

Does the King James Bible Even Matter Anymore?

Writer and critic Christopher Hitchens was an outspoken critic of **religion**, but when it came to the King James Bible, he was a huge fan.

In the May 2011 edition of *Vanity Fair* magazine, he wrote a powerful article about the King James Bible and its impact on Western civilization. The title of the article was “When the King Saved God, with a subtitle that says, “An unbeliever argues that our language and culture are incomplete without a 400-year-old book—the King James translation of the Bible. Spurned by the Establishment, it really represents a triumph for rebellion and dissent. Accept no substitutes!”

Here’s a powerful excerpt I thought you’d enjoy. Get out the tissues:

“Though I am sometimes reluctant to admit it, there really is something ‘timeless’ in the Tyndale/King James synthesis. For generations, it provided a common stock of references and allusions, rivaled only by Shakespeare in this respect. It resounded in the minds and memories of literate people, as well as of those who acquired it only by listening. From the stricken beach of Dunkirk in 1940, faced with a devil’s choice between annihilation and surrender, a British officer sent a cable back home. It contained the three words ‘but if not ...’ All of those who received it were at once aware of what it signified. In the Book of Daniel, the Babylonian tyrant Nebuchadnezzar tells the three Jewish heretics Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that if they refuse to bow to his sacred idol they will be flung into a ‘burning fiery furnace.’ They made him an answer: ‘If it be so, our god whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thy hand, o King. / *But if not*, be it known

unto thee, o king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up.'

"A culture that does not possess this common store of image and allegory will be a perilously thin one. To seek restlessly to update it or make it 'relevant' is to miss the point, like yearning for a hip-hop Shakespeare. 'Man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward,' says the Book of Job. Want to try to improve that for Twitter? And so bleak and spare and fatalistic—almost non-religious—are the closing verses of Ecclesiastes that they were read at the Church of England funeral service the unbeliever George Orwell had requested in his will: 'Also when they shall be afraid of that which is high, and fears shall be in the way, and the almond tree shall flourish, and the grasshopper shall be a burden, and desire shall fail: because man goeth to his long home. ... Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. / Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was.'"

I'm certainly not one of those "King James only" people who think any other translation is wrong. I've personally read the introduction to the 1611 King James Bible in the British Museum, and the authors actually hope for better translations in the future. But the truth is, the King James Version united the West for centuries, and it's impact on our arts, letters, music, politics and more cannot be measured. If you haven't read the King James Version for awhile, check it out.

And by the way, I'd never read that story about Dunkirk, but it's powerful stuff ...

Phil Cooke *is a filmmaker, media critic and adviser to some of the largest churches, ministries and nonprofit organizations in the world. He's the founder of the Influence Lab.*