



Original title page from the 1611 King James Bible, by Corneilus Boel.

The King James Bible in America

Pilgrim, Prophet, President, Preacher

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I am honored to be invited to speak to you today about that book of books, the King James Bible, in connection with the quatercentenary of its publication. It is fitting to address this topic here in Oxford, a place that hosted a third of the translators. I have been asked to speak to the influence of the KJB on America, which forms a huge part of the story, for the KJB may have had an even greater impact across the Atlantic than it has had here on this “sceptred isle.”¹ Ironically, although we declared our independence politically from a king of England, for hundreds of years we remained deeply dependent on a Bible bearing the name of an English king. The magisterial KJB long reigned as the unrivaled monarch among Bible translations in America. In some respects, it does so still.

Introduction: Like the Air Americans Breathe

The great Harvard historian of American Puritanism, Perry Miller, once remarked that “the Old Testament is truly so omnipresent in the American culture of 1800 or 1820 that historians have as much difficulty taking cognizance of it as of the air people breathed.”² This is precisely the problem posed

by trying to describe the influence of the King James Bible on America. The KJB has been as omnipresent in our history as the air we breathe and as vital as air to our cultural life. As another historian observed, “Of no nation can it as aptly be said as of the United States, that, in its settlement and development, the Bible has played a major role.”³ For most of our history, to refer to the Bible in America is to refer to the King James Bible. The KJB is the “canonical” translation for America.⁴ It has been America’s Bible, providing a “surprising degree of homogeneity” in an otherwise highly “heterogeneous religious landscape.”⁵ As an illustration: over 90 percent of the separate editions of the Bible published in the United States from the War of Independence through the Civil War were King James Bibles, and this figure masks its true hegemony, as print runs for the KJB were far larger than for other translations.⁶ Though it is gradually losing its preeminent place,⁷ the language of the KJB still defines the proper language of scripture for most Americans, as it does across the English-speaking world. The translators of the King James Bible attuned the ears of English speakers everywhere as to how the Bible is supposed to sound. No small feat this, to have defined how the Word becomes words in English! The KJB fulfilled the moniker “Authorized Version” in America primarily by virtue of its rhetorical authority and power. It constitutes England’s single most influential linguistic legacy, more pervasive even than Shakespeare. Over the past four hundred years, it has worked its way deep into our public rhetoric, private discourse, and common understanding. The King James Bible has truly been as omnipresent in American history and culture as the air we breathe.

This obviously makes my task of reducing the topic to a one-hour lecture difficult, if not impossible, for the influence of the KJB in America is extensive in both time and scope. The story of the KJB’s impact stretches from before the arrival of the *Mayflower* in 1620, which deposited John Alden and his King James Bible upon the shores of New England, to beyond the inauguration of Barack Obama, who took the oath of office with his hand on Abraham Lincoln’s King James Bible.⁸ As the most popular book by far in our history, the KJB has touched every aspect of American culture. Americans have printed and bought the KJB in astonishing quantities. It has flooded our pulpits and parlors alike, providing texts not only for innumerable sermons and Sunday School lessons, as one would expect, but also for some of our greatest political speeches, such as Lincoln’s second inaugural and Martin Luther King Jr.’s “I Have a Dream.” Similarly, some of our finest works of literature exploit its rhetorical resources. These include Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*, Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom*, and Robinson’s *Gilead*.⁹ It has also provided fodder for popular novels like *The Robe*, *Two from Galilee*, and *Ben Hur*, for films like *The King of*

Kings and *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, and for musical theater like *Godspell* and *Children of Eden*. Above all, it has supplied the terms and typology for the American national myth as a promised land, a city on a hill.

To provide some semblance of coherence and focus to this vast topic, I have decided to highlight how a few representative Americans, from the Pilgrims to the present, have engaged the KJB, sketching the contours of the larger story in connection with these individuals. I shall focus specifically on a Pilgrim, a prophet, a president, and a preacher: John Winthrop, Joseph Smith, Abraham Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr. They illustrate among them the ongoing and evolving presence of the KJB in American culture and history.

A Pilgrim: John Winthrop and the Bible in Early America

More than any other immigrant group, the New England Puritans are responsible for introducing the English Bible to America and (more importantly) for casting our national identity and founding myths in biblical terms. It has been argued that the Puritan's most "distinctive contribution" lay "in the realm of rhetoric,"—"rhetoric grounded in the Bible." The Puritans "saw New England as scripture brought to life." "They discovered America in the Bible,"¹⁰ as it were, by conceiving of themselves as reenacting the entrance of the children of Israel into a "promised land" and as establishing there not just a commercial colony but a consecrated "city on a hill." No one was more important in articulating this enduring national myth than John Winthrop in his justly famous 1630 speech aboard the *Arbella*, entitled "A Model of Christian Charity." Let me briefly paraphrase the peroration of this famous sermonlike speech to give you a sense of how Puritans fashioned America's national identity out of biblical rhetoric.¹¹

"Thus stands the cause between God and us," Winthrop tells the Pilgrims aboard the *Arbella* bound for the Massachusetts Bay Colony, "we are entered into a covenant with him for this work." New England's covenant with God is imagined by Winthrop in Deuteronomic terms: God will bless the colonists if they keep their covenant and punish them if they break it, just as he did ancient Israel. Winthrop summarizes their obligation by quoting from Micah 6 and then from Matthew 5: "Now the only way to avoid the shipwreck and to provide for our posterity is to follow the Counsel of Micah, to do Justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with our God." If the colonists are "knit together" in "brotherly Affection," then "the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us, as his own people" and "men shall say of succeeding plantations: the Lord make it like that of New England: for we must consider that we shall be as a City Upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if we should deal falsely with our god . . . , we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world." Winthrop concludes by quoting "that exhortation of Moses . . . in

his farewell to Israel [in] Deut. 30,” which Moses delivered as the children of Israel were about to enter the promised land of Canaan: “Beloved, there is now set before us life, and good, and death and evil in that we are Commanded this day to love the Lord our God, and to love one another to walk in his ways and to keep his Commandments . . . that the Lord our God may bless us in the land where we go to possess it” (see Deut. 30:15–16).

