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The Book of Books

The Radical Impact of The King James Bible 1611-2011

Written by Melvyn Bragg

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The Book of Books

THE RADICAL IMPACT OF
THE KING JAMES BIBLE

1611 – 2011

MELVYN BRAGG


HODDER &
STOUGHTON

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To The Reverend Marie-Elsa Bragg
With love

PROLOGUE

In 1953, Queen Elizabeth II was crowned in Westminster Abbey. She swore her oath on the King James Bible. This version of the Bible was printed in English in 1611. It was inspired by James I, who was also crowned in Westminster Abbey, 350 years before Elizabeth II. His cousin, Elizabeth I, had, on the last day of her life, indicated that he was to be her successor.

The Bible was a book which changed and moulded the English-speaking peoples. In America, Abraham Lincoln was sworn in as President on the King James Version as were other Presidents including George Washington, Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama.

This is no mere ceremonial token either in the United Kingdom or in the United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and elsewhere. This binding ritual signifies and honours a bond of faith and an acknowledgement of the unique reach and power of this book.

You may be a Christian. You may be anti-Christian, or of another religion, or none. You may be an atheist fundamentalist and think the Bible is monstrous, a book to be dismissed or derided.

But whoever you are in the English-speaking world, I hope to

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persuade you to consider that the King James Version of the Bible has driven the making of that world over the last 400 years, often in most unexpected ways.

PART ONE
FROM HAMPTON COURT
TO NEW ENGLAND

CHAPTER ONE

THE SCOPE OF IT

The King James Bible has been called the Book of Books. It has a good claim to this title. It consists of sixty-six different 'books'. It has sold more than any other single book since its publication in 1611. It has carried the Protestant faith around the globe. And, by the law of unexpected consequences, its impact, alongside and often outside its vital role in spreading the Word, has been radical and amazingly wide-ranging. This Bible is one of the fundamental makers of the modern world. It has set free not only its readers and its preachers but those who have used it as a springboard to achieve gains and enrichment in our world never before enjoyed by so many. This book walks with us in our life today.

Its impact on the English-speaking world is unparalleled. It can touch on mysteries which seem beyond our reach yet at times we sense them to be there. It can teach us day-to-day morality. It gave us myths and stories which are as familiar to us as the histories of our own families and communities. It stands still as a book of great language and beauty.

There has never been a book to match it. It has a fair claim to be the most pivotal book ever written, a claim made by poets and statesmen and supported by tens of millions of readers and

congregations. It declared itself to be the Word of God. Many people have believed and cleaved to that and some still do. But everyone, even atheists, has benefited from many of its unexpected consequences.

The King James Bible was the steel of will and belief that forged America and other British colonies. It has inspired missionaries around the globe and consoled the hopeless in their desperation. It was used by the enforcers of slavery and later by the liberators of slaves, and transformed into liberation theology by the slaves themselves. It became the bedding of gospel music and the spirituals which set in motion soul, blues, jazz and rock, the unique cultural gift of America to the world. It has defined and re-defined sexual attitudes. It has fortified and provoked philosophy.

Followers of the King James Version – as it is known in America – provided the vocabulary, the seedbed and construction model for the early development of democracy. It was the consolidating voice of two world empires. It unleashed and motivated philanthropic movements of a size and effectiveness which bettered the lives of ordinary people throughout the English-speaking world. Its ferocious sense of mission transformed and sometimes destroyed native cultures.

For centuries the King James Bible fed some of the finest thinkers and artists and men of science and politics; others it persecuted. This English version came out of persistent demands for a voice in their own tongue, a demand which, despite persecution, could not be extinguished in medieval England. It had grown into an irresistible force by the time of Henry VIII in the 1530s. The lasting version was finally secured by King James in 1611.

‘It was wonderful to see with what joy the Book of God was received,’ wrote a commentator at the time of its publication ‘. . . not only among the learned sort . . . but generally all England

over among all the vulgar and common people; with what greediness God's word was read . . . Some got others to read it to them if they could not themselves . . . even little boys flocked among the rest to hear portions of the Holy Scriptures read.' In their own tongue: that was the first and still the most radical part of its impact.

Since 1611 it has flooded over the world. 'It is the best book that God has given to man,' said Abraham Lincoln. Charles Dickens wrote: 'The New Testament is the very best book that ever was or ever will be known in the world.' 'It is impossible rightly to govern the world without God and the Bible,' said George Washington, the founding President of the United States.

This is a story of the present every bit as much as it is of the past. When American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan looked through the sights on their guns, they may not have seen it, but inscribed minutely there are words justifying war taken from the King James Bible. John viii, 12 for example: 'he that follows me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life,' and 2 Corinthians iv, 6: 'For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'

When the Nobel-prize-winning novelist Toni Morrison wrote *Beloved*, she called on that Bible again and again, bringing to bear its spirit and its words, her inspiration and her material. Behind the gallant, desperate and often flawed attempts to feed the poor of the world and release them from their oppression stands the most magnificent morality in print – the Sermon on the Mount from the King James Bible. In verses called the Beatitudes:

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven . . .
Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

When biologists seek the origin of life or physicists look for the formation of the universe in the particle accelerator at CERN, how far is that from the Christian belief in a prime mover? And how much does the modern scientific idea of a First Cause, a Big Bang, owe to the Christian Newton and his conviction that there was indeed a First Cause: God? After all, the Big Bang could just as well be the *end* of something. There is, it seems to me, something biblical in claiming it was the beginning. Atheists, like Richard Dawkins, seek to define themselves by the destruction of what they see as the corrupt temple of the Bible. Their zeal can appear rather like religious fundamentalism and share its inflexibility.

