

# THE BOOK THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

## The influence of the King James Bible on English language and literature<sup>1</sup>

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This is indeed a bold claim. Can a book, which is not even an original, but a translation, change the world? The great and the good have written books in time for this 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary. Melvyn Bragg waxes eloquent about the influence of the KJB on social developments such as the anti-slavery campaign of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>2</sup>. I think he misses the point. The KJB was the *only* translation available to William Wilberforce, and it was the message of the Bible, not the way in which it was translated, which moved him to campaign for change. We need to draw a distinction between the Bible as the Word of God and the KJB as a literary product. I will try to concentrate on the latter. David Crystal has written an entertaining but rather disappointing book, compiling a list of KJB words and phrases which fuel the modern English obsession for punning in the media, advertising and politics<sup>3</sup>. We need to note the difference between using 16<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup> century English for humorous purposes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and acknowledging our indebtedness to its thorough permeation of our cultural heritage. Again, I hope to concentrate on the latter.

So how, and to what extent, did this book change the world?

### The unexpected success of the KJB

1. Alistair McGrath makes the point that the KJB was published within a unique **window of opportunity**<sup>4</sup> in the development of the English language, as indeed

- 1 Lecture Marking the 400<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the King James Bible at the Faculty of Teacher Education of the University of Zagreb (November 10, 2011).
- 2 Bragg, Melvyn, *The Book of Books: The Radical Impact of the King James Bible 1611-2011* (Hodder and Stoughton 2011).
- 3 Crystal, David, *Begat, the King James Bible and the English Language* (OUP 2010).
- 4 McGrath, Alistair, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language and a Culture* (Hodder and Stoughton, 2001), p. 258.

were the works of William Shakespeare in the decades which preceded it. Both became defining influences. It was a time of great energy and expansion, new freedoms, interest in theology and intellectualism. In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, Latin was being abandoned as the language of government and diplomacy in Western Europe, and the vernacular was moving towards standardisation, to a form we now call Early Modern English (differing considerably from Wycliffe's English of 200 years earlier). The Elizabethan and Jacobean periods are recognised today as the time in which modern English received its distinctive cast. Interestingly, the KJB was not at first received warmly. It must have sounded strange to contemporary listeners, as the translators faithfully retained Hebrew and Greek metaphors, images and constructions which were completely unfamiliar to their readers. Yet the more a particular text is read, the more it becomes standard. Continuity of usage diminished its strangeness and transformed the unfamiliar into the everyday.

2. It should be remembered that the KJB was not translated from scratch, but built on the hard work and endeavours of previous translators, taking the best of their work and making it better. It was a **crowning achievement**. In the preface entitled 'The Translator to the Reader', Myles Smith wrote, "Truly, good Christian Reader, we never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation, or even to make a bad one into a good one, but to make a good one better."<sup>5</sup> Although the first editions were riddled with compositing, proofreading and printing errors, and many amendments had to be made, by the late 17<sup>th</sup> century it had become 'authorised' not only by royal edict, but also by common consent.

3. **The political and social milieu** – after 1616, the Geneva Bible ceased to be printed in England. At first, it was imported, then it was banned completely, due to the perception that it was anti-monarchist and Calvinist (this refers to the contents of its interpolations and footnotes, rather than the actual Bible text). With the rise of Puritanism and Cromwell's Commonwealth in the 1650s, the battleground between the two translations was drawn up. The monarchist faction prevailed and the Restoration took place in 1660, affirming the triumphant dominance of the KJB as part and parcel of the monarchical order. The 1662 Act of Uniformity (which, among other things, prescribed the form and content of church services,) was the final blow for the Puritans and the main motive for many of them to emigrate to the New World. The KJB became the standard church Bible (huge bibles in large type were chained to lecterns in parish churches throughout

5 The Translators to the Reader (The Purpose of the Translators, Their Procedures and Principles)

the kingdom, thus theoretically available to all the people), and was also the text used for the Gospel and Epistle readings in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer, thus ensuring its supremacy. An ordinary working man or woman in 1611 would have known the story of Noah and the Flood but not St. Paul. They would have been able to count the sorrows of the Blessed Mother of God, but not the miracles and parables of Jesus, or the words and deeds of the apostles. Only fifty years later, it was being heard by most people every Sunday (let's not forget that church attendance was mandatory), while in many homes it was read daily to the entire household, used by mothers to teach their children to read, and used in schools as a basic textbook, thus becoming a dominant factor in shaping public and private religious discourse. Up to the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it remained the major contributor to the common fund of language shared by all native English speakers. It was distributed to schoolchildren and prisoners, and donated to hospital wards and hotel rooms. (I was given mine at the age of ten, for attendance at Sunday School.) As a result, it remains deeply embedded in the collective consciousness, even if Generations X, Y and Z (or M) no longer recognise it as a source.