Through such ringing rhetoric, John Winthrop casts the founding in terms of a biblical covenant. It is hard to overstate the importance of this rhetorical move for America’s ongoing sense of national identity. Whether used to justify American exceptionalism or to condemn American failure to live up to its ideals, the biblical rhetoric of America as a city on a hill has permeated the country far beyond New England and long after Puritanism faded there. Americans from John Adams to John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and Bill Clinton have evoked Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity.”¹² No wonder Winthrop’s recent biographer calls him “America’s Forgotten Founding Father.”¹³

Yet Winthrop was scarcely unique. He represents many other Pilgrim Fathers who deployed similar biblical rhetoric for similar purposes—such as William Bradford, John Cotton, and Cotton Mather.¹⁴ Moreover, the Puritans not only suffused their discourse with Bible quotations, they also mimed biblical rhetoric to fashion their own language. For example, Cotton Mather exhorts the same group of Pilgrims leaving for the Massachusetts Bay Colony as follows: “Awake, Awake, put on thy strength, O New-English Zion, and put on thy Beautiful Garments, O American Jerusalem, Put on thy beautiful Garments, O America, the holy City.”¹⁵ In such a text, Mather becomes, rhetorically, the prophet Isaiah, just as Winthrop becomes a new Moses, while the immigrants on board the *Arbella* are invited to consider themselves the children of Israel.¹⁶

Now, for the purposes of this lecture, I need to note that when the Pilgrims cited the Bible, they sometimes quoted from the Geneva and sometimes from the King James translation. The smaller Plymouth Plantation seemed to prefer the Geneva Bible, while the larger Massachusetts Bay Colony preferred the KJB. Thus William Bradford consistently cites scripture from the Geneva Bible in his famous *History of Plymouth Plantation*, while John Cotton in his address “God’s Promise to his Plantations” uniformly quotes from the KJB, as do the sermons from the Bay Colony.¹⁷ Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity” is mixed. Most, but not all, of his biblical citations come from the Geneva Bible, but the text from Micah about God requiring us “to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God” is taken from the KJB, a rhetorically superior translation of the text than any that preceded it. Likewise, the reference to “charity” rather than “love” in the title also nods to the KJB translation in 1 Corinthians 13 rather than Geneva.

I mention this to make the point that when the KJB first arrived on American shores it faced competition from a rival translation. Surprisingly, however, the KJB fairly quickly became the predominant translation, both in New England and across North America generally. Many reasons have been suggested for this.¹⁸ Three reasons seem most compelling to me: the lack of marginal notes in the KJB, the greater availability of the KJB, and the excellence of the KJB translation.

By royal command, the King James Bible was printed without notes or comments. James's proscription expressed his annoyance with the Geneva Bible's antimonarchical notes. This fortuitous decision had the result of making the KJB feel less partisan and hence more appealing to Protestants of all stripes. The nondenominational nature of the text was especially important in America, which developed a tradition of religious pluralism. Moreover, for those who preferred Geneva's notes, enterprising publishers were happy to supply the need by printing editions of the KJB text with the Geneva notes.

Another important reason for the predominance of the KJB in America is that the supply of Geneva Bibles from the mother country diminished rapidly after 1611. Between 1611 and 1644, the last year of a new Geneva edition, only nine Geneva editions were printed. During these same years, 177 editions of the King James Bible were printed.¹⁹ It should also be remembered that until the Revolution, the colonists were utterly dependent on imported Bibles, lacking the means and the legal license to print their own editions. Consequently, until after the War of Independence, all English Bibles in America were imported. These were virtually all King James Bibles. This allowed the KJB to take root in the New World and ultimately to establish itself as *The American Bible*.

Finally, one must assume that the KJB became the American Bible because Americans, like readers everywhere, found the translation itself congenial. The KJB was regarded as the most accurate translation of its day. By the eighteenth century, it also came to be regarded and cherished as the best translation, a monument to the English language. It won its way into the hearts of readers across the English-speaking world, including those in America.

Nevertheless, it is still somewhat surprising that a new nation, throbbing with a spirit of independence, possessing the legal authorization and technical means to print Bibles, remained so thoroughly committed to a British translation through the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. The fact that America continued to rely on the KJB is both puzzling and a bit irritating to a scholar like David Daniell, who returns to this issue again and again in his massive history *The Bible in English*. Daniell refers disdainfully to the KJB in nineteenth-century America as "the great monolith . . . a

monarch that would brook no rival.” While admitting that the KJB served a useful purpose by providing a stabilizing force in a country prone to religious fragmentation, Daniell concludes his history by expressing surprise and dismay over “the continual flourishing in the American republic of a monarchical version [of the Bible], frequently beautiful but already archaic in 1611, often erroneous, sometimes unintelligible, but persistently loved as ‘our American Bible.’”²⁰

Puzzling as it may be, and as David Daniell knows better than anyone, the predominance of the King James Bible had the happy effect of transmitting the work of William Tyndale across the Atlantic. A great Tyndale scholar, Daniell has taught us all what an extraordinary, if long unrecognized contribution Tyndale made to the KJB. A BYU colleague has calculated that 83 percent of the King James New Testament comes from Tyndale.²¹ That the KJB translators borrowed from previous translations is not surprising. Their stated mission was to make “out of many good ones, one principall good one.”²² Yet it is surprising how much they retained from Tyndale. In no small part, the translators’ genius lay in having the wit and wisdom to draw so heavily from Tyndale. He is the unacknowledged source of much that Americans, along with the rest of the English-speaking world, have come to love and admire in KJB. As Daniell writes in his introduction to Tyndale’s New Testament:

