Folger Shakespeare Library celebrates 400th anniversary of King James Bible

By by DeNeen L. Brown, Published: October 7, 2011

Under dim lights in a grand hall of the great Folger Shakespeare Library lies the “Wicked Bible,” called so because it omits one distinctly important word from the Seventh Commandment. It is a word with the power to prevent sin.

“Thou shalt commit adultery,” the Wicked Bible commands.

For this unfortunate typo, the printer of this 1631 edition of the King James Bible met with retribution. By order of the king, copies of the “Wicked Bible” were quickly gathered and burned. Its printer, Robert Barker, was chastised for stupidity.

“I knew the tyme when great care was had about printing, the Bibles especially, good compositors and the best correctors were gotten being grave and learned men, the paper and the letter rare, and faire every way of the beste,” wrote George Abbot, the archbishop of Canterbury, chastising Barker. “But now the paper is nought, the composers boyes, and the correctors unlearned.”

Barker was summoned to the Star Chamber, an English court for the powerful, relieved of his printer’s license and fined 300 pounds. Barker pleaded his innocence. Legend says another printer with whom he was locked in a legal battle had bribed one of Barker’s workers to sabotage his printing, driving poor Barker into bankruptcy.

After the burning, few copies remained of the Wicked Bible, which has also been called the Adulterous Bible or the Sinner’s Bible.

A rare copy sits on display at the Folger as part of its new exhibition, “Manifold Greatness: The Creation and Afterlife of the King James Bible.” The exhibition, which runs through Jan. 15, displays other rare Bibles, books and manuscripts, including the Folger’s own first edition of the King James Bible, printed in 1611.

“Manifold Greatness” — developed by the Folger, the Bodleian Library at the University of Oxford and the
Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin — celebrates the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible and tells the story of the most-published book in the English language.

“The King James Bible is hugely influential, not just in America or in Britain, but anywhere the English language went — all the colonies, including Canada, Australia, New Zealand and in the African countries where English is spoken,” says Hannibal Hamlin, co-curator of the Folger’s exhibition. “It is one Bible among many, but many denominations are devoted to it. Many aspects of the King James Bible got things right. Nothing else has endured remotely as long.”

“As to the number of editions,” he added, “it is vast. I am not sure anyone knows.”

The King James was a Bible meant to be read aloud; the beauty of its language helped it to endure, says co-curator Steven Galbraith: “Its extraordinary poetic power allows the translation to find a home in settings as diverse as the poetry of John Milton, the lyrics of Bob Marley and the speeches of Martin Luther King. Because the King James Bible is a revision of the work of William Tyndale and other 16th-century translators, it isn’t a new translation, but rather a fusion of the best translations that preceded it, with fresh input from the most talented English theologians of the early 17th century.”

The exhibition includes fascinating mysteries, epic battles, stake burnings and other enthralling episodes in the lives of the men involved in Bible translation. It covers the events that led to the birth of the King James, as well as the book’s influence on art, literature, popular culture, music and history — from Handel’s “Messiah” to the reading of Genesis by the astronauts aboard Apollo 8, a broadcast heard by a quarter of the people on Earth at the time, making the Bible’s reach literally astronomical.

“The King James is the only Bible version I am aware of that has been read in space,” Hamlin says.

On Earth, the words and cadence of the King James have influenced political and civil rights speeches. Its language, rhythm and stories have found their way to Hollywood: Think Charlton Heston and Yul Brynner in “The Ten Commandments”; “Samson and Delilah”; and 1951’s “David and Bathsheba,” starring Gregory Peck. Its tales have inspired works by writers both religious and radical: John Milton’s “Paradise Lost,” William Blake’s “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” and Herman Melville’s “Moby Dick.”

The King James has been quoted in classics and in cartoons. In “A Charlie Brown Christmas,” when Linus decides to tell Charlie Brown “what Christmas is all about,” he recites nativity passages from the King James. “Whenever I read this part of the Bible,” Hamlin says, “I can’t get Linus’s voice out of my head.”