**4. Distribution.** Although the Pilgrim Fathers took the Geneva Bible with them to the New World, still regarding the KJB to be too Catholic, the royalist British Government controlled commerce, and allowed only the King James Bible to be imported into America (but not printed). During the Revolutionary War, there was an embargo on goods imported from England, and this led to a defiant act of bravado in 1782, when the Bible was printed for the first time in America, without the permission of the King. The entrepreneur Robert Aitken chose the King James Version, and his decision meant it became the primary translation in Colonial America, going from strength to strength, and indeed retaining a higher status in the United States today than in the United Kingdom. By 1862, the American Bible Society was selling one million copies a year. Afro-American speech in particular became steeped in the idioms of King James English. Then, the great British and American missionary movements of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries took the KJB to many parts of the world, where it was used to teach English and formed the basis for new translations, standing between the original Greek and Hebrew, which most missionaries could not read, and the target languages.

## **Influence on the English language**

Jeannette Winterson wrote recently, regarding the '66 Books project' at the Bush Theatre in London, "Language starts in the mouth before it hits the page. In the beginning was the Word – was the Word spoken or written? The Old Testament God was declamatory, writing nothing down until the Ten Commandments,

which he wrote on tablets of stone, an iPad without the electronics.”<sup>6</sup> But once written down, language can be passed on to each other and across generations. It can be used for more than simply conveying information.

Let’s take a closer look at just how the King James Bible shaped the modern language of English.

1. Another paradox of the King James Bible is its **dignified simplicity**. There is a popular perception that the King James Bible is difficult to read today because of its language. Its champions, such as Prince Charles, turn this into a virtue, praising it for its ‘grandeur... lyrical beauty... and deep sense of the sacred’. His Royal Highness echoes the popular opinion that “If the Word of God can seem a bit over our heads, perhaps it is supposed to be”<sup>7</sup>. In fact, the opposite is true. Most of the words we find difficult today are simply archaic or have changed in meaning. The translators chose an astonishing 93% of English words with only 7% of Latinate forms. In the entire Bible, only 6,000 different words are used (just to compare, Shakespeare used about 18,000). The average length of words is four letters (including all the long names). In the Ten Commandments, there are 319 words, of which 259 are monosyllabic. Look at Psalm 23:

*<sup>1</sup>The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. <sup>2</sup>He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. <sup>3</sup>He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.*

*<sup>4</sup>Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

*<sup>5</sup>Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

*<sup>6</sup>Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*

There are 119 words, 92 of them monosyllabic. Today, good English is short, sweet and to the point, preferably unembellished (which can be a major headache for those of us who translate from Croatian into English!).

2. The KJB introduced hundreds of **new words and phrases**, which were at first unfamiliar. English has an infinite ability to accept, Anglicise and absorb loan-words, an ability perhaps nurtured by the KJB. Today, most of us do not

6 *The Times*, 9 October 2011.

7 Foreword by HRH *The Prince of Wales to the 400th anniversary edition of the King James Version*, (BFBS 2011).

know these are loan-words - *camel, cherub, jubilee, manna, shibboleth, sycamore* - though we might recognise *alleluia, amen and sabbath*. The following expressions and metaphors were completely new in 1611, but have become thoroughly absorbed into modern English and are no longer stumbling blocks (there's another!) to modern readers (*scapegoat, hide your light under a bushel, fell flat on his face, a drop in a bucket, thorn in the side, put the words in his mouth, skin of his teeth, fat of the land,, jot and tittle, sheep and goats, apple of his eye, beside himself, eleventh hour*).

