The King James Bible in America: Pilgrim, Prophet, President, Preacher

John S. Tanner

Abstract

John S. Tanner, BYU academic vice president (2004-2011), says the influence the King James Bible on American culture and history is like the air we breathe. This paper, given in 2011 at Oxford University, illustrates this influence by examining the central role the King James Bible played in the lives of a Pilgrim, John Winthrop; a prophet, Joseph Smith; a president, Abraham Lincoln; and a preacher, Martin Luther King Jr. Puritan leader John Winthrop’s famous 1630 speech compared the Pilgrims bound for the Massachusetts Bay Colony to ancient Israel, as both sought a covenant with God in a promised land. Tanner examines James 1:5, which impelled Joseph Smith to seek God’s wisdom in the Sacred Grove, and the sources the King James translators drew upon to create the exact wording that so impressed young Joseph Smith. Abraham Lincoln, faced with the problem of evil as posed by the Civil War, plumbed the Bible’s depths more honestly and profoundly, and exploited its rhetorical resources more adroitly, than anybody else. Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech drew upon biblical imagery and rhetoric to urge America to become a city on a hill and a land of promise for all its citizens. Tanner predicts that as more Americans prefer other versions of the Bible and as America becomes more secular, the King James Bible will likely be less pervasive in the national atmosphere and less vital to our cultural life.

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