

Report

THE BOOK THAT CHANGED THE WORLD

Abstracts of Three Lectures Marking the 400th Anniversary of the King James Bible

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Gunpowder, spittle and parchment - the curious origins of the greatest English Bible

In the spring of 1603, a curious little Scot travelled south to England. He had just become King James VI of Scotland, James I of England. James was bookish and even intellectual without being intelligent: he was nicknamed “the wisest fool in Christendom.” He was a pedant, a bigot and a bore. His court was a morass of intrigue, corruption and depravity. He abused the English constitution, and bequeathed a civil war to his saintly son and successor. Moreover he was ugly; he stammered and he had the unfortunate habit of spitting, which everyone noticed.

But one very good thing came out of his scandalous reign. In 1604, James commissioned a revised translation of the Bible. The very phrase King James has come to mean, most often, not the ghastly little monarch, but the glorious book he ordered into existence. Why did he do it?

When he arrived in London in 1603, James found the English nation torn into three religious factions. Many people clung to the old Roman Catholic faith; many to the new religion of which Calvin was the prophet. And in the middle was the state Church, neither properly Roman nor decently reformed. All three factions had their own English version of the Bible, and all of these versions were flawed and partisan. James’ idea was to produce a revised translation of such splendid scholarship that it would unite the nation.

Did he succeed? Not politically. The Roman Catholics tried to assassinate him and his entire government by blowing up parliament. The Calvinists hated him, and a few decades later rose up, overthrew his dynasty, and killed his son. But the

glory of James' Bible outlasted these disgraces, the gunpowder and the spittle.

Incidentally, there is a Croatian connection to all this! In 1616 the Archbishop of Split, Markantun de Dominis (Gospodnetić), a native of the island of Rab, fell out with the Pope, fled to England, and was welcomed (for political reasons) by King James. For a few years he was the Dean of the royal town of Windsor, and if you had gone into the chapel of Windsor Castle, you would have heard the lovely cadences of the King James Bible being read aloud to King James himself - in a strong Croatian accent.

Janet Berković (M.A. Oxon, English Language and Literature)

The book that changed the world – the influence of the King James Bible on English language and literature

This is a bold claim – can it be justified? We need to distinguish between the Bible as an original work and the King James Bible as a literary product. To the latter, we are greatly indebted because it has permeated thoroughly our language and cultural heritage.

Factors which led to the unexpected success of the King James Bible include: the historical window of opportunity within the development of Early Modern English in which it was published; the fact that the King James Bible was a culmination of translation endeavours; the political milieu which favoured the monarchical order and gave it prominence over other translations; and its wide distribution in England, America, the colonies, and through missionary work, throughout the world.

The King James Bible has had a lasting influence on the English language because of a) the simplicity of its language, b) the introduction of hundreds of new words and phrases literally translated from the Hebrew and Greek, at first unfamiliar, but quickly assimilated, c) the introduction of metaphors, via verbal equivalence, which have entered the vernacular and popular imagination, d) its inherently aphoristic, therefore memorable expressions, e) its dual purpose as a crossover text, written to be read and heard.

It has been described as a “book-making book”. It has served as a source (of things to write about) and an influence (on the way things are written about) through four centuries. It has been a major informing influence on literary symbolism. The works of Jacobean, Restoration, Romantic and Victorian writers draw heavily on Bible themes, quotations and allusions. In the 20th century, it has been the repository of points of reference, images and allusions, the most pervasive source-book for authors, whether religious or secular. It has been praised as a manual of good style.

Today, its archaisms may be off-putting, yet the fact that 400 years on, the

King James Bible is today 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). It should not be relegated to becoming a museum exhibit or simply to feed a particularly British obsession with word-play and puns.

Dr. Jutta Henner

The King James Bible - a milestone towards modern principles of Bible translation

By the end of 2010, at least one book of the Bible had been translated into 2,527 languages, while the complete Bible is now available in 459 languages. No other book or piece of literature has been so often translated. In 1550, there were only 14 languages with their own Bible translation.

The translation commissioned by King James I, published in 1611, was a major achievement. It can be claimed that the KJB would pass modern Bible translation standards set by the United Bible Societies - UBS are actually involved in 540 Bible translation projects in 452 languages at present. The KJB used the best available base text for its translation: not the Latin Vulgate, but the original Hebrew and Greek. It was undertaken by the most highly educated translators and scholars of the time, who started and completed the translation as a team project. Compared to the modern average of 12 years needed to complete a full Bible translation, the translators of the KJB worked quickly: it took them only 7 years to accomplish their task.

After publication, it had a great impact on the Church and led to spiritual growth. It helped form the modern English language and had a huge impact on society, culture and the arts.

Looking deeper into the publication of new Bible translations around the world, one can continuously see parallels to the KJV, its principles and influence. There is, however, a key difference: nowadays politicians and kings rarely commission a Bible translation! Whatever his reasons, King James invited church leaders to Hampton Court in 1604 – and the KJV turned out to be a blessing for the Church and societies around the world.