

# King James Version of the Bible--Alexander Scourby, narrator (1966)

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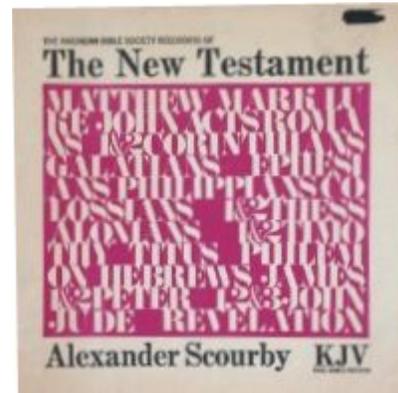
Essay by Cary O'Dell



*Alexander Scourby*



*Original label*



*Album packaging*

Impassioned, eloquent orations of the Bible are as ancient as the text itself. And as recent as last Sunday's sermon. For centuries, the good word has also been the spoken word. But a permanent, non-transitory rendering of the Bible became possible only after the advent of recording technologies at the beginning of the last century. And a full aural documentation of the Bible became possible only after efforts by the American Foundation for the Blind and the U.S. Congress converged in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Actually, the use of recorded sound as an aid to the blind is nearly as old as the concept of recorded sound itself. It was second on Edison's list of possible uses for his phonographic contraption when he first took it to the U.S. patent office in 1877. (Music was fourth.) Cumbersome early technology however slowed its full implementation in just about any endeavor. But in the 1920s, with sound recording and playback improving dramatically, the American Foundation for the Blind took up the cause of the so-called "talking book" as one of their primary missions. They were only spurred on further in 1929 when a nationwide study determined that only 15% of America's sightless population was proficient in "touch reading" (i.e. Braille).

Earlier, the Foundation (founded, 1921) had been instrumental in pushing through Congress the Pratt-Smoot Act of 1931, a bill which mandated wider distribution of Braille books by the Library of Congress as well as a \$100,000 annual appropriation to achieve this goal. In 1933, they advocated for the Act to be amended to include the audio recordings of books. They also began lobbying recording companies to produce audio performances of written works. Though the Act was later expanded, the effort to entice America's top record labels to commit books to disc proved less successful. Eventually, the Foundation was forced to bring their idea in house, setting up their own production facilities and, eventually, securing their own talented narrators.

Early cylinders and discs could hold only a few minutes of sound, but, by this time, a 12 inch record had been developed that ran at 33 1/3 rpm and could hold 15 minutes of sound on a side in audio fidelity adequate enough for the spoken word. These forerunners of the long playing albums that became standard in the 1950s could only be played on special turntables made available solely to the blind.

According to a "Christian Science Monitor" article from 1934, among the first works recorded by the Foundation were The Psalms and the four Gospels. Other initial titles included: Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice," P.G. Wodehouse's "Very Good Jeeves" and a

collection of patriotic documents that included Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Gettysburg Address. The Foundation eventually recorded the rest of the Bible, pieced together from the narrating sessions of many readers. As reported by the “New York Times” in 1950, clergymen were originally used as readers at first, but they were not always comfortable facing the microphone, and the project was eventually completed by several actors and a radio announcer in 1944.

Then, again per the “Times” in 1950, in 1946, the Foundation began its most ambitious undertaking: a full recording of the King James Version of the Bible, read—performed—by only one voice. It was an unprecedented endeavor, never before attempted. The recording of the unabridged text would take four years to complete. The final product would extend to over 160 long-playing records that, if played from beginning to end, would run over 80 hours in duration.

Obviously, the recording of such an austere volume required an austere narrator and the Foundation already had one in Broadway and radio actor Alexander Scourby, one of the readers of their first recorded Bible.

Born in 1913 in Brooklyn, Scourby abandoned an earlier interest in writing in order to pursue a career on the stage. After apprenticing with Eva La Gallienne at her Civic Repertory Theatre, Scourby made his Broadway debut in a 1936 production of “Hamlet,” opposite Leslie Howard. His later Broadway credits included “King Henry IV” (1939), “Crime and Punishment” (1947), “Detective Story” (1949), “Saint Joan” (1951), and “A Month in the Country” (1956).

Along with his stage work, Scourby’s resonating voice, which has been described as “precise, mellifluous,” made him a natural for radio work and he participated in his first broadcasts also in 1936. The following year, on the recommendation of his “Hamlet” cast mate Wesley Addy, Scourby auditioned to be a reader for the American Foundation for the Blind. He was quickly cast in the Foundation’s audio production of “Antony and Cleopatra.”

Scourby would be affiliated with the Foundation for the next 40 years. And though he would eventually narrate more than 500 different titles for them (including “War & Peace” and “A Farewell to Arms”), his most famous, and certainly most enduring, work would be his rendition of the King James Bible.

In retrospect, Scourby seems like the perfect vocal choice for this demanding undertaking. His voice is warm and approachable, yet still commanding and authoritative, similar in tone and timbre to such other renowned radio and voice artists as Orson Welles and William Conrad. Hearing Scourby’s masterful approach, one quickly understands why he often found himself cast, across all media, as various authority figures, from doctors to kings. (Once, on radio, he even played Superman’s Kryptonian father.)

Equally impressive is Scourby’s treatment of the material. He is respectful and reserved. His performance eschews over-the-top fire-and-brimstone theatrics in favor of a delivery that is dramatic yet restrained and, therefore, sustained. His relatively low-key delivery no doubt created a recording that, while fully conveying the powerful themes and story of the Bible, nevertheless proved approachable, endearing and understandable to a wide variety of listeners.

Once Scourby’s work was done, the Foundation made the recordings available to its constituents where, despite the work’s Wagnerian size, they found many early, eager takers for their “Living Bible.” Thanks to Congress’ earlier decree, the King James records could be sent, in parcels, for free, to the blind and vision-impaired across the nation.

Not to be forgotten or diminished today is the impact the Scourby recordings had on their audiences. Now not only could listeners hear the full word of God but, thanks to its recitation by

a skilled narrator, they could experience the Bible in a way few people, sighted or not, ever had before. Suddenly, the “theatre of the mind” (radio’s stock and trade, its *raison d’etre*) was being applied to this most holy and sacred of texts. And the effect was resounding.

Soon, by word of mouth or incidental exposure, knowledge of and interest in the KJV/Scourby series quickly spread beyond the blind and to the sighted. In 1966, the recordings were made available commercially. Despite its bulk and, for the time, hefty price tag, the set became a bestseller. The recordings became a potent new tool for people to explore and use in their faith. Its success laid the groundwork, not only for the audio recording of other religious volumes, but also for the now highly-lucrative and artistically-viable books-on-tape industry.

As with all classics, since its debut in the 1940s, the Scourby narration has never been out of “print” and it remains today, to many, the definitive audio treatment of God’s word. Similarly, though Scourby would go on to give voice to hundreds of other books and to have a long career on stage, in film (including “Giant” in 1956) and on television, his KJV work would remain his definitive achievement. When the actor passed way in 1985, mention of it would lead most of his obituaries. Even today Scourby is often referred to as “The Voice of the Bible.” His exalted status in the books-for-the-blind field was only underscored further by the fact that, for many years, the Foundation annually bestowed the Alexander Scourby Narrator of the Year award to recognize outstanding achievement in readings for the blind and sight-impaired. Not long before his death, Scourby said of his Bible affiliation, “I consider the Bible [readings] my most important work.... It is the one book that has the power to inspire, encourage, comfort and change the life of the person who hears it.”

Though originally issued on record, the Scourby/King James recording has migrated to other formats as they have developed. After vinyl albums, the recordings (and other Scourby-read versions of them commissioned in the early 1970s) were re-issued on cassettes. Later still, Scourby’s work was transferred to CD. Today, they can be experienced online or downloaded. Passages are even available on Youtube, where enterprising individuals have illustrated the audio with scenic still photos and inspiring, slow-motion video.

In their original audio box set, due to their size, value, what they represented, families that possessed them tended to prize them as much as the family Bible or any other valuable heirloom. Weighted with meaning and memory, their status as an intergenerational treasure only further underscored their power, legacy and non-ephemeral nature.

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