

**KJV in the USA: The King James Bible in a Country Without a King**

A Folger Shakespeare Library podcast

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*Jill Lepore was introduced by Michael Witmore, director of the Folger Shakespeare Library, and by Kathleen Lynch, director of the Folger Institute and co-organizer, with Lori Anne Ferrell, of the King James Bible conference.*

I want to thank Michael for holding this wonderful conference in this beautiful place and I especially want to thank Kathleen and Lori Anne for inviting me. I got an email from them a couple of years ago asking me if I was interested in coming to the Folger to talk about the King James Bible in America, and I thought, I've always wanted to go into the Folger and see the Folios—maybe they would let me! And so I said okay, because it was two years in the future, and I thought, it doesn't matter that I know nothing about the King James Bible now, that's so far away.

Well, the day is now upon us, and what I'm hoping to do this evening is tell you a little bit about how an American historian thinks about the King James Bible and maybe some bit of a story from early American history that I think casts some light, from an American vantage, on the complicated process of writing a sacred text for a new generation of people.

"There once was a man whose name was Job, who feared God and eschewed evil, and there were born unto him seven sons and three daughters. And his substance was seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels and five hundred yoke of oxen and five hundred she asses. Then Satan said, Doth Job fear God for naught? And the Lord said, Doest thy worst. And behold, Satan slew all of Job's animals and every of his sons and each of his daughters and then he smote Job with boils from the sole of his foot unto his crown and Job brent his mantle and said, let the day perish wherein I was born." Or so, more or less, sayeth the King James Bible, commissioned by this man and first published four centuries ago in London.

The King James Bible is a book whose origins and influence and illustrations and whose lasting beauty we are here to study and to celebrate this weekend with eminent scholars from Kent and Sussex and Bloomington and Toronto and more. And I would like to talk about the King James, too, for all the little I know about it, but as I am an American historian, I really want to talk about what happened to the King James Bible here in the United States, a country without a king. More particularly, I want to tell you a story about what happened when an American named Noah Webster—whose nickname happened to be "the monarch," because he was quite an imperious man—when Noah Webster undertooketh his own revision.

Before the Reformation, as you all know, knowing the story of the King James Bible better than I, the Bible could not be read in the vernacular. "The secret mysteries of the faith ought not to be explained to all men in all places," the church decreed in the year 1215, "for such is the depth of divine scripture that not only the simple and illiterate, but also the prudent and learned, are not fully sufficient to try to understand it."

For a very long time, it was a crime to translate any part of the Bible into English. For his translation of the New Testament, William Tyndale, a scholar fluent in eight languages was burned at the stake in 1536. His last words are said to have been, "Lord, open the king of England's eyes." That king would be James, who commissioned an English translation in 1604 on the theory that it would be better to have one official Bible than a dozen heretical ones.

Aside from Tyndale's, there were at the time several English translations in print. Puritans preferred the anti-royalist Geneva Bible made by Calvinist Englishmen in the 1550s, the first Bible to use chapter and verse numbers. In it, the word "tyrant" appears more than 600 times. James decided that he would like a single Bible, and he would like it to be decidedly a royalist one. His highness wished that "some special pains should be taken in that behalf for one uniform translation." In the King James Bible, the word "tyrant" appears not once.

The work was divided into six committees or companies of nine members, each headed by a director. They borrowed heavily from earlier translations, including Tyndale. The Geneva Bible began, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth and the earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the deep and the Spirit of God moved upon the waters." James's translators made this even lonelier by giving it a face: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth and the earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the deep and the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters."

But they also studied a wealth of sources in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, and Aramaic, and they went back very often to the original, introducing for instance Hebraic idioms into the English, including, "lick the dust" and "skin of my teeth" and "like a lamb to the slaughter." While they worked, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *The Tempest* were written and first staged, which is among the reasons why the King James Bible has in the English language both the cadence and the stature of Shakespeare, and which is why we are here in this wonderful, beautiful place, this Elizabethan Theatre, to talk about these words. In the Bishops' Bible, the 23rd Psalm begins, "The Lord is my shepherd, therefore can I lack nothing." James's translators took this and made it soar: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

Because the crown held the copyright, it was, in Britain's American colonies, beginning with Jamestown—that first American permanent settlement that was settled on a charter given by that very same king who'd commissioned the Bible—in all of those colonies, it was illegal to print an English Bible. American colonists were left to bring their Bibles with them, as indeed they did. The Puritans of New England were of course a very bookish people, and they liked to be depicted as such. They preferred the Geneva Bible, they did not want James's Bible, but they would have loved to print Bibles of their own, even though they could not.

