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0521617006 - A History of the Bible as Literature: From Antiquity to 1700, Volume One

David Norton

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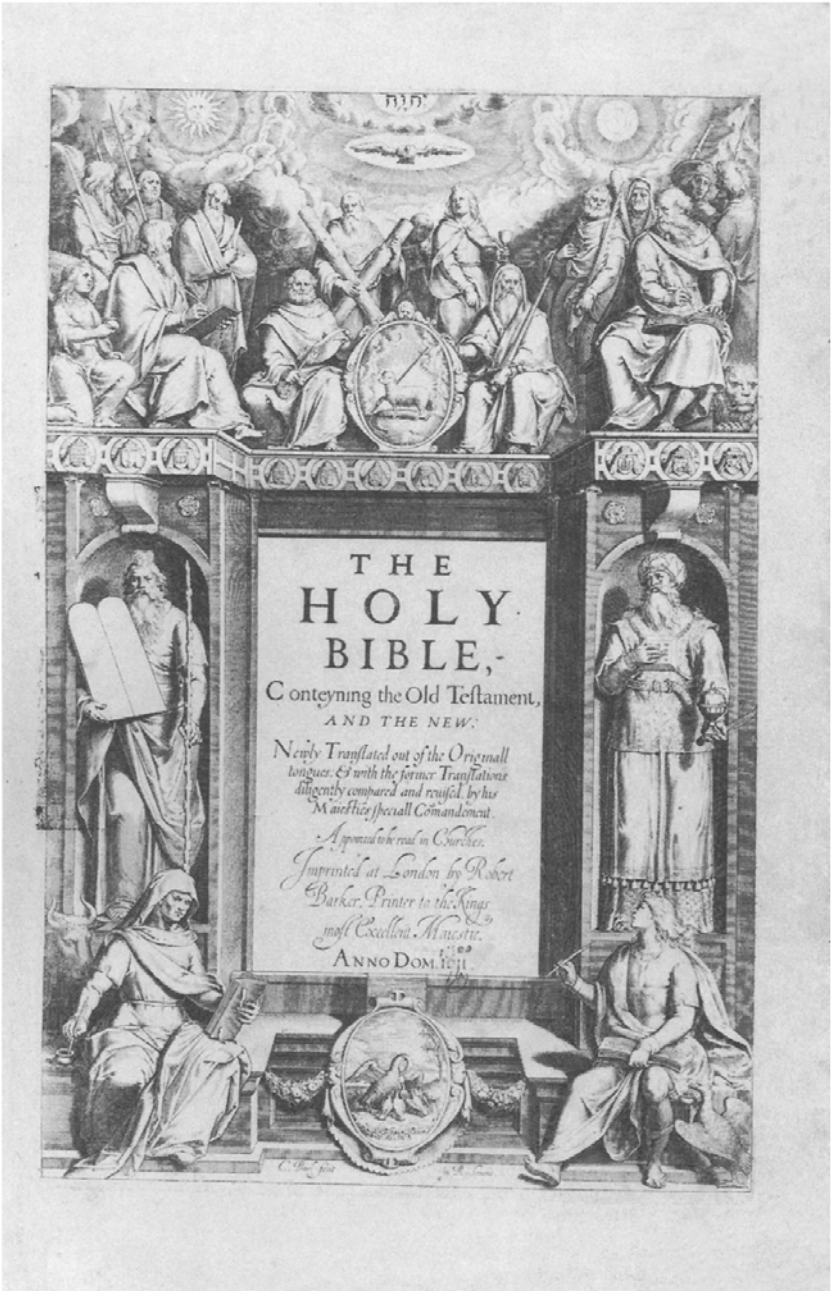
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The first volume of this two-volume work provides the only full account of how people have thought of the Bible and Bible translations from biblical times to the end of the seventeenth century. It gives special attention to what the English Bible translators were trying to do, and to the early reception of their work. A central concern is how little people thought of that most revered translation, the King James Bible, in the century following its publication. In what it reveals of the way contrary views can often be held of the same text at different times, this study provides more than a unique view of the Bible and translation. It is also a history of ideas of literature and of standards of language, since these ideas and standards have been shaped by the Bible more than by any other book.

