



400 Years of the King James Bible

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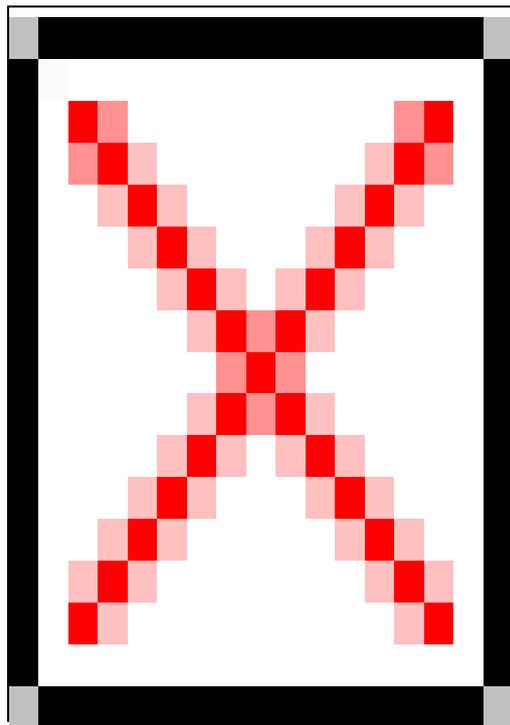
[187](#) [2]

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Michael Rosen on how it came about.



?Education used to be full of what the bible had to say,? says Michael Rosen and even today, children who have little bible knowledge will be familiar with many of the idioms and phrases of the King James version, so steeped in the bible is the English language. On its 400th anniversary, **Michael Rosen** explains how the King James Bible came about.

Old stuff is always heading off out of sight: buildings are demolished, tunes are forgotten and old books stop being read. Part of being alive is wending a way through what's worth saving and what might as well be junked. In the world of books, there is a constant sifting and re-evaluation going on as academics, punters, professional interest groups, bibliophiles, librarians, teachers, antiquarians and others shunt the manuscripts, old books, facsimiles and newly edited texts to and fro, in and out of specialist journals, lectures, radio and TV programmes, theatre and film stagings. To my mind, it's all rather wonderful, offering a mix of insights into past lives and civilisations along with fanatical enthusiasms, rivalries and staked out territories. In recent years, there have been excruciating battles over James Joyce, Franz Kafka and John Clare. Every so often, there are amazing discoveries: in the nineteenth century archaeologists found a long lost play by Euripides in what was really an ancient dustbin while others found texts of the epic of Gilgamesh written on clay tablets on the floor of an ancient palace in Iraq and an adventurer found an almost complete text of an ancient Bible in a monastery in Sinai.

It's in these kinds of contexts ? and many others ? we have the bundle of books we call the King James Bible. If you are of a certain age, many of its passages are familiar. All you had to do was sit in assemblies, carol concerts, and RE

lessons (called RI for Religious Instruction, in my day), and its words, phrases and cadences washed over you. If you fancied going in for a bit of public reading, then the chances are you were given a passage from that Bible to recite... ?There went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed...? ?In the beginning was the word...? I can't speak for private education, but the state education system as I received it, was full of what that Bible had to say.

If, as I did, you found yourself studying English Literature then a good deal of it post-1611 seemed to negotiate all this too. Metaphysical poets, Milton, Bunyan, the Romantics and on to T S Eliot used it as a hoard of ideas, phrases and as a reference point that they could assume would ring bells with their readers. People outside of this circle could find themselves in a spot of bother here. My father had no Christian education but, in the late 1930s opted to study Eng Lit. He needed to swot up on this biblical stuff, so he popped into a place on the Whitechapel Road in London's East End, where he lived, called the ?Mission to the Hebrews?. So what with him being a Hebrew and in need of what the Mission had to offer, he was able to acquire, thanks to the folks inside, a good supply of the texts he needed. Though he didn't convert, he did become an enthusiast for the sound of what he read and could be heard round the house singing ?The Lord's my shepherd...? or chanting Ecclesiastes? ?There's a time for...?