Artists have plundered its stories for 400 years and time before then. Along the path that led to the publication in 1611 are atrocities, tortures and burnings at the stake. But the men who wanted the Word of God in English would not be deterred. Men were destroyed for trying to get the Bible published in English: others took their place. It is a heroic story. And because of them we speak out of that book still, every day of our lives.

When we ‘put words into someone’s mouth’ and ‘see the writing on the wall’ or ‘cast the first stone’, when we say ‘you are the salt of the earth’, or ‘a thorn in the flesh’, when we ‘fight the good fight’ or ‘go from strength to strength’ or ‘when the blind lead the blind’; or are ‘sick unto death’ or ‘broken-hearted’, or ‘clear-eyed’, or talk of ‘the powers that be’ – in these and literally thousands more ways we talk the language of the 400-year-old King James Bible. And ‘beautiful’, that too makes its first appearance in the translation which became the keystone of the Bible. ‘It is,’ wrote American journalist and satirist H.L. Mencken ‘the most beautiful piece of writing in any language.’

Its words comprise 8,674 from Hebrew, 5,624 from Greek, 12,143 from Old English. From those many roots grew a

bounteous tree, a tangle of faith and work, thought and debate, violence, prejudice, terror, poetry, song and hope.

It has gone through these last 400 years responding to different times, meeting and seeking out new demands, changing its powers. It has been and still is the book for peacemakers and the book for warmongers, the book that ignites rejoicing and the book that incites fury, the book worshipped and the book scorned, but above all the book that affected minds, hearts and destinies profoundly over centuries. 'It is no mere book,' wrote Napoleon, 'but a living creature with a power that conquers all that oppose it.'

Just after the Easter of this year, 2010, I went to Westminster Abbey where King James I was crowned in 1603. Significantly, it was the first coronation to take place in an entirely English liturgy. At least the English language, in that Shakespearean age, needed no assistance from ancient or foreign tongues. In 1066, William the Conqueror's coronation had been in Latin and French.

I went there on the afternoon of that Sunday to hear the Anglican Church's jewel of a service, Choral Evensong. I was raised an Anglican in the Church of England.

In this abbey, which has witnessed thirty-eight coronations, the blessing of power was God-given from the tyranny of Henry VIII to the constitutional democracy of Elizabeth II. Here too lie the tombs and commemorative plaques of the famous dead. Out of those you can pick examples from many whose work and life had been shaped by the King James Bible: William Blake, Sir Winston Churchill, Isaac Newton, Charles Dickens, T.S. Eliot, Martin Luther King, Florence Nightingale, Handel, William Shakespeare, William Wilberforce . . .

In that service I heard one of the dozens of cathedral and college choirs which up and down the land on most days of the week sing a religious service as their predecessors did for more

than a thousand years. The arches meeting in the high Gothic stone ceiling rang with the affirmation of a religion triumphant still in some parts of the world, beleaguered, disdained or ignored in others, but here in the singing, its resonance still evident. What began with a flourish of trumpets in 1611 calling together our island tribes became a global orchestra of sounds and themes, now rising, now fading, but for many the soul goes marching on.

Ten years after the King James Bible was published, the Pilgrim Fathers set sail for America. They found and they founded a New World. It became a great democracy. It was a world based on the book, the Word of God. And America propagates its faith like no other people has ever done. The Gideon Society alone places 60 million new Bibles a year in over 181 countries and many Americans pray their way into the theatres of war and the parks of peace and the work and play of their daily lives.

Even in England, now seen to be at an ebb tide of formal Christianity, this book can still arouse passionate eloquence. It is accepted that the two greatest speeches in the House of Commons, a stone's throw from Westminster Abbey, were by Christians and rifted with the King James Bible. Those were by Winston Churchill in 1940, just after the outbreak of the Second World War, and by William Wilberforce when he made his first speech for the ending of the slave trade in 1789. The parliamentary tradition is not dead. On 9 December 2009, David Simpson, the Member of Parliament for the Northern Ireland constituency of Upper Bann, demanded a debate, calling on the government to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of the King James Bible.

'The great Winston Churchill,' he said, 'noted that the scholars who produced it had forged an enduring link, literary and religious, between the English-speaking people of the world.' David Simpson went on:

The Scope of It

It is not only our literature and language that has been influenced by the King James Bible. It has had an extraordinary beneficial influence upon political and constitutional affairs. It was the Bible of Milton and the Protectorate, later it was the Bible of the Glorious Revolution, which gave us constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy. It was the Bible of Whitefield and the Wesleys, that saved the realm from the brutality and blood of the French Revolution. It was the Bible carried by the founding fathers of the United States that helped to force that land and give the world that great democratic powerhouse . . .

Hospitals were built and charities created as a result of its influence. The hungry were fed, the sick nursed, the poor given shelter . . . lives that lay in ruins were made whole and souls that were held in bondage were set at liberty.

The anthem was taken up by other speakers, most notably Dr William McCrea, MP for South Antrim, who quoted from John Wesley: ‘Oh, give me that Book! At any price give me the Book of God. Let me be a man of one Book.’ Dr McCrea continued: ‘It has been burned but there is not the smell of fire about it. It has been buried but no man has ever kept it in the grave . . . This book sets men free . . .’

How and why did such a book come to be written? With what was that core so fire-filled that it became the sun to a solar system of human life? How did what was asserted to be the Word of God become the key which unlocked so many doors of history, Christian, non-Christian, even anti-Christian?

The writing of this book is a story that begins in blood, fear, murder and acts of high courage by dedicated scribes who lived and died to see the Scriptures in English. And the finest of those scribes and martyrs to the Word was William Tyndale.