In the anniversary year of the King James Bible, it is fitting that scholars should turn their attention once more to what is often referred to as the most influential book in the English language. Hamlin’s and Norman’s *The King James Bible after 400 years* and Crystal’s *Begat* are two such texts that offer different and engaging perspectives of the Bible. Both contain a wealth of information: Prickett highlights ‘how all three great world religions claiming written descent from Abraham – Judaism, Christianity and Islam – have traditionally conducted their worship in a language different from their worshipper’s common speech’, which makes the introduction and popularity of the KJB ‘historically unusual, not in its difference, but in its closeness to the English language as a whole’ (Hamlin & Norman, 34). River introduces the reader to little known figures such as Doddridge, who ‘was a highly influential contributor to the principal genres of eighteenth-century religious literature’ (Hamlin & Norman, 124).

On a lighter note, Crystal quotes Alistair Cooke’s ‘hypothetical version of Genesis 1:3 as it might emanate from the White House: ‘the Supreme Being mandated the illumination of the Universe and this directive was enforced forthwith’ (17). As Crystal points out, the succinctness of ‘Let there be light’ is hard to beat.

Hamlin and Jones introduce their subject with concise language and informative content, and the reader’s interest is piqued by claims that the King James Bible became ‘the single most influential book in the English language and arguably the greatest work ever produced by a committee’ (1). The inclusion of a brief historical overview offers enough information to contextualise the many translations of the Bible without overwhelming the reader, and reminds one of the costs, in human terms, of this Book of books – Tyndale was forced to work abroad on his unauthorised translation, and was strangled as a heretic in 1536 (3). They remind one too of the pervasively biblical culture in the seventeenth-century, which was ‘naturally reflected in works of English literature, which had always been steeped in the Bible since its origins in the Anglo-Saxon period’ (11). This is well worth remembering for students of English Literature and Cultural Studies.

*The King James Bible after 400 years* is split into three parts – language, history and literature. This makes it easier for the student who is interested, for example, to know more about Milton’s anxiety, or lack thereof, with the influence of the Bible, to find the appropriate essay, and allows for an expansion of thematic concerns. Overall the essayists are measured in their approach to their subject; however, Wheeler’s final statement, ‘Whereas in 1811 the KJB was considered to be “the (authorized) word of God,” in 2011 it is regarded as “the literary Bible”’ (250), is perhaps a little too sweeping.
As well as the broad range of essays, there is a chronology of the major English Bible translations to 1957; surely a bonus for historically-challenged people like me who constantly get the centuries confused! The chronology is followed by a select bibliography on the KJB and an index of Biblical quotations. *The King James Bible after 400 years* is an informative reference that could be used by students across a variety of subjects including English Literature, Theology, Biblical Studies and Cultural Studies.

David Crystal’s *Begat* is a study of the linguistic influence of the KJB, or more specifically of the Biblical expressions that have passed into everyday use, and are often ‘used by speakers and writers of modern English, most of whom will have no religious motivation for their use’ (257). I must admit I did not expect to enjoy this book because I have always found linguistics to be a difficult subject, and Appendix 1 has the frightening air of statistical data. However as I worked my way through chapters with headings such as ‘Let there be light’, ‘Nothing new under the sun’, and ‘Be horribly afraid’, I found myself enjoying the new aspect Crystal gave these well-worn sayings and the, at times, truly funny or ghastly puns and wordplay to which they have been subjected.

Crystal’s study reveals that many expressions that are considered as originating in the KJB have in fact either come from other versions such as the Geneva, Coverdale or Tyndale, or also appear in these versions as well as in the KJB, therefore,

when people talk about the King James Bible introducing various expressions into English, it doesn’t mean that it always originated them. Rather, it gave them a widespread public presence through the work being ‘appointed to read in Churches’ (8-9).

Furthermore, his discussion on the uncertain etymology of manna, which is ‘glossed “What is this?” in the marginal note to the passage in King James’ (50), highlights the appeal of certain biblical words in the English language. The phrase ‘manna from heaven’ remains a popular and readily understood metaphor for English speakers, despite it neither meaning literally food, bread or sustenance, nor actually appearing word for word in the Bible.

*Begat* should make it on to the reading list of any individual considering a career in writing. Crystal highlights how the use of iambic rhythm, alliteration, and other linguistic devices can make particular passages more memorable, and his discussion of the phrase, *Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askalon; lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice*, should perhaps be stuck in a highly visible position on one’s writing desk:

The juxtaposition of two clauses without an explicit linking word (technically known as asyndeton) increases the pace, emphasizes the rhythm, and highlights the syntactic similarity between the two sentences. The effect is often found in proverbs ... and the result is to make a sequence more memorable. (80)
Crystal’s stated aim is to discover how many expressions from the KJB have passed into idiomatic use. He does not include direct quotations in his count, but only considers everyday expressions that are either used word for word, or subject to variation for idiomatic purposes. An Appendix collating the expressions discussed in the book, an Index of Expressions and a General Index are included to aid the reader. By the end of the book, he claims to have found the answer ... but I won’t be the one to spoil it for you!

Kathleen Steele