Shaping our cultural memories

The biblical text has had an enormous influence on British culture. But we must also take notice of what is not there.

Stephen R Holmes

Steve Holmes is Senior Lecturer in Systematic Theology at University of St Andrews.

Sometimes, it is what is not there that is most revealing. The influence on culture of the translation of the Bible authorised by King James VI of Scotland, just after he had become King James I of England, demonstrates this.

There are a hundred ways to demonstrate the enormous influence of the King James Bible on British culture, showing how the text that is there has shaped our language, in particular, in decisive ways. A recently published book, *Scapegoats, Shambles & Shibboleths*,[1] entertainingly shows just how many common idioms find their origin in this text. Examples such as 'a fly in the ointment'; 'a drop in the ocean'; or 'a man after my own heart' make the point effectively.

It is a point I tried to demonstrate in my contribution to a forthcoming book resourcing next year's BibleFresh campaign by looking at popular music. Of course, there are rock and pop lyricists who find constant inspiration in the Bible, including some of the most iconic and successful – Bob Dylan and U2 spring to mind. But this is deliberate. Steve Harmon has showed convincingly just how intentional the use of scriptural words and images by U2 is, looking at the typical set lists for their tours, and showing how liturgically sensitive placement of the most biblical songs at key moments shapes the concert experience.[2]

What I find most interesting, however, is the sense that any lyricist who is interested in exploring and experimenting with the language, and the culture it reflects and shapes, finds him- or herself echoing biblical words, particularly those from King James's great translation, unwillingly or unconsciously. Chris Martin of Coldplay is on record as commenting that he enjoyed communal singing in church as a child, but either quickly lost, or never had, any Christian commitment; indeed, he suggested that many of his lyrics have their roots in the quest for spirituality that remains once Christianity has been dismissed from the agenda.[3] And yet snatches of biblical language – particularly, interestingly, the Lord's Prayer – appear again and again in his songs (to give only two examples, try 'Kingdom Come' and 'Yes').

Franz Ferdinand, who a couple of years back were the coolest band in Scotland, are very conscious about their use of biblical language and imagery: it is done with deliberate intent, and savage irony, again and again on the three CDs they have so far released. This is perhaps most obvious and powerful in 'The Fallen', the first track on their second CD, *You Could Have it so Much Better*. The song describes a drug pusher in language deliberately evocative of the miracle of the feeding of the 5000 in the Gospels. We might consider this to be gratuitously offensive (although there is an interesting and plaintive groping toward faith in the bridge, which suggests that belief in God is inevitable, but that the sheer brutality of organised religion makes any formal engagement impossible); it is eloquent testimony, however, to the sheer cultural power of the language of the Bible, the Bible of King James. Self-conscious cool on a twenty-first-century Glasgow dance floor will wander around gender ambiguities, and pop-culture references, and celebrations of the dance drugs – but it still, seemingly, cannot avoid the ancient measured cadences of the Bible translated at the orders of King James. When Stephen Fry entitled his autobiography *Moab is*

my Washpot,[4] he was reflecting the same reality. This text remains an inescapable reference point for British culture.

Or at least its language does. These rhythms, these cadences have wormed their way inside us, and will not soon come out. According to one of the most interesting books about the influence of the Bible on British culture, we have somehow expelled another aspect of the biblical witness, the shape of its stories, from our shared cultural memory, but only very recently.

Callum Brown, in *The Death of Christian Britain*, tries to do two things.[5] On the one hand, he addresses the standard narrative of slow decline in British church attendance beginning in (say) 1850 and continuing ever since. There is some basic evidence for a decline like this, if we just look at the number of 'bums on pews' on a given Sunday. Brown argues that these statistics are misleading, because one of the things going on is an increase in mobility - with the railway and the motor car. People who would have been at church every Sunday, perhaps twice, gradually became people who came every other Sunday, or once a month, because they were away, visiting family or whatever, on the other weekends. The same number of people attended worship regularly, however.

If we look at other measures (Brown highlights the proportion of weddings held in church, the number of babies baptised, and similar), Christian commitment appears fairly steady until the early 1960s, and then drops precipitously. For Brown, this is evidence of a change in the cultural discourse patterns of our culture around 1963. Prior to this change, whatever our own religious opinions or practices, we narrated our lives in biblical terms; afterwards, we found the standard Christian narratives of redemption culturally implausible.

I think there are reasons to at least moderate Brown's analysis, but I also think that we need to take it seriously. Every culture has its classic stories, its myths. These give us the names that resonate, but they also give us shapes of stories that are found convincing. The King James Bible was published into a culture that already knew certain biblical stories – they were painted on the walls of the churches, and acted out in the mystery plays – but these central stories, and the peripheral stories, became the heart of the narrative imagination of our culture for centuries. If Brown is right, and these stories have become incredible to the majority of people in Britain, then that is a shift of massive significance.