Right through the sixty-six books of the Bible, from “And God said, Let there be light, and there was light” (Genesis 1) to “And God shall wipe all tears away from their eyes” (Revelation 7), phrases of lapidary beauty have been admired: “Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you” (Matthew 7); “With God all things are possible” (Matthew 19); . . . “Be not weary in well doing” (2 Thessalonians 3); “Fight the good fight of faith; lay hold on eternal life” (1 Timothy 6); . . . “Behold, I stand at the door and knock” (Revelation 3). Indeed, phrases from the Authorized Version are so familiar that they are often thought to be proverbial: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4); “The salt of the earth” (Matthew 5); “The signs of the times” (Matthew 16); “The burden and heat of the day” (Matthew 20); “They made light of it” (Matthew 18); “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26); “Eat, drink, and be merry” (Luke 12); . . . “Filthy lucre” (1 Timothy 3); “The patience of Job” (James 5). . . .

All these phrases, and many, many more, were taken by the Authorized Version translators directly from Tyndale. Throughout the New Testament, where the Authorized Version is direct, simple and strong, what it prints is pure Tyndale.²³

I attribute the enduring popularity of the KJB in America and elsewhere to the appeal of such moving and memorable language. The KJB has broad appeal. It spoke to American Puritans and patriots as well as to

the princes and prelates they opposed. But most of all it spoke to ordinary people—to plowboys. These were the readers Tyndale most wanted to reach. He famously retorted to an antagonist, “If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more to the Scripture than thou dost.”²⁴ Although, alas! his life was not spared to complete the translation of the entire Bible (and the KJB’s translation of the Old Testament is the poorer for this), he was spared long enough to make a major contribution to the Bible that would be put in the hands of plowboys across the world.

A Prophet: Joseph Smith and the KJB in Early Nineteenth-Century America

One such American plowboy was Joseph Smith. His reading of a verse in the King James Bible set in motion events that would lead to a dramatic theophany and the founding of a new church, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, which continues to publish and promote the KJB for its English-speaking members. Let me paraphrase and read from the story of this experience in Joseph Smith’s own words and then place it in the larger context of the history of the KJB in America.

Living in 1820 in upstate New York in an area historians have since called the “burned-over district” because it lay at the epicenter of revivalism sweeping across the country like fire during the Second Great Awakening, the young fourteen-year-old Joseph and his family were agitated by the religious fervor of the times.²⁵ In his own words, Joseph Smith says simply, “There was in the place where we lived an unusual excitement on the subject of religion. . . . Indeed, the whole district of the country seemed affected by it. . . . During this time of great excitement my mind was called up to serious reflection. . . . My mind at times was greatly excited, the cry and tumult were so great” (JS–H 1:5, 8–9). He continues:

In the midst of this war of words and tumult of opinions, I often said to myself: What is to be done? Who of all these parties are right; or, are they all wrong together? If any one of them be right, which is it, and how shall I know it?

While I was laboring under the extreme difficulties caused by the contests of these parties of religionists, I was one day reading the Epistle of James, first chapter and fifth verse, which reads: *If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him.*

Never did any passage of scripture come with more power to the heart of man than this did at this time to mine. It seemed to enter with great force into every feeling of my heart. I reflected on it again and again, knowing that if any person needed wisdom from God, I did; for how to

act I did not know, and unless I could get more wisdom than I then had, I would never know; for the teachers of religion of the different sects understood the same passages of scripture so differently as to destroy all confidence in settling the question by an appeal to the Bible.

At length I came to the conclusion that I must either remain in darkness and confusion, or else I must do as James directs, that is, ask of God. I at length came to the determination to “ask of God,” concluding that if he gave wisdom to them that lacked wisdom, and would give liberally, and not upbraid, I might venture.

So, in accordance with this, my determination to ask of God, I retired to the woods to make the attempt. It was on the morning of a beautiful, clear day, early in the spring of eighteen hundred and twenty. It was the first time in my life that I had made such an attempt, for amidst all my anxieties I had never as yet made the attempt to pray vocally. (JS-H 1:10–14)

What followed, of course, was what Mormons refer to as the “First Vision,” a glorious theophany that for Joseph Smith and for his followers changed, well, everything. For the purpose of this lecture, however, I want to focus not on the significance of the vision itself but on the circumstances that enabled Joseph Smith to read this passage in the Epistle of James. I will discuss (1) how the translators came to choose the particular words Joseph Smith read in James 1:5 and (2) how a poor plowboy living on the American frontier came to have access to a King James Bible in his own home.

Though he could not have known this at the time, the passage that Joseph read in James 1:5 brought him into direct contact with the history of English Bible translation stretching back to Wycliffe.²⁶ The KJB translators amalgamated in this single short verse the work of three previous translations. The language is mostly from Tyndale. “If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, . . . and it shall be given him” is all Tyndale. It is characteristically simple and direct in syntax and vocabulary, the kind of prose a plowboy might turn over and over again in his mind and heart. “Upbraideth,” however, is not from Tyndale. It is much too fancy. Tyndale wrote instead that God “casteth no man in the teeth.” All the Protestant translations after Tyndale used this colorful if rather violent phrasing. The KJB translators disliked it and wrestled with other options. According to John Bois’s invaluable notes of their deliberations, they considered both “hitting in the teeth” (even more violent and indecorous) and “without twitting,” which is comically prissy and surely would have rendered the verse infamous had they used it.²⁷ In the end, they reached back to a term first used by Wycliffe and then taken up by the Douay—“upbraideth”—but inverted the negation to improve the cadence: “and upbraideth not.” Their choice was dignified and melodious. Though the diction was perhaps a bit above the range of most plowboys, it seems to have been intelligible to Joseph Smith.

