Folger Shakespeare Library celebrates 400th anniversary of King James Bible

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.”

haveaheart wrote:
10/10/2011 12:12 PM EDT

I'm surprised there's no mention here of the tidbit for the ages tucked into the 46th psalm by W. Shakespeare.

According to the lore, Will was 46 years old at the time he was working on his portion of the KJB and wanted to include something of himself for posterity. If you count 46 words down from the beginning of the psalm, and then count 46 words up from the end, you'll see his naughtily self-aggrandizing deed.

annerogerduncan wrote:
10/10/2011 10:21 AM EDT

Fine article, putting to rest the claim that the Bible is the literal truth and its teachings to be so followed...they revised it to get rid of the Catholic trend of it and tried to make it more poetic? A book of prose...actually a collection of some of the many books of the Bible...why else the four books of gospel.

annerogerduncan wrote:
10/10/2011 10:17 AM EDT

The curator is Hannibal Hamlin...any relation to Lincoln's first VP??

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