The stories we tell and find believable shape everything. They shape our television dramas, our novels, the stories we tell ourselves in every circumstance. They shape the way we understand our own lives, as we look for narrative shapes to make sense of the jumble of our experiences. They shape our attitudes to public figures, as the press invite us to construct narratives about their lives from the data available. It might be that we have reached the point where biblical stories no longer define what is narratively convincing in our culture; if so, it is a massive and missionally decisive shift. Whether this is true or not, the sheer power of the King James Bible, its modes of storytelling, lasted long in our cultural memories.

One step deeper, however. The King James Bible did not just shape the phrases of our language and the stories we tell with our language; it shaped our language itself. Around 1600, the local languages of Western Europe were becoming more significant: the role of Latin as the political, academic, and legal *lingua franca* (sic!) was evaporating, and local languages were replacing it. This led to a pressing need for standardisation of spelling and grammar: promulgated laws had to be clear in meaning, and variations in spelling and grammar could potentially prevent this. Historically, the responses to this need went one of two ways: nations that remained Roman Catholic tended to create an 'Academy' to define the language; nations that had chosen for Protestant Reform tended to define their language through the example of a culturally dominant Bible translation. The work of the Academia della Crusca in Italy (founded 1585) or the Académie Français (1635), both still continuing today, are examples of the former; the influence of Luther's Bibel and the King James Bible are examples of the latter.

the language of the biblical text remains an inescapable reference point for British culture

The King James Bible shaped English in several ways. Alister McGrath, in his history of the translation, highlights the rumbling debate over whether English should welcome latinate words, or remain true to its Anglo-Saxon roots.[6] The translators' solution, to stay with indigenous terms most of the time, but to allow a judicious sprinkling of Latin (and Greek) imports, was a decisive intervention in a raging debate, and sets the pattern for good English still. The fact that the medieval usage of 'Thee' and 'Thou' survived, as did the associated inflected verb endings ('Thou sayest'; 'she sayeth'), even though both were already archaic in general spoken English when the King James Bible was produced is further testimony to the power of the translation to shape language.

The most powerful illustration, though, and one which encompasses literary and political culture at once, lies in noticing what is not there.

My daughters are growing up speaking a 'dialect' of English, local to Fife. They are not particularly adopting the local accent (my wife and I both speak with fairly standard English accents, and, thus far at least, our influence has been more decisive on the girls than their classmates), but they use a vocabulary which is defined as 'non-standard', using 'wee' where standard English would have 'small' and so on. It happens that King James VI of Scotland first committed himself

Notes

1. M Manser, *Scapegoats, Shambles & Shibboleths: The Queen's English for the King James Bible* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009).

2. Steve's article is online at www.baylor.edu/christianethics/SingingOurLivesArticleHarmon.pdf

3. Interview in *Rolling Stone*, August 2005.

4. (London: Arrow, 2004).

5. CG Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800–2000* (London: Routledge, 2001).

6. AE McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001), pp. 258–62.

to the project of a new Bible translation in Fife. The General Assembly of the Kirk in 1601 was moved out of Edinburgh to avoid the plague; it was intended for St Andrews but, because the King suffered a hunting accident, eventually met in Burntisland parish church. During that meeting, all present – including the king – agreed to commission a new Bible translation.

Two years later, King James VI inherited the throne of England. He travelled south and was almost immediately faced with the religious controversies of a divided England. Summoning a conference at Hampton Court in 1604, He recalled and reaffirmed the idea for a new Bible translation, entrusting it to translators in London, Oxford, and Cambridge. The King James Bible defined standard English, and defined it as the English of southern England, not of the king's native land. The accents and dialect of Fife, where the translation was first mooted, were marginalised by the text that resulted, to the extent that it is within living memory that people seeking a public career would take extensive 'elocution'

the King James Bible helped shape cultural dominance and marginalisation within the union

lessons to eliminate the traces of 'non-standard' (sic, 'non-southern') accent and vocabulary from their voices.

King James's preferences for England over Scotland, and the reasons for them, are well enough known. In ecclesial terms, he chose a sycophantic episcopate over a presbytery that claimed the right to call him to account for the practice of his Christian discipleship. And for his newly united kingdom, he commissioned a Bible translation that would silently but powerfully assert that London and Oxford were normal, whereas Dunfermline and St Andrews were odd and alien. The speech of Jesus and his apostles was recognisably the speech of a marginalised northern people (Mt 26.73); in King James's hand it would become a key justifier of a political settlement that located power and normativity 'down south'. As an Englishman living in Scotland, I am very aware of the deep feeling here of the injustice of the union begun by James receiving the English crown and completed with the dissolution of the Scottish parliament in 1707. Whether that sense of injustice is right or wrong, the Bible translation, intended by King James to be a tool of political unification, played an important part in shaping cultural dominance and marginalisation within the union.

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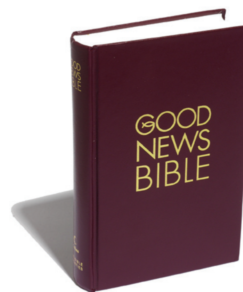

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