The translators also changed Tyndale's "indifferently" to "liberally" in describing how God "giveth to all men." Tyndale wrote that God giveth to all men "indifferently." This emphasizes God's impartiality, which was very important to Tyndale, a man who cared about plowboys more than prelates, but it misses God's love. The KJB translators opted instead for a word in the Geneva Bible, whose marginal note reinforces the idea that God is "bountiful and liberal" to all who ask, while stressing, polemically, the Protestant doctrine that one needs no human mediator to approach God, but may do so directly.

Thus, the verse that touched Joseph Smith's heart so deeply and launched what Mormons believe is the restoration of Christ's church on earth was the product of a long history of English translations, from Wycliffe on. After Wycliffe died, his body was ordered to be exhumed, burned, and the ashes scattered in the river Swift, a small tributary of the Avon. A poem imagines his ashes flowing from the Swift to the Avon to the Severn to the sea, and from thence as "wide as the waters be."²⁸ Through the KJB, they reached across the Atlantic to touch a boy in upstate New York centuries later. Now every English-speaking Latter-day Saint knows that God "upbraideth not" even if they don't know what "upbraid" means or that the term originated with Wycliffe.

How a poor farm boy from a poor family in rural New York came to have access to a King James Bible in the home illustrates yet another aspect of the story of the KJB in America.²⁹ Through most of the eighteenth century, Bibles were still too expensive and too scarce for common folks in the hinterlands to own. But this all changed by the turn of the century. Two developments lay behind what would become a veritable deluge of KJB editions worldwide: one was technological, the other social.

The technological development had to do with the introduction of cheap paper, power presses, and most of all stereotype printing. The latter in particular opened the way to print Bibles cheap enough for those of very limited means to purchase.

Just as important, if not more so, were social developments that set in motion vast forces in the human landscape. The eighteenth century saw the rise of enthusiastic evangelical movements like Methodism and remarkable figures like Wesley and Whitfield, who mobilized great numbers of people and stirred in them the desire to read the Bible. The same evangelical forces lay behind the emergence of the Sunday school movement,³⁰ missionary societies, and, above all, Bible societies, whose nondenominational purpose was to flood the world with Bibles "without note or comment"—which meant King James Bibles in English-speaking countries. The British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) was organized in 1804 as the result of a request of a poor girl from rural Wales named Mary Jones, who walked many miles barefoot

to purchase a Welsh Bible.³¹ The American Bible Society (ABS) was organized in 1816.³² The success of these societies in placing Bibles staggers the imagination. Within three years of its founding, the BFBS had distributed 1.8 million Bibles or portions of Bibles!³³ The ABS was equally active. In 1829, for example, it printed and distributed 360,000 Bibles—this at a time when the normal print run for books was only 2,000. The ABS was printing over 1 million Bibles a year by the 1860s.³⁴ As Daniell writes, America was in the midst of a “Bible-buying phenomenon, beyond anything seen anywhere else in the world. . . . The Bible [was] the most imported book, and then the most printed, most distributed, most read text in North America. . . . If any book touched the lives of Americans, it was a Bible,” the King James Bible.³⁵

Given the explosion of Bible distribution in America, it is scarcely surprising that a KJB was in the home and touched the life of Joseph Smith in 1820. Indeed, this is entirely consistent with the massive proliferation of KJBs in America, which would continue throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, immensely abetted by groups like the ABS and later by the Gideons, a nondeominational organization begun in Wisconsin in about 1900 by two Bible-loving American salesmen.³⁶ Nor is it surprising that Joseph Smith turned to the KJB to seek guidance for his religious questions. In an America brimming with religious enthusiasm, individuals were encouraged to seek answers directly from their own spiritual encounters with God through reading “the Bible alone.”³⁷ That Joseph Smith felt inspired by reading the Bible to ask God is not unusual. What is unusual is the experience he had when he followed James’s counsel to ask God, who giveth to all men liberally and upbraideth not.

Joseph Smith continued to turn to the KJB throughout his life, and to God. Many of Joseph Smith’s subsequent revelations came in response to reading the KJB. As one historian has said, “Almost every part of Joseph Smith’s prophetic career was connected in some way with the Bible.”³⁸ While he recognized that the KJB was not a flawless translation and even tried his hand at improving the translation—as did other Americans of his era, such as Noah Webster—Joseph Smith loved and admired the King James Bible. He said that “he who reads it oftenest will like it best.”³⁹ It continues to be read, loved, and admired by millions of Mormons today. Latter-day Saints express gratitude for the KJB, for its translators, and for those who have disseminated it.

A President: Abraham Lincoln and the KJB during Mid-Nineteenth-Century America

Another American plowboy profoundly touched by the KJB was Abraham Lincoln, our sixteenth president. Lincoln represents a very different sort of American shaped by the KJB from the Pilgrim and prophet we’ve considered

so far. He did not found a church like Joseph Smith, nor did he even belong to a church like John Winthrop.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, he was among his generation's best readers of the KJB when wrestling with the religious questions raised by a bloody, bitter Civil War. Unlike New England Pilgrims and later Yankee patriots, who generally enjoyed an optimistic sense of Providence guiding America's destiny in its sojourn in a new Eden, Lincoln had to make sense of Providence amid a fallen world. He had to face squarely the problem of evil as posed by the national agony of our bloodiest war, and the problem of sin as posed by the national disgrace of slavery. He had to deal with how Providence applied to the national experience in a fallen world, where America was responsible for the fall. The King James Bible provided a crucial source of Lincoln's public and private reflection on this issue during the Civil War, as it did for his countrymen. The difference is that Lincoln plumbed the Bible's depths more honestly and profoundly, and exploited its rhetorical resources more adroitly, than anybody else.

