Bible: The Story of the King James Version 1611-2011 by Gordon Campbell – review

A history of the King James Version celebrates the Bible's stunning scholarship – and drunken misprints

Daisy Hay
The Observer, Saturday 16 October 2010

Part way through this history of the King James Bible, Gordon Campbell turns his attention from the 17th century to our own age. "It would be difficult now," he writes, "to bring together a group of more than 50 scholars with the range of languages and knowledge of other disciplines that characterised the KJV translators. We may live in a world with more knowledge, but it is populated by people with less knowledge."

Campbell’s book demonstrates that this conclusion is depressingly accurate. The King James Version was, first and foremost, an unbelievable feat of scholarship: its translators were fluent in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic and Ethiopic, as well as being expert theologians and Bible historians. It was also an organisational feat, which brought together Britain’s leading scholars in tiers of companies and committees, and which entailed a concerted effort by cohorts of printers, typesetters and bookbinders.

But the story of the King James Version is also a political story, about a monarch determined to assert his authority by setting his seal on every Bible in the land. There had been English
translations of the Bible before the King James Version, produced by the likes of William Tyndale, who was condemned by Thomas More for "discharging a filthy foam of blasphemies out of his beastly brutish mouth", and who eventually burned at the stake for his efforts. The King James Version, however, was a state project, which celebrated the King as its God-like "principal mover and author". Rules were drawn up for massed teams of experts to follow, and factions formed and rivalries festered as scholars in Oxford, Cambridge and London raced to outdo each other. When the King James Version was eventually published, those academics who had been denied a slice of the action rushed to condemn it in print. One particularly bitter reviewer thought the translation so hopeless it should be burnt, and another loftily dismissed it as a botched rehash of older versions.

Despite some dissenting voices, the King James Version was a huge success. Today it is the all-time bestselling book in the English language, and in 2011 it will have been continuously in print for 400 years. Gordon Campbell's "affectionate biography" has been published to mark this anniversary alongside a new edition of the Bible itself. Both are published by Oxford University Press, one of the King James Version's original printers. Campbell is an academic treading a delicate line between book history and storytelling, and at times dry textual detail predominates. Yet he remains fully aware of the dangers of this, and successfully makes the case for his own scholarly rigour. A section titled "Punctuation", for example, acknowledges that the prospect of such a discussion "may make the reader's eyes glaze over", but also notes that "the issue has long been a battleground, and cannot be ignored, though it can be treated with merciful brevity".

There are enough good anecdotes in Bible to compensate for the occasional discussion of punctuation and paragraphs. In the 18th century, new editions of the King James Version were notable mostly for the errors introduced by drunken printers' employees, who were quite capable of rendering "parable of the vineyard" as "parable of the vinegar", earning one edition the sobriquet "Vinegar Bible". Other 18th-century King James detractors pointed to the already ludicrous obscurity of its language. In 1759 Matthew Pilkington published a greatest-hits of the most ridiculous bits, including the remarkable "Woe to the women that sew pillows to all armholes, and makes kerchiefs upon the head of every stature to hunt souls".

In fact, the language of the King James Version was archaic even by 17th-century standards. Its translators may have been very brilliant, but they were also conservative and slightly out of touch, and Campbell is sceptical about the notion that their translation had a long-lasting impact on the English language. It was certainly the means by which various 16th- and 17th-century expressions, such as "salt of the earth" and "at their wits' end" survived through the centuries, but Campbell's account shows that the importance of the King James Version does not rest on its linguistic legacy. It enabled 17th-century men and women to read the Bible in their own language, it remains at the heart of the English-speaking Christian tradition, and today it continues to be celebrated as one of the great works of English literature. For Gordon Campbell, though, its significance is finally more personal. "It is the King James Version that has been loved by generations of those who have listened to it or read it to themselves or to others; other translations may engage the mind, but the King James Version is the Bible
of the heart."

