

Book Review
By
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The Legacy of the King James Bible: Celebrating 400 Years of the Most Influential English Translation. By Leland Ryken. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2011, 265 pp. \$15.95. ISBN: 978 1-4335-1388-6.

Leland Ryken gives us a fair and factual account of the history of the King James Bible and its impact on the English speaking world. In many circles, the King James Bible has become the brunt of attack and vilification. There are those who would like to destroy its influence but, as Ryken shows, its beauty and magnificence as a translation and literary work will not fade quite so easily. The King James Bible is unsurpassed in its literary excellence. It is unsurpassed in its worldwide influence. Without a doubt, it is the best selling Bible in the history of the world.

Ryken is professor of English at Wheaton College. He specializes in sixteenth and seventeenth century English literature. He is an expert on Puritanism and on the Bible as literature. He has written several books or edited books including: *The Word of God in English, Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* and *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible*. He also served as a literary stylist for *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*.

The book is divided into two major parts. The first part deals with the King James Bible—its history and value as a Bible translation. The second part is literary in emphasis and shows the literary qualities of the King James Bible and its influence on English and American literature.

There are four major areas of study: (1) The history of the King James Bible; (2) Its influence in the subsequent history of Bible translation and in English-speaking culture; (3) The literary excellence of the King James Bible itself; and (4) The influence of the King James Bible on English and American literature (p. 16). These four parts are covered in fifteen chapters. Ryken gives a post-comment and end-notes along with permissions and General and Scripture indices.

In chapter one, Ryken begins to trace the origins of the King James Bible. He begins with John Wycliffe and William Tyndale. Both of these men translated the Scriptures into English under the threat of their lives. Wycliffe is known as “the morning star of the Reformation.” He translated from the Latin Vulgate into English. His work circulated in handwritten manuscripts that were costly. He was opposed to transposing Latin syntax and vocabulary into English. He translated into English in order to provide the common person with the message of the Bible so that they could obey it in their lives.

Tyndale died as a martyr because of his translation of the Bible. He was educated at Oxford and was a linguistic genius. He was expert in seven languages. Tyndale’s goal was similar to Wycliffe’s. He wanted to see the common man possess the message of God’s Word. Ryken lists the contributions of Tyndale to English translation of the Bible. First, the Bible needs to start with the words of the original Hebrew and Greek of the Old and New Testaments. Second, Tyndale insisted on fidelity to the actual words of the original text. Third, he expected his readers to rise to what is called standard formal English (p. 28). As much as 80 percent of

Tyndale's translation was carried over into the comparable parts of the King James Bible (Tyndale translated about half of the Bible).

Chapter 2 covers the history from Tyndale to the King James Bible. Ryken gives the history of Coverdale's Bible, Matthew's Bible, The Great Bible, The Bishop's Bible and the Geneva Bible.

In chapter 3, the history of the making of the King James Bible is given. Ryken answers the following questions. Who came up with the idea for the King James Bible? Who did the translation? What was the process of translation like? What were the circumstances of the first appearance of the King James Version as a printed book? What was the early history of the books' reception? (p. 44).

Ryken reveals that the reception of the King James Bible was very good. Within 50 years of its publication, it was outselling the Geneva Bible and replaced it. He states, "The existing best-selling Bible, the Genevan, went into six editions between 1611 and 1614, compared with seventeen editions of the King James Bible. If we expand the time from 1611 to 1644, we find fifteen editions of the Geneva Bible, and a whopping 182 editions of the KJV" (p. 52). By 1660, the triumph of the King James Bible was secured (p. 53).

The idea for the King James Bible was hatched out in 1604 and brought to fruition in 1611. By 1660, the King James Bible supplanted the Genevan and would remain the most influential English translation for 350 years (2011)!