A re-hash of translations

In fact, there are probably very, very few speakers of English who can totally avoid speaking King James-ese, unless you never say girded loins, whited sepulchre, feet of clay, land of milk and honey, reap the whirlwind, cry in the wilderness, threescore years and ten, love thy neighbour, through a glass darkly, the valley of the shadow of death and many, many more. Not all of them first appeared in the KJB (as good bibliophiles call it!), as it was in some ways a re-hash of the translations that appeared before it: Wycliffe, Coverdale, Tyndale and the ?Bishops' Bible? of 1568. What happened was that the ?wisest foole in Christendome?, King James, was holding a politico-religious conference at Hampton Court in 1604. He was under pressure from the Puritans to alter the Church of England so that it would, as it were, sing from their hymn sheet. Rather than give in to them, he offered to commission a new translation of the Bible. By the time it was published in 1611, some 50 translators had been involved and, if accounts are true, this team compared the ancient texts in Hebrew, Greek and Latin with translations that had appeared in English, French, Spanish, Italian and perhaps others.

This was a spectacular enterprise by any standards, past or present. One comparison you can make is with the awful bickering that took place with first the non-translation and then the translation itself of the Dead Sea Scrolls. But let me bring in a note of caution here: the book we have held in our hands in assemblies, Sunday Schools, churches and chapels is not strictly speaking the KJB. It is a text full of the multiple revisions of one F S Parris in 1743 in Cambridge and one Benjamin Blayney in 1769 in Oxford. It was Blayney who made it possible for a modern reader to read it without getting stuck on spelling and punctuation ? or lack of it.

But was it any good? As you might imagine, in recent years old KJB has come in for the fine tooth comb treatment. Here's an example: Robert Alter in **The King James Bible after 400 Years** (Cambridge University Press) has put this beautiful passage under the microscope:

??the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets.?

By showing that the original Hebrew probably (note my ?probably?!) means something different, Alter comes up with ?...the almond tree shall flourish, the locust-tree shall be a burden and the caper-fruit shall fail...? Nice, but not quite as beautiful. Others have spotted that the Hebrew word ?eved? appears 799 times in the Hebrew Bible. It means ?slave?. In the KJB Old Testament, it appears only once, using there the words ?servant? and ?handmaid? instead. And was the neighbour who Jesus suggested we should love, really our neighbour? Some say that the original would have us love our friend. Very different.

What is the future for the King James Bible?

Ah, but then, what is the original? And that's where we really get into deep water. No matter how much we love or indeed ? as some do ? despise this body of texts, we should always remember that it not only comes to us through the

work of translators. It is a consequence of the work and editing of people who can be best described as patriarchs. Both the Old and New Testaments emerged out of religious leaders selecting and favouring the texts we know, over others that have either disappeared completely or indeed turned up only in 1944, some of which can be read in what is known as the 'Nag Hammadi Gospels'. So, for example, my favourite, the glorious, sexy, passionate 'Song of Songs' also known as the 'Song of Solomon' very nearly missed the boat. It was only included under pressure from the people and, accurate or not, the KJB version of the Song rates for me as a great piece of early free verse. In the first centuries after Christ, the textual patriarchs excluded any text that hinted at the possibility that Jesus was not divine and/or that he survived the crucifixion as a living, breathing human being perhaps through being taken down by his supporters. Elaine Pagels' **The Gnostic Gospels** is a good read on this chapter in the story.

So what of KJB's future? For many Christians and non-Christians alike, the various forms of the New English Bible seem to have slowly but surely taken its place. My own children find it difficult to cope with those thines, doths, hasts and shalts. It survives most vigorously amongst some of the Evangelical sects and on the desks of Eng Lit scholars. For anyone who likes the sound of 17th-century English and that includes Shakespeare of course, some of whose writing overlaps with the work of the KJB team then give yourself a treat and read the Song of Songs, the Psalms and for a bewildering, trippy, fantastic ride, the Book of Revelation.

By way of postscript, let me say, that some people as similarly convinced atheists as I am, seem to think that the first step in a discussion of the Bible is to denounce its messages. Please, dear fellow unbelievers another time, another place for that!

The former Children's Laureate, **Michael Rosen** is a poet and writer.

Page Number:

12

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