The first Bible printed in America was not printed in English. It was printed in a dialect of the Algonquin language Massachusetts. It was written, translated by native scholars working at Harvard with the Roxbury minister, John Elliot. It was printed beginning in the 1660s and formed part of what's known as the Indian Library, a series of religious tracts, catechisms, prayerbooks, confessions that were printed for the purpose of converting the native peoples of New England to Christianity.

Many of these Bibles were burned in the 1670s during what's known as King Phillip's War, when the Indians of New England attempted to oust the English settlers from the colonies and nearly succeeded. And their views on these Bibles are often well expressed by the symbolic actions taken with them. Colonists described reaching a town burned to the ground and the pages of the Bibles all ripped out and left to fly and scatter across the wind. Indians attacking Englishmen cut open their bellies and stuffed their Bibles inside them. There are very few of these Indian Bibles left because of this, even though thousands were printed in the 1660s. Thousands were burned in the 1670s.

But King James was by far the dominant Bible throughout the colonies and it was the King James Bible that Benjamin Franklin decided to pull a hoax on in 1760 when he wrote a fake chapter of the Old Testament. Franklin was always pulling hoaxes. Remember, Franklin is the guy who wrote under the pseudonym Silence Dogood when he was a teenager, affecting the persona of a widowed old woman in order to make fun of Harvard students. Franklin used to love this kind of parlor trick. He had written out this fake chapter of the Old Testament in the voice of the King James translators and he glued it into his Bible and at dinner parties he would take it out and read from it and see if he could convince anybody that it was actually in the Bible.

So I'm going to read it to you, but I've put up this picture of Franklin, because I want to remind you how well Mel Brooks would have been cast to play Franklin. And as I read this to you, imagine the voice of Mel Brooks, because it's not funny unless you do, because although eighteenth century humor is very funny, it's not that funny if you haven't read a lot of eighteenth century prose lately. So, if you look at him, picture Mel Brooks. You might, this might, tickle you, I don't know. I'm waiting for the dead silence when I get to the punchline, I'm just telling you in advance:

"Abraham sat in the door of his tent about the going down of the sun. And behold, a man bowed with age came from the way of the wilderness leaning upon a staff. And Abraham arose and met him and said unto him, Turn in, I pray thee, and wash thy feet and tarry all night and thou shalt rise early on the morrow and go on thy way. And the man said, Nay, for I will abide under this tree. But Abraham pressed him greatly; so he turned, and they went into the tent; and Abraham baked him unleavened bread, and they did eat.

"And when Abraham saw the man blessed not God, he said unto him, Wherefore dost thou not worship the most high God, creator of heaven and earth? And the man answered and said, I do not worship the God thou speakest of, neither do I call upon his name, for I have made to myself a God, which abideth always in my house and provideth me with all things.

"And Abraham's zeal was kindled against the man, and he arose, and fell upon him, and drove him forth with blows into the wilderness. And at midnight God called unto Abraham, saying, Abraham where is the stranger? And Abraham answered and said, Lord, he would not worship thee and neither would he call thy name, therefore I have driven him out from before my face and into the wilderness. And God said, Have I borne with him these 398 years and nourished him and clothed him, notwithstanding his

rebellion against me? And couldst not thou, thou art thyself a sinner, bear with him one night?"

You see that I did require the Mel Brooks build-up there in my entrance! This was Franklin's gentle, subtle parable about religious persecution and the importance of religious toleration, of course, which is a lesson he did not find in the King James Bible and wanted to insert in it.

Then came American independence and the end of the king. In 1775, the Continental Congress banned British imports and when they did, that ban included Bibles, so Americans could finally start printing their own. Two years later, the Scottish immigrant Robert Aitkin, printer of the Congressional Journal, became the first American to print any part of the Bible in English. He started with the New Testament.

In 1782, Aitkin brought out 10,000 copies of the whole Bible. Unfortunately, this ruined him, because just at that moment the United States signed the Treaty of Paris and the ban on imported Bibles was lifted. The imports were better. Aitkin was left in desperation begging George Washington to use government funds, mind you, to buy up his inventory and give a Bible to every Revolutionary War veteran. Washington refused.

