

Book Reviews

BIBLE. The story of the King James Version 1611-2011

Gordon Campbell

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BEGAT. The King James Bible and the English language

David Crystal

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To mark the quatercentenary of the Authorised or King James Version of the Bible, Oxford University Press has undertaken to publish a number of celebratory volumes, of which these two are the first to appear. The remarkable thing about them is that only a few years ago, many people would have doubted whether there would be any commemoration in 2011 at all. The secularisation of society has meant that Bible-reading, which was once standard practice in many homes, has virtually disappeared, except among the minority who are religiously committed. They, however, have largely moved on to more modern translations and left the AV behind, making the question of who continues to read it now hard to answer.

But as the anniversary draws closer, it is becoming more apparent that reports of the death of the King James Bible have been greatly exaggerated. Despite the competition and apparent lack of interest in it, the AV continues to be a best-seller and new editions of it are still being prepared. Significantly, in the wider social context, it remains 'the Bible' as far as most ordinary people are concerned. When it is quoted, it is immediately recognised as such, even by those who have never read it, and it is still the version of choice used by film-makers and newspaper editors when they need to refer to the Bible for one reason or another. The AV may even be enjoying a modest revival in popularity, as a new generation realises how much it has been cut off from its religious and cultural inheritance by the modernising barbarians of the 1960s and later.

It is in this climate that Gordon Campbell, a Canadian who teaches Renaissance literature at the University of Leicester, has put together a very readable history of the AV, both in Britain and in the United States. After

briefly rehearsing the process of translation into English before 1611, he goes into the first edition of the King James Bible in considerable detail, pointing out how linguistic and theological forces were both instrumental in shaping it. His account is sensitively and quite lavishly illustrated, and the reader is introduced to the quirks of printing as much as to those of church and secular politics.

Professor Campbell does not shirk the theological controversies that lay behind the original edition and that have surfaced from time to time over the centuries, nor does he ignore the pressures which have led to further revision and new translations in modern times. In particular, he has treated the Evangelical wing of the church very fairly, without ignoring the contributions made by others. One of the curious findings of his research, borne out by experience, is that the AV enjoys special popularity among high church Anglicans at one end of the spectrum and low church fundamentalists at the other, both of whom are moved by its powerful cadences. He also pays special attention to the version's impact on Black America, which has been very great but tends to get overlooked in the standard histories.

David Crystal's volume covers the same general theme but treats it in a very different way. He starts off by wanting to know how many phrases in modern English owe their origin to the King James Bible, and in the end concludes that there are 257 of them, though 196 of these have antecedents in earlier translations or elsewhere. In other words, as Dr Crystal demonstrates, the AV did not so much coin idioms as popularise them and embed them in the language of the people. He goes through each of them in turn, showing how they have developed their range of meaning over the years and continue to have a life of their own today.

Lovers of the Bible and students of the English language will enjoy these books, which will undoubtedly refresh and enlarge our understanding of the religious heritage that all speakers of English share. One of the more important points that Dr Campbell makes, relying in this instance on T. S. Eliot and C. S. Lewis, is that the Bible is not and cannot be read simply as 'great literature'. Those who do not appreciate its religious quality may honour it as such but they are most unlikely to read it. The Bible survives because its message continues to speak to people today and to convert them to the faith which it proclaims. In this great mission of the church, the King James Bible continues to play its part, despite

the indifference of the secularists and the disdain of the religious zealots who worship at the altar of almighty ‘relevance’. Long may it continue to do so.

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