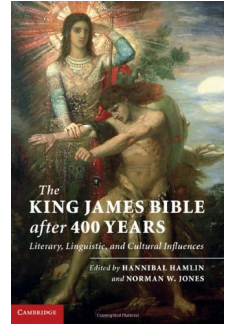


*The King James Bible after 400 Years: Literary, Linguistic, and Cultural Influences*, edited by Hannibal Hamlin and Norman W. Jones

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010 | xii + 364 pages | ISBN: 978-0-521-76827-6 (hardback) £25.00



In the introduction to *The King James Bible after 400 Years*, Hamlin and Jones describe it as “the most complete one-volume exploration of the King James Bible and its influence to date” (2). This assessment is further promoted by the publishers, and reasonably so; yet the end product does not quite meet the promise of its subtitle.

The book is divided into three parts, with a total of fifteen essays in addition to the introduction. Notes are provided at the end of each chapter; this being an indication of the book’s dual purpose—to serve scholars (who may prefer footnotes) and a “wider audience” (2). In terms of the volume’s overall coherence, the editors identify a common thread: the repeated and successful use of the King James Bible (KJB) as “an ironic vehicle for criticizing authority” (16) by those determined to resist, dissent from, or defy Church and State.

The introductory chapter sits a little awkwardly at the helm. Coverage of the KJB’s origins is over-simplified at points, but generally functional, and will help the inexpert reader. However, the ensuing survey of reception

contains so many examples that it becomes unwieldy, and the chapter as a whole provides limited assistance for those who wish to navigate the book's contents. A conventional summary guide to the chapters may have been more helpful.

The first section is devoted to the language of the KJB, beginning with the "King James Steamroller," Stephen Prickett's metaphor for the slow process which pressed Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic into "uniform" English, before cementing literary style. Prickett brings out the translators' successful pursuit of equivalent polyvalence with several well chosen (if somewhat derivative) examples. The "swerving" of 1 Timothy 1:6, bearing both physical and metaphorical connotations, is a case in point. The example is borrowed from Ward Allen, but alas, something has gone badly wrong with the Greek citation (δοσζήσατεξ for ἀστοχήσαντες); the same example was misprinted in Prickett's *Origins of Narrative* (Cambridge University Press, 1996 (90 n. 83)), so perhaps the Press would benefit from a Greek proofreader.

With his first-class command of Hebrew, Robert Alter is more than competent to explain how its synthetic constructions, monosyllabic vocabulary, and paratactic syntax differ from idiomatic English. Alter argues that, because there was no Tyndalian version for King James' team to work with, the translators may be regarded as responsible for the felicities and flaws of Ecclesiastes's English. He finds that they captured the Hebrew's "emphatic incremental repetition" (50) but neglected "mercantile vocabulary" and introduced unnecessary and mistaken abstractions, such as "vexation of spirit" (Eccl 1:14; for which Alter proposes "herding the wind"). Despite other "stylistic pratfalls" (54), Alter's verdict is positive: the translators profoundly affected the English language, "intervening in [its] evolution" and communicating the "experience of the Bible" in a way both "indigenously English" and true to the "cadences" and "tonalities" of the original (58).

Section two focuses on history. John N. King and Aaron T. Pratt select and analyse data, mainly records in the English Short Title Catalogue, to demonstrate how the "materiality and artifactuality" of early English Bibles may shed light on their "consumption" (61, 63). They identify correlations, suggesting that combinations of typeface and format (from single-fold folio to 32mo) may reflect external circumstances such as the political status of translations, and shifts in commercial demand. The authors offer a convincing interpretation of the data, including the commercial reasoning behind simultaneous publication of multiple formats and versions by a single printer, and use diagrams to advantage to illustrate spikes in demand and the lifespan

of individual versions. This is a densely factual essay, replete with observations and hypotheses which testify to the potential of this new research focus.

Gergely Juhász's essay establishes the KJB's debt to Antwerp, "the ideal place for printing clandestine English books" (102) including a 1526 Tyndale NT and Coverdale's 1535 Bible (Juhász follows Guido Latré in this regard). The continuity between these early translations and that of 1611 is illustrated with examples from Isaiah and Hebrews (there is scope for further analysis here). Juhász also draws attention to the contribution of Tyndale's contemporary, George Joye, who bequeathed several terms to the KJB. Juhász's notes are exemplary, and for those unfamiliar with Joye or the Antwerp connections, this should prove a welcome and interesting introduction.

