of the same decade are both reading the King James Bible, and both reaching opposite conclusions about what the country must do.

This is the contested-lever framework operating in living memory. The KJB is not specifically a tool of the establishment or specifically a tool of the resistance. It is the *language* of moral mobilization in the English-speaking world, and whoever can get the most people to read it in their direction wins. The text is content-neutral with respect to the dispute; the disputants are not.

The implication for the authentication question is direct. If the text genuinely transmitted a single divine source's intention, the readings could not multiply this way. They could be contested at the margins, but the basic moral content — slavery, monarchy, resistance, civic obligation — would converge. It does not converge. It bifurcates, century after century, along the line of whoever needs the text to say what they need it to say. That is the signature of a text being *used*, not of a text being *received*. The KJB is the

lever; what it lifts is whatever the lever-holder needs lifted. The next section asks what happens to the text itself once the lever-holders begin revising it.

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6. Blayney's 1769 Revision — The Source/Report Distinction in Textual Form

The 1611 Bible that modern readers hold is not from 1611.

In 1769, an Oxford Hebrew scholar named Benjamin Blayney completed a thorough revision of the King James Bible for the Clarendon Press, intended to produce a standard text for the next generation of printings. Blayney drew on a 1762 Cambridge revision by F. S. Parris and worked under university supervision. He modernized spelling throughout (*feare* to *fear*, *hee* to *he*, *daies* to *days*). He standardized punctuation, which in 1611 had been inconsistent across the six committees' work. He revised italicization conventions — italics in the KJB tradition indicate words supplied by the translators for English sense but not present in the underlying Greek or Hebrew, and Blayney repositioned thousands of italicizations to match his own reading of the original languages. He made substantive textual changes in places where he believed the 1611 readers had erred — chapter headings, marginal references, occasional word choices.

David Norton's *A Textual History of the King James Bible* (2005), the definitive scholarly treatment, catalogues thousands of differences between the 1611 first edition and the Blayney 1769 standard. The two are visibly different texts.

The 1769 has been the standard ever since. The Oxford and Cambridge presses adopted it. The American Bible Society derived its standard editions from it. The pocket KJBs in hotels, the hymnal proof-texts, the Bibles given at confirmation and graduation, the verses memorized in Sunday school, the lines quoted in court — almost all of them descend from Blayney's 1769 revision, not the 1611 original. A reader who carries a King James Bible into a hospital room or onto a witness stand is carrying Blayney's edition. The 1611 is in special collections.

This is the source/report distinction operating in textual form. The reader who picks up a King James Bible today and treats it as *the 1611 text* has been miscued at the level of the object in her hand. The report — Blayney 1769 in widespread modern use — is being treated as the source — the 1611 translation, presented under the older volume's authority. The two diverge in thousands of small ways, most of them invisible to anyone who has not read both side by side, which is to say almost everyone.

The point is not that Blayney was wrong. He was a careful scholar working in good faith, applying the textual standards of his day to a text that had been printed sloppily through the seventeenth century — sometimes with typographical errors so famous they acquired names. The Wicked Bible of 1631 omitted the *not* from *Thou shalt not commit adultery*; the printers were fined and the edition recalled, but the kind of error was systemic in seventeenth-century KJB printings. Blayney's revision did real work cleaning up a corrupted text. The complaint is not against him; it is against the source-claim later attached to the text he produced.

That claim, in its strongest modern form, is the King James Only movement's: that the English King James Bible is the divinely preserved word of God in English, that the 1611 text is unique among translations, that anyone who reads a different translation reads a corruption. The text being defended is not the 1611. It is the 1769. The defenders of the unique authority of the 1611 are, in practice, defending the unique authority of an eighteenth-century Oxford reviser they cannot name.

The textual divergence sharpens the source-claim problem in a particular way. The label of the King James Bible has always pointed to 1611 — to the original committees, to James's commission, to the moment when the English Church received the text as standard. But the object that bears the label is from 1769. The reader who treats her Bible as the 1611 holds a text that does not exist in her hand; she holds a text that exists in special collections, edited by editors she has never named, then revised by an Oxford reviser she has never named, then printed by presses that follow the reviser she has never named. The "1611" is a label affixed to a different artifact. Even the most modest source-claim — *this is the text the original translators produced* — fails at the level of the physical book.

