

You Won't Believe What This Professor Discovered in the Pages of This 17th-Century Notebook

For about a month after he returned from England last year, a Montclair State University professor did not realize what a treasure he had found in a rare books library at Cambridge University.

While abroad, Jeffrey A. Miller, an assistant professor of English at the New Jersey school, had acquainted himself with some of the 70 pages of a notebook that had belonged to Samuel Ward, a 17th-century biblical scholar. But it wasn't until Miller returned home, and made a more thorough study of photographs he had taken of its pages, that he understood how stunning a discovery he had made.

The notebook held draft portions of the most enduring English translation of the Bible: the King James Version, which was published in 1611 and named for the newly ascended King James I.

"I am not even sure I believed it initially," said Miller, describing the moment when he figured out he had seen draft pages from the most widely read work in all of English, including Shakespeare.

"It seems beyond belief to think you could be looking at a draft of the King James Bible, much less a draft unlike any other draft that we previously had, much less the earliest draft of the King James Bible," he said.

Jonathan Greenberg, graduate director of the English department at Montclair State, said, "One of the most amazing

things about the discovery is that in a certain sense this draft was hiding in plain sight.”

It is not likely that many scholars had been clamoring to look at Ward’s archives, continued Greenberg, who credited Miller’s expertise and persistence for bringing the now-prized pages to light. “The draft was there for hundreds of years, but no one had realized exactly what it was.”

In the months after the discovery, scholars of the KJV confirmed Miller’s find.

Miller, who specializes in early modern literature, history and theology, had set out for Cambridge in hopes of learning more about Ward. The professor had agreed to write an essay on him for a book about the several dozen men the Church of England had grouped into “companies” charged with producing the KJV.

So Miller went to Sidney Sussex College, within Cambridge University, whose archives contain many of Ward’s papers.

“I was maximally hoping to find some letter that he had written that seemed relevant,” said Miller. “Actually, I did find that.”

But he also found the notebook, cataloged in the 1980s as “a verse-by-verse biblical commentary” with “Greek word studies and some Hebrew notes.”

“Let’s have a look at this,” Miller thought of the paperback-size book, whose pages date from 1604 to 1608.

Eventually, Miller came to understand that some of the pages were Ward’s draft of a part of the KJV – one complete and one incomplete book from the Apocrypha, writings accepted by some Christian denominations as part of the Bible but considered noncanonical by others. Miller saw an entire draft of 1 Esdras and a partial draft of the book known as the Wisdom of

Solomon.

The professor made his findings public Wednesday (Oct. 14) in an article in the Times Literary Supplement, in which he explains that the King James Bible, organized as a group endeavor, may have been more the product of individuals than previously thought.

“It’s really the first real solid evidence for that,” Miller said.

While very few drafts—and no complete drafts—of the KJV have been found, Miller’s discovery is the first that can be attributed to a particular translator. Further study, he said, will shed light on the KJV, but also the English language it helped shape.

“The King James Bible is a monument of English religion, literature and the language itself,” he said, and it’s important to understand how it got built.

“It didn’t just fall out of the sky.” {eoa}

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