The depth of Lincoln's reflection derived not from any formal theological study, for he had none, but from long, intimate engagement with the King James Bible.⁴¹ Like Joseph Smith, Lincoln had little formal education. The KJB provided a major component of the curriculum for his meager schooling as a boy. Lincoln himself said that "all our reading [at school] was done from the Bible." Yet, though he had little to read but the Bible, he read it exceedingly well. Lincoln committed to memory many parts of the Bible, which he would often use to clinch points in speeches and debates. Lincoln continued to read the Bible throughout his life, often daily, especially the Psalms, which he told a nurse at the White House "are the best, for I find in them something for every day in the week." A friend remembered that Lincoln "read few books but mastered all he read, of which the Bible was chief, which gave the basis to his character, and which partly moulded his style."⁴²

One detects the influence of KJB style everywhere in Lincoln's writings. He deploys biblical metaphor, for example, in his "House Divided" speech: "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free." Similarly, the Gettysburg Address is shot through with biblical style. Although only the final phrase, "shall not perish from the earth," is "explicitly biblical," from its famous opening line, "Four score and seven years ago" (which echoes the KJB "three score and ten"), to the concluding "climactic anaphora, 'that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth,'" the language of the Gettysburg Address "is both plain and dignified, resonant in its very ordinariness . . . [in ways] inspired by the diction of the King James Version."⁴³

In Lincoln we see how the KJB can become, in the hands of a capable writer, a salutary influence on prose style in English. Similarly, Robert Alter

has demonstrated in detail the effect of the King James Bible on the prose style of other great American writers, including Herman Melville, William Faulkner, Saul Bellow, Ernest Hemingway, Marilynne Robinson, and Cormac McCarthy. As a prose stylist of the first order, Lincoln belongs high on the list of American authors who have tapped the KJB to create literary masterpieces.

In Lincoln's greatest speech, his second inaugural address, the influence of the KJB is more than stylistic, though it is clearly that.⁴⁴ It is substantive as well. This greatest of all presidential inaugurals articulates a complex understanding of the workings of Providence profoundly shaped by Lincoln's reading of the KJB. In it Lincoln apportions blame for slavery, accepts guilt on both sides of the conflict, acknowledges the incompleteness of human understanding of evil, and asserts his faith that somehow God's ways are purposeful and just, however incomprehensible the workings of Providence seem to those who must live through history. Lincoln also points the nation to a postwar future of healing and forgiveness by forcefully evoking the biblical concept of charity. It is an altogether extraordinary instance of biblically based reflection on civic issues of the greatest consequence—a sort of secular sermon by the president to the nation.

The speech was long in gestation. It reflects years of KJB-inspired reflection. This is evident in Lincoln's unpublished musing entitled "Meditations on the Divine Will," jotted down two years before. In these musings, we see a president groping to make sense of the biblical notion, so dear to the Puritans, that God's will is somehow discernible in America's national life:

The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both *may* be, and one *must* be wrong. God can not be for, and *against* the same thing at the same time. In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party. . . . I am almost ready to say this is probably true—that God wills this contest, and wills that it shall not end yet. . . . He could have either *saved* or *destroyed* the Union without a human contest. . . . Yet the contest proceeds.⁴⁵

Lincoln lived in a country flooded with Bibles, as we have seen. In the Civil War, these were trotted out by both sides to justify and condemn slavery, persuading neither.⁴⁶ The discursive situation in the public sphere for Lincoln resembles that in the religious sphere for Joseph Smith: Americans read the same Bible only to prove the other side is in error.⁴⁷ Likewise Lincoln shrewdly observed in the second inaugural address, "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other."

"Once the Bible has been introduced in this fashion," notes Robert Alter, "biblical quotations and weighted phrases drawn from the language of the

Bible are predominant for the rest of the Address.” Lincoln puzzles over how it is “that any men should dare to ask a just God’s assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces”—alluding to Genesis 3:19.⁴⁸ And then, as if catching himself in a self-righteous thought, he quotes from Luke 6:37: “But let us not judge that we be not judged.” After this, Lincoln asserts the thesis that “the Almighty has his own purposes,” then frames the most remarkably sophisticated meditation on Providence the country had ever heard from a public leader. It is framed between two scriptural quotations: Matthew 18:7 (“Woe unto the world because of offences”) and Psalms 19:9 (“the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether”). Let me quote:

The Almighty has His own purposes. “Woe unto the world because of offences; for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh!” If we shall suppose that American Slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South, this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said “the judgments of the Lord, are true and righteous altogether.”⁴⁹

Lincoln invites America to understand its providential relationship to God in a way that is richer, more complex, and more nuanced than what he received from the Puritans, or than what was being propounded from the pulpits of the day by even the best theologians. His contemporaries proffered simple biblically based readings of the war: The victory of the North vindicated providence and validated vengeance against the other. Mark Noll writes:

The contrast between the learned religious thinkers and Lincoln in how they interpreted the war poses the great theological puzzle of the Civil War. Abraham Lincoln, a layman with no standing in a church and no formal training as a theologian, propounded a thick, complex view of God’s rule over the world and a morally nuanced picture of America’s destiny. The country’s best theologians, by contrast, presented a thin, simple view of God’s providence and a morally juvenile view of the nation and its fate.⁵⁰

In the final paragraph of his second inaugural address, Lincoln turns from looking backwards to discern God’s providence in the war, and looks forward to describe God’s will for those who shall have survived it. God’s

will was clear to Lincoln. It was not to exact revenge, as so many who read the same Bible were calling for. Rather, it was to fulfill the repeated appeal of Old Testament prophets to care for the widow and orphan, and the central demand of the New Testament to act with charity for all:

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just, and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.