Isabel Rivers shows how Philip Doddridge at once respected and contested the work of the 1611 translators within his *Family Expositor* (1739–56). Thus at Mark 15:28, Doddridge retained "transgressors," stating his reason as "to keep as close to our English Version of the Passage quoted, as the Greek will allow me" (i.e. the OT of the KJB—Mark is quoting Isaiah 53:12; emphasis as Doddridge); but at Luke 23:34 shifted Jesus' words to a different form of the present tense: "they know not what they *are doing*" (emphasis added), commenting that his translation gave "the *exact Import* of what Gram-marians call the Present Tense" (135; emphasis changed). Rivers's careful study moves from Doddridge's close interaction with the KJB text to establish his centrality in contemporaneous Christian culture, emphasising especially his influence on John Wesley. There is ample justification for further research.

R. S. Sugirtharajah exposes the colonisation endemic in "Englishing" a West Asian text. His most prominent target, Adam Nicolson, is shown denigrating the disciples' "despicable" scholarship before heaping praise upon the highly academic fidelity of James's translators, in a particularly pernicious takeover (150ff.).<sup>3</sup> This essay is a devastating critique of uncritical attitudes to the KJB, drawing attention to the ways in which its "clones" damaged indigenous cultures, and bringing to light its varied appropriations as totem, tobacco wrapping, or template for the countertexts of the colonized. "The survival of the KJB," he concludes, "depends on its giving up its elitist, majestic, ceremonial, stately, celebratory, and establishment image" (160).

<sup>3</sup> The reference is to Nicolson's *Power and Glory: Jacobean England and the Making of the King James Bible* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), 82. The book was published in the US and in a UK reissue under the title, *God's Secretaries*, rather underlining Sugirtharajah's point.

Paul Gutjahr traces the shifting tastes of Bible consumers, and the translation strategies which produced new versions, including the late Eugene Nida's contribution—"dynamic" or "functional equivalence." A range of accessible Bibles has enabled a democratisation of the marketplace, "dethroning" the KJB. Gutjahr is quick to conflate democracy and consumerism, but there is scope for a stronger critique or questioning of the ideologies behind this development: how does the apparent preference for highly determined texts relate to other aspects of late modernity; how do modern reference Bibles compare with the annotations of Geneva, Scofield or the *Family Expositor*?

The final section is considerably larger, covering the KJB's influence on literature with a multitude of case studies, both the classical core (Milton, Bunyan, Wordsworth) and texts from the twentieth century (Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner, Toni Morrison, et alia). Taking snapshots of Milton's youth, middle years, and later work, Jason P. Rosenblatt shows how an early disregard for translation changed to a need to prove himself against the KJB; then as the poet matured, a combination of assertive autonomy and "exultant poetic freedom" led to the KJB's creative reintroduction (197). Analysing the annotations Milton provided to support his divergences from the KJB, Rosenblatt relies upon Brown, Driver and Briggs's Hebrew lexicon, without acknowledging the anachronism. In discussing נָאוֹת (Ps 83:12), he then judges Milton "unpersuasive" because his reading does not accord with BDB (187), foreclosing the attempt to make sense of the poet's own interpretation. (Milton's translation is odd and inappropriate, at first glance; yet most likely he is eliding roots, judging "palace" to be a becoming abode for God, possibly influenced by an assumed Greek cognate, ναός.) Despite some methodological limitations, the overall argument of the essay remains sound.

Discussions of seventeenth-century writers and the Bible frequently have to contend with the same question—which Bible? Hannibal Hamlin gives a convincing answer on Bunyan's behalf: the "vast majority of identifiable biblical quotations and allusions" are "decisively KJB" (212). Noting that Bunyan's spiritual autobiography shows a peculiar sense of scriptural agency, Hamlin argues that while Bunyan shared a Puritan concept of allegory with contemporaries, his own life's "progress" through (or inside) the Bible is embodied in the "scriptural intensity" of *Pilgrim's Progress* (215).

By the late eighteenth century, the KJB was the Bible; Adam Potkay's leading thesis is that the Romantic poets (Wordsworth, Shelley, Blake) transform it, using the "rhetorical sublime" (221) while overturning or reversing the text to expose "tensions or fissures" (220), an approach which Potkay

terms “antithetical.” There are tensions within Potkay’s enterprise; for example, a stress on the deliberate ambiguity of Blake’s proverbs is accompanied by claims about what Blake did or did not know, think, or mean. Still the chosen juxtapositions are productive, identifying a trend within Romantic attitudes to the Bible while allowing for the different motivations and practices of each writer.

Michael Wheeler skilfully sketches John Ruskin’s career, showing how the leading intellectual’s experience of the Bible may be seen as a microcosm for the broader evolution of Victorian relationships with the KJB. Where Ruskin’s early writings contained numerous allusions to the KJB (and to evangelical hymnody), these were displaced by Ruskin’s own studies of the Greek New Testament. Though this study diminished the KJB’s authoritative reputation, appreciation for its “habitual music” did not fade. Wheeler makes his own contribution to KJB allusions (he may prefer the term AV-lusions), and picks out Ruskin’s biblical commentaries as an area “ripe for research” (241).

