



Western Michigan University  
ScholarWorks at WMU

---

Comparative Religion Publications

Comparative Religion

---

2011

## KJV in the USA: The Impact of the King James Bible in the USA

Brian C. Wilson

Western Michigan University, [brian.c.wilson@wmich.edu](mailto:brian.c.wilson@wmich.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/religion\\_pubs](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/religion_pubs)



Part of the Religion Commons

---

### WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Wilson, Brian C., "KJV in the USA: The Impact of the King James Bible in the USA" (2011). *Comparative Religion Publications*. 2.

[https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/religion\\_pubs/2](https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/religion_pubs/2)

This Conference Proceeding is brought to you for free and open access by the Comparative Religion at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Religion Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



**KJV in the USA:  
The Impact of the King James Bible in America**

**Brian C. Wilson**

Professor of American Religious History  
Department of Comparative Religion  
Western Michigan University

When King James gave his approval for a new English translation of the Bible at the Hampton Court Conference in 1604, it is doubtful he was expecting the production of a literary masterpiece that would exert a profound influence on the English language and English culture for generations to come. And we can be certain that he was not thinking about the impact the Bible might have on the English Colonies of America, the first permanent English settlement of which—Jamestown—was still three years in the future. James' goals in approving the new translation were altogether more modest: if it helped reduce a modicum of the tension between his fractious Puritan and Anglican divines, and if the new translation supplanted the Geneva Bible with its subversive marginal notes, then it would have done its job. In terms of the latter, it succeeded admirably; in terms of the former, not so well.<sup>1</sup>

And yet, we would not be here celebrating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1611 publication of the King James Bible if only the King's immediate goals had been met. It is the unintended and unexpected consequences of King James' decision that command our attention. For one, there is the wholly unexpected consequence that an unwieldy committee of some forty-seven-odd scholars would manage to create a

---

<sup>1</sup> For good overviews of the production of the King James Bible, see Alister E. McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How It Changed a Nation, a Language, and a Culture* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), and Adam Nicolson, *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible* (New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2003).

literary work that no less a critic than Mathew Arnold would call “the perfect book.”<sup>2</sup> Another unintended and wholly ironic consequence was that the King James Bible would become the literary touchstone for the United States, a new nation that was initially desperate to jettison all things English in an effort to create a culture all its own. Indeed, the career of the King James Bible in the United States is actually replete with ironies of this kind, and by tracing some of the influences of the King James Bible on the social and cultural history of the United States I will highlight some of the interesting twists along the way. If, as Reinhold Niebuhr argued, American history is best understood in the ironic mode,<sup>3</sup> then no better example of this is the rise and fall of the King James Bible in the United States.

### **The King James Bible as Consensus Text**

Although the first English Bible brought to America was most likely the Bishop’s Bible, it appears that the Geneva Bible was the translation most widely used by English colonists in the first decades of English colonization. As mentioned above, the founding of Jamestown in 1607 antedated the appearance of the King James Bible by some four years, and, as a colony dominated at first by Puritans, the Bible used for services in Jamestown’s original wattle-and-daub church was probably the Geneva Bible.<sup>4</sup> Only after Virginia became a royal colony in 1624 did

---

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in McGrath (2001), p. 218.

<sup>3</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1952).

<sup>4</sup> Paris Marion Simms, *The Bible In America: Versions That Have Played Their Part In the Making of the Republic* (New York: Wilson-Erickson, Inc., 1936), pp. 72, 74-79, 89-90.

the Authorized Version become the Bible of choice there, as it would become throughout the Southern and Middle colonies in the coming years.<sup>5</sup>

The history of the Bible in Puritan-dominated New England was very different, but ended in the same result. The Pilgrims of Plymouth Colony, founded in 1620, were Calvinists of the old school and preferred the Geneva Bible.<sup>6</sup> Their leader, William Bradford quoted exclusively from the Geneva Bible in his classic history of the settlement, *Of Plymouth Plantation*.<sup>7</sup> In the much larger Massachusetts Bay Colony, centered on Boston and founded in 1630, the Geneva Bible competed with the King James Bible. In his *Modell of Christian Charity* (1630), a document that became something of an unofficial charter for Massachusetts, John Winthrop took his biblical citations from both the Geneva Bible and the Authorized Version.<sup>8</sup> However, in 1637, a theological crisis with grave political consequences for the Puritan colony led to a concerted effort on the part of the leadership, including John Winthrop, to make the King James Version the Bible of choice in Massachusetts.