Chapter four focuses on the King James Bible as an English translation. Here are some of the facts related by Ryken. First, the KJV is a synthesis of the English translations that preceded it (16th century). Second, the translators of the KJV aimed at refining the translation and making it better. The translators were experts in Hebrew and Greek. They desired accuracy in translation and rhythmic excellence. Third, the KJV is a translation for public use and private reading, but is especially suitable for oral use in public settings. Fourth, the translators followed an essentially literal process of translating as opposed to a free style of translating. Fifth, the KJV was the most accurate translation in existence in 1611. Today, its accuracy is questioned unfairly by the archaic language it contains and the Greek text upon which it is based. Ryken addresses both of these concerns and defends the KJV. Then, he shows that the KJV exceeds in accuracy any dynamic equivalence translation on the market today (2011). Many modern translations have moved further and further away from the Greek text (p. 65).

With chapter five, Part II of the book begins. Ryken relates the impact of the King James Bible in history. In chapter five, he discusses the influence of the KJV on the history of Bible translation. The KJV was the dominant translation over the past three centuries. Its influence in Bible translation continued until the making of the NIV in the 1970's. Ryken traces the lineage of the Bibles that adhere to the translation philosophy and stylistic preferences of the KJV. He specifically mentions three: the Revised Standard Version of 1952, the New King James Bible of 1983, and the English Standard Version of 2001. Ryken exposes the dynamic equivalent style of translating the biblical text as opposed to the KJV tradition and resulting in a destabilization of the biblical text (p. 76).

Ryken takes a look at the influence of the KJV on language, education and religion in chapter six. Many assert that the KJV has had the largest single influence on the English language. The literary style of the KJV has made it memorable. Many idioms have been integrated into the English language as a result. David Crystal lists 257 such idioms from the KJV compared to Shakespeare who gives us less than 100 (*Begat*, p. 258). Ryken lists seventeen examples on page 85. The KJV has also influenced English speaking peoples from non-Western

countries. Ryken relates his own personal experience with the KJV to illustrate its religious influence. The KJV has influenced religious thought, writings, poetry (hymns), and doctrinal vocabulary. Ryken points out the tremendous influence of the KJV on education. Many children learned to read by reading the KJV. The most widely used schoolbook of the nineteenth century in America was *McGuffey's Eclectic Reader* series. The biblical passages contained in it are from the KJV (p. 93). Many of the notable preachers in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries have used the KJV. Ryken mentions Charles Spurgeon, Charles Hodge, A. W. Pink, Horatius Bonar, J. C. Ryle, Matthew Henry, and Billy Graham. An interesting fact about Billy Graham was related by Ryken. Graham's lifetime audience has been estimated to be over two billion (p. 97). The translation all of those people listened to was the KJV.

Chapter seven continues Ryken's portrait of the cultural influence of the KJV. He gives illustrations of its influence on the courts, political discourse, public inscriptions, music, and the visual arts. He concludes, "But between 1700 and 1975, any consideration of biblical influence on public life, politics, education, music, and art is actually a consideration of the King James Bible" (p. 114).

The literary merits of the KJV are considered in chapter eight. Ryken lists five questions that he answers in this chapter. Why is the literary aspect of an English Bible important? How can we tell if an English translation is a good literary translation? What has been the verdict of the general public regarding the literary merits of the King James Bible? What is there about the King James Bible that might make its literary excellence unlikely? What factors explain why the literary excellence of the King James Bible is not such a surprise after all? Ryken makes an important point concerning the literary nature of an English Bible translation. He states, "It is literary when it preserves the literary qualities of the Bible in its original Hebrew and Greek form" (p. 121).

Chapter nine is a survey of what scholars have said about the literary excellence of the King James Bible. This chapter focuses on the prose of the KJV. John Livingston Lowes states that the KJV is "The noblest monument of English prose" (p. 129). Ryken discusses biblical narrative and discourse sections in Scripture. He examines the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary of the KJV. He lists four stylistic features that are notable: (1) the genitive or *possessive construction*. This construction involves the common biblical formula noun plus the preposition *of* plus noun (noun + of + noun). A subcategory of the noun-plus-of-plus-noun construction occurs when the same noun appears in both halves of the formula (King of kings or Lord of lords). The effect is to suggest the quality of being superlative (p. 136). (2) A second formula involves the use of the words *lo* and *behold*. This formula is called *interjection*. They are commonly used to lead in to something that follows: "Behold I stand at the door and knock." (3) A third stylistic feature of the KJV is the use of the *intensive* word *verily*. For emphasis, the word sometimes occurs twice, "verily, verily." The phrase marks a statement as being highly important. (4) Finally, the use of the conjunction *and* in the KJV is important. The use of frequent *ands* creates a sense of continuity, adds to the flow of the passage and shows cause and effect. An example is given in Judges 3:21-22. Ryken concludes this chapter by considering the prose rhythm of the KJV. "The word *rhythm* implies a back-and-forth recurrence, the rise and fall of language [cadence-*ds*]. Anything that impedes the smoothness of flow is detrimental to good rhythm" (p. 138).

Chapter ten addresses the poetic effects of the KJV. At least one-third of the Bible is poetry. The language of poets is called "the poetic idiom." The most basic element of that idiom is imagery. An image is any word that names a concrete thing or action. In addition to imagery, the poetic idiom consists of figures of speech. The KJV preserves the poetic qualities that inhere

in the original languages of the Bible. The KJV exhibits poetic rhythm. Its poetry is affective in the sense of expressing and activating feeling. Poetic effects of the KJV are demonstrated by a sense of exaltation, evocative power and a sense of eloquence. The KJV is aphoristic, i. e. beautiful, striking in its impact and memorable. An example is found in I Timothy 6:6 “But godliness with contentment is great gain.”

Ryken gives extensive testimony to the literary superiority of the KJV from the literary establishment in chapter eleven. The testimony is virtually unanimous in favor of the KJV. He lists the sentiments of poets, fiction writers, playwrights, and literary essayists regarding the KJV.

Chapter twelve addresses how the Bible can enter a work of literature and how it functions as part of that literature. Many authors use the Bible as a literary source. Ryken lists the following examples: a title of a novel, a title of a play, a title of a poem, a title of a short story, an epigraph at the beginning of a novel, an epigraph at the beginning of a poem, a chapter title in a novel, the name of a character and a place name in a fictional story. Each of these are illustrated by Ryken (pp. 171-172).

In chapter thirteen, Ryken takes the reader on a journey through English and American literature chronologically to show the tremendous influence of the KJV. Authors considered are: John Milton, (*Paradise Lost and Paradise Regained*); George Herbert (*The Book of Common Prayer, Redemption*); John Bunyan (*Pilgrim's Progress*); John Dryden, Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, and Samuel Johnson.

The nineteenth century is covered by Ryken in chapter fourteen. The dominant literary and cultural movement of the nineteenth century in England and America is known as romanticism. The emphasis was on exalted feeling (p. 195). Ryken considers the work of William Blake, William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Alfred Lord Tennyson. He mentions that Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Dickens and Robert Browning have had whole books written on their use of the Bible (p. 210).

In chapter fifteen, Ryken covers the modern era demonstrating the literary influence of the KJV. He begins with two fiction writers: Virginia Wolf and James Joyce. Then, he considers the works of Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, and T.S. Eliot. He includes modern poets such as William Butler Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, Philip Larkin, W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Robert Frost, and James Weldon Johnson.

In an “Afterward”, Ryken laments the loss of four significant things with the decline in the use of the KJV. They are: the loss of a common English Bible in both the church and culture. He states, “It is an incalculable loss” (p. 230); the loss of the authority of the Bible in public spheres; the loss biblical literacy—students do not recognize biblical references in literary works; and finally, the affective and literary power of the King James Bible. These losses denote a general loss in the unity of mind and heart that having one significant Bible translation for English speaking peoples gives to culture and religion.