3. By faithfully translating **metaphors**, using verbal equivalence, rather than dynamic equivalence, Ancient Hebrew, which is very down-to-earth, has entered our vernacular and popular imagination (*I've got myself into deep water, wheels within wheels, you can't make a leopard change his spots, they've seen the writing on the wall, a president with feet of clay,*) as have the phrases of NT Greek: (*I won't hurt a hair of your head, signs of the times, turn the world upside down, I've washed my hands of her, clear as crystal*), while evangelistic and theological metaphors have acquired mundane, secular meanings (*fall from grace, baptism of fire, sack-cloth and ashes*). Sometimes a Bible phrase is picked up bodily and dumped into a different grammatical context – thus we can say that a person is *holier-than-thou* – what was originally a comparison has become an adjectival phrase.

4. The language of the KJB is inherently **aphoristic** i.e. memorable, and this is what sets it apart from modern translations. You will find aphorisms on every page, many more than David Crystal found (*gird up your loins, an eye for an eye, give up the ghost, out of the mouths of babes, nothing new under the sun, no peace for the wicked, suffer fools gladly, bottomless pit, millstone about one's neck, fall by the wayside/on stony ground, all things to all men, the parting of the ways*). These have been retained to the present day, in spite of the fact that several words in this list are now archaic.

5. Biblical characters and place names have been made familiar and their spelling standardised by the KJB; they have become **types** (*I don't know him from Adam, he's a doubting Thomas, it's a David and Goliath situation in this football match, she's real Job's comforter, he's as old as Methuselah, you Judas! This place is like Sodom and Gomorrah, we're heading for Armageddon, I'm off to the Land of Nod*). With the exception of the first, most people today would not be able to explain to tell the stories behind these people or places. Nor do most Americans know where in the Bible to find the originals of US cities like Memphis and Syracuse.

6. The KJB has provided us with a wealth of **shorthand**. Many biblical phrases are used today in truncated versions, assuming that everyone knows the ending

(out of the mouths, turn the other cheek, sufficient unto the day, spare the rod).

7. The translators worked hard to make it suitable for **reading aloud** (this is the meaning of the phrase which appeared on the title page of the first edition, 'Appointed to be read in churches', i.e. punctuated). Since each translator had to read his work aloud to the others, his work was written to be spoken. The KJB is an early crossover text, written to be read and written to be heard. Combining their scholarship and auditory sense, the translators achieved rhythmic smoothness and energy. There are two basic stress patterns in spoken English - iambic (alternating weak and strong) and anapaestic (one weak and two strong) forms. Again, Psalm 23 provides examples of both

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*And I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.*

- · · - · · - · · · - · · -  
*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*

To summarise this section on the influence of the KJB on the English Language, I end with a quotation from Leland Ryken: "Dominant culture texts penetrate deeply into the collective psyche, even when they cease to be the primary objects of study and instead, supply materials to construe reality"<sup>8</sup>. That is why the KJB is the translation used even to the present day on statuary, monuments, inscriptions, in the visual arts, music, rhetoric and speeches, newspaper headlines, and book and film titles. Here are just a few examples of the last two categories.

*East of Eden (John Steinbeck)*

*The Sound and the Fury (William Faulkner)*

*A Time to Kill (John Grisham)*

*Butter in a Lordly Dish (Agatha Christie)*

*Fear and Trembling (Kierkegaard)*

*The Golden Bowl (Henry James)*

*Moab is my Washpot (Stephen Fry)*

*The Sun Also Rises (Ernest Hemingway)*

*Vile Bodies (Evelyn Waugh)*

*The Wealth of Nations (Adam Smith)*

*Inherit the Wind*

*The Sixth Day*

*The Seventh Seal*

*Children of Men*

*Days of Heaven*

*In the Name of the Father*

*Tender Mercies*

*Flesh and Blood*

*Terror by Night*

*Chariots of Fire*

*The Good Shepherd*

8 Leland Ryken, *The Legacy of the King James Bible: celebrating 400 years of the most influential English translation* (Crossway 2011), ch. 6.

## Influence on English literature

The King James Bible has been praised for its simplicity, dignity, power, happy turns of expression, the music of its cadences and rhythm. This is a paradox, since a text perceived as the gold standard of literary excellence was in fact produced by the members of not one, but six committees, who were translators, rather than literary authors.