The Antinomian Crisis, as it came to be called, centered on Anne Hutchinson, a woman of formidable intellect who, among other things, taught the Puritan notion of a new National Covenant—the founding ideology of the Massachusetts Bay Colony—was nothing more than a covenant of works. When brought to trial and questioned about the origins of her doctrine and her right to teach it, Hutchinson

---

<sup>5</sup> Simms (1936), pp. 78, 93.

<sup>6</sup> Harry S. Stout, "Word and Order in Colonial New England," in Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (eds.), *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982): 19-38, p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> Simms (1936), p. 90.

<sup>8</sup> Stout (1985), p. 28.

referred instantly to the text of the Geneva Bible and to its marginal notes, both of which insistently focused on the individual Covenant of Grace unalloyed with any mention of a theocratic national covenant. Her opponents countered with citations from the King James Bible and thus, unconstrained by any textual apparatus, were free to interpret the text in line with the notion of a dual covenant, personal and national. As historian Harry S. Stout writes, the Antinomian Crisis could in a sense be characterized as a clash of translations, between the Geneva Bible and the King James Bible. For decades, the Puritans in Old England had cited the Geneva Bible's commentary as warrant for their insubordination against the Crown; now in power in New England, the Puritans found themselves facing precisely the same problem as the King: how to keep aggressive Puritans from using the Geneva Bible to threaten the political structure. In the end, both Anne Hutchinson and, by implication, the Geneva Bible with its troublesome notes, lost, and both were banished from the Colony.<sup>9</sup> I think King James, had he lived to learn about it, would have enjoyed the irony.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the King James Bible reigned supreme in America. Since printers in Great Britain could manufacture and export Bibles much more cheaply than they could be produced in the New World, no English Bibles were printed in the Colonies until after Independence. Once the Revolutionary War disrupted the supply of Bibles, however, a couple of printers in the U.S. tried to produce one, but

---

<sup>9</sup> Stout (1985), pp. 31,

with little financial success.<sup>10</sup> The first successful producer of Bibles was an Irish-Catholic printer from Philadelphia named Mathew Carey. Carey first printed the Catholic Douay-Rheims Bible, but the shrewd printer quickly understood the limited market for this translation and, under the prompting of his most successful itinerant book agent, Parson Mason Weems, later famous for his celebrated biography of George Washington, Carey shifted to the King James Version in 1801. For the next twenty years, Carey would be the largest printer of Bibles in the country.<sup>11</sup>

Carey's dominance in the Bible market would be challenged not by another commercial printer, but by a charitable organization founded in 1816 in the wake of the Second Great Awakening by a former president of the Continental Congress, Elias Boudinot. Modeling his organization on the British and Foreign Bible Society, Boudinot's American Bible Society (ABS) had two goals: printing the "Holy Scriptures without note or comment"—that is, the King James Bible—and broadcasting these to every corner of the Nation. The ABS did so through a far flung network of auxiliary organizations and through periodic massive campaigns called General Supplies, the first of which, in 1829, aimed at getting a copy of the King James Bible into every household in the U.S. It failed, of course, but the number of King James Bibles distributed was phenomenal, an estimated 500,000.<sup>12</sup> The ABS was among the first publishers in the country to embrace stereotype printing and steam presses; by 1860, the ABS was producing and distributing, either for a small

---

<sup>10</sup> Gutjahr (1999), p. 20-23.

<sup>11</sup> Gutjahr (1999), p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> Gutjahr (1999), p. 19.

fee or gratis, over a million Bibles a year. It is for this reason that the King James Bible became one of the most generally available and widely read books from the Eastern seaboard to the Western frontier.<sup>13</sup>

We can say with confidence that the King James Bible was indeed widely read not only because it is a ubiquitous presence in the writing of the common people of the period, but also because of its exceptional influence on the development of American political rhetoric and American literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>14</sup> The examples one could choose are legion, but I will focus on two, Abraham Lincoln and Herman Melville. I pick these two not only because they were masters of the biblical idiom, but because they deployed their knowledge of the King James text to essay and defend positions that, ironically enough, are surprisingly modern.

Raised on a 1799 SPCK printing of the King James Bible, Abraham Lincoln imbibed the language and style of the Authorized Version from boyhood and he developed a remarkable ability to cite passages of Scripture at length. As a young man, Lincoln also learned to incorporate creatively these elements into his writing, even to point of using them for some of his comic stories.<sup>15</sup> When it came time to be serious, however, when, as President, it came time to communicate to the nation the transcendental implications of the Civil War, he did so by drawing on the Bible. The

---

<sup>13</sup> Gutjahr (1999), pp. 11, 19, 32-35.