James Wood’s essay speaks more to the Bible than the specifics of the KJB. Wood characterises *To the Lighthouse* as “stealthily biblical” (253), and goes on to demonstrate how Woolf uses biblical referents (leviathan), allusions (the psalmists’ “how long?”), and stylistic elements, as well as prayer book language (vouchsafe) to convey the apocalyptic atmosphere of the First World War. It is a hard case to build due to the nature of the text (“difficult, obscure, and sometimes overwrought”), but Wood rises to the occasion, giving an account of *To the Lighthouse*’s ambivalent quest that fits well with Woolf’s other writings, and brings to light details hitherto overlooked.

Part of Bunyan’s allusive repertoire, the Song of Solomon proves to be a recurrent intertext. This is obviously true of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, which features in both Norman Jones’s and Katherine Clay Bassard’s studies. For Jones (“The King James Bible as ghost in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Beloved*”), the characters’ dialogue with the biblical text signifies an unexpectedly competitive possession, and implies a pre-conscious relationship with biblical language. Bassard draws out the perversity of the KJB translation “black but comely” (compare “black and beautiful”), contextualising Morrison as one of many African American writers who have worked to redefine the Bible, “de-authorizing” the racism and enslavement endorsed by “the master’s unauthorized reading” (301). Bassard’s piece, spanning more than two centuries, is relevant for those with literary and postcolonial interests, but should also augment reading lists for general studies of the Bible’s influence (in politics, in the USA).

In a more comical reference to the Song of Solomon, Heather Walton relates how an aunt instructed Jean Rhys: “don’t imagine it’s about a woman” (324). Walton adopts a deliberately positive hermeneutic for her study, shaping it with a question: what did the KJB give to “women writing in the twentieth century”? In Rhys’s case, the Bible came to stand over against the oppressive (purity, whites, England, cliché, wealth), not as a redemptive force but as a support for her own revolt against the status quo. Similarly, for Elizabeth Smart, a writer who “inhabited” the KJB, the Song of Solomon gave license to her own sensual approach to sexuality. Fascinatingly, Smart’s source notes were excised by her publishers, thus effectively suppressing explicit biblical references; these notes remain unpublished, a gap which has contributed to the undervaluation of Smart’s work (and may provide matter for further study).

At the end of the book, there are two chronologies of Bibles, one which provides a brief description of each major English translation from Wyclif to the RSV, and a second to accompany Paul Gutjahr’s essay (chapter 7); the latter focuses on English Bibles from 1957 onward, providing basic bibliographic details (but no description). A select but extensive bibliography distinguishes between volumes which concern the “background, history, and reception” of the KJB and those which explore its “literary-cultural influence.” The general indexing seems fair, but the index of biblical passages is badly wanting. In the first place, it picks up only specific chapter and verse references, omitting to record where a book is discussed (as with Rhys on the Song of Songs, 324), but it even fails at the narrower task: Rivers’s (or Doddridge’s) explicit reference to Isaiah 53:12, for example, is not listed at all. This is an obvious impediment to the volume’s usefulness.

Reviewing the project as a whole, there are slight indications that the editors participate in the colonisation Sugirtharajah identified, in the suppression of James’s Scottishness, for instance. However, the major disappointment is that the sections do not reflect the tripartite subtitle, particularly in terms of “cultural” influence. The introductory chapter teases the reader with references to cinema and drama, but these genres are not even touched on within the range of essays (the same might be said of art and music). A more minor frustration concerns presentation: throughout the volume, extended quotations are indicated not by indentation but by a minor adjustment in font size, making them harder to distinguish and read. Given this strange format, it is not surprising that one passage in the volume is wrongly presented as quotation (312).

Setting aside these deficiencies, the individual studies are all varied and engaging, offering unique insights into the KJB's past 400 years. This volume makes a strong case for biblical literacy amongst scholars of English literature, and illustrates the way in which literary studies can benefit from the involvement of those with biblical expertise. Individual chapters may well form part of the reading list for those taking courses in the Bible as/and literature, and the contributors identify a good number of opportunities for further research.

In the introduction, the editors share a hope that the quatercentenary is a moment of "resurrection," taking comfort in the spread of contributors ("scholars at every stage of their professional careers"). Positioned at the other end of the volume, and reflecting specifically upon literature, Heather Walton expresses foreboding, "a disturbing sense" that—no longer part of the cultural furniture (or wallpaper)—the KJB's gifts may not be taken up by contemporary authors. The quiet openness behind her hesitant lament is more thought-provoking than many lyrical elegies voiced during 2011, and the editors' choice of this essay as the concluding note (Jones might have taken this place, chronologically) makes some amends for the volume's other infelicities.

I. C. Hine

*The University of Sheffield*