Inside a case near the end of the great hall lies a Bible that belonged to Elvis Presley. “We go from King James,” Hamlin says, to “the King!”

Across the hall are early Bibles printed before the King James, which was the third official translation of the Bible in English. These previous texts, unauthorized by the British monarchy, were written in an era when translating the Bible was considered heretical, and punishable by death. One display case tells the tragic story of John Wycliffe, a 14th-century Oxford scholar, who with his followers is credited with translating the first complete Bible from the Latin Vulgate — “vulgaris” in Latin means “common” — into Middle English.

But Wycliffe and his followers were considered threats to the king, and reading or possessing an English Bible became illegal. In the early 15th century, translating the Bible into English became punishable by being burned at the stake.
“Just to drive the point home, they dug up poor old Wycliffe’s bones and burned them,” Hamlin says, pointing to a stark illustration. “You can see the skull being burned.” Despite the flames, about 100 Wycliffite Bibles survived. The display case holds a rare copy from the 1380s.

Hamlin moves on. “The real hero of English Bible translation is William Tyndale,” who began translating in 1520 in secret, he says. Tyndale, considered a remarkable linguist, was the first to translate the Bible into English from the original languages of Greek and Hebrew.

He translated on the run but was eventually caught after an Englishman snitched to the authorities, revealing his whereabouts. Tyndale — who had finished translating the Pentateuch, or the first five books of the Bible; other books of the Old Testament, including Joshua, Second Chronicles and Jonah; and the New Testament — was tried as a heretic and was publicly executed in 1536. “He was sentenced to be burned at the stake, but either in deference to his former clerical status or as some kind of act of mercy, they strangled him first,” Hamlin says. “Apparently, his last words were, ‘Lord, open the King of England’s eyes.’ ”

It was only three years later, in 1539, that the first fully authorized English translation of the Bible was made. On its title page is an illustration featuring King Henry VIII, who appears at the top, god-like and omniscient. This is known as the Great Bible, the work of Miles Coverdale, “not because it was really great,” Hamlin says, “but because it was very large.”

The exhibition moves quickly through England’s Golden Age, displaying the Bishop’s Bible, the second authorized English translation, which was probably given to Queen Elizabeth I. After Elizabeth died in March 1603, King James I came to power.

James was a conservative Protestant and an advocate of a strong monarchy. During the second year of his reign, he called together the leaders of the Church of England in response to a petition urging him to further reform the church. The leaders thought there were too many lingering signs of Catholicism in the church’s liturgy and structure.

On the second day of what was called the Hampton Court Conference, John Reynolds, a leader in the Puritan faction of the church, put forth a proposal — “for some reason that nobody is quite sure about, because it wasn’t on the agenda,” Hamlin said. “But Reynolds proposed a new Bible. Maybe in desperation, because James was rejecting proposal after proposal.”

The king decided to make his mark on the Church of England by commissioning a new Bible. About 50 scholars from Oxford, Cambridge and Westminster were convened. Working from the Bishop’s Bible, they were ordered to produce a revised version.

The translators began in 1604, improving upon earlier texts, revising in keeping with the king’s tastes and editing the language to make it more concise and poetic. The work took years, and it was not without minor peculiarities. For instance, the first edition of the King James Bible, which debuted in 1611, is also known as the He Bible.

“The reason it is called the He Bible is because there is a verse in the Book of Ruth, Chapter 3, Verse 15, which says, ‘He went into the city.’ That’s it,” Hamlin says. “In subsequent editions, ‘He’ is changed to ‘She,’ which seems to make more sense because it seems to be Ruth they are talking about and not Boaz” who went into the city.
The succeeding edition of the King James Bible is called the She Bible. The writers wanted to be exact.

And thus the King James Bible, called by some scholars the greatest work of prose in English, has endured, despite epic battles and ancient, wicked typos, now forgiven.

**Manifold Greatness: The Creation and Afterlife of the King James Bible**

Through Jan. 15, 2012, Folger Shakespeare Library, 201 E. Capitol St. SE, Washington. 202-544-7077. Free Open Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; and Sunday noon to 5 p.m.

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