<sup>14</sup> See Lewis O. Saum, *The Popular Mood of Pre-Civil War America* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980); and Robert Alter, *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010),

<sup>15</sup> William J. Wolf, *The Almost Chosen People: A Study of the Religion of Abraham Lincoln* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1959), p. 36, 38-39. For an extended discussion of the King James Bible's influence on Lincoln's literary style, see Roy P. Basler, "Abraham Lincoln's Rhetoric," *American Literature*, 11:2 (May, 1939): 167-82.

Gettysburg Address (1863), for example, is, according to one Lincoln scholar, “utterly suffused with the style, cadence and archetypes of the King James Bible.”<sup>16</sup> In its opening line—“Four score and seven years ago, our fathers brought forth,” etc.—Lincoln draws heavily on the language of the Psalms and the Gospels, and the last phrase from the Address—“shall not perish from the earth”—is a direct citation of a phrase that appears in the King James Version of Job, Jeremiah, and Micah.<sup>17</sup>

It is in his Second Inaugural Address, however, as the Civil War wound down and Northern victory was inevitable, that Abraham Lincoln demonstrated the full brilliance of his use of the biblical idiom. Called by some “Lincoln’s greatest speech,” the Second Inaugural is unlike any such presidential address before or after.<sup>18</sup> Those in the audience in front of the Capitol building on that rainy March afternoon in 1865 probably expected some kind of celebration of the expected Northern triumph and an optimistic paean to the power of the American Union. But what they got instead was a sophisticated and ultimately ironic meditation on the theological meaning of the Civil War. “Both read the same Bible,” Lincoln observed,

and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces; but let us judge not that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered; that of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has his own purposes. "Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man

---

<sup>16</sup> Joseph R. Fornieri, *Abraham Lincoln's Political Faith* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), p. 48.

<sup>17</sup> Glen LaFantasie, “Lincoln and the Gettysburg Awakening,” *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 16:1 (Winter 1995), pp. 73-89; Alter (2010), pp. 14.

<sup>18</sup> Ronald C. White, Jr., *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002).



by whom the offence cometh!" If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said "the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether"

The King James Bible pervades this second section of Lincoln's text. Not only does he quote or paraphrase passages from Genesis, the Gospel of Matthew, and the 19<sup>th</sup> Psalm, but Lincoln's choice of vocabulary and grammar also consciously echoes the Authorized Version's archaic Hebrew style. It is doubtful that this was the message that, after four years of bloody civil war, the President's audience most wanted to hear, but Lincoln felt it was necessary to convince his audience of the ambiguities of the war in order to persuade them to embrace his hope for charity to the vanquished and healing for the nation, in place of the vengeance and malice he feared. And to do so he invoked the one text that he knew was both instantly familiar to most, but would also instantly command their respect and reverence: the King James Bible.<sup>19</sup>

Herman Melville, now recognized as one of the premier novelists of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, also knew and used the King James Bible. Melville's Bible, an 1846 E. H. Butler & Co. printing of the Authorized Version, still exists, heavily annotated with

---

<sup>19</sup> Alter (2010), pp. 11-19.

pencil marks, check marks, underlining, marginal exclamations of all kinds in many of the sections of the text.<sup>20</sup> We can see the influence of Melville's Bible study throughout his work in his choice of imagery, names of characters (Israel, Gabriel, Ishmael, Ahab, Bildad, etc.), themes, and overall, in his prose style.<sup>21</sup> As Alan Alter observes in his book, *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (2010),

There is...a variety of ways in which "that old tongue" of the King James Version of the Bible makes itself heard in Melville's prose. At times, he adopts the diction of the Bible, moving from actual quotation to pseudo-quotation to biblicizing turns of speech. At other moments, whether consciously or not, he picks up in the formal patterns of his prose the semantic parallelism that underlies biblical poetry, using it as an alternate or simultaneous model for epic language along with the dominant English model of blank verse. At a good many junctures, a biblical image or symbol is taken up with no explicit signal pointing to the scriptural text in which it originates and usually with a surprising new spin given to the biblical idea.<sup>22</sup>

*Moby Dick* (1851), undoubtedly, is the novel in which Melville's incessant biblicizing is most evident. Indeed, the work is bounded by Father Mapple's sermon on Jonah and the Whale near the beginning and, near the end, Ishmael's marvelous characterization of a sounding harpooned whale as Job's Leviathan:

As the three boats lay there on that gently rolling sea, gazing down into its eternal blue noon; and not a single groan or cry of any sort, nay, not so much as a ripple or a bubble came up from its depths what landsman would have thought, that beneath all that silence and placidity, the utmost monster of the sea was writhing and wrenching in agony! Not eight inches of perpendicular rope were visible at the bows. Seems it credible that by three such thin threads the great Leviathan was suspended like the big weight to an eight day clock.

