

David Daniell. *The Bible in English:
Its History and Influence.*

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Reviewed by Richard Y. Duerden

The question “Is the Bible true?” may not be the most important or most interesting question about the Bible. After all, for the Bible’s first millennium and a half as canonical, the question likely would have elicited the response, “What a silly question. Of course it’s true; it’s the word of God.” And to demonstrate that the Bible is indeed the word of God, your respondents probably would not try to illustrate how accurately the Bible narrative corresponds with history. Rather, they would remind you of what the Bible has done and what it can do for you, your family, your community, and your culture; the question they would ask is, “What hath God wrought?” Rather than a correspondence test of truth, they would presuppose a more direct, pragmatic test of truth. The tactic is sound; the practical efficacy of God’s word as the demonstration of its truth was recommended by the Savior himself (John 7:17 and 8:31–32). The point of the Bible is not to describe the world; it is to change it.

David Daniell’s *The Bible in English* is an engaging, readable, and argumentatively forthright survey of what the Bible has done in the English-speaking world. He discusses 190 complete or partial translations of the Bible from seventh-century Anglo-Saxon England through late twentieth-century America, but he also argues, sometimes by inference and sometimes quantitatively, for the overwhelming transformative impact of this book on our culture. As Yeats said, “That is no country for young men”: the erudition required to survey all of English-speaking culture for a millennium and more can only be the product of a lifetime of devoted scholarship. The stunning contribution here is not only to survey the history of how and how many Bibles were made, but to dare map their routes through the literature, culture, and thought of Anglo-American societies—not just how we got the Bible, but what it did to us once we had it.

Though comprehensive chronologically, the book narrows its focus polemically. Daniell wears his predilections lightly, but on his sleeve: he champions the Reformation over Roman Catholicism and gives relative emphasis to the New Testament over the Hebrew scriptures. His study is an immensely learned scholarly and cultural history by a committed Pauline Christian, and in that commitment Daniell inaugurates another round of argument in early modern historiography, directly confronting the revisionism of the last generation of Reformation historians, particularly Christopher Haigh and Eamon Duffy. To assert that ritual-based Catholicism remained vital well into the Bible-based Protestant Reformation, revisionist historians have drawn their arguments from festivals and church architecture, from wills and churchwardens' account books. Daniell successfully dwells instead on the sheer numbers of printed texts and the accessibility of the vernacular: at least two million Bibles printed in the century after 1525, in a nation with a population of six million; the New Testament read all the way through in church services three times a year, the Old Testament once a year, and the Psalms every month; duodecimo New Testaments in the pockets of apprentices and shepherds; biblical phrasing permeating the language of English law, poetry, fiction, hymn, and oratorio.

Daniell tracks both recent discoveries and ongoing scholarship with brief discussion in the text and elaborations in endnotes, but his book is also readable and rewarding for a popular audience. So let us face the question raised for Latter-day Saint readers by our eighth Article of Faith: how far is it translated correctly? In general, the Bible has been transmitted and translated remarkably well: "The Greek New Testament is the best-attested document in the world, surviving in about five thousand manuscripts," but "there are still problems" for translators (3–5). Early Latin manuscripts of the Bible vary widely. In 1516, Erasmus noted hundreds of errors in the Vulgate and therefore offered a new Latin translation alongside his issuance of the first printed critical Greek text. Erasmus had one of the greatest minds of the Renaissance, but his critical Greek text was necessarily a rush job with errors of its own. He could find no Greek manuscript with the last verses of the Book of Revelation, so he back-translated them from the Vulgate's Latin into Greek. He also announced that he could find no Greek manuscript authority for the "Johannine comma," the added passage in 1 John 5:7–8 saying that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one. Someone produced a Greek manuscript that did give authority for it, and he therefore included the passage in his critical text. He later concluded that someone else created a forgery to deceive him. Nevertheless, Erasmus's Greek text came to be regarded as the *Textus Receptus*, or "received text," the

basis of all Greek New Testament translation until the 1880s, including the King James Version. The *Textus Receptus*, in turn, has been challenged and improved in many details by later textual discoveries and scholarship. The process of “translating correctly” goes on.

Daniell analyzes all the major translations, but their accuracy is only part of his story. Above all, he traces their impact on English language, art, belief, and culture, and he pauses often to reflect on modern scholars’ astonishing neglect of the Bible as cultural force, as if the book had been airbrushed out of the cultural portrait.

The Bible is the core, the heart, of Anglo-American culture. The earliest substantial bodies of written Old English include the gloss in the Lindisfarne Gospels and translations from Exodus in the law codes of King Alfred, who even saw himself in terms of Old Testament kings. Almost all of the 30,000 lines of extant Old English poetry are explicitly Christian; three-fourths of Middle English lyrics are religious.