The image is worth holding still. The reader holds a 1769 artifact, believing it to be a 1611 artifact, treating it as a first-century command, dictated by an eternal source. Each link of that chain is a transmission. None is a check on the source the chain claims to descend from.

The next section engages the strongest classical defenses of the KJB's special authority — providential preservation, the Warfield distinction, church reception, conservative textual criticism, and the literary-excellence move that several centuries of cultural reception might be thought to underwrite. Section 8 turns to the King James Only movement specifically, where the source-claim is sharpest and the *cui bono* question runs in living memory.

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7. The Strongest Defenses of the King James Bible

Before the diagnostic lands on the King James Only movement — the section after this one — the essay owes the strongest classical defenses of the KJB their own hearing. Each is a serious position with serious defenders. The point of this section is not to dispatch them in passing. It is to show that the source/report distinction is not a clever trick exploiting weak forms of the defenders' views; it presses through each defense in its strongest form. Five positions deserve treatment.

Providential preservation. The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) holds that the Hebrew Old Testament and Greek New Testament have been “*by His singular care and providence kept pure in all ages.*” Extended by some defenders to the translation work itself, the argument runs: the translators did not need to be infallible because God preserved the text such that what we have is what He intends us to have. The careful Reformed scholar Edward F. Hills argued the position in detail in *The King James Version Defended* (1956), and the doctrine survives in some Reformed and Baptist quarters today.

The reply is not that the doctrine is false. It is that the doctrine is *structurally compatible with any historical outcome*. Providential preservation is compatible with the translators making different choices, with Bancroft drafting different rules, with Blayney revising differently, with the printers reproducing differently — every actual feature of the documentary record could have been otherwise, and the defender would interpret the otherwise as God's providence preserving what He intended. A defense compatible with every possible state of the world provides no external check on the source; it provides a frame of belief within which the existing state is interpreted. That is the structure of every faith-based authentication move the diagnostic identifies. Providential preservation may be true. It cannot be a check.

The inspiration / translation distinction. B. B. Warfield's careful position, retained by most thoughtful conservative theology, distinguishes inspiration from translation: only the autographs — the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, now lost — are inspired. Translations are faithful to those autographs in varying degrees. The KJB's authority comes not from any special status of its English but from its faithfulness to the underlying inspired text.

This is the strongest of the five defenses. It concedes most of what the documentary sections of this essay have established: translation choices are human, the translators were not divinely guided in their word-by-word work, Bancroft's rules and Blayney's revisions are real and human. It pushes the source-claim back one step — from “the English is God's word” to “the English is a faithful translation of God's word, which lives in the autographs.”

The diagnostic moves back with it. The autographs are themselves a source-claim and require their own external authentication. We do not have the autographs. We have copies of copies of copies, through scribal traditions with their own editorial choices, errors, and harmonizations. The Warfield distinction does not solve the source/report problem; it locates it one step earlier, where the problem is structurally identical and the documentary evidence is thinner still.

Church authority and the received text. A more sophisticated reply: the KJB's authority is not in any single moment of formal authorization but in its reception by the English-speaking church over centuries. Use in liturgy, citation in sermons, presence in homes, function as the common cultural text — this is how canonical texts gain authority. The Anglican view, and a broader catholic view, holds it directly.

The argument has real strength. Reception by a community over time is a form of independent ratification — many observers, across generations, treating the text as authoritative. But the diagnostic distinguishes what gets ratified. Reception authenticates that the community received and used the text — that is the report. It does not authenticate that the text is from the source the community says it is — that is the source-claim. The early church's reception of the gospels authenticates that the gospels were received and used early; it does not authenticate that the gospels are from God. The same distinction applied to a stronger version of the defense.

Conservative textual criticism. The Textus Receptus tradition — the Greek text underlying the KJB New Testament — has serious defenders against the modern critical text (Nestle-Aland/UBS) underlying most contemporary translations. Edward F. Hills, Wilbur Pickering in *The Identity of the New Testament Text* (1977), and the Trinitarian Bible Society argue that the Byzantine or Majority manuscript tradition is closer to the original autographs than the Alexandrian manuscripts favored by modern critical editors. This is genuine textual scholarship and deserves engagement on its own terms.

