

***The English Bible, King James Version: The New Testament and the Apocrypha*, edited by Gerald Hammond and Austin Busch**

Stephen Pattemore

United Bible Societies, New Zealand

The Bible Translator
2015, Vol. 66(2) 202–207
© The Author(s) 2015
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.com/permissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/2051677015590900
tbt.sagepub.com


Gerald Hammond and Austin Busch, eds. *The English Bible, King James Version: The New Testament and the Apocrypha*. Norton Critical Editions. New York: W. W. Norton, 2012. Pp. xxxiv + 1518. Paper. \$22.50. ISBN 9780393975079.

This book is not, as I first supposed, just one more panegyric celebrating four hundred years of the King James Bible. Rather, it takes its place in an extensive series of “critical editions” published by W. W. Norton, beginning with Cardinal Newman’s *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* in 1968, and encompassing a range of American, British, and classical literature. That locus provides a clue about how to receive and read this volume: it seeks to locate the New Testament (and Apocrypha) of the King James Bible in the context of other literary works, “the Bible as literature.” In that endeavour it succeeds in quite a remarkable, if sometimes idiosyncratic, way.

At its heart, occupying 971 pages, is the text of the New Testament and Apocrypha, essentially from the 1769 Cambridge University Press edition, together with introductions to genres and individual books and extensive annotations, making it a variety of “study Bible.” This is introduced by a preface, and followed by 535 pages entitled “Context, Reception, Criticism.” This is much more than an appendix (as the notes sometimes refer to it).

Corresponding author:

Stephen Pattemore, 1 Bluebird Crescent, Auckland 0632, New Zealand.

Email: spattemore@biblesocieties.org

Together with the preface, this section creates a multidimensional, layered context within which to read and interpret the central text.

The preface begins by clarifying what is meant by “New Testament,” stressing what will become thematic: the Jewish origins of the New Testament and of the movement that generated it. Distancing itself from biblicist and self-referential interpretations of 2 Cor 3.6, however hallowed by tradition, it uses this same verse to reorient the reader to the programme this publication undertakes, suggesting that “perhaps the soundest advice it offers is this: read closely and with careful attention to echoes of other relevant literature, contextualize appropriately, and beware of anachronistic presumptions ” (xiv).

Four matrices, or complexes of contexts, are proposed as important for locating the New Testament, and in describing these the preface also explains the logic of its annotations. The “Biblical Matrix” places the New Testament text in connection with the Old Testament, not just by means of quotation and allusion but by the very structure of the texts (such as Matthew’s Gospel). The editors promise plentiful annotations pointing to Old Testament contexts of interpretation. The “Jewish Matrix” locates the New Testament within the apocalyptic stream among many Second Temple Judaisms. The “Greco-Roman Matrix” explores the multivocal relationship of the Christian movement and its documents to the dominant Greek culture and Roman polity of the first century.

Only in subsequent centuries can we truly talk of a “Christian Matrix.” Here the editors discuss both orthodox and heterodox influences in the formation of the canon of the New Testament. Here also is a brief discussion of text-critical issues, sketching the path from Erasmus to Stephanus and Beza, with the conclusion that “the King James New Testament, then, translates a Greek text that is frequently corrupt” (xxvi). The editors promise notes on “every place where the King James Bible translates a Greek reading that does not accord with the best construal of the manuscript tradition” (xvii), as provided by NA²⁷ and Metzger’s *Textual Commentary* (2nd ed.). Paragraphing is defended as an editorial decision, as is a certain amount of adjustment of punctuation. A brief history of English translations from Tyndale onwards leads to a characterization of the translation style of the King James Bible as “fairly literal,” which “often does a better job of capturing the strangeness of the New Testament’s Greek than do modern versions” (xxvii). In Jude 7, for example, the King James’s literal “going after strange flesh” preserves the implication of the rape of angels, contextually important from Gen 19 and Gen 6, rather than most contemporary translations’ overwriting of this context with explicit references to homosexuality.

Apart from its textual base, the King James is taken to task also for privileging “English’s predilection for variation of diction over a tendency displayed in the Old and New Testament to repeat key words and roots in rhetorically or thematically significant ways” and the fact that “at times its translators’ theological presuppositions lead to tendentious renderings” (xxviii). The editors thus occasionally offer a “better” translation in the notes either to avoid misleading connotations of words that have changed meaning or “because it preserves thematically significant repetition in the original.” This last is commendably in keeping with the literary focus of the authors.