---

<sup>20</sup> Ilana Pardes, *Melville's Bibles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> For a straightforward account of Melville's use of the Bible, see Nathalia Wright, *Melville's Use of the Bible* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969).

<sup>22</sup> Alter (2010), pp. 70-71.

Suspended? and to what? To three bits of board. Is this the creature of whom it was once so triumphantly said-"Canst thou fill his skin with barbed irons? or his head with fish-spears? The sword of him that layeth at him cannot hold, the spear, the dart nor the habergeon; he esteemeth iron as straw; the arrow cannot make him flee; darts are counted as stubble; he laugheth at the shaking of a spear!" [A direct quotation from portions of Job 41 (KJV).] This the creature? this he? Oh! that unfulfilments should follow the prophets. For with the strength of a thousand thighs in his tail, Leviathan has run his head under the mountains of the sea to hide him from the Pequod's fish-spears!<sup>23</sup>

But, of course, as we know, Ishmael spoke too soon: the Pequod and all her men save one are destroyed by Leviathan, and Ishmael is saved only by a coffin that floats up from his wrecked ship. The epigram for the last chapter of *Moby Dick* is, significantly enough, another citation from Job: "And I only am escaped alone to tell thee." This is perhaps one of the most dour endings of all American literature, but the key thing to understand here is how Melville's use of the Bible made it even more shocking. The Bible, as Robert Alter reminds us, was for most of Melville's readers, "a safe and reassuring book," offering "God's providential concern for humankind and the delineation of an orderly plan of redemption history."<sup>24</sup> Melville implies, however, that God's creation, and therefore God himself, were far more mysterious and uncompromising than sentimental 19<sup>th</sup>-century Americans so optimistically believed them to be. It is no wonder that *Moby Dick* sank like a stone after it was first published: not only did they dislike its pessimistic message, but they perhaps resented the fact that he used the King James Bible to convey it. Only in the following century and after several bloody wars and massive social upheaval,

---

<sup>23</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or the White Whale* (Boston: The St. Botolph Society, [1851] 1892), pp. 336-37.

<sup>24</sup> Alter (2010), p. 73.

would Americans be in a mood to embrace the Melville's dour vision of God and the universe in what is now recognized as *the* American novel.

I could go on listing 19<sup>th</sup>-century writers who were decisively influenced by the Authorized Version. As a scholar of American religion and new religious movements specifically, one of my favorite examples is that of Joseph Smith, Jr., founder of the Mormons. Although a relatively uneducated farm boy from Upstate New York, Smith nevertheless knew his Bible, and the Bible he knew was the King James Version, probably through copies supplied by the American Bible Association. When it came time for him to translate the Book of Mormon from the gold plates dug up on the Hill Cumorah at the behest of an angel, or as his detractors contended, create the volume from whole cloth, Smith chose to do so, naturally enough, using the idiom of the King James Bible. This, after all, was the language of Scripture, and in some ways Joseph Smith perhaps overused it to prove his work's scriptural credentials: for example, while the phrase "it came to pass" appears some 396 times in the 21,000 verses of the Authorized Version, it appears some 1,168 times in the 6,604 verses of the Book of Mormon.<sup>25</sup> And while it appears that Joseph Smith himself never claimed anything more for the idiom of the Book of Mormon as a translation choice, some of his latter followers, struck by the linguistic congruence between the King James Bible and the Book of Mormon, assumed that when God

---

<sup>25</sup>Philip L. Barlow, "Before Mormonism: Joseph Smith's Use of the Bible, 1820-1829." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 57:4 (Winter, 1989): 739-71, p. 756-57.

spoke, he spoke in Jacobean English.<sup>26</sup> No doubt this was an assumption shared by many orthodox American Protestants as well.