The text of Lincoln's second inaugural address is now engraved on the wall of the Lincoln Memorial, a tribute to its lapidary eloquence and lasting importance. Such a speech is an inestimable gift to America. In an important sense, it is the bequest not only of a great president but also of a great Bible translation.

A Preacher: Martin Luther King Jr. and the KJB in Twentieth-Century America

One hundred years later, on the centennial marking Lincoln's signing of the Proclamation of Emancipation, Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and gave another classic American speech informed by the King James Bible that dealt with slavery and its aftermath. In "I Have a Dream," King wielded the Bible, as Lincoln did, to call the country to repentance.

A century after the Civil War, America still struggled with the legacy of slavery. King felt that the Emancipation Proclamation had brought Americans "nearer to the Red Sea, but it did not guarantee [their] passage through parted waters."⁵¹ As this biblical metaphor suggests, he did not see Americans as having entered the promised land upon arriving in the New World, as had John Winthrop. Rather, King reminded the nation that the American Dream had been, and still too often was, a nightmare for those who came to America on the "middle passage" as slaves. Even so, like Winthrop, Martin Luther King Jr. drew upon biblical imagery and rhetoric to urge America to become a city on a hill and a land of promise for all its citizens.

King's biblical rhetoric still had purchase in twentieth-century America. Although the United States was far more secular than it had been when Lincoln gave his second inaugural address, it still continued to be a Bible-buying and Bible-revering nation. The KJB continued to be the dominant American Bible, even though its preeminence was beginning to wane. Other translations were now available, modern translations, including some by Americans. These translations boasted to be based on better ancient texts and to be rendered in

more accessible English. The gradual dislodgement of the KJB as America's Bible, which continues today, occurred first in seminaries and divinity schools. As a product of such programs, Dr. King was very aware of newer Bible translations and occasionally drew from them in his sermons and speeches.

Yet as son, grandson, and great-grandson of Baptist preachers, King was also the product of a long line of ministers steeped in the language of the KJB. King learned the KJB from their pulpits and in Sunday school at Ebenezer Baptist Church. He also picked up KJB language and rhetoric from the rich vein of spirituals and hymns. And he heard the KJB at home. An aunt and his grandmother Williams, a gifted storyteller, would regale the children night after night with vividly told Bible stories.⁵² Like Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr. memorized scripture so that "when King was five years old, he could [already] recite passages of Scripture from memory."⁵³

As a result of all this, "the most important source of his language was the King James translation of the Bible. . . . He was so immersed in the language and imagery of the Bible that he would later use it almost unconsciously. Even when he was delivering material . . . inspired by the words of other preachers, he would add turns of phrase to make his source material sound more Biblical."⁵⁴

This biblicism is conspicuous in "I Have a Dream" and partly accounts for its resonance with Americans.⁵⁵ It is evident in the speech's metaphors, many of which have counterparts in the Bible: for example, "long night of their captivity," "dark and desolate valley of segregation," "cup of bitterness and hatred," and "hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope."⁵⁶ The influence of the KJB is evident in patterns of parallel clauses that give King's speech an almost incantatory effect as he repeats phrases like "we are not satisfied," "I have a dream," and "let freedom ring." The immediate source of this rhetorical pattern is the pulpit rhetoric in the Black church, but this, in turn, was influenced by translations of Hebrew poetry in the KJB. Without understanding the nature of Hebrew poetry, the KJB translators transmitted its chief characteristic, parallelism, in memorable English.⁵⁷

The KJB influence in "I Have a Dream" is most obvious in two quotations from the Old Testament. One occurs in the paragraph built around the refrain "We cannot be satisfied," which ends "No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." The image comes of course from Amos 5:24. Similarly, King quotes from Isaiah 40 in the "I have a dream" passage: "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together" (Isaiah 40:4). King's

biblical language, like Lincoln's, calls America to a better future. Like Lincoln, Joseph Smith, and John Winthrop, Martin Luther King Jr. speaks to a backsliding America in the prophetic language of the KJB.

Conclusion: Thinner Air

It is hard to imagine an American today, speaking to the country in a secular setting such as a civil rights march or presidential inaugural, offering a speech so redolent of the Bible. To be sure, the Bible is still revered in America, but it has become a problematic guest in public settings. We still invite it to presidential inaugurations and other formal occasions; we just don't want this guest to speak or be spoken about. The KJB is now more honored and revered than opened and read.

Let me conclude by invoking one final image: the KJB at three presidential inaugurations—the inaugurations of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Barack Obama. George Washington initiated the tradition of taking the presidential oath of office with his hand on the King James Bible. Washington put his hand on an open Bible, typifying the way the Bible was still very much an open book for Americans. Abraham Lincoln not only took the oath on an open King James Bible, he drew deeply from it in his inaugural address. By then the KJB was very much part of our national discourse. Barack Obama also took the oath on the KJB. In fact, he requested to use Lincoln's Bible. But Lincoln's KJB remained closed during the oath, and it did not deeply inform President Obama's address. Without intending to be critical of President Obama, I see this as symptomatic in the story of the KJB in America as we celebrate the quatercentenary of its publication. The KJB is still an important feature in American culture, but it is increasingly more important for its symbolic value than for its substantive contribution to the culture. In this sense, I suppose you in England may say that our King James has become somewhat like your kings and queens: an honored figurehead, but not essential to the actual operation of church and state.