Washington's attitude about the Bible is something that has been greatly contested of late, in which there is great interest. One of my favorite portraits of Washington is this portrait, owned by the National Portrait Gallery, by Gilbert Stuart. It has many gestural elements that we saw on that Mather portrait, the typical kind of gentleman in his study portrait. This is a much more magnificent and grand, heroic painting than that portrait of Mather. But one of the things that's interesting about it is on this gentleman's table in the back—and I don't think you'll be able to see this on the detail because it's too fuzzy—the two books there are the Federalist Papers and the Journals of Congress. Washington does not have himself painted with the Bible.

There's also this fascinating story when Washington was inaugurated, which was in New York in City Hall, it was decided more or less at the last minute that he would like to place his hand on a Bible as he was sworn in and no one had one. There was this kind of mad scramble. They had to go next door and find someone who had a Bible.

There's not a great abundance of Bibles in Washington's own biography, but Washington is linked with a man who's very important to Bibles in early American history and that is Mason Weems, who there's no contemporary portrait of, but I just wanted to show you a beautiful painting by Grant Wood, because I love this painting. It

depicts Mason Weems, who is this itinerant bookseller and preacher and fabulist who writes the life of Washington in 1799, right after Washington's death, and becomes very wealthy indeed for selling Washington's life story.

Weems in 1801 convinced the Philadelphia printer Matthew Carey to leap into the Bible printing business. Weems wrote to Carey that year, "I tell you this is the very season and age of the Bible. Bible dictionaries, Bible tales, Bible stories, Bibles plain and paraphrased, Carey's Bibles, Collins' Bibles, Clarke's Bibles, Kimpton's Bibles. No matter what or whose, all, all will go down, so wide is the crater of public appetite." There was indeed this great outpouring of Bibles printed in the first decades of the nineteenth century and by 1829 the American Bible Society announced its plan to put a King James Bible in every American home. "A Bible to every household," was the American Bible Society's motto.

This gets us back to the monarch, Noah Webster, who found this horrifying, the plan of the American Bible Society to put a King James Bible in every American household. Webster wrote, "those who would send the Bible to the destitute who are usually poor and often unlearned," that is anyone who does not have a Bible; whoever needs a Bible must be someone who is unlearned, Webster thought. They "should be careful not to send copies which are incorrect even in a single passage." Webster thought that the King James Bible was ungrammatical, obsolete, filthy, and unAmerican.

So I'm going to tell you a little bit about this man whose other excellent nickname was Coxcomb General of the United States. Noah Webster was born in 1758 in Hartford, Connecticut. He studied at Yale, he became a schoolmaster, and in 1783 published his first book, a spelling book, an American spelling book, a patriotic spelling book, designed to celebrate and to standardize the distinctiveness of American writing and speaking.

National language is a national tie, Webster insisted, and what country wants it more than America? Without a common religion, a common history, a common ethnicity, a common language, what did Americans have except for a common idea? Webster thought Americans needed their own language. He fully expected the American language would one day be, as he wrote, as different from the future language of England as the modern Dutch, Danish, and Swedish are from the German. And he wanted to help this along by teaching American schoolchildren to spell differently than English schoolchildren did, so that you would immediately see upon picking up a book that it was American rather than an English book.

What remains to us of Webster's spelling reforms are slight. The *u* that we lack in "honor," the *k* that we dropped from "mimic." The *re* that we lost from "theatre" and switched around to an *er*. And too, in its first two decades, Webster's *American Spelling Book* sold a million and a half copies.

Webster, though, had in fact a far grander scheme for the simplification of American spelling. He had an idea for a gradualist approach. In 1789 he introduced the scheme to simplify and make more distinctive American spelling— this did not go over well. Webster's 1789 essay proposing an American spelling reform was a disaster. One reviewer offered Webster two pieces of advice: the first is to reform his own language before he attempts to correct that of others, the second to learn to deliver his opinions with a less dictatorial air.

One critic remarked that this bordered on insanity. "The perusal of this essay must strike every reflecting mind with a sense of the mildness of the municipal regulations of this land of liberty, which has permitted the writer to roam abroad unrestrained by a straight waistcoat and a keeper." Webster, who was not deterred by criticism, which was one of his chief strengths as a writer, pressed on.

