The King James Bible and the English language


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In this delightful book, David Crystal takes a look at the influence of the Holy Bible on the English language principally (though not exclusively) thanks to its King James’ or so-called Authorized Version. Referring to ‘the myriad contributions of Wycliffe, Tyndale, and many others’ and their ‘linguistic fingerprints’, C says in the closing sentence that ‘they are an essential element in the story of how the English language was “begat”’ (262).

The book has two prologues (the first focusing on the influence of the Bible on the English language and the second alerting the reader as to some problems inherent in the very enterprise and some minor caveats) and an interlude that divides its content chapters into two equal halves. It ends with an epilogue, two appendices, a brief note on the New Testament sources, three indices (expressions, Bible translations, and Books of the Bible), and finally a general index.

Despite this formidable overall design, the book is extremely user-friendly and a veritable delight to read. In forty-two short chapters roughly averaging five pages each, C entertains the reader with a wealth of interesting (and often curious) information on how deeply ingrained many of the expressions from the Bible are in the day-to-day use of the English language by its speakers right across the world. Even more impressive is the fact that many users of the Biblical idiom seldom, if ever, realize that they are indebted to the book every time they resort to an expression like a fly in the ointment or kick the bucket.

The content chapters all have as their headings expressions and English phrases whose origins lie in the Bible, to wit ‘The skin of one’s teeth’ (83–85) and ‘Nothing new under the sun’ (101–09). C points out that some expressions such as two by two (from the Genesis account of Noah and the Flood) have ‘minimal or moderate influence’ (39), others like a coat of many colors have a much wider currency perhaps because people feel attracted to the concept rather than the language per se. Other expressions like fire and brimstone occupy a middle rank in terms of their applicability to new contexts of use.

C conducts his discussion in a captivating and most enjoyable manner. It is both informative and witty. In the chapter titled ‘Begat’ (42–44), this is what he has to say: ‘This archaic past-tense form of beget carries a phonetic punch which has made it a popular stylistic choice among present-day writers commenting on how one thing has led to another. It has even become a book title’ (43).

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Does the King James Bible contain spelling errors? The 1611 King James Bible was written more than four hundred years ago when the English language was different. The original 1611 A.D. text, written in Early Modern English, shows the language with its Latin influence. Spelling was in Jacobean style which was not entirely standardized, but could be read phonetically. The original typeface was in Gothic style. Although both the typestyle and the older language of the 1611 version may be considered difficult to read by some 21st Century English readers, the translators produced an accurate translation. In Begat, best-selling language expert David Crystal offers a stimulating tour of the verbal richness and incredible reach of the King James Bible. How can a work published in 1611 have had such a lasting influence on the language? The author surveys the Bible, chapter by chapter, and lists for the reader phrases that have entered into the English idiom, oftentimes apart from the public’s awareness of its Biblical origins. Examples and modifications of each phrase or idea are provided, but that’s about it. There is no interacting with or analysis of the Biblical text. I’m not sure who the target audience is. Perhaps a small group of etymologists would find some interesting information tucked away in each chapter, but I’m not sure. King James Bible - The History The King James Bible, published in 1611, was England’s authorized version of the Bible translated from the original Hebrew and Greek languages into English at the request of King James I of England. At the time, other English Bibles existed, but King James did not like the most popular translation, the Geneva Bible, because he felt that some of the marginal notes encouraged disobedience to kings. So when a Puritan scholar, Dr. John Reynolds, suggested a new English translation of the Bible at a 1604 conference of bishops and theologians at Hampton Court Palace.