In its next century the KJB will no doubt continue to be part of the air we breathe in America, but likely less pervasive in the national atmosphere and less vital to our cultural life. Some will not lament or even notice the demise of this great volume. But for some of us, the cultural air in America will seem thinner as a result.

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Department. Dr. Tanner received a BA in English from Brigham Young University in 1974 (magna cum laude and Highest Honors), and a PhD from the University of California at Berkeley in 1980. He was an assistant professor at The Florida State University before coming to BYU, where he holds the rank of Professor of English. He has also been a Senior Fulbright Lecturer in Brazil. Dr. Tanner's first professional love is teaching. He is the recipient of several teaching awards, along with other academic honors. John Tanner is married to Susan Winder Tanner. They currently reside in Brazil, where he has been serving as president of the Brazil São Paulo South Mission since July 1, 2011.

1. William Shakespeare, *King Richard II*, act 2, scene 1, line 40.

2. Perry Miller, "The Garden of Eden and the Deacon's Meadow," *American Heritage* 7 (December 1955): 54; cited in *The Bible in America: Essays in Cultural History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch and Mark A. Noll (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 5–6.

3. John Alden, "The Bible as Printed Word," in *The Bible and Bibles in America*, ed. Ernest S. Frerichs (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 9.

4. Robert Alter, *Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 1, 6.

5. Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 372.

6. Noll, *America's God*, 372.

7. In 2002, 41 percent of Americans reported a preference for the KJB, while the NIV garnered 45 percent of Bible sales in Christian bookstores. See Jennifer Robison, "The Word on Bible-Buying," Gallup Polls, June 18, 2002, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/6217/Word-BibleBuying.aspx>. However, buyers increasingly prefer a Bible translation that is easier to understand. There are significant demographic as well as denominational differences that affect preferences for Bible translations. See "Grey Matter: Research on Denominational Uses of Bible Translations," released May 4, 2004, http://www.greymatterresearch.com/index_files/Bible_Versions.htm.

8. Alden, "Bible as Printed Word," 11. The famous "Mayflower Edition" of the KJB, normally on display in Pilgrim Hall in Plymouth Mass., is featured in the traveling exhibit "Manifold Greatness: The Creation and Afterlife of the King James Bible," <http://www.manifoldgreatness.org/index.php/late/historic-american-bibles/>. The exhibit also includes pictures of the Lincoln Bible.

9. Robert Alter discusses the KJB's stylistic influence on these and other works from American high literary culture in *Pen of Iron*. For a more superficial overview of the influence of the KJB on American literature, see also Melvyn Bragg, *The Book of Books: The Radical Impact of the King James Bible, 1611–2011* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2011), 164–81.

10. Sacvan Bercovitch, "The Biblical Basis of the American Myth," in *The Bible in American Arts and Letters*, ed. Giles B. Gunn (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), 219, 221, 223.

11. All citations from the sermon are taken from the text reproduced as appendix A in Matthew S. Holland's *Bonds of Affection: Civic Charity and the Making of America—Winthrop, Jefferson, and Lincoln* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2007), 261–75.

12. Matthew S. Holland, "Remembering John Winthrop—Hawthorne's Suggestion," *Perspectives on Political Science* 36 (Winter 2007): 9–12. See also Holland, *Bonds of Affection*, 88 n. 39.

13. Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founding Father* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

14. For an eloquent discussion of how American Puritans appropriated the biblical types, see the lecture given by Neal A. Lambert, "Pilgrim and Puritans: The Meaning of the *Mayflower* in the Twenty-First Century," KBYU FM, November 15, 2001, <http://www.byub.org/talks/Talk.aspx?id=2467>.

15. Quoted by Lambert (typescript, p. 8) and by Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1975; rpt. 2011), 107–8.

16. Similarly, in his history *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Cotton Mather refers to John Winthrop as "Nehemias Americanus" after Nehemiah, the biblical prophet who led the Jews back from Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana; or, The Ecclesiastical History of New-England, from Its First Planting in the Year 1620 unto the Year of Our Lord 1698. In Seven Books*, 2 vols. (Hartford: Silas Andrus and Sons, 1853), 1:118.

17. Alden, "Bible as Printed Word," 12.

18. Alden notes Harry Stout's argument that the KJB had more appeal than Geneva because it better supports the notion that God's covenant binds him to a people rather than to individuals, the emphasis in the Geneva notes. Alden, "Bible as Printed Word," 12–13. See Harry S. Stout, "Work and Order in Colonial New England," in Hatch and Noll, *Bible in America*, 19–38.

19. Alden, "Bible as Printed Word," 12.

20. David Daniell, *The Bible in English* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003), 581, 642–43, 653–54, 768.

21. Jon Nielson and Royal Skousen, "How Much of the King James Bible Is William Tyndale's?" *Reformation* 3 (1998): 49–74.

22. "The Translators to the Reader," in *The Holy Bible, Conteyning the Old Testament, and the New* (London: Robert Barker, 1611).

23. David Daniell, *Tyndale's New Testament* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996), ix–x. In *The Bible in English*, 429–30, Daniell expands this list to include proverbial phrases that enter the KJB through the Geneva Bible. Daniell feels that the KJB translators were hampered by having to base their translation on the Bishops' Bible rather than on the more popular and less stuffy Geneva.

24. Quoted in Daniell, "Introduction," in *Tyndale's New Testament*, viii. Daniell wrote the standard modern scholarly biography of Tyndale: *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994).

