

"Can King James's Bible Still Be Defended?"

by Theodore P. Letis

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The real question is, to whom should it have to be defended? Analogously, to whom must we defend such unquestionable talents as Shakespeare, Mozart, and Dickens? Certainly not to the literate and aesthetically aware. Though these gifts to mankind are antique, their treasures remain timeless just because of that quality, not in spite of it. Who would balk at free tickets to a performance of Hamlet, or to a concert featuring A Little Night Music, or to a dramatic reading of Dickens, with the inane argument that these are not contemporary works? The only segments of society that would despise such cultural giants are the profoundly ignorant or the insufferably modern ideologue. Note what Shakespeare apologist Harold Bloom, Sterling Professor of Humanities at Yale University, has said about both classes:

Four centuries have only augmented Shakespeare's universal influence.... Will that change in the new century, since deep reading is in decline, and Shakespeare, as the Western canon's center now vanishes from the schools with the canon? Will generations to come believe current superstitions, and so cast away genius.... A journalist, scorning what he called any "lone genius," recently proclaimed that the three leading "ideas" of our moment were feminism, environmentalism, and structuralism. That is to mistake political and academic fashions for ideas, and stimulates me to ask again, Who besides Shakespeare can continue to inform an authentic idea of the human? (Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human, pp. 715-716)

But here we must step back and observe further: surely this literary gem of the English Renaissance while tending toward the newly secular was greatly indebted to the Geneva Bible and the Book of Common Prayer for his essential understanding of the human condition. It was precisely from this Bible also that the Reformers, the Puritans, and the great literary and religious giants of the English language have all heard the voice and discovered the mind of God giving comprehensive meaning to what it is to be

human. It would be this very Bible that would attain its final refinement under King James's patronage. It is also, however, this same Bible that now, like Shakespeare, stands on the brink of disuse, both because of the decline of serious reading and because of the rise of the smug contemporary culture guardians promoting sweeping historical revisionism.

And in the case of the Bible, one more factor is in play: an entire profit-driven market of "modern" American Bible publishers. These modern Bible marketeers have convinced an entire generation < even those who would otherwise be both literate and aesthetically sensitive < to trade down from antique majesty to modern mumbling, from the Ancient of Days to a wholly modern god in contemporary garish dress. Renaissance Bible apologist, Gerald Hammond, Professor of English, University of Manchester, has noted this parallel trend:

While the Renaissance Bible translator saw half of his task as reshaping English so that it could adapt itself to Hebraic idiom the modern translator wants to make no demands on the language he translates into.... The basic distinction between the Renaissance and the modern translators is one of fidelity to their original. Partly the loss of faith in the Hebrew and Greek as the definitive word of God has led to the translators' loss of contact with it, but more responsibility lies in the belief that a modern Bible should aim not to tax its reader's linguistic or interpretive abilities one bit. If this aim is to be achieved then it seems clear that a new Bible will have to be produced for every generation < each one probably moving us further away from the original text, now that the initial break has been made (The Making of the English Bible pp. 2;12-13).

The situation seems bleak, but not hopeless. If Harold Bloom's magnificent apologia of Shakespeare is the definitive cure for his neglect, then the single most potent and comprehensive arrest of this development with regard to the Bible of the Reformation/Renaissance lies in the reading of yet another single book: The King James Version Defended, 4th ed., by Edward Freer Hills. This study is nothing less than an encyclopedic redress of every major fallacy about this Bible and every feeble plea that the antique qualities of the King James Version now excludes it from consideration for everyday use.

In a brief but penetrating sketch, Hills traces the history of Christian thought clearly illustrating that a decidedly Enlightenment mentality crept into the Church in the 19th century by way of the then young discipline known as New Testament textual criticism. Hills, himself a well-trained classics major from Yale University with a doctorate in New Testament textual criticism from Harvard, reveals in this study how a loss of belief in the inspiration of the Bible led to the endless modern attempts to both make it contemporary and familiar, as well as to reshape it to reflect not the timeless, changeless truths of the Christian Faith but to reflect the various academic fashions, trends and emerging ideologies that have invaded most of the modern churches. For anyone interested in a thoroughgoing and compelling defense of the Bible of the Reformation by a well-respected authority in the field, this study is indispensable and is guaranteed to bring back to life a love for the Bible of Shakespeare, of Milton, of the Puritans and of the authors of the Book of Common Prayer.

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