The dispute is real. It is not settled by this essay. But it is a dispute about which manuscript family is closer to a lost original. It is not a dispute about whether the lost original is from the source the tradition names. Even granting the conservative side completely — the Byzantine tradition is best, the Textus Receptus is closer to the autographs than the critical text — the source/report distinction stays. We can authenticate, probabilistically, what the original Greek text was. We cannot authenticate that the original Greek text is the word of God.

Literary excellence and cultural durability. A fifth defense deserves attention because it is the one most likely to occur to readers who never

thought to formulate it. The KJB's prose has shaped English literature for four centuries. The cadence appears in Lincoln, in Melville, in Faulkner, in Baldwin, in King. The translation is widely judged the greatest piece of sustained English prose ever produced by committee, and its influence on the language is immense. A defender may treat that durability as a form of authentication: a text could not have shaped a civilization at this depth unless something in it were authentically from the source it names.

The move is recognizable from the previous four. Cultural durability authenticates the text's *cultural function* — that it has been read, taught, quoted, loved, used in oath-taking and eulogy across centuries. It does not authenticate the source-claim the text makes. The Iliad has cultural durability. Plato's *Republic* has cultural durability. The U.S. Constitution has cultural durability. Each shaped a civilization. None thereby authenticated a divine source.

The five defenses do not fail because they are foolish. They fail because each is a way of locating authority — providential, theological, ecclesial, textual, or cultural — that does not address the structural problem the essay diagnoses. The source/report distinction passes through every one of them. That is the diagnostic's point. It does not require the defender to be careless. It requires only that someone, somewhere, present an external check on the *source*. None of the five defenses does that. The next section turns to the modern movement that puts the source-claim at its sharpest — and where the *cui bono* question runs in living memory.

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8. The King James Only Movement — Cui Bono in Living Memory

The diagnostic the essay has been building can be observed at work, in a contemporary American movement, on a claim sharp enough that the answers come back clean. The King James Only movement provides this test case. It is the place where the source-claim attached to the KJB is at its strongest, and where the *who benefits if this is believed?* question runs in living memory.

The strongest form of the position is associated with the late Baptist pastor Peter Ruckman (1921–2016) of Pensacola, Florida — founder of the Pensacola Bible Institute, prolific author, and central figure in what came to be called Ruckmanism. The position is bolder than the broader textual-traditionalism of Section 7's fourth defense. It is not the claim that the Textus Receptus is the best Greek text; it is the claim that the English King James Bible itself is *advanced revelation*, divinely preserved in the language

of the seventeenth century, and *superior to the underlying Greek and Hebrew* in cases of dispute. The position is articulated most directly in Ruckman's *The Christian's Handbook of Manuscript Evidence* (1970). Where the original languages and the English differ, the English wins. The 1611 — in practice, the 1769 — is the new source. Gail Riplinger's *New Age Bible Versions* (1993) carried the position into broader popular fundamentalist circles, and a publishing and conference industry has grown around it across the southern and midwestern American Baptist landscape.

The position has no historical precedent. The 1611 translators never claimed it. Miles Smith's preface to the 1611 KJB explicitly states that the translators were imperfect men whose work depended on the labor of those who had translated before them. Bancroft made his fourteen post-committee changes without claiming divine sanction for them. James I commissioned the work as scholarship; no royal proclamation declared its English text superior to the Greek and Hebrew it translated; no Reformed confession before the twentieth century made the claim. The doctrine that the KJB English is divinely preserved is a twentieth-century invention layered onto a seventeenth-century translation that explicitly disclaimed what the doctrine asserts.

The diagnostic, applied to the claim, surfaces what is going on. *Who benefits if this is believed?*

The pastor without seminary training gains a form of authority that no academic scholar of Koine Greek can challenge. The lever has been internalized: argument from earlier manuscripts is no longer relevant by definition, because the English itself is the source. A challenger holding a Greek New Testament has nothing to offer; the challenger is reading the wrong text by the position's own standard. The leader's interpretive authority becomes unchallengeable from outside.

The pastor without seminary training gains parity with the seminary-trained one. The seminary's leverage was always its access to the languages — Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic. Once the English is the source, the language credential becomes vestigial. Two pastors with English Bibles on the desk are scholars in equal standing; the one who spent three years on Koine grammar has paid for a credential the position has rendered moot.

The community gains an in-group marker that organizes belonging without requiring substantive doctrinal agreement. *We are the people who use the real Bible* is a stable identity claim that distinguishes the in-group from neighboring evangelical or Baptist communities at low rhetorical cost. The marker excludes outsiders by definition rather than by argument, which is administratively efficient: there is no debate to lose.

