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Bible: The Story of the King James Version, 1611-2011; Begat: The Story of the King James Bible and the English Language

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Reviewed by Brandie R. Siegfried

We are celebrating the four hundredth anniversary of the first publication of the King James Version of the Bible, and Oxford University Press has published several books in support of that commemoration. I review two such here, both of which are intended for a general readership, well worth reading on a quiet Sunday afternoon. Each book provides a historical framework for understanding the continued influence of the KJV on modern culture, and each convincingly argues that the underlying reasons for this success go beyond simple tradition or aesthetic snobbery.

Gordon Campbell's *Bible: The Story of the King James Version* is developed in three general segments. The first sketches the history of the English Reformation beginning in the early sixteenth century, discusses the emergence of vernacular Bibles in Europe, briefly recounts the more particular genealogy of English Bibles during that same period, and succinctly narrates the political and doctrinal tensions that drove King James VI to commission a new English Bible. Readers familiar with David Norton's *The King James Bible: A Short History from Tyndale to Today* (2010) and Alister E. McGrath's *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (2002, reviewed in *BYU Studies* 42, no. 2) will recognize that Campbell's treatment is a much-truncated version of the religious history, but one that is necessary given his desire to spend more time on the printing history in the subsequent segment.

The several chapters comprising the second segment focus on the evolution of the KJV through various editions and are an especially useful reminder to modern readers that the versions used in churches today are typically a far cry from earlier editions' peculiar, period-specific formats and flaws. Sixteenth-century Bibles before the KJV, for instance, were generously strewn with elaborate illustrations and marginal glosses, and all Bibles printed in these early years were rife with printer's errors. Such mistakes could be quite egregious. In one early printing of the KJV, Campbell

explains, a printer “omitted the ‘not’ from the seventh commandment in Exodus 20, and so made adultery compulsory.” Another notorious error, rendered “the beginning of Deuteronomy 5:24 as ‘the Lord our God hath shewed us his glory and his great asse’ (instead of ‘greatnesse’), which is surely mischief rather than error” (109). Campbell hastens to add that “in the seventeenth century ‘ass’ was a respectable word meaning ‘donkey,’ not a coarse word meaning ‘buttocks,’ but the meaning nonetheless verges on blasphemy” (109).

The late seventeenth and early eighteenth century saw significant subtractions in the amount of visual ornamentation and marginalia in newly corrected editions of the KJV, even as printing errors continued to proliferate. Campbell walks us through these centuries (sixteenth through twentieth), noting problems with transmission, including both accidental changes and intentional interpolations. Along the way he explains how it came to be that the Apocrypha—which had been included in English Bibles for over two hundred years—was finally dropped.

The final and shortest section of the book is devoted to the influence of the KJV on U.S. culture and politics, including a brief discussion of why further revisions of the Bible were desired and developed throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Doctrinal preferences, an antiquated language, political allegiances, the emergence of the Dead Sea Scrolls, enhanced Hebrew and Aramaic lexicons, and distribution issues all influenced how and why various new avatars of the KJV emerged. However, according to Campbell, the “most audacious version of the KJV in America was the work of Joseph Smith, the founder of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints” (156). Although he is quick to point out that the LDS contribution has had little influence on biblical understanding generally, Campbell finds it significant that “it has served to maintain the centrality of the KJV in a strand of the Christian faith that has millions of adherents” (157).

As an introduction to the complexities of Bible translation and transmission, Campbell’s book is a fine resource. The book’s only real flaw rests in the odd redundancy of the appendices that repeat (in short form) material already fully developed in the main body of the text. However, all other supporting material—the list of further reading and the many illustrations—are useful aids indeed. As a last observation, I note that Campbell’s narrative is threaded throughout with ruminations on the alchemy of time, the power of which transformed the KJV from a botched attempt at mitigating strife among Christians in early seventeenth-century England to a cultural classic in the twentieth. The KJV is now considered one of the best feats of translation and adaptation to be accomplished in English, and

Campbell's insights regarding that triumph are exultantly displayed yet judiciously handled.

In contrast to Campbell's final chapters, which suggest the enduring but fading authority of the KJV in modern culture, David Crystal's book strongly asserts that its linguistic influence seems to be proliferating. *Begat: The Story of the King James Bible and the English Language* is another enjoyable introduction to the history of the KJV and generously rewards a casually curious reader. Although it can be read from cover to cover, the narrative format makes for a somewhat tedious "story." The delights of Crystal's feasting table are best enjoyed in nibbles and tiny tastes.

The format is simple. The book is divided equally between the Old and New Testaments, and tracks in each the words and expressions that entered the English language thanks to the KJV. Crystal's review does not systematically treat the KJV according to evolutionary, historical, or socio-linguistic methods of analysis, eschewing these stricter forms of dissection for the amplitude (and fun) of suggestive juxtapositions. By the end of his treatment of both halves of the Bible, Crystal concludes that the Old Testament of the KJV has contributed more outright *idiomatic expressions* to English, whereas the New Testament has provided more recognizable *quotations*. The distinction he makes between idiomatic expression and quotation is, however, a fairly superficial one: "Quotations are context-dependent: we use them when their sense best suits the linguistic setting," he writes. "They're infrequent, compared to idioms" (89–90). "The skin of my teeth" (Job 19:20) is an example of an idiom, he suggests, while "though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" (Psalm 23:4) is a quotation. Crystal admits that the distinction is difficult to maintain in all cases of biblical expression (some idiomatic expressions are highly context specific and some quotations are used in a wide variety of everyday situations) but asserts that by and large the distinction is useful when considering the KJV's influence on modern English.

In crisp, clear prose, Crystal also sketches the mistakes we sometimes make when attributing the origin of common English idioms and quotations to the KJV. Many idiomatic expressions were already in circulation well before any Bibles had been translated into English; the KJV simply preserved them for subsequent generations of readers. Other idioms had been developed as part of earlier English translations of the Bible (such as the Tyndale Bible, Geneva Bible, or the Coverdale Bible), and again, the KJV merely took them up and passed them on. Additionally, some idioms commonly assumed to be direct citations from the KJV are actually paraphrases of longer passages, and the wording so familiar to all is really nowhere to be found in the text of the Bible.

Genesis, Job, Psalms, and Ecclesiastes are especially rich Old Testament influences, Crystal explains, while the books of the New Testament seem to be more evenly consequential for English. The continued pertinence of both testaments is traced to pop music, literature, advertising, political polemics, analogies in science, social movements for change, and the translation of nonreligious literary masterpieces (Dryden's *Aeneid*, Pope's *Iliad*, and Smollett's *Gil Blas* are offered as early examples that use famous lines from the KJV to bundle foreign idioms into English). The result is a solid case for the continued importance of the KJV to modern cultural literacy. The appendices underscore that significance, providing a list of the expressions covered in the book (257 in total), as well as a column-formatted comparison of those expressions to the same lines in the Wycliffe, Tyndale, Geneva, Bishops, and Douai-Rheims Bibles. In short, *Begat: The Story of the King James Bible and the English Language* is a welcome reminder that the English Bible's continued linguistic influence is both deep and wide.

Both of these books are recommended for readers hoping to dip their toes pleurably in the shallows before wading more deeply into the ocean of scholarship on the KJV.

Brandie R. Siegfried (who can be reached via email at byustudies@byu.edu) is Associate Professor of English at Brigham Young University and teaches senior and graduate courses on various topics in English Renaissance Literature. Her recent publications have appeared in a variety of venues including *Shakespeare Yearbook*, *Early Modern Literary Studies*, and the *George Herbert Journal*. Her current book project, *The Tree of Life in English Renaissance Thought*, surveys the Bible's influence on subjects as diverse as genealogy and natural philosophy, theology, and the art of engraving.