The 19<sup>th</sup> Century was the heyday of the influence of the King James Bible on the United States. It would continue to be a literary touchstone well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for authors as diverse as William Faulkner, Ernest Hemmingway, Saul Bellow, Marilynne Robinson, and Cormac McCarthy.<sup>27</sup> Political rhetoric in this country reached an apex with Lincoln, but there are still echoes of the King James Bible at least as late as 1963 in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" Speech, delivered, appropriately enough, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.<sup>28</sup> But for the most part, except in certain religious subcultures which I will discuss below, the overwhelming influence of the King James Bible waned, and in some ways—again the irony—the KJV evolved from a text of consensus to a text of dissensus.

### **The King James Bible as "Dissensus Text"**

Beginning in the 1840s with the Great Irish Potato Famine and the failed revolutions of 1848, millions of Roman Catholics, primarily from Ireland and Germany at first, immigrated to the United States. This new migration swelled the ranks of the small population of English Catholics that had been established here since colonial times. Colonial Catholics used preferentially the Douay-Rheims Version and, obedient to the 1546 decree of the Council of Trent that proscribed

---

<sup>26</sup>Philip L. Barlow, "Why the King James Version? From the Common to the Official Bible of Mormonism," *Dialogue* 22: 2 (1989): 19-43, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> For discussions of each of these authors and their works, see Alter (2010).

<sup>28</sup> D. W. Hansen, *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Speech that Inspired a Nation* (Array New York: Ecco, 2003), pp. 8, 104-20.

Bible translations not made from the Latin Vulgate, endeavored to avoid using the King James Bible.<sup>29</sup> This became increasingly difficult during the early National Period since the American Bible market came to be overwhelmingly dominated by the Authorized Version. Mathew Carey, the Philadelphia printer who, as mentioned above, was so successful printing the King James Bible, also printed in 1790 a Douay-Rheims Bible with the support of Bishop John Carroll. It couldn't compete in popularity with the Authorized Version, however, and Carey took a loss on the project. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the American Catholic hierarchy would continually work to wean their parishioners from the King James Bible (which often could be had for free from the bible societies) by providing them with inexpensive copies of the Douay-Rheims Bible.<sup>30</sup>

Why, exactly, was this such an issue? There are several substantial differences between Catholic and Protestant Bibles. For example, the Apocrypha, which contain, among other things, an important biblical warrant for the doctrine of Purgatory,<sup>31</sup> were routinely deleted from many printings of Protestant Bibles, or at least relegated to an appendix as non-canonical texts. The American Bible Society in 1826 dropped the Apocrypha from the Bibles they circulated, a policy only overturned in 1964.<sup>32</sup> In the Douay-Rheims Bible, the Apocrypha are always found

---

<sup>29</sup> Simms (1936), p. 98; Gutjahr (1999), p. 126.

<sup>30</sup> Gutjahr (1999), p. 126-27; Gerald P. Fogarty, S.J., "The Quest for a Catholic Vernacular Bible in America" in Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (eds.), *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 166-67

<sup>31</sup> 2 Maccabees 12:43-46.

<sup>32</sup> Edgar J. Goodspeed and Moses Hadas, *The Apocrypha: an American Translation* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), p. xxiii; Melton, J. Gordon, *Encyclopedia of Protestantism* (New York: Facts On File, 2005), p. 38.

integrated into the Old Testament because the Catholic Church considers them fully canonical. Translation differences, too, distinguish Catholic from Protestant Bibles: for example, I Corinthians 11:27 reads in the Douay-Rheims version, “Whosoever shall eat this bread or drink the chalice of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord,” while the King James Bible substitutes ‘and’ for ‘or,’ thus undercutting the Catholic argument that communion consisting of just the bread or the wine is legitimate, a teaching Protestants reject. Several other differences could be instanced.<sup>33</sup> Both Catholics and Protestants saw the doctrinal consequences of these differences as so potentially dangerous, that both warned against the reading of each other’s Bibles. Perhaps in order to make this point, in 1842 a Catholic friar in Upstate New York went so far as to stage a public burning of ABS-distributed King James Bibles, an act excoriated by anti-Catholic Nativists but approbated by some in the Catholic press: “To burn or otherwise destroy a spurious or corrupt copy of the Bible, whose circulation would tend to disseminate erroneous principles of faith or morals,” wrote the editor of the *New York Freeman’s Journal*, “we hold to be an act not only justifiable but praiseworthy.”<sup>34</sup>

The place where this clash of Bibles became most acute was in the public schools. Since colonial times, mandatory Bible reading was a part of curriculum; indeed, the whole purpose of public education, at least according to the Massachusetts statute of 1647, was to defeat that “old deluder, Satan” who wished

---

<sup>33</sup> See Charles B. Dalton, “The Origin of the Version Authorized by the Roman Catholic Church, and the American Revised Version” in M. W. Jacobus (ed.), *Roman Catholic and Protestant Bibles Compared* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1915), pp. 278, n. 96.