A hundred years ago, in 1911, marking the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the KJB, Clement Boyd McAfee said, “The Bible is a book-making book”<sup>9</sup>. Northrop Frye wrote, “The Bible is the major informing influence on literary symbolism. Once our view of the Bible comes into proper focus, a great mass of literary symbolism, from Anglo-Saxon texts to TS Eliot, begins to take on meaning.”<sup>10</sup>

**The KJB is a source** (providing things to write about). Its great OT narratives and poetry, Gospel stories, parables and miracles, men, women and other creatures have been recreated from Jacobean times to the present day. It is virtually impossible to read the sacred poetry and prose of Milton (*Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*), George Herbert, John Donne or Bunyan unless you have a thorough knowledge of their greatest source book.

**The KJB is an influence** (prompting writers to write in a certain way). Even 18<sup>th</sup> century secular wits such as Pope, Dryden and Addison show great familiarity with the KJB. Satirists such as Jonathan Swift are pervaded by it. As we move into the Romantic Period and the Victorians, “the fact that authors dealing with secular materials rely on the Bible to drive home a thematic point or character trait suggests how indispensable the Bible has become to the formation and understanding of our literature.”<sup>11</sup> Wordsworth meditates upon it; Coleridge said, “The words of the Bible find me at greater depths of my being than all other books put together”; Tennyson’s imagery and metres reflect it, and Byron’s melodiousness mimics it. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which has declared itself frequently and vigorously to be secular, the Bible has become a repository of points of reference, of images and allusions, a treasure-house of characters, ideas, narrative modes and patterns, into which novelists and poets dip continuously. The Bible remains the most pervasive source-book for 20<sup>th</sup> century authors across many countries (Wolf, Joyce, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Yeats, Larkin, DH Lawrence, Auden, Dylan Thomas, WW1 poets, Faulkner, Conrad, Golding, Edgar Allan Poe, Washington Irving, Nathaniel Hawthorn, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Longfellow, Walt Whitman and others).

9 Cleland Boyd McAfee, *The Greatest English Classic* (Harper and Brothers, 1912)

10 Northrop Frye, *The Anatomy of Criticism*, (Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 316.

11 Roland Bartel, *Biblical Images in Literature* (1975).

**The KJB is an authoritative reference:** Chambers Dictionary of Quotations, Oxford Anthology of Quotations, Penguin Thesaurus of Quotations, Webster's Dictionary and others all use the KJB as the standard text for quotations or definitions. Why do English speakers add a doxology to the Lord's Prayer? Because it is there in the KJB, which used source texts which have since been superseded.

**The KJB is a manual of style:** We have already examined the main factors of style which rendered Hebrew and Greek thoughts, expressions and images into fluent, memorable English. The Pilgrim's Progress is written from start to finish in a style which echoes the KJB. Macaulay wrote, "Intensive study of the Bible (by which he meant the KJB) will keep any writer from being vulgar in point of style. A person who professes to be a critic in the delicacies of the English language ought to have a Bible at his fingers' ends."<sup>12</sup> John Ruskin said, "It is entirely impossible to write superficial, formal English while I know by heart the 32<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Deuteronomy, the 8<sup>th</sup> of 1 Corinthians, the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm or the Sermon on the Mount."<sup>13</sup>

However, there is a catch, particularly for students of English Literature today. You need to be biblically literate in order to bring the biblical presence to life. You need to recognise an allusion in order to appreciate its effect. Quotations and allusions are used as shorthand to the reader, assuming common knowledge. When I was studying English Literature over thirty years ago, I was constantly asked by colleagues to help them find sources in the Bible ("Where is the book of Samson?"). Although one would think Google would solve the problem today, apparently it is worse than ever, according to the Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, who laments that his students of English simply do not know enough of the Bible to begin discussing *Paradise Lost*.<sup>14</sup>

Recently, a new film production of *Jane Eyre* was released. I decided to re-read the novel before seeing the film and as I read, I looked specifically for the influence of the King James Bible. I was astonished. Charlotte Brontë grew up in a parsonage and was continually exposed to the text. Of course, she puts direct Bible quotations into the mouths of her religious characters, the saintly Helen Burns, the overbearing superintendent of Lowood School, Mr. Brocklehurst, and the insufferable clergyman, St. John Rivers. Yet the rest of the book is also shot through with biblical allusions, echoes and mannerisms, though her heroine is no great believer and at the moment of her deepest distress, prays to the Moon (and receives an answer).

