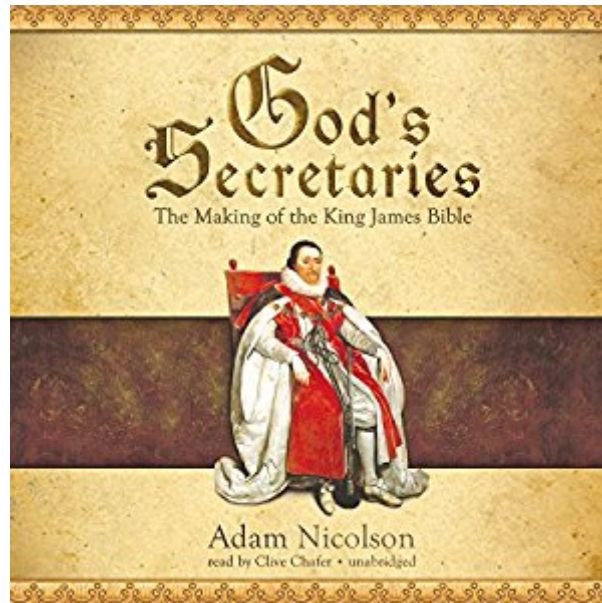


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# God's Secretaries: The Making Of The King James Bible



## Synopsis

A net of complex currents flowed across Jacobean England. This was the England of Shakespeare, Jonson, and Bacon; the Gunpowder Plot; the worst outbreak of the plague England had ever seen; arcadian landscapes; murderous, toxic slums; and, above all, sometimes overwhelming religious passion. Jacobean England was both more godly and less godly than it had ever been, and the entire culture was drawn taut between the polarities. This was the world that created the King James Bible. It is the greatest work of English prose ever written, and it is no coincidence that the translation was made at the moment "Englishness" and the English language had come into its first passionate maturity. Boisterous, elegant, subtle, majestic, finely nuanced, sonorous, and musical, the English of Jacobean England has a more encompassing idea of its own reach and scope than any before or since. It is a form of the language that drips with potency and sensitivity. The age, with all its conflicts, explains the book. The sponsor and guide of the whole Bible project was the king himself, the brilliant, ugly, and profoundly peace-loving James the Sixth of Scotland and First of England. Trained almost from birth to manage the rivalries of political factions at home, James saw in England the chance for a sort of irenic Eden over which the new translation of the Bible was to preside. It was to be a Bible for everyone, and as God's lieutenant on earth, he would use it to unify his kingdom. The dream of Jacobean peace, guaranteed by an elision of royal power and divine glory, lies behind a Bible of extraordinary grace and everlasting literary power. Adam Nicolson is the author of *Seamanship*, *God's Secretaries*, and *Seize the Fire*. He has won both the Somerset Maugham and William Heinemann awards, and he lives with his family at Sissinghurst Castle in England.

## Book Information

Audible Audio Edition

Listening Length: 8 hours and 39 minutes

Program Type: Audiobook

Version: Unabridged

Publisher: Blackstone Audio, Inc.

Audible.com Release Date: May 30, 2012

Whispersync for Voice: Ready

Language: English

ASIN: B0087EB9P6

Best Sellers Rank: #41 in Books > Audible Audiobooks > Religion & Spirituality > Bibles #320

inÂ Books > Audible Audiobooks > Fiction & Literature > Literary Criticism #488 inÂ Books > Audible Audiobooks > History > Europe

## Customer Reviews

As always, visiting and reading the words of the previous 63 reviews has proved to be enlightening and useful. Because of certain comments and objections offered in the past, it seems to me that I should begin with statements of what this book is NOT:--This book is not an advocate of any particular religious issue, sect or cause.--This book is not a Bible study or, indeed, any sort of religious study guide. Those seeking an exposition of religious truth should turn away right now. This is not for you.--This book is not an academic text, being largely free of any formal thesis and paying no particular homage to whatever Theory happens to be on the academic boil these days. Academic drudges burrowing for material with which to footnote their footnotes will be wasting their time here in a manner even more dramatically pointless than usual.--This book is not a self-consciously designed "easy read" written in words and phrases suitable for the comprehension of fourth graders. This author occasionally dares to quote people who lived four hundred years ago in their own words, styles and spellings. Consider this passage: "I am persuaded his Royall mynde reioyceth more with good hope, wch he hathe for happy successe of that worke [the new Bible], then of his peace concluded with Spayne." [Page 65-66 of the hardcover edition] If that taxes your reading skills to the breaking point, seek enlightenment elsewhere. This book does provide an overview--or perhaps more accurately, a sketch of religion and politics in 17th century England. In many ways, the two words were alternate terms for the same phenomenon, much as they are in Baghdad today.

These observations come from a reader who is a scholar of neither the Bible nor British history and for whom Nicolson's book was the first venture into literature pertaining to the creation of the King James Bible. In multiple ways, then, these are all first impressions. They also represent the reactions of a reader who was steeped in the conservative Protestant ethic prevalent in the Bible Belt of the United States, a broad area of the country where the King James Bible is taken as the literal Word of God and is not to be submitted for interpretation, much less translation. Yes, there are many there who fervently believe that every word in the King James Bible is represented precisely as the Christian deity placed it in the minds of the holy ones who set it on paper and that the King James Bible is the only "true" Bible that has ever existed. Even when one does not subscribe to such a literalist and historically ignorant approach to the contents of the Bible, growing

up in such an environment leaves lasting impressions. With this as background, I found Nicolson's work informative and enlightening. Understand that Nicolson's book is not "Bible study": It does not deal with issues of spirituality; it does not attempt to explicate biblical passages; and it does not care whether or not heaven and hell exist or whether or not God is dead or alive-or has ever existed. It does deal with the social, cultural, economic, and governmental milieu that existed at the time King James VI of Scotland and I of England directed that a new translation be made of the Greek and Hebrew texts comprising the Bible. It explains why yet another Bible was to be created-in addition to the multiple versions that already existed.

There are a good many churches in America who insist that the use of any Bible other than the King James Version is anathema. The joke goes that one of the members of such a sect declared, "If it was good enough for Saint Paul, it is good enough for me." The truth is that the KJV is good enough for any English speaker, more majestic than any other version, and that it is a foundation of the English-speaking world more than even Shakespeare is. How this astonishing book came to be composed is Adam Nicolson's story in *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible* (HarperCollins). It is a successful account of how diverse personalities, European history, and religious fashions produced a timeless classic. There were English Bibles before 1611. The KJV grew out of a conference at Hampton Court where the new king took up grievances of the Puritans; the Bible was a byproduct of the conference. James was heartened by the idea of a new translation. He distrusted the widely used Geneva Bible because it had marginal notes about how people ought to view kings, notes he viewed as seditious. Less self-servingly, he thought an authoritative translation might bring religious peace to his conflicted land. The translation was his personal project. There are plenty of jokes about how committees invariably complicate rather than solve problems, but Nicolson shows that in Jacobean England, individuality was distrusted and "Jointness was the acknowledged virtue of the age." The KJV was a product of 54 translators, broken into teams and organized in a fashion that would befuddle a modern CEO, and they followed general or specific rules laid down by King James.

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