<sup>34</sup> Fogarty, (1982), p. 165; Gutjahr (1999), p. 124.

“to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures.”<sup>35</sup> And as literacy for secular purposes superseded the ability to read the Scriptures as the overriding concern of public education by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the King James Bible nevertheless continued to be the textbook of choice in many a one-room frontier school house, simply because in the early days that was the one text that most children could be assumed to have in their homes. Moreover, even in those school districts wealthy enough to afford secular textbooks (roughly from the 1820s on), mandatory reading from the King James Bible often continued in some form.<sup>36</sup> This became an extremely divisive issue as more and more Catholic children enrolled in public schools and were forced to read the King James Bible. Catholic parents and the Church hierarchy decried the practice as a key example of the pervasive Protestant bias in the public education. They demanded that children be allowed to read from the Douay-Rheims version of the Bible, or, failing that, that Bible reading be dropped from the curriculum and left to the churches.<sup>37</sup>

In Philadelphia, the reaction of anti-Catholic Nativists to such a request was swift and intense. In 1844, in response to Bishop Francis P. Kendrick’s plea to the school board that Catholic children be allowed to read from any version of the Bible their parents’ approved, riots broke out pitting Irish Catholics against Nativist mobs.

---

<sup>35</sup> See Kenneth A. Lockridge, *Literacy In Colonial New England: an Enquiry Into the Social Context of Literacy In the Early Modern West* (Array New York: Norton, 1974), p. 50.

<sup>36</sup> Gutjahr (1999), p. 118-19. See also R. Laurence Moore, “Bible Reading and Nonsectarian Schooling: The Failure of Religious Instruction in Nineteenth-Century Public Education,” *The Journal of American History* 86:4 (March 2000): 1581-1599. Moore points out that one of the most popular secular textbooks of the day, *The McGuffey Readers*, quoted liberally from the King James Bible (pp. 1591-92).

<sup>37</sup> See Tracy Fessenden, “The Nineteenth-Century Bible Wars and the Separation of Church and State.” *Church History* 74:4 (December 2005): 784-811.



The result was the burning of two Catholic churches and a convent, and several deaths. Two months later, the state militia had to be mobilized to control continued rioting in which thirteen died, including George Shifler, who became a martyr for the Nativist cause.<sup>38</sup> An official investigation into the violence ruled that it was entirely due to “the efforts of a portion of the community to exclude the Bible from our Public Schools.”<sup>39</sup> Similar riots were only narrowly averted in Cincinnati, but the result was the same: the school board there ruled in 1852 that King James Bible was fit for use in the public schools since it was common to all Christians.<sup>40</sup> Faced with a situation they felt powerless to change, the Catholic Church in the United States launched a major campaign to create parochial schools.<sup>41</sup> It was not until 1872 that a state, in this case Ohio, banned mandatory Bible reading in public schools, and the U.S. Supreme Court only banned the practice nationally in 1962. By this time, however, most school districts had long dropped mandatory Bible reading in an effort to avoid the continuing controversy.<sup>42</sup>

While the sectarian tensions that led to the eventual banning of Bible reading in the public schools were one factor for the declining influence of the King James Bible in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an equally important factor was simply the explosion of new English translations of the Bible, although loyalty to the old Authorized Version

---

<sup>38</sup> Fessenden (2005), p. 795.

<sup>39</sup> Fogarty (1982), p. 166.

<sup>40</sup> Fessenden (2005), pp. 799-80.

<sup>41</sup> Eventually, the need for Catholic parochial schools would be seen as so urgent, that the 1884 Third Plenary Council of Baltimore mandated that school buildings should have priority over church buildings in new parishes (Peter W. Williams, *America's Religions: From Their Origins to the Twenty-first Century*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2008, p. 301).