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A history of the Bible as literature

VOLUME 1



King James Bible, 1611 (Herbert 309). Title page.

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VOLUME ONE

From antiquity to 1700

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For my parents and Heidi

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- 17 King James Bible, 1611. Title page
- 18 King James Bible, 1611. A page of genealogies
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Preface

These are truths universally acknowledged, that the Bible is one of the world's great collections of literature, and that the King James Bible is one of the finest pieces of English prose. Yet almost nothing is known of how these truths came to be. This is not because there is nothing to know, but because, in the first place, people believed that there was nothing to know. The King James Bible, since its publication, has 'held the position of an English classic' (Revised Version, preface): if so, what possible story could there be? None, naturally. But the truth is that the King James Bible was generally scorned or ignored as English writing for a century and a half after its publication.

This book had its origins in that fact. To read John Selden's observation from the middle of the seventeenth century that the King James Bible's language 'is well enough so long as scholars have to do with it, but when it comes among the common people, Lord, what gear do they make of it' was to realise that the cliché of the King James Bible's immediate success as an English classic had to be questioned. To find that Selden's was not a lone voice was to know that there was a story to be told, and to find that no one had recognised the existence of such a story, let alone told it, was to have to try to understand it and tell it myself.

The rashness of the undertaking, the scope and scale, were not immediately apparent. The King James Bible's reputation is the central, most fascinating element in a larger, longer, engrossing history, that of literary ideas of the Bible as they have come into and developed in English culture. This history begins in the nature of the Bible itself, includes attitudes expressed in the Bible, and involves not only the Greek and Latin translations of the Bible as their histories reveal patterns of thought and create a legacy for the English Bible, but also the ideas of the Church Fathers, especially Augustine and Jerome. It necessitates a new kind of study of the English translators, the study of their critical ideas and intentions; all this before opinions and criticism of the King James Bible are

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reached. Only in some of the earlier areas has this material been studied in anything like the way it is studied here. The full history involves not only religious and literary ideas of the Bible but attitudes to religion, and to literature and language; it involves social as well as literary history. In this range and what it reveals of the way people think, especially their ability to hold opposite views of, often, the same text at different times, lies the real fascination, and also the real rashness and difficulty of the undertaking.

Apology, then, is essential. The subject came to me accidentally more than a decade ago, and I was unprepared. I have these things only in common with one of the heroes of the story, William Tyndale, 'that I had no man to counterfeit', that I know that my work can be greatly improved and that I must desire 'them that are learned and able' to correct what in my case are blunders.

The novelty of the subject, the unfamiliarity of much of the evidence and the way much of the argument calls into question universally acknowledged truths all necessitate an attempt at scholarly thoroughness. But the range and general interest of the subject mean that the reader will, for most parts of the book, not be a specialist, and so I have tried to write for any interested reader, sometimes stating or mis-stating the obvious, and keeping the scholarly apparatus as unobtrusive as possible. Almost without exception, quotations are modernised; sometimes this is done with real regret because, besides tending to misrepresent the authors, it masks a real factor in the history, the changing nature of the English language. Bibliographical references in the text are given in full where a text is referred to in one place. Works used in several places are listed in the bibliography, but this is no more than a reference list: even a selective bibliography for the Bible as literature can run to book length, as does Gottcent's, and he finds no place for the majority of the works I have used. By contrast, the indexes are as thorough as possible, not just because indexes are a vital way into large works but also because they point to connections I have not made explicit in the text. The second index lists biblical passages, Bibles and similar works, and subjects such as divine inspiration. Where reference is made either to an unspecified version of the Bible or to the originals, this has been listed under 'Scripture' rather than 'Bible'.

