

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

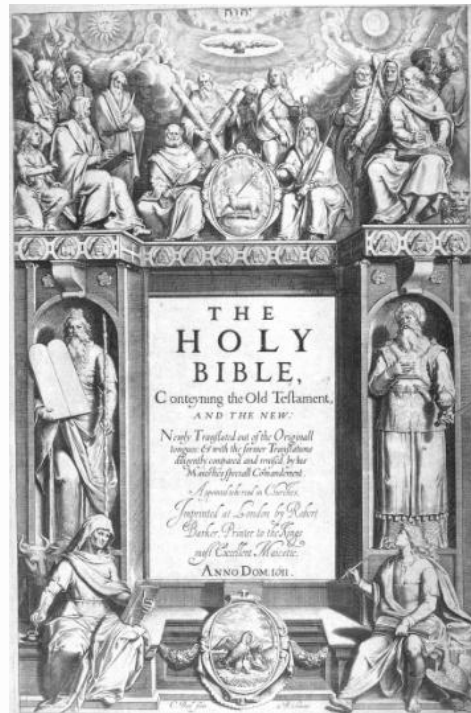
Along with Shakespeare – who lived at the same time – the King James Bible had a lasting influence on the English language. The translators did not set out to write a literary masterpiece, but that is what happened.

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.



Education

The existence of the Bible in the language of the people acted as a stimulus for education, book production and printing. It was the beginning of the opening up of knowledge to all people. In the past, educated people had written for an audience of other educated people, but the King James Bible was written for ordinary people.

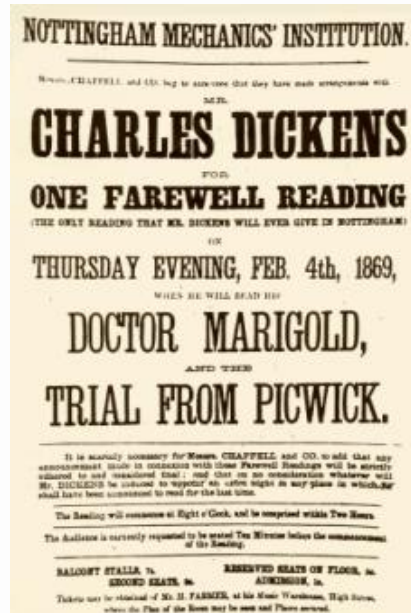
The Bible in English stimulated learning as people needed to be able to read their Bibles. Schooling could be informal at home or in the growing number of schools that were founded in the 16th and 17th centuries. The Bible was the text which children used to learn to read as it was often the only book a family possessed.

In popular culture

The Bible was everywhere in the 17th century. It appeared in popular songs, in texts and Bible pictures painted in houses and even on the walls of pubs. Britain became a people that shared a single book. From housewife to bishop, from apprentice to King they shared the common language of the Bible.

Literature

The King James Bible influenced English literature for hundreds of years, from Milton to Dickens and T S Elliot. It influenced the way people wrote, and *what* they wrote. The great themes of the Bible: creation, fall, redemption



and recreation are often echoed in poems and novels. *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, and *The Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison all echo the Bible in their titles and themes.

For hundreds of years after the publication of the King James Bible, writers could assume their audience would understand biblical references. That is why some students find English literature difficult to study today, as we have lost this common knowledge and language. (The site www.crossref-it.info/ helps people with this.) In the 19th century Keats could write about Ruth, who 'Stood in tears amid the alien corn', and know his audience would know the biblical story of Ruth being far from home. Dickens could describe the ill-treatment of David Copperfield and write 'Though there was a child once set in the midst of the disciples,' knowing his audience would contrast Jesus' kindness toward children with the cruelty experienced by David Copperfield.



George Fox

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 such 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://whtigr.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

Background notes on the Biblical passages used in the lessons in this section

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

- William Blake (1757-1827) was a man of many talents. He was an artist, poet, printmaker and visionary. He was the writer of the poems 'Tyger' and 'Jerusalem'.
- Blake came from a devout Christian family and the Bible was an influence on his work, although Blake was a rather unconventional Christian.
- Painted in 1795, this shows the three women wearing the fashions of the late 18th century.

- The painting is of the moment when Ruth refuses to leave. She clings to Naomi. Orpah is shown leaving but in deep distress.
- Naomi's open hands suggest she can offer nothing to Ruth.
- The flowing lines of the women's clothing, the gentle sweep of the arms and the bent backs echo the landscape. The colours are soft.
- The gestures, body language and expression capture the grief of the women.
- The story of Ruth is set in the turbulent times not long after the Israelites had settled in Canaan (Israel) possibly in the 12th century BCE.
- Ruth was the great grandmother of King David and an ancestor of Jesus.
- Ruth is the stranger from another land who shows how faith should be lived. She kept the Jewish law. (Honour your father and mother . . . care for the widow, etc.)
- Ruth becomes a gleaner, someone who picked up the fallen bits of corn. Biblical law stated that a farmer could not pick

anything that dropped or was left behind by mistake. Farmers also had to leave the corners of their fields for the poor to pick.

- Ruth's promise to Naomi from the King James Bible is some of the most beautiful language of the Bible, often chosen for weddings. The passage is poetry but it is not laid out as poetry. Hebrew poetry does not rhyme but is full of imagery and rhythm.

And Ruth said, 'Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me'.
Ruth 1:16-17

Note: the phrase 'the LORD do so to me, and more also' is an ancient vow. It would probably have been accompanied by a gesture such as a finger drawn across the throat.

Websites

www.bible-art.info/Ruth.htm Gives a range of paintings of Ruth and Naomi

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 A time for everything

- The saying 'A time for everything' is a paraphrase of, 'For everything there is a season and time for every purpose under the heaven.' This saying comes from the wisdom literature of the Bible which contains wise sayings for living well in relation to God and others. This saying is 'unpacked' in the poem that follows in Ecclesiastes.
- This part of the Bible is not just saying that there is a right time for everything; it is also saying, 'That is what life is like'. These words from the Bible remind people that life has its good and bad times; its times for sadness and laughter, its time for keeping and time for throwing away. Life is varied. The phrases on killing and war have been omitted.