Daisy Hay is the author of The Young Romantics: The Shelleys, Byron, and Other Tangled Lives (Bloomsbury)

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LittleRichardjohn
17 October 2010 4:23PM
So it was, in fact, a bit of a horse designed by a committee. Today it would be ridiculed by every columnist in London. Just goes to show that the race really isn't always to the swift, but time and chance happeneth to them all.

McGellie
17 October 2010 10:00PM
Surely the Observer would want to point out that the King James Bible has an exemption under the 1775 Copyright act. Comment may be free but in the UK the reproduction of the King James Bible is still restricted...after all these years.
The lasting phrases cited as "16th and 17th century expressions" are more than a bit off-point given the context of this discussion. "Ye are ye salt of the erthe" is from Tyndale's version of Matthew 5:13; "At his wits end" (Psalms 107:27) is from Coverdale's Bible. Just two among many other examples that demonstrate the debt that the KSV owes its predecessors—a debt not fully recognized in this piece.

The translators were instructed to follow the Bishops' Bible, except where the sense was flagrantly wrong.

As a translator myself, able to read the original of what Christians call the Old Testament, I can say that the Kings James version contains surprisingly few mistakes and has some interesting innovations such as putting in italics words that were not in the original but have to be inserted for the text to make sense in English, such as the present tense of the verb "to be"/

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fwiw, the KJV ahs no traction in the Jewish community which has its own translations (into many languages) of the Hebrew Bible e.g. the Hertz Chumash http://www.amazon.com/Pentateuch-Haftorahs-English-Translation-Commentary/dp/0900689218

sadly the Soncino translations which were done some years ago are no longer available - the new editions have been bowdlerised as part of a drift to the right ibn certain circles
and if you can access the "original" Hebrew and Aramaic this is still the best way to read it imho - quotes around "original" only because the Septuagint version that we have is earlier than any complete Hebrew Bible though of course there are fragments and it is exciting that the Dead Sea scrolls are going to be available online - access to them is a story in its own right of scholarly back biting par excellence!

David Crystal is coming out with **BEGAT**, on the language of the KJV. Robert Alter has written **PEN OF IRON** on the KJV's influence in literature. It is good to see a book about the KJV coming from Oxford, one of its parent institutions (Cambell's **BIBLE**). Most profoundly, the KJV has taught us how to speak, how to shape our thoughts, even as Shakespeare has. It is subtle perhaps, but inevitable and somewhat undeniable. No wonder English has become the lingua franca of the civilized world, or that the English language dominates film and music.

Considering Shakespeare, the years between 1604 and 1611 were his best years. He wrote his greatest tragedies during that time (post-HAMLET of course), the deep groaning rhapsodies—LEAR, OTHELLO, MACBETH, ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA, and all of them had links to James I, particularly MACBETH. The late Elizabethan, early Jacobean age [Jacobethan] was a time of linguistic sizzle. I'm not sure it could be repeated.

I have added **MAJESTIE** [Thomas Nelson] to the books listed above for the 400th anniversary of the KJV. I am an American writer, and found James I the most fascinating element of the KJV. He is the odd solitary figure behind it. For all his unloveliness, all the negative spin, he is enchanting. James is a study in contrast, a fond mix of bombast and imperium, sparkle and grime, smut and brilliance, visionary headship and blunder. And without him there would be no KJV. We'd be stuck with the anti-monarchist Geneva Bible or maybe the frumpy Bishop's. Ouch.

I envy you Brits. What a deep and magnificent heritage. I hope an American writer offering a book on one of your most colorful kings is a forgivable offense. I must go where my fascination leads me. We too have a share in English here in the US. You gave us what is best about yourself. The language. Ah, there is empire, empire indeed.

David Teems —Author of **MAJESTIE: The King Behind the King James Bible** [Thomas Nelson, October 2010].

http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/oct/17/bible-king-james-version-gordon-campbell-review
So daisy, please clarify for me if the bible, or more specifically the King James version, is the unequivocal 'Word of God' as many believers inexplicably state; or simply a compilation put together by committees of doddering old uppity farts.