25. For an LDS discussion of this background to the First Vision, see Milton L. Backman, "Awakenings in the Burned-over District: New Light on the Historical Setting of the First Vision," *BYU Studies* 9, no. 3 (1969): 301–20.

26. For a fuller discussion of the KJB translation of James 1:5, see my forthcoming article "The Aural Authority of the King James Bible: 'Appointed to be Read in Churches,'" in *The King James Bible and the Restoration* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University, Religious Studies Center, 2011).

27. John Bois, *Translating for King James: Notes Made by a Translator of the King James Bible*, trans. and ed. Ward Allen (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1969), 87. Scholars are deeply indebted to Ward Allen, who discovered and meticulously translated John Bois's notes, taken at Stationer's Hall, London, during the final revision of the Epistles.

28. See Benson Bobrick, *Wide as the Waters: The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution It Inspired* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 73.

29. See Richard Bennett's unpublished article "'Without Note or Comment': The Holy Bible Rising to the Restoration" for a discussion of how the explosion of inexpensive, widely available Bibles in the early nineteenth century impacted the emergence of Mormonism. For general discussions of the flood of Bibles in America, see Paul C. Gutjahr, *An American Bible: A History of the Good Book in the United States, 1777–1880* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); and Daniell, "Mathew Carey and the American Bible Flood," in *Bible in English*, especially 634–58.

30. For histories of the development of the Sunday school movement in England and America, see Anne M. Boylan, *Sunday School: The Formation of an American Institution, 1790–1880* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988); Philip B. Cliff, *The Rise and Development of the Sunday School Movement in England, 1780–1980* (Redhill, UK: National Christian Educational Council, 1986); Thomas Lacquer, *Religion and Respectability: Sunday Schools and the Working Class Culture* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1977). The influence of Sunday Schools on Bible reading in mid-nineteenth-century America is comically captured in a famous scene from *Tom Sawyer* in which Tom trades the spoils from his white-washing gambit for tokens that prove he has memorized two thousand verses of the Bible. He hopes to impress Becky Thatcher but is exposed as a fraud when he cannot recite the names of even two apostles.

31. For a modern history of the British and Foreign Bible Society, see Leslie Howsam, *Cheap Bibles: Nineteenth-Century Publishing and the British and Foreign Bible Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

32. For histories of the American Bible Society, see W. P. Strickland, *History of the American Bible Society from Its Organization to the Present Time* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1849); Henry Otis Dwight, *Centennial History of the American Bible Society* (New York: Macmillan, 1916).

33. William Canton, *History of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1904), 1:318; quoted in Bennett, "'Without Note or Comment.'"

34. See "Fiftieth Annual Report of the American Bible Society, Presented May 10, 1866," in *Annual Reports of the American Bible Society*, vol. 4 (New York: American Bible Society, 1871), 225.

35. Daniell, *Bible in English*, 703.

36. The Gideons have been enormously successful in placing English Bibles, the great majority of them KJBs. They presented George H. W. Bush with the five hundred millionth Bible in 1990! See Mark A. Noll, *The Old Religion in a New World: The History of North American Christianity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 269–70. See entire chapter, "Day-to-Day Christian Spirituality and the Bible," 253–74.

37. See Mark A. Noll, "The Bible Alone," in *America's God*, 370–76, and Nathan O. Hatch, "Sola Scriptura and Novus Ordo Seclorum" in Hatch and Noll, *Bible in America*, 59–74. Hatch quotes Joseph Smith's mother, Lucy Mack Smith, as follows: "I said in my heart that there was not then upon the earth the religion I sought. I therefore determined to examine my Bible, and taking Jesus and the disciples as my guide, to endeavor to obtain from God that which man could neither give nor take away. . . . The Bible I intended should be my guide to life and salvation." Hatch, "Sola Scriptura," 69.

38. Kent P. Jackson, "Joseph Smith and the Bible," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 63, no. 1 (2010): 25.
39. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 2:14.
40. See William J. Wolff, *The Religion of Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Seabury Press, 1963), especially appendix 3, "Lincoln Not a Church Member," 201–3.
41. See David Elton Trueblood, "Lincoln and the Bible," chapter 3 in *Abraham Lincoln: Theologian of American Anguish* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 48–71.
42. Trueblood, *Abraham Lincoln*, 49–50, 53, 58.
43. Alter, *Pen of Iron*, 12–13.
44. For a fine book-length analysis of the speech, see Ronald C. White Jr., *Lincoln's Greatest Speech: The Second Inaugural* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002).
45. Photographic image of original document at <http://dl.lib.brown.edu/catalog/catalog.php?verb=render&id=1210012353437500&view=pageturner&PHPSESSID=b7c3db07179a0422af6bf3622b48013a>.
46. See the final three chapters in Noll, *America's God*, 386–438. Also see Daniell, *Bible in English*, 717–26. For a popular account of the KJB and the American Civil War, see Bragg, *Book of Books*, 229–58.
47. See Joseph Smith–History 1:9.
48. Alter, *Pen of Iron*, 16.
49. Photographic images of original document at <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=mal&fileName=mal3/436/4361300/malpage.db&recNum=0>.
50. Noll, *America's God*, 434.
51. Lewis V. Baldwin, *The Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Boundaries of Law, Politics, and Religion* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002), 131–32.
52. Frederick L. Downing, *To See the Promised Land: The Faith Pilgrimage of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Macon, Ga.: Peters and Mercer University Press, 1986), 52–53.
53. Drew D. Hansen, *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Speech that Inspired a Nation* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003) 101.
54. Hansen, *Dream*, 101.
55. Hansen, *Dream*, 103.
56. Hansen, *Dream*, 101–3.
57. See Alter, *Pen of Iron*, 146–83, on the use of parataxis by modern American novelists.