On June 4, 1800, he took out an ad on the back page of a Connecticut newspaper just above notices of a sailor's death, a shoe sale, and a farmer's reward for a stray cow. The sailor had drowned, the cheap shoes were ladies' morocco, the cow was red with a white face, and Webster, who was 42 by now, had this to say. He was busy writing the dictionary of the American language and he wanted the world to know it.

Poor Webster! I feel kind of bad now. I adore Webster; I think that's probably clear. Webster believed this work was absolutely necessary for American's national identity. The American people had declared independence, they'd constituted their own government, and they had learned to spell differently, distinctively, from those people on the other side of the ocean.

Surely now they needed their own dictionary, a place to put all the new words they had coined. Americanisms like "lengthy," a good word to describe both the dictionary and the amount of time it would take Webster to finish it. Seventy thousand entries later he would write his last definition, much to the relief of his wife and seven children and toward the end, the tumbles of grandchildren, who stomped up and down the stairs while dear grandpapa toiled away A to Z in a study whose walls had been packed with sand to keep out the noise of even their whispers. Although for those brave enough to open his study door, Webster stocked the desk drawer with raisins and peppermints.

One day during those decades that Webster worked year after year writing his dictionary of the American language, it's actually a beautiful story— he had this desk built in his study, a circular desk with an opening at one end, and he had dictionaries of the world's languages arranged in this large circle and with each word, he would trace its etymology as he moved around the room. He became convinced that he could trace the etymology of all words back to the language that preceded Babel. He wrote a long essay about this, it's actually a full manuscript. It's at the New York Public Library. It's called *A Synopsis of the History of Language*. It is completely mad and no one would publish it. The cost of publishing it would have been extraordinary because of all the special characters that would have been needed to prove the original single language—the solitary origins of all words.

In any case, one day while Webster was in this study, at a time in his life when he was undergoing a great deal of grief— one of his children, his second son, had just died and his wife at 42 had just given birth to their last child, a girl named Louisa, who seemed to be born profoundly damaged; her life was blighted by severe mental and physical infirmities. Webster was at his lowest; this dictionary had taken him much longer to work on than he had ever thought. He had very little money. He had tried to raise subscriptions to pay for this monumental work; he had very little success.

He found that as important as he knew his work to be—indeed, he was right that his work was important—he was unable, for some reason he could not understand, to convince people to pay him to do it. In any case the month after his daughter was born, Webster was in his study when he was born again. He found Jesus in his study one day. He wrote, "a sudden impulse upon my mind arrested me and subdued my will. I instantly fell on my knees and confessed my sins to God, implored his pardon and made my vows to him that from that time I would live in entire obedience to his commands and be devoted to his service."

When he had first proposed his dictionary, Webster had said it would take him five years, then he thought eight, maybe ten, but the work was far more painstaking than he expected. His massive two-volume *American Dictionary of the English Language* was printed in 1828. It had taken him not five or ten years, but 28. And at twenty dollars a copy, it didn't exactly fly from the shelves, but it was respected and soon enough revered.

It rivaled and dwarfed Samuel Johnson's celebrated 1755 dictionary of the English language. Johnson's listed some 43,000 words, Webster defined more than 70,000, and

Webster, unlike Johnson, had written the entire dictionary himself, without so much as an amanuensis. But what most contributed to Noah Webster's dictionary success is what we have greatly forgotten now. It was published at the height of America's greatest religious revival, the Second Great Awakening, the revival that Webster's own conversion was a part of. And Webster's conversion came at the very beginning of that movement.

Webster's dictionary is a Christian dictionary; it is essentially a catechism. Webster's faith shines through on every page, even under the most unlikely bushels. I've just given you a few samples here to look over. You can see that Webster brought his faith into how he defined his words, into the examples that he chose to illustrate the use of different words, on every occasion.

Americans loved it. People loved Webster's dictionary for all kinds of reasons, but especially born-again Americans loved it. They applauded it; they loved it as they loved their Bibles. Many still do. Today you can buy a handsome facsimile addition of Webster's 1828. It is published by the Foundation for American Christian Education, and urged upon many schoolchildren in place of other dictionaries for its evangelical fervor.

The Foundation for American Christian Education plausibly reports that Noah Webster's original dictionary contains the greatest number of biblical definitions than any given secular volume. Webster began writing an American dictionary for his country, out of his patriotic zeal, and he ended up writing it for Christ. Which is why, even before his dictionary came out, Noah Webster set about revising the King James Bible.