Students of English as a second language can use the KJB as a tool to improve

12 Thomas Babington Macaulay, *The Miscellaneous Writings of Lord Macaulay* (Longmans Green, 1868), p. 118.

13 John Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera*, 1871.

14 BBC Radio Four, *Today Programme*, February 17, 2009.



their English – though not by talking like the Jacobean, of course. One of the features of modern English, particular in Great Britain, is our love of wordplay, puns and metaphors. We can hardly get through a sentence without them. You tell your boss that a project is basically going well, “but there’s a *fly in the ointment*”. You tell your daughter not to leave her Chemistry homework until the “*eleventh hour*”. We read that yet another politician is suspected of misdoings and comment, “*His days are numbered*”. You buy a bargain kitchen appliance, but there is a “*sting in the tail*” – the instructions are in Chinese. We pepper our speech with idioms and images whose origins we have forgotten. So, for example, if you approach a person with a bad cold, they might signal you to keep your distance, croaking “*Unclean! Unclean!*” Issuing an invitation to Sunday lunch, you might well promise to “*bring out the fatted calf*”. If you want to show that you are not too seriously attached to wealth, you will dismiss your money as “*filthy lucre*”. You don’t believe that England will ever win the World Cup again? “*O ye of little faith!*” All these phrases come from the KJB.

Inevitably, as language is a living and dynamic torrent, it develops and leaves archaisms or changes in meaning in its wake. After four centuries, the archaisms of the KJB lend themselves to endless punning and jokes (David Crystal is good on this). My favourite is the apocryphal story of the exhausted parents of month-old triplets were given a Bible verse to hang above their cots, “*We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.*” (1 Cor 15:51).<sup>15</sup> Today, the archaisms of the KJB may be off-putting, yet the fact that 400 years on, it is still within walking distance of native speakers (and perhaps jogging distance of speakers of English as a second language) indicates its enduring ability to stimulate the “auditory imagination” (TS Eliot). Let’s not relegate the KJB to the status of a museum relic. It is widely available, in print and online. You can buy it, borrow it, or download it onto your computer, iPad or Kindle. “*Of making many books, there is no end.*” This is one book worth studying.

## FURTHER READING

### History of the Bible in English

Bruce, F. F., *History of the Bible in English* (OUP 1978)

Gilmore, Alec, *A Dictionary of the English Bible and its Origins* (Sheffield Aca-

15 My thanks to Adrian Plass.

demic, 2000).

Moynahan Brian, *God's Bestseller: William Tyndale, Thomas More and the Writing of the English Bible* (St. Martin's 2002).

Norton, David, *A History of the Bible as Literature* (CUP 1993).

### **The Making of the King James Bible**

McGrath, Alister, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language and a Culture* (Hodder and Stoughton, 2001).

Nicolson, Adam, *God's Secretaries* (HarperCollins 2003).

### **Influence of the King James Bible**

Daniell, David, *The Bible in English, its History and Influence* (Yale University Press, 2003).

Lewis, C. S., *The Literary Impact of the Authorised Version* (in Selected Literary Essays, CUP 1969).

McAfee, Cleland Boyd, *The Greatest English Classic* (Harper and Brothers, 1912)  
[www.bible-researcher.com](http://www.bible-researcher.com)

### **New books for the 400th anniversary**

Bragg, Melvyn, *The Book of Books: The Radical Impact of the King James Bible 1611-2011* (Hodder and Stoughton 2011).

Crystal, David, *Begat, the King James Bible and the English Language* (OUP 2010).

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Moore, Helen and Read, Julian, *Manifold Greatness: The Making of the King James Bible* (Bodleian Library Oxford 2011).

Norton, David, *The King James Bible, A Short History from Tyndale to Today* (CUP 2011).

Ryken, Leland, *The Legacy of the King James Bible: celebrating 400 years of the most influential English translation* (Crossway 2011).

*Famous phrases from the KJB Bible*, (Bible Society 2011).

## **Internet**

[www.biblegateway.com](http://www.biblegateway.com)

ref-it: discover the KJB legacy to literature on-line and on your mobile [www.crossref-it.info](http://www.crossref-it.info)

King James Bible Trust: [www.kingjamesbibletrust.org](http://www.kingjamesbibletrust.org)

## **DVD**

*KJB: The Book that Changed the World* (presented by John Rhys-Davies). Available from Amazon, or in sections on YouTube.