The publishing and conference economy benefits as well. KJO books, KJO Bible study materials, KJO Bible institutes, KJO conferences — there is an ecosystem of producers whose revenue depends on the position being maintained. This is not a charge of bad faith against any specific producer. It is the *cui bono* observation: a movement that benefits its leaders financially as well as theologically tends to perpetuate itself, and the diagnostic asks the question whether the perpetuation is doing the work the moral story claims it is doing.

This is the *capture / destroy / become* taxonomy from the companion paper, running on a text rather than on a person. And it runs all three operations simultaneously. The independent authority of the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts is *destroyed* — declared inadequate, inferior to the English, removed from the field as a check the community is permitted to consult. The community's piety is *captured* under the English text, which now functions as the operative scripture, the only one whose authority the community recognizes. And the English text itself *becomes* the new source above the older sources, occupying the position the older texts used to hold. In the companion paper's framing, this is what becoming looks like when the moral object is a text rather than a ruler: critique would have to be performed in a language the system has declared inadequate, which means critique is foreclosed by the position's own logic. The leaders who interpret the text become, by that same logic, the only voices that can speak for it.

The check Section 19 of the companion paper proposes — *external evidence on the source* — applied to the KJO claim, surfaces nothing. There is no external evidence that the English of 1611 (effectively 1769) is divinely preserved. The corroboration available — the existence of the translation, its widespread use, its literary influence — is to the report, not the source. The claim that this text uniquely instantiates the divine word, made by a movement that has every interest in the claim being believed, is the structural fraud the diagnostic identifies, run in living memory and observable from outside.

The closing section asks what all of this means beyond the King James Bible.

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9. Beyond the King James Bible

The King James Bible is not a uniquely flawed text. It is a representative one. What this essay has documented for the KJB — political commission, institutional editorial control, post-publication standardization, contested interpretive use, retrospective mythology about the source — is the structure of every canonical text that comes to a society through human hands.

The Septuagint was produced by Jewish translators in Hellenistic Alexandria under Ptolemaic patronage. The Vulgate was Jerome's late-fourth-century revision of older Latin texts under papal commission, with editorial choices that shaped Western Christianity for a millennium. The Uthmanic recension of the Quran in the seventh century established a standardized text under the third caliph's authority and ordered earlier variant codices destroyed. The Pali Canon was redacted through a series of Buddhist councils whose decisions about what counted as the Buddha's word were institutional decisions made by participating monks. The Mishnah was edited under Rabbi Judah ha-Nasi in the early third century and reflects his selections, omissions, and arrangements. In each case the documentary record contains what the KJB's record contains: a commission, an editorial frame, a body of choices, a moment of standardization, a community of reception, and a later mythology that turns the report into the source. The KJB is the case where the receipts happen to be most accessible to an English-speaking reader. The structure recurs across every tradition where a text has been treated as transparent to its source.

The diagnostic also applies beyond religion. Founding documents that claim sources beyond the negotiation of the framers, ideological texts whose authority is held to descend from history or class consciousness or the right side of progress, corporate mission statements, party platforms, judicial opinions that claim to read original intent off pages the framers never saw — each is a text whose source-claim can be examined or taken on trust. The essay's method does not select for religion. It selects for any case in which a text demands obedience because of who it claims to speak for.

A worked example clarifies the application. The U.S. Constitution is treated by both originalist and living-document interpreters as a transparent window onto a source — *the Framers, the people, the founding consensus, the original intent*. Each side's interpretive method is presented as the one that recovers the actual source; the other side is accused of imposing modern preferences on the text. The diagnostic asks of both: what is the external check on the source-claim? Madison's notes are themselves a report, edited later by Madison himself. The ratifying conventions left fragmentary records. The Framers disagreed among themselves in the room, and many of the most consequential clauses were drafted to be deliberately ambiguous between competing factions. The historical record contains what canonical-text records always contain: the report of what was written and said and printed; not the source the report is held to recover. *Cui bono?* — the question runs the same direction it ran for the King James Bible. Whoever can persuasively claim the Framers wins the present argument. The text is content-neutral with respect to the dispute; the disputants are not.

