

Sunday, August 20, 2023—The Language Of The KJB: Literary Forms & Features

Introduction

- In Part 1 we consider the following regarding the language of the King James Bible:
 - A Brief History of the English Language
 - The Age of Shakespeare, James, and the Translators
- In doing so we concluded the following:
 - “Steeped in the Elizabethan aesthetic, the King James translators conducted their work with an ear for how the text sounded when it was read out loud.”
- In this Lesson we want to consider the following additional points:
 - Literary Forms and Features
 - Concluding Thoughts

Literary Forms and Features

- Another factor to consider is that King James translators tried to reproduce the Hebrew and Greek texts as literally as possible in English. Therefore, many of the features modern readers find strange are not Renaissance or Elizabethan traits but Hebrew and Greek traits. (Ryken, 135)
- One of these features that slides right by us as modern readers relates to the genitive or possessive construction. A common biblical formula is the construction noun plus the preposition *of* plus noun (noun + *of* + noun). The Standard English way of achieving the same effect is to turn the second noun into a modifying adjective placed in front of the first noun. (Ryken, 135-136)
 - Genesis 1:24— “beast of the earth” (land animal)
 - Psalm 2:9— “rod of iron” (iron rod)
 - Isaiah 5:22— “men of strength” (strong men)
 - John 4:7— “women of Samaria” (Samaritan woman)
- A subcategory of the noun + *of* + noun construction occurs when the same noun appears in both halves of the formula. The effect is to suggest the quality of being superlative—the most heightened form that can be imagined. (Ryken, 136)

- I Timothy 6:15— “King of kings, and Lord of lords.”
- Song of Solomon 1:1— “song of songs”
- Ecclesiastes 1:2— “Vanity of vanities”
- Even when the noun + *of* + noun formula does not meet the special conditions noted in the preceding paragraphs, it is simply a common formulation in the King James Bible. (Ryken, 136)
 - Psalm 34:7— “angel of the LORD”
 - Psalm 65:9— “the river of God”
 - Proverbs 4:17— “the bread of wickedness”
 - James 3:18— “fruit of righteousness”
 - Ecclesiastes 10:18— “idleness of hands”
- “Once alerted to the noun + *of* + noun construction, we can find it nearly continuously in the King James Bible. In addition to preserving the word order of the original, the King James Bible gains rhythmic smoothness with this construction.” (Ryken, 136)
- Another formula that is vintage King James are the words ‘lo’ and ‘behold’. The grammatical term for them is interjection. The function of the formula is to signal the spectacular nature of an event or the profound importance of a statement. The effect is awe-inspiring. (Ryken, 136-137)
 - Revelation 3:20— “Behold, I stand at the door and knock”
 - Acts 12:7— “Behold, and angel of the Lord came upon him”
 - Matthew 28:20— “Lo, I am with you always”
- “Did your English teacher ever tell you never to begin a sentence with the word “and.” It so happens that the ancient Hebrews and Greeks absolutely loved the conjunction translated as “and.” In Hebrew the prefix *waw* has this meaning and in the Greek the word is *kai*. The effect of these frequent occurrences in the King James Bible is to create a tremendous sense of continuity. Everything flows in sequence. The construction often shows a sense of cause and effect, as one thing produces the next, which produces the next.” (Ryken, 137)
 - Judges 3:21-22
- “One of the most fundamental factors to this willingness to accept and use verbal immigrants at this formative period was the influence of the King James Bible. Many phrases having their

origins in Hebraic, Hellenistic, or Latin context have been naturalized in English through the simple yet inexorable force of their regular use in biblical contexts. . . “Biblical English” came to possess a cultural authority on the same level as that of Shakespeare. As a result of centuries of use, many Hebraic phrases and idioms have become so common in normal English use that most modern English speakers are unaware of their biblical origins.” (McGrath, 259)

- “One of the results of this important decision (literal translations) is that a significant number of essentially Hebrew ways of speaking became incorporated into the English language. This approach to translation has resulted in the receptor language being enriched by idioms drawn from the donor language.” (McGrath, 252)
 - “to lick the dust” (Psalm 72:9, Isaiah 49:23, Micah 7:17)
 - “to fall flat on his face” (Numbers 22:31)
 - “a man after his own heart” (I Samuel 13:14)
 - “to pour out one’s heart” (Psalm 62:8, Lamentations 2:19)
 - “the land of the living” (Job 28:13, Psalm 27:13, 52:5, Isaiah 38:11, Jeremiah 11:19, Ezekiel 32:23-27)
 - “under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:4 and twenty other times in this book)
 - “sour grapes” (Ezekiel 18:2)
 - “from time to time” (Ezekiel 4:10)
 - “pride goes before a fall” (Proverbs 16:18)
 - “the skin of my teeth” (Job 19:20)
 - “to stand in awe” (Psalm 4:4; 33:8)
 - “to put words in his mouth” (Exodus 4:15, Deut. 18:18, II Samuel 14:3; 14:19, Jeremiah 1:9) (McGrath, 263)
- “A comparison of the King James Bible with the Geneva Bible suggests that the king’s translators were much more likely to retain the Hebrew word order or structure, even when this resulted in a reading that did not sound quite right to English ears at the time. The passage of time, and increased exposure to their translation, has eliminated an awareness of its initial strangeness and led to its phrases being accepted as normal and standard English.” (McGrath, 264)
- Another reason why the King James reads as it does is because of the specific instructions to use the Bishops Bible and other preceding English Translations as the default text. According to

David Teems, despite being the default text, the Bishops Bible comprises only 8 percent of the King James Bible. (Teems, 176) In contrast, “estimates vary, some as low as 76 percent and as high as 94 percent, but the general consensus among historians, Bible scholars, and biographers is that William Tyndale is responsible for at least 90 percent of the King James New Testament.” (Teems, 226-227)

- William Tyndale is responsible for introducing the following idioms and single word wonders into the English language.
 - “fight the good fight”
 - “my brother’s keeper”
 - “the apple of his eye”
 - “the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak”
 - “sign of the times”
 - “in the cool of the day”
 - “ye of little faith”
 - “a law unto themselves”
 - “peace-maker”
 - “long-suffering”
 - Passover, Jehovah, scapegoat, atonement, landlady, seashore, fishermen, stumbling block, taskmaster, two-edged, viper, zealous, and beautiful (Teems, 227-228)
- In the Prologue to his 2010 book *Begat: The King James Bible & the English Language*, David Crystal tries to assess the true impact of the KJB on the English Language. The surest way to analyze the effect of the KJB on the language according to Crystal is to look at how many expressions have become so thoroughly assimilated into the language that any sense of a biblical origin is lost. (Crystal, 5)
- After conducting a systemic study of the KJB, Crystal has concluded that there are 257 idioms in modern usage that were popularized by the KJB. No other work in English literature can make such a claim. (Crystal, 5)

Concluding Thoughts

- “The King James Bible was published within a window of opportunity, which allowed it to exercise a substantial and decisive influence over the shaping of the English Language. It is no accident that the two literary sources most widely identified as defining influences over English—the King James Bible and the works of William Shakespeare—both date from this critical period.” (McGrath, 258)
- “There was virtually universal agreement in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that the King James Bible had made a massive contribution to the development of the English language in general, and English prose in particular. . . Yet there is no evidence that the translators of the King James Bible had any great interest in matters of literature or linguistic development. Their concern was primarily to provide an accurate translation of the Bible, on the assumption that accuracy was itself the most aesthetic of qualities to be desired. Paradoxically, the king’s translators achieved literal distinction precisely because they were not deliberately pursuing it. Aiming at truth, they achieved what later generations recognized as beauty and elegance . . . elegance was achieved by accident rather than design.” (McGrath, 254)
- The KJB is both simple and majestic. Adam Nicholson, author of *God’s Secretaries* writes, “One of the King James Bible’s most consistent driving forces is the idea of majesty. Its method and its voice are . . . regal. . . Its archaic formulations, its consistent attention to a grand and heavily musical rhythm are the vehicles by which that majesty is infused into the body of the text. Its qualities are those of grace, stateliness, scale, power. There is no desire to please here; only a belief in the enormous and overwhelming divine authority.” (Nicholson, 189)
- “Translators of modern prosaic Bibles engage in a self-defeating venture when they produce Bibles that do not yield the effects common to readers of the King James Bible and its heirs. A Bible translation that sounds like the daily newspaper is given the same level of attention and credence as the daily newspaper. . . Someone has correctly said that modern colloquial translations ‘slip more smoothly into the modern ear,’ but they also slide ‘out more easily; the very strangeness and antique ceremony of the old forms make them linger in the mind.’” (Ryken, 156-157)
- Leland Ryken, author of *The Legacy of the King James Bible* chronicles the following results of the ascendancy of modern versions.
 - A common English Bible in both the church and culture has been lost.
 - The authority of the Bible went into eclipse when we lost a common Bible.
 - Biblical illiteracy has accompanied the decline of the KJB (Ryken, 230)
- Read from Ryken pages 230-231 in conclusion.

Works Cited

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