<sup>42</sup> Fessenden (2005), p. 796; Moore (2000), pp. 1581, 1585, 1599.

died hard. In 1881, the first major revision of the King James Bible, the English Revised Version New Testament was released, followed by the RV Old Testament in 1885; these new translations made use of the advances in biblical scholarship, especially the increasing availability of older Hebrew and Greek manuscripts than were used in the King James Version. The English Revised Version sold poorly in this country and failed to supplant the Authorized Version, and an effort to create a truly American Bible, the American Standard Version (ASV), was launched. The ASV was released in 1901. This, too, met with limited success and was followed by yet newer translations, the Revised Standard Version (RSV) in 1947 and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) in 1971. The last of these was an explicitly ecumenical translation meant to appeal to Protestants, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians alike.<sup>43</sup>

For many Evangelicals, NSRV was viewed as giving up too much ground to liberals and ecumenists. The New International Version (NIV), released in 1973, was designed to return to the Protestant distinctness of the KJV while using the latest advances in Biblical scholarship. What was produced was one of the most popular Bibles ever with the American public; whereas all other versions up to this point had attempted word for word accuracy, the NIV was less dependent on previous translations, including the KJV. It aimed at a freer translation that would be easier to comprehend for the average reader who now, more than likely, had not been raised

---

<sup>43</sup> For a good overview of the history of modern Bible translations in Europe and the United States, see Peter J. Thuesen, *In Discordance with the Scriptures: American Protestant Battles over Translating the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

since childhood with the KJV. In time, the NIV would become the best selling Bible in America.<sup>44</sup>

Despite the continuing popularity of the NIV (or perhaps because of it), some conservative Evangelicals, mostly Baptist independents but others as well, argue still for the superiority of the King James Bible. In fact, some have made acceptance of the KJV a mark of orthodoxy. When I first encountered King James Onlyism about a decade ago, it was represented to me rather facetiously as, “If the King James Bible was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for me!” Now there are some who are that naïve, but many of the leaders of the movement are better historically informed and have developed a variety of arguments to support their position. In fact, King James Onlyism is not a monolithic movement, but a spectrum of opinions that range from conservative to ultra-conservative. Taking a typology from Baptist theologian James R. White, the King James Only movement can be divided along a continuum from those whose loyalty to the Authorized Version is primarily aesthetic (Group #1: “I like the KJV best); to those who believe that the Greek texts, the so-called *Textus Receptus*, used by the King James translators to translate the New Testament are still superior to manuscripts discovered subsequently, even if these are older (Group #2: The Textual Argument); to those who believe the *Textus Receptus* was divinely preserved (Group #3: Received Text Only); to those who believe the King James translators were inspired by God and produced an inspired translation (Group #4: The Inspired KJV); to those who believe the King James translation

---

<sup>44</sup> See the Christian Booksellers Association statistics on bestsellers ([www.cbaonline.org/nm/BSLs.htm](http://www.cbaonline.org/nm/BSLs.htm); accessed February 1, 2011)

actually represents a new revelation from God (Group #5: The KJV as New Revelation).<sup>45</sup> Again, except for the relatively tolerant Group #1, King James Onlyism is found primarily in the Baptist and Independent Bible Church tradition, along with such sectarian traditions as Seventh-Day Adventism, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and those dispensational premillennialist groups that rely on the 1917 Scofield Reference Bible.<sup>46</sup>

What is now called the “King James Only Movement” or “King James Onlyism” finds its roots in work published in 1930 by a Seventh-Day Adventist named Benjamin G. Wilkinson entitled *Our Authorized Bible Vindicated*.<sup>47</sup> Wilkinson’s ideas and arguments were subsequently picked up in the 1950s and ‘60s by Baptist writers J. J. Ray and Peter Ruckman.<sup>48</sup> King James Onlyism really takes off, however, in the 1970s and ‘80s, probably in light of the phenomenal success of the NIV, which now seriously challenged the status of the King James Bible as the preferred Bible of American Evangelicals. In response to the popularity of this new translation, authors such as Gail Riplinger, whose 1993 book, *New Age Bible Versions*, became a bestseller, repeated the arguments of the earlier authors, adding in a heavy dose of conspiracy thinking linking liberal Christians, Catholics, and New Agers in a Satanic

---

<sup>45</sup> James R. White, *The King James Only Controversy: Can You Trust Modern Translations?* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1995), pp. 1-4. See also D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979).

<sup>46</sup> See Theusen (1999), p. 62-65; Barlow (1989); and R. Todd Magnum and Mark S. Sweetnam, *The Scofield Bible: Its History and Impact on the Evangelical Church* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2009).

<sup>47</sup> Benjamin G. Wilkinson, *Our Authorized Bible Vindicated* (Washington, DC: NP, 1930).