The Apocrypha receives much less attention than does the New Testament: just a brief note on its history and an explanation that the annotations will likewise be briefer. Perhaps fitting the nature of the King James Bible itself, this imbalance of attention, along with the grouping of “The Apocrypha” with, and after, the New Testament, gives a decidedly Protestant flavour to the book.

I have taken some time over the preface because it helpfully describes the motivation and character of the paratextual material that surrounds the biblical text. Little needs to be said of that text itself. It is in a readable (if slightly small) serif font, as a wide single column, paragraphed, with dropped chapter numbers, superscript verse numbers at the start of verses, and no intrusive footnote callers. The notes are at the bottom of the page, single column, small type, with bold chapter and verse references, and, where appropriate, quoted text in italics.

Each section of the New Testament (narratives, the Pauline collection, Catholic Epistles, and Revelation) has an introduction, as has each individual book (though Acts is included with Luke). Introducing the narrative books, the editors explore the Synoptic Problem in some detail, to assist close readers to discern not only Old Testament texts but other parallel New Testament accounts as important features of the textual environment. The introduction to the Pauline collection treats Romans to Hebrews, matching their status in the King James Bible, but discusses the origins both of the generally accepted Paulines and of the deutero-Paulines. Introductions to individual books conclude with the recommendation of two or three commentaries aptly chosen from among the best available.

The annotations to the text include brief summaries of sections and paragraphs, explanations of difficult or archaic words and phrases, of cultural and historical references, intertextual allusions most significantly from the Old Testament, and alternative translations. My only quibble is that different types of notes are not distinguished typographically or hierarchically. All are keyed to chapter and verse reference, and all run together in a single sequence, making them difficult to dip into.

So much is straightforward and unsurprising. The text of the New Testament and Apocrypha is placed on stage against a historical and literary backdrop crafted by careful and erudite scholarship—conservative scholarship, one might say, not in a theological sense, but as measured, mainstream Western scholarship.

What follows is very different. The long section entitled “Context, Reception, Criticism” introduces multiple layers of foreground texts through which the New Testament (and Apocrypha) can—indeed, from our perspective in time, *must*—be viewed, in refracted (sometimes distorted) images. This section has five parts: “Historical Contexts,” “Exegesis,” “Poetic Reimaginings,” “Case Studies,” and “Translation.”

Part I, “Historical Contexts,” provides the reader with an interesting selection of classical texts. Though the first group are called “Backgrounds,” only some are truly such, while the rest are already part of the foreground formed against the context of the New Testament itself. Alongside a parade of the usual suspects (Josephus, Philo, Suetonius, Pliny) we find some surprising and stimulating additions: the Community Rule from 1QS, Virgil’s *Fourth Eclogue*, Plutarch (on Zeus’s paternity of Alexander), and, at greatest length, extracts from Philostratus’s *Life of Apollonius*. This late second- to mid-third-century document is provided because “as a whole these parallels underscore the conventionality of Jesus’ ministry in the Greco-Roman world; but they may at the same time represent Philostratus’s adaptation of increasingly popular Christian literary forms to pagan religions and philosophical contexts” (1004). Fascinating as it is, I am unconvinced that it really works both ways—throwing light on and enlightened by the Jesus stories.

“Early Developments” includes, apart from Papias, mostly marginal or heterodox developments: the Acts of Paul and Thecla, Thomas, Valentinus, and the *Toledoth Yeshu*—a collection flavoured more by the contemporary popularity of gnostic alternatives to developing orthodoxy than by its representativeness of the period. Despite obvious generic similarities, one is struck in reading these (and the pagan authors listed above) more by the difference between these documents and the New Testament than the similarities—difference in tone and in substance, as different as, say, George McDonald and Thomas Hardy.

Part II, “Exegesis,” includes writings from three approaches. “Pre-critical Exegesis” includes Origen, Augustine, and Tertullian (strangely located after both the others) before leaping to Thomas Aquinas and Thomas Hobbes. The gap is partly filled because the Aquinas extract is from his *Catena Aurea*, in which he collates many older authorities. Hobbes provides a fascinating and dramatic contrast to Tertullian in his attitude to ruling authorities.

“Critical Exegesis” begins appropriately with Reimarus, followed by Strauss, