

How We Got the Best-Selling Book of All Time

The King James Bible is celebrating its 400th anniversary and deserves its longevity.

Leland Ryken (WSJ 8/26/11)

The King James Bible—the bestselling book of all time, the most quoted book in the English language—is celebrating its 400th anniversary this year with conferences and exhibits in museums and libraries. Yet how this book of superlatives came to be is not so well-known. It is a peculiar story, full of twists and surprises.

Upon the death of Queen Elizabeth I in March 1603, King James of Scotland became the ruling monarch of England. Somewhere along the way south to London his procession was met by a group of Puritans who presented him with a list of grievances and requests.

The requests were entirely in keeping with their movement's desire to "purify" the Church of England from vestiges of Catholic church practices. They asked for an end to the obligatory wearing of vestments by ministers, for example; they wanted to end the practice of ministers not living in the parishes to which they had been appointed.

In response, the Hampton Court Conference met in January 1604 to consider their requests. It was a farce: Four hand-picked Puritan moderates were pitted against 18 Church of England heavyweights. King James rejected all Puritan requests and even threatened to "harry the Puritans out of the land or worse." Then, at the last minute, the Puritans requested that the king commission a new English translation of the Bible.

This is somewhat surprising, inasmuch as the Puritans' preferred English Bible, the Geneva Bible, was by far the most-used and best-selling translation of the time. It is not entirely clear why they made the request. More surprisingly, the king granted it.

One fourth of the translators were of Puritan convictions, and the selection of all 47 was based solely on scholarly expertise. They were the best that England possessed in terms of biblical knowledge and facility with the Hebrew and Greek of the original texts of the Bible. It took them six years to finish. Remarkably, everyone on the translation committee rose above sectarian spirit.

The King James Version was not an original translation. It was a revision—technically of the Bishops' Bible of 1568, but actually of an entire century of English Bible translations starting with William Tyndale. This history lies behind a famous statement in the preface to the King James Version: "Truly (good Christian reader) we never thought from the beginning, that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one, . . . but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principal good one."

The King James Bible is familiarly called the Authorized Version, but the king who lent his name to the translation never officially authorized it, even though he hoped that the new translation would help to unify a politically and religiously divided kingdom (a kingdom that would erupt into civil war not long after his death in 1625). Nor did church officials authorize the new translation. The King James Version in reality was authorized by the people, who chose it over others. For three and a half centuries, when English-speaking people spoke of "the Bible," they meant the King James Version.

The King James translators believed their task was to take readers as close as possible to what the original text says, and in doing so they created a great work of literature. Its style is part of its magic. Yet that style is hard to define.

Modern readers are too quick to conclude that with its now-archaic language and grammar, the Bible's style is embellished and formal. But thee and thou pronouns and verb endings like walkest and sayeth were a feature of everyday speech in the early 17th century.

However imitated or parodied, the language is dignified, beautiful, sonorous and elegant. “Godliness with contentment is great gain”—six words and unforgettable. “Give us this day our daily bread.” “The Lord is my light and my salvation.” The King James style is a paradox: It is usually simple in vocabulary while majestic and elevating in effect.

Many of the formulations are impossible to forget, having passed into everyday English usage: “the land of the living,” “at their wit’s end,” “the salt of the earth,” “the root of the matter,” “labor of love,” “fell flat on his face.” When the famous sayings from the King James Version were extracted from Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations into a freestanding book in 2005, the book ran to more than 200 pages!

For more than three centuries, the King James Bible provided the central frame of reference for the English-speaking world. Former Yale University Prof. George Lindbeck well claims that until recently “Christendom dwelt imaginatively in the biblical world.” During the years of its dominance, the King James Bible was the omnipresent force in any cultural sphere that we can name—education (especially childhood education), religion, family and home, the courtroom, political discourse, language and literacy, choral music and hymns, art and literature. For more than two centuries children in England and America learned to read by way of the Bible.

Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address contains so many biblical references that someone has written a whole book on the subject. When President Truman lit the White House Christmas tree on Dec. 24, 1945, his address to the war-weary nation included an exhortation “to make real the prophecy of Isaiah: ‘They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning-hooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more’” (Isaiah 2:4).

The influence of the King James Bible is perhaps most profound in the realm of literature. From Milton’s “Paradise Lost” to Toni Morrison’s “Paradise,” it is a presence quite apart from the author’s religious stance. In his book “The Bible as Literature,” British literary scholar T. R. Henn said it best: “The Authorized Version of 1611 . . . achieves as we read a strange authority and power as a work of literature. It becomes one with the Western tradition, because it is its single greatest source.”

Rumors of its demise have been greatly exaggerated. It is consistently, year after year, either second or third on the list of current Bible sales in the United States. Furthermore, the King James Version lives on in two modern translations that perpetuate the translation philosophy and style of the King James Version while updating its scholarship and language. They are the New King James Version and the English Standard Version.

And yet, even if every copy of the King James Version suddenly vanished, it would remain a cultural presence. People passing the gate of Harvard University would continue to read “open ye the gates that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth may enter in” (Isaiah 26:2). Every year two million visitors would pass the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia and still read, “Proclaim LIBERTY throughout all the Land unto all the Inhabitants thereof” (Leviticus 25:10).

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