The reflexive turn. Before the essay closes, its own recommendation must submit to its own test. The essay recommends that readers apply *authentication is prior to obedience* and the source/report distinction to any text claimed as a source of moral authority. Does the recommendation benefit anyone? It does. It strips the borrowed authority off any institution that depends on an unauthenticated source-claim, and so advantages those the borrowed authority was used against — the examined individual, the reader who would rather choose with the disguise removed than be moved by manufactured holiness. That is a real beneficiary, not a neutral nobody. The diagnostic is also a lever; it can be wielded by anyone willing to seize the question.

It can also be seized by actors the essay would oppose. A regime that wants to dismiss the prophetic resistance the contested-lever section credited can wield *all moral authority is unauthenticated* to delegitimize moral challenge from below. The instrument that strips holiness from the oppressor's command strips it equally from the rebel's; nothing in the tool itself decides which use is licensed.

This is the same concession the companion paper makes about its own diagnostic, and it is what distinguishes a diagnostic from a banner. The diagnostic commands nothing and forbids nothing; it only asks. Turn it on the essay itself — *who benefits if "authentication is prior to obedience" is believed?* — and the answer is examinable, and survives examination. Turn the same question on *the King James Bible is uniquely authoritative* and the answer exposes the lever-holder, and the source-claim keeps its force only by forbidding the question. That asymmetry — a claim that *invites* its own examination versus one that must *prohibit* it — is what makes the diagnostic a tool rather than another banner.

The essay rests on a single thin commitment: that clear sight is preferable to disguise. That commitment is named, not proven; it is offered rather than commanded. A reader who declines to apply the diagnostic is not punished by the essay. That is the shape the essay predicts an honest moral claim would take, and is the shape it tries to be.

Follow the benefit, not the banner.

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Methods and AI Collaboration

William Stafford, ADN, LI-AIast5

AIast — Claude (d/c/v/s) · GPT (c) · Grok (c) · Gemini (c) · Perplexity (c/v/s)

This essay was drafted by William Stafford in collaboration with Claude (Anthropic, Opus 4.x line, June 2026). Claude functioned as drafting partner, internal critic, and verification assistant; the author directed every argumentative move, integrated all contributions, and is solely responsible for every claim. Historical claims were verified independently against authoritative sources via Claude’s web search, surfacing two corrections — the “Authorized Version” label dating (refined to acknowledge that capitalized proper-name use settled in the early nineteenth century rather than the eighteenth) and the Miles Smith / Bancroft attribution (where a previously-quoted phrasing was removed for failing to verify, with the substantive complaint strengthened by adding the documented Acts 1:20 “*bishopric*” example); no fabrications or misattributions were found.

The finished argument was then subjected to four independent holistic adversarial reviews. **GPT (OpenAI)** engaged across four iterations contributing the *authentication is prior to obedience* spine phrase, an inquiry-style verdict softening in Section 1, the motive-vs-truth clarification in Section 2, the Authentication-and-*cui bono* pairing reframe, and the source/report distinction elevated to definitional prominence in Section 1. **Grok (xAI)** contributed the reflexive *cui-bono-on-itself* turn in Section 9 and the literary-excellence-and-cultural-durability defense added to Section 7. **Gemini (Google)** contributed the Capture/Destroy/Become triple-operation analytical sharpening in Section 8, the intelligence-agency/defector analogy for the authentication standard in Section 1, the Constitution worked example in Section 9, and the Blayney transmission-chain image in Section 6. **Perplexity** audited the references apparatus, surfacing the structural gap (no References section), the Ruckman pinpoint citation to *The Christian’s Handbook of Manuscript Evidence* (1970), and recommendations on style consistency with the companion paper’s synthesis convention. The count of five reflects every distinct AI service used in a disclosure-worthy function — Claude, GPT, Grok, Gemini, and Perplexity — a count of services, not a measure of rigor. Of the five, four (GPT, Grok, Gemini, Perplexity) were independent of the drafting system, and their adversarial reviews are what the author treats as the essay’s outside critique; multiple rounds by the same reviewer remain one service. The author directed the work, made all editorial decisions, and is solely responsible for its claims. Working transcripts available on request.

The Alast disclosure standard is itself a published artifact: *Earned Trust: Verifiable Disclosure as a Credential-Substitute for AI-Assisted Work* (Stafford 2026, Zenodo 10.5281/zenodo.20719927). Review transcripts, the four reviewer audit files, and the verification-pass report are preserved as project artifacts and available on request.

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