

The linguistic legacy of the King James Bible is immense. But, **David Crystal** discovers, it is not quite the fount of common expressions that many of its admirers believe it to be.

How are the Mighty Fallen?

I did not know what to expect when I began my study of the King James Bible's influence on the English language. I knew what I did not know – one of Donald Rumsfeld's 'known unknowns' – and that was all. In 2004, in Chapter 11 of my book *The Stories of English*, I had written this:

The King James Bible – either directly, from its own translators, or indirectly, as a glass through which we can see its predecessors – has contributed far more to English in the way of idiomatic or quasi-proverbial expressions than any other literary source.

But just how many expressions, exactly? Like everyone else who has written on the influence of the King James Bible on the English language, I had listed a few dozen examples – 'out of the mouths of babes', 'fly in the ointment' and so on – but I had no clear sense of just how many such items there were in the Bible as a whole. Nor, it seems, had anyone else. When I asked people how many idioms like these they thought appeared in the Bible, I received answers ranging from a hundred to a thousand.

It was time to do a proper count. But that would mean reading the whole Bible from beginning to end and such a challenge needs special motivation. This was provided by the year 2011, the 400th anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible, and by Oxford

University Press, who wished to capture the moment through a series of new publications, notably, Gordon Campbell's quatercentenary edition and his accompanying account of the work's compilation and later publishing history.

So I read the whole work, from the first words of Genesis to the last words of the Apocrypha, twice. I looked out for any phrase that I felt had come to be a part of modern English, whether people were aware of the biblical connection or not. And I made two discoveries. First, there are not as many of them as people suggest. In fact, I found only 257. And, second, most of these do not originate in

the King James translation at all. Rather they are to be found in Tyndale's translation nearly a century earlier, or the Bishops' Bible of 1568 (in the 1602 edition used by the King James translators), or Wycliffe's translation (the first into English, in 1388), or one of the



English oak Bible boxes from the reign of Charles II.

other major versions of the 16th century. By my count, only 18 expressions are unique to the King James Bible: they include 'how are the mighty fallen', 'the root of the matter' and 'a thorn in the flesh'.

This relatively small number means that we must not exaggerate the influence of the King James Bible on English. I was right to say, in my quotation above, that no other literary source has matched this edition for the number of influential expressions that it contains. Not even Shakespeare coined or popularised so many idioms. But the exaggerations are widespread and seem to be growing as 2011 approaches. In an article in *The Tablet* published in April 2010, entitled 'England's Gift to the World', the MP Frank Field (director of the 2011 Trust established to coordinate the anniversary celebrations) quoted the broadcaster Melvyn Bragg as saying that the King James Bible is 'quite simply the DNA of the English language'. A striking metaphor, but a hugely misleading one. DNA is in every cell we possess; but the King James Bible is by no means in every word we write.

Only a limited number of King James phrases have entered the language. There are actually many features of its style that are no longer used or liked in English. Not used? Consider a sentence such as 'In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die', where much of the grammar is obsolete. Not liked? I suspect that many readers of *History Today* were taught in school that it was 'bad grammar' to begin a sentence with 'And'. But what do we find in the opening Chapter of Genesis? Thirty-one verses. All but two of them begin with And – 'And God said ... And God made ...' Only the opening verse ('In the beginning God created the heaven and earth') and verse 27 ('So God created ...') do anything different.

What the King James Bible did was put before the

public in an unprecedented way a range of biblical expressions that would capture the public imagination, so much so that it is now impossible to find an area of contemporary expression that does not from time to time use them, either literally or playfully. History is no exception, as this brief selection from texts and sites illustrates. Leo and Diane Dillon's illustrated book on world cultural history has the title *To Every Thing There is a Season*. A popular piece of software for organising information about family history is called *My Brother's Keeper*. An article on famous historical personalities was headed 'There were giants in the earth in those days'. Because of its welcoming immigration history, the USA is often called 'a land of milk and honey', though the message was different in this headline from the *Independent*: 'The US, a land of milk and honey and mass obesity.' Sometimes the reference is within the text. Volume 19 of Thomas Carlyle's *History of Friedrich II of Prussia*, published in 1865, uses an unexpected plural form: 'This Siege of Dresden is the alpha to whatever omegas there may be.'

St John's Gospel begins with a powerful linguistic metaphor: 'In the beginning was the Word.' The expression has generated countless imitations, usually making a historical point about a particular area of knowledge. Here is a random selection of three from periodicals or websites: 'In the beginning was the Big Bang' (in cosmology); 'In the beginning was the IBM card' (in computing); 'In the beginning was the worm' (in zoology). Nor is *History Today* immune. In June 1961 an article on the Hebrew story of the Creation was headed 'In the Beginning'.

David Crystal is the author of *Begat: The King James Bible and the English Language* (Oxford University Press, 2010). For further articles on this subject, visit: www.historytoday.com/religious