<sup>48</sup> Jasper James Ray, *God Wrote Only One Bible* (Junction City, OR: Eye Opener Publications, 1955); Peter Ruckman, *The Bible “Babel”* (Pensacola, FL: Pensacola Bible Institute, 1964).

a plot to undermine the Word of God.<sup>49</sup> These books had their impact. King James Onlyism has now become an important marker for a portion of the fundamentalist subculture within the larger world of conservative evangelicalism; and because of this, whether or not one uses the King James Bible exclusively has become an exceedingly divisive issue in some congregations. Thus, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, we are confronted with the irony of ironies: the King James Bible, originally intended by King James to unite the various factions of fractious English-speaking Christians, now serves as a bright-line marker of exclusion for a fractious subset of English-speaking Christians.

### **The King James Bible in a Post-Biblical America**

The rise and fall of the King James Bible in America is, of course, part of the larger story of the rise and fall of the Bible in America. For the most part, the United States is a post-biblical country.<sup>50</sup> While sales of the Bible, including the King James Version, remain high, and despite the fact that opinion polls show that rudimentary knowledge of the Bible remains relatively high, the kind of deep knowledge of the text that was once so common is now a thing of the past.<sup>51</sup> Echoes of the King James Bible do, of course, linger. Anyone who has watched the annual Easter showing of *The Ten Commandments* (1956) has been exposed to the influence of the KJV since it's apparent to me that the screenwriters consciously attempted to reproduce the

---

<sup>49</sup> Gail Ripplinger, *New Age Bible Versions* (Munroe Falls, OH: A. V. Publications, 1993).

<sup>50</sup> Grant Wacker, "The Demise of Biblical Civilization," in Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (eds.), *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 121-38.

<sup>51</sup> For sales statistics, see note 44 above. For statistics on current biblical knowledge in America, see the U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey, Pew Forum on Religious & Public Life (September 2010), available at <http://pewforum.org>.

cadence and vocabulary of the Authorized Version. According to one of the screenwriters, Jesse Lasky, Jr., “As to how our Moses ‘talked,’ we had no hesitation: the King James Version of the Bible—the Bible DeMille had learned as a child—became the direct source of a great deal of the movie’s dialogue.”<sup>52</sup> And, of course, when in the movie Moses receives the actual Ten Commandments, God quotes directly from the King James Bible.

My first encounter with the King James Bible, as it was for many of generation, came from another television ritual: *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, first broadcast in 1965. In a pivotal moment in the animated special, Linus explains the meaning of Christmas to Charlie Brown by quoting from the King James Version of Luke’s Gospel (2: 8-14). Even today, KJV references still occasionally appear in popular culture, most notably (and frequently) on *The Simpsons*.<sup>53</sup> And yet, despite these survivals in the popular culture, I doubt references to the King James Bible carry much resonance in America today beyond sounding vaguely “churchy.”

Ultimately, what is the significance of the eclipse of the King James Bible in the United States? Societies do need their unifying cultural symbols, and as we have seen, the King James Bible did serve as a consensus text for generations in the United States, its language and imagery providing instantly recognizable symbols that could unite millions. However, as *the Bible* of English-speaking Protestant

---

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Katherine Orrison, *Making Cecil B. DeMille’s Epic*, *The Ten Commandments* (Lanham, MD: Vestal Press, 1999), p. 36.

<sup>53</sup> For examples in *The Simpsons*, see [www.snpp.com/guides/religion.html#b](http://www.snpp.com/guides/religion.html#b). See also, Lisle Dalton, Eric Michael Mazur, and Monica Siems, “Homer the Heretic and Charlie Church: Parody, Piety, and Pluralism in *The Simpsons*,” in Eric Michael Mazur and Kate McCarthy (ed.), *God in the Details: American Religion in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 231-248.

America, the King James Bible also provoked profound dissensus from those who were American but not Protestant. And as America grows even more pluralistic, it isn't likely that a single sacred text like the King James Bible—no matter what it's literary merits—will ever play the same kind of cultural role again. Given the relative religious homogeneity of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Great Britain, King James could reasonably hope that a nation might unite behind a single translation of the sacred text. Such a hope in the face of the heterogeneity of 21<sup>st</sup>-century America would be forlorn indeed.

Of course, there is no danger of the King James Bible disappearing, and in fact it now exists—the final irony—in a larger variety of forms than ever before: in addition to a myriad of print versions, there are now dozens recordings of the King James Bible on CD and for MP3 players, and it can now be downloaded to be read on a Kindle or other e-reader, fully searchable and replete with engravings by Doré. The fact that the KJV can now be carried around in your pocket and read on your cell phone would undoubtedly astonish the original company of translators, both because of the technology, but perhaps also because their translation still remains in print after four hundred years.

© Brian C. Wilson 2011