"I consider this emendation of the common version as the most important enterprise of my life," he wrote. Webster, spelling book writer, dictionary compiler, born-again Christian, gave unto the world his *Holy Bible with Amendments of the Language* in the year of our Lord eight hundred and thirty-three. Let's go back again to the book of Job with which we began, you remember the King James: "There was once a man whose name was Job who feared God and eschewed evil and there were born unto him seven sons and three daughters and his substance was seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels and five hundred yoke of oxen. And five hundred she asses. Then Satan said, doth Job fear God for naught?"

Well, in Webster's, Job no longer "eschews" evil, he "shuns" it. "Shun seems to be a more correct word," the grammarian explained. Also no one is born "unto" Job but is instead born "to" him. "The first syllable *un* adds nothing to the signification or force of *to* but by increasing the number of unimportant syllables rather impairs the strength of the

whole clause or sentence in which it occurs." Do to other prepositions as you would do to "unto." "Wherein," "therein," "whereon," "thereon"—inelegant, Webster pronounced. Eschew them! Then too, think of the savings by slaying the "un" in every "unto." Webster spared the reader, and he counted, 34 pages of close-set type.

Except that in Webster's, you couldn't "slay" the "un." Thou shalt not "slay," nor "slew," thou shalt "kill." And on the subject of verbs that begin with the letter *s*, you can "spit" in Webster's, but you can't "spew," you can only "vomit," and while we're at it, you can't "plague" anyone, although it's possible to "afflict" them if you really muck up their holy books.

There is a great deal of "sucking," if you may have not noticed this, in the King James Version of the Bible. It was often said in the seventeenth century that the Good Book itself gave suck. "Milk for Babes Drawn out of the Breasts of Both Testaments" was the title of a popular seventeenth century catechism. It's a very common metaphor in the seventeenth century; it doesn't have any association with filth, really in any conceivable way. By the nineteenth century, it certainly had for Webster.

In Webster's Bible, Job is "nursed," other infants are "nourished." Also men have no "stones" in Webster and women have no "teats." Maybe that's why there's no "fornication" in Webster, there's only "lewdness." There's not very much "lewdness" either, because no one has any "legs." For the sons of Adam and the daughters of Eve have naught but "limbs." "Whoring," mind you, is off the table.

In Isaiah 36, a favorite passage of schoolboys, I can say, reporting from my own children's experience, there are men who eat their own dung and drink their own piss. Webster has them devour their "vilest excretions." If there had been snot in the scriptures, Webster would have made it mucus. When Jesus has been dead for four days in the King James in John 11:39, he "stinketh." In Webster, his body is "offensive."

Webster explained this kind of thing this way: "Language that cannot be uttered in company without a violation of decorum or the rules of good breeding, exposes the scriptures to the scoffs of unbelievers, impairs their authority, and multiplies or confirms the enemies of our holy religion." Noah Webster had, in other words, very little faith in his fellow men. The King James, of course, can make you swoon; Webster's leaves you cold.

Consider the carnal beauty of the 22nd Psalm: "I was cast upon thee from the womb, thou art my God from my mother's belly." Webster, who slew mothers the way knights

slew dragons, rewrote this as, "I was cast upon thee from my birth, thou art my God from the time I was born."

In King James, Job curses the very light because it "shut up not the doors of my mother's womb, nor hid sorrow from mine eyes." In Webster's, Job regrets that light "prevented not his birth."

In King James, "Why did I not give up the ghost when I came out of the belly?" Job cries. There will be no "bellies." And "give up the ghost" is pagan. Instead, Webster's Job asks, "Why did I not expire at the time of my birth?" It has the syntax of a question on a form prepared by the registry of motor vehicles.

There have been hundreds of translations of the Bible since Webster's, many new emendations, many new corrections. There's been a great flowering and blossoming of ideas about how to tell the stories that are told in the King James Bible, in some cases very differently. We'll be learning a lot about them this weekend and I know we're all looking forward to hearing all the many wonderful papers that we'll be listening to over the course of the next few days.

We can just now pause one more time to remember that Noah Webster began this great work in 1828, when he was three score and ten, or what he preferred to call 70. As he explained, "it appears to be most eligible to retain but one mode of specifying numbers."

Abraham Lincoln, born in 1809, sucked the King James and a good thing. "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth, upon this continent, a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." If Lincoln had been weaned on Webster, the Gettysburg Address would have stinkethed! Thank you.