

The influence of the King James Bible

The Bible influenced every part of life, from the arts and sciences, to politics and family life. From 1660 onwards the King James Bible was the Bible in general use and it was this version of the Bible that had a lasting influence on society.

How it changed the language

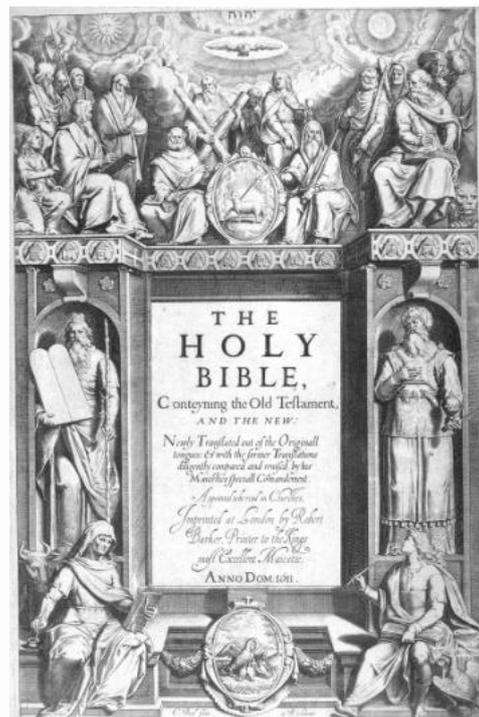
Along with Shakespeare – who lived at the same time – the King James Bible had a lasting influence on the English language. The translators did not set out to write a literary masterpiece, but that is what happened.

Britain was a land of several languages and many dialects and the language was in a state of flux. The King James Bible is written in the language of educated people of south east England; local dialects are not represented. This had a profound effect on the development of English. Small versions of the Bible were produced for personal use, by a growing reading public. This enabled the influence of the Bible to spread, as people could read it whenever they wanted, rather than only hearing it read at Church. Spelling also began to be standardised as people saw words spelt in a particular way in the Bible. Biblical words and phrases crept into the language and are still in use today, though most people are not aware of their origin. Because these new words and phrases were in a Bible they were accepted; Biblical English had authority.

To bite the dust
 Fall flat on your face
 The apple of his eye
 Pride goes before a fall
 Put words in his mouth
 Rise and shine
 Say the word
 Sign of the times
 Powers that be

As the Bible was translated into other languages Biblical phrases entered Welsh and Gaelic as well.

The use of an older form of English by the translators preserved the 'thee and thou' form of address that continued to be used in churches long after it had died out in ordinary speech.



Religion

When the King James Bible was published, the Church of England (also known as the Anglican Church) was the Church people were required to attend. No other Protestant denomination was recognised. Over the 17th century other denominations began to form, afterwards called Congregationalists, Baptists and the Society of Friends (Quakers). These arose because they believed that ordinary people with access to the Bible in English could interpret the Bible for themselves. Although it was originally intended as a way of the government controlling how people read the Bible, once the King James Bible was in the hands of the people it was beyond government control. People read and interpreted the Bible for themselves and began to challenge both Church and State. Some groups set up separate churches without bishops where the people had a say in how they were run. Putting the Bible into the hands of ordinary people let the genie out of the bottle and there was no getting it back in. Eventually the Act of Toleration was passed in 1689 and different denominations were recognised. Later, many other denominations formed, such as the Methodists.

Politics

The Bible became the yardstick by which the people judged the government and they began asking for more say in how they were governed. Many people felt a growing responsibility to create a more compassionate and equal society,

inspired by the values of the Bible. Once the Bible was freely available it influenced political thought for good and ill. Some people selected quotations to support the status quo, others saw the Bible's values as a basis for change. Early Christian socialists, F. D. Maurice and Charles Kingsley, were both Anglican ministers. Keir Hardie, one of the founders of the Labour movement was an active Christian. Many a trade union leader and social reformer gained their values from the Bible. Tony Benn and Martin Luther King are examples of this. Methodism was influential in the founding of the Unions and the Labour party (for further information see

www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/subdivisions/methodist_1.shtml)



Science

For the scientists of the day the Bible was a key to their intellectual life. John Ray the naturalist and Isaac Newton the scientist and mathematician both paid tribute to the importance of the Bible. The tradition grew of the 'clergyman scientist', clergy with a strong interest in science who made a significant contribution to scientific knowledge. Later, many were friends of Charles Darwin.

Music

The poetry and musical tone of the King James Bible influenced church music. Anglican chant was sung scripture that followed the rhythm in the language. The lyrics of Handel's *Messiah* follow the King James Bible and the popular *By the Rivers of Babylon* by Boney M uses parts of Psalm 137 in the King James version. See www.lyricsfreak.com/b/boney+m/rivers+of+babylon_20022508.html for Rivers of Babylon lyrics.

Sound clips of the *Messiah* can be found on <http://commons.wikimedia.org> – search by 'Handel's *Messiah*'.

Drama and film

The Bible is reflected in plays and films. Shakespeare used the Geneva Bible but T. S. Eliot loved the rhythm of the King James Bible. The Bible is reflected in films such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *The Matrix*, *Bruce Almighty* and *Armageddon*.

Art

The Bible's influence on art hardly needs stating. For hundreds of years most art was religious and much of it biblical. Biblical art in the English speaking world after the 17th century was most likely to be inspired by the King James Bible.

The art of William Blake in works such as *Jacob's Ladder* and *Naomi entreating Ruth to return to the land of Moab* reflects Bible stories. The Victorian artist Holman Hunt reflects the Bible (Revelation 3:20) in his painting *The Light of the World*. Many of these can be seen at http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Bowyer_Bible A comprehensive list of works inspired by the Bible can be found at www.textweek.com/art/art.htm

Resources

<http://whtjgr.homestead.com/> A dictionary for the King James Bible that gives definitions for archaic or obscure words



Naomi entreating Ruth and Orpah to return to the land of Moab by William Blake