In every age, Daniell urges, a proliferation of Bible texts stimulates thought and creativity, and the suppression of biblical reading dries up thinking generally. The earliest complete English Bibles appeared in manuscripts circulating in the 1380s. (Daniell discusses the possibility that it was John Trevisa rather than Wycliffe who was behind the translation.) Because the translation was attributed to religious dissenters, it was forbidden, and in 1401 reading scripture in English was made a heresy punishable by burning alive. The effect of religious censorship, Daniell argues, was to diminish writing and thinking of all sorts; the age of Chaucer petered out in a century of repression. On the other hand, the outpouring of scripture that began with William Tyndale and Miles Coverdale, with the first printed New Testament in English in 1526 and the first complete printed English Bible in 1535, opened up “a vast, rich sunlit territory, a land flowing with the milk and honey of new images and metaphors, and the rediscovered ancient monuments of God-given religious, political and social revelation” (160). An old historian’s proverb says, “Without Erasmus, no Luther.” Daniell adds, “Without Tyndale, no Shakespeare” (772).

Daniell works to reverse old prejudices: the Bible used by Shakespeare and Milton, the Geneva Bible of 1560 and after, despite its reputation, was neither combative nor tendentious (only ten of its thousands of marginal notes even refer to the Roman Catholic Church); the Catholic Rheims-Douay translation of 1582, on the other hand, was adversarial indeed, large parts of its preface “written in bile” (367). Although Daniell is consistently Protestant in his tone, he offers no comfort to the more conservative evangelicals who cling to the *Textus Receptus* and the King James Version as the sole word of God. (For the arguments of these ardent adherents to one

translation only, enter “King James Version” and “authority” or “history” into any internet search engine.) On the contrary, he regards the “systematic destruction” of the Geneva Bible “for political and, above all, crude commercial reasons” and its replacement by the King James Version as “one of the tragedies of our culture” (319, 347, 442). The revision spurred on by King James was intended from the start to silence religious dissent and was overseen by the ruthless Archbishop Richard Bancroft; it stripped away the scholarly aids to readers provided by the Geneva Bible; it turned its back on advances in textual scholarship from the Continent; and it retained and even increased the use of a diction that was already archaic in 1611. Even so, enough of Tyndale’s directness and the Geneva translators’ understanding shone through to make the KJV not only a monument of English prose style, but “the bestselling book in the world” (427). How did the KJV achieve its triumph over other translations? Not through its superiority, but through very mundane commercial maneuvers: a printing monopoly and a decades-long legal battle over the printing rights, with large sums of money at stake. The ensuing centuries ring with recognition of shortcomings in the KJV, defenses of it, and principles driving revision and fresh translation.

Across the Atlantic, in America, the biblical fervor that accompanied the dissidents who settled beginning in 1620 gradually declined over the course of a century until the Great Awakening of the 1740s. Bible printing in America began in Philadelphia in 1777; by 1800 there were seventy available printings of the Bible; by 1840 over a thousand. What spirit drove this new outpouring of scripture? The first Congresses refused to have anything to do with the printing of Bibles: though one resolution of 1782 did “approve” of Robert Aitken’s printing endeavors, no support was offered. Daniell’s examination of many individual editions and his characterization of the larger trends of Bible publishing in America, as well as his attention to the surprising paucity of indigenous American translations, should be of great interest to students of the Restoration.

Students of the Restoration, however, will be disappointed by the author’s treatment of the Book of Mormon. Daniell has been a friend of Brigham Young University for over a decade; the journal of the Tyndale Society, *Reformation*, of which he was the founding editor, was edited and prepared for publication at BYU, and he has been invited to speak on campus on a few occasions. But his LDS audience will be dismayed at his discussion of the Book of Mormon: in two pages, rife with errors, sandwiched between *Ben Hur* and Hollywood Bible epics, he dismisses the Book of Mormon as a biblical fiction. The best reply to such a slight may

be the words of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale*: "How will this grieve you, when you shall come to clearer knowledge!"

Daniell might have had a brilliant book if he had heeded the final proposition of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: "What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." The superficiality of his treatment of the Book of Mormon is symptomatic of his book's last three hundred pages: presuming to speak with authority while transparently dependent on the scholarship of others. While his first thirty chapters are often bold, insightful, and innovative, his last ten chapters take him too far from his expertise, and the book ends not with a bang but with a drawn-out whimper. He is a fine surveyor of others' scholarship (for several years he wrote the chapter on Shakespeare for *The Year's Work in English Studies*), and his book's last chapters could serve as a good bibliographic review essay or a fine introduction to the study of translations in the last two centuries, but they offer nothing new. *The New English Bible*, *The Jerusalem Bible*, *The New American Bible*, *The New International Version*, *The Good News Bible*, *The Revised English Bible*—none receives more than a page or two. On modern translations, Daniell will not supplant F. F. Bruce's *The English Bible*, or S. L. Greenslade's *Cambridge History of the Bible*. However, he holds his finger on the pulse of a certain kind of authority, an authority that comes from association with origins and foundings. For the Bible in the English language, those origins lie in Tyndale and Coverdale, and Daniell resoundingly endorses their authority.

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