If this study succeeds in its prime objective, to show that its subject is of real importance, further work will inevitably be needed. As well as the deficiencies in my understanding, there are limitations in the nature of the evidence. The first is as obvious as it is deliberate. I have not argued from either a literary-critical or a translator's view of the work of the translators. The dangers of subjectivity, especially in literary-critical assessments of the achievement of translators, are large: so many and so various judgements have been reached

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that it is time the work of the translators was viewed without making such judgements, indispensable though they must be to a complete view of the translations. It is not my aim to try for a complete view of either the translations or of the Bible as literature: rather, it is to present as fully as possible how people have thought about literary aspects of the Bible. Only in the appendix is a place given to the natural desire to judge the translations. Brief passages from a range of kinds of biblical writing are presented as translated by various of the translators. The original Hebrew or Greek is not given, so the focus is on the relationships between the translators and on the qualities of their work as English.

The second area of limitation is that, for the most part, the evidence reflects the views of a particular kind of people, intellectual, cultured, devout men. These views of course substantially influenced, and sometimes reflect, the ideas of the vast numbers who thought about the Bible, but they are unlikely to reveal the full story of the average thinking person's sense of the Bible. It is very difficult from this kind of evidence to deduce much about ways in which the Bible was read aloud – for instance, what kind of rhetorical effects the speaker's voice might have created – or about the aural effects of the Bible. Voice and ear contributed strongly to attitudes to the Bible, and these attitudes may not have been coherent with those expressed in writing. Scholars can probably fill out and modify the picture this study gives from evidence not considered here or through other methods of study, and such work would be welcome.

As with the translations, no personal view of the Bible is put forward: this is necessary if one is to be fair to the wide variety of views that are the real subject-matter. This study does not try to reassess the Bible as literature but to show how and why particular valuations have been reached. If, in the end, this shows a need for new study, particularly of the King James Bible, and even for new judgements, that can only be healthy.

Because of its size, the work has been divided into two volumes. For one of the stories being told, that of the fortunes of the King James Bible, this is a happy accident, for this story moves into a new phase in the eighteenth century. For the larger story of literary attitudes to the Scriptures, it is more arbitrary. Nevertheless, the seventeenth century has substantial connections with patristic and Reformation ideas, while much that begins to feel modern is to be found in the eighteenth century.

I am indebted to the following, among others, for their help and encouragement: my wife, Heidi, who has had to make major personal sacrifices to allow

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me to do this work (as this volume was completed she confessed that her private name for it is ‘the book of Damocles’, because it has been hanging over our heads for so long); my parents; Mike and Jill Gethin; Michael Black, to whom no blame attaches if I have not profited as I might from his knowledge, help, patience and encouragement; all my colleagues in the English Department at Victoria University for their general support, and, for their particular help, Robert Easting, Ian Gordon, Linda Hardy, Ian Jamieson, Frank McKay, Don McKenzie, Bill Manhire, Geoff Miles, Brian Opie, Harry Orsman, Vincent O’Sullivan, Harry Ricketts, Roger Robinson and Kathryn Walls; Ward Allen, for his real generosity to a colleague he has never met; John Beer, who helped me so much as a student and, later, with my initial thoughts towards this study; Simon Cauchi, John Davidson, Hansgerd Delbruck, Alistair Fox, Annette Garcia, John Holloway, Mark Kinkead-Weekes and Arthur Pomeroy; Alex Wright at Cambridge University Press, and Pauline Marsh (‘Hawkeye’); Alan Jesson, Bible Society Librarian; Christine, Selena and James, Rare Books Room, Cambridge University Library; and Victoria University of Wellington for its longterm support of work such as this through its library, leave scheme, equipment grants and computer facilities, and especially for its congeniality as a place in which to work.

Abbreviations

CC	<i>Corpus Christianorum. Series Latina</i>
CHB	<i>The Cambridge History of the Bible</i>
DNB	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
KJB	King James Bible, 1611
NEB	The New English Bible, 1970
NT	New Testament
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
OT	Old Testament
PB	The Book of Common Prayer
PL	J.-P. Migne (ed.), <i>Patrologiae Cursus Completus Series Latina</i>
Pollard	<i>The Holy Bible</i> (facsimile of 1611 KJB (1911) with introduction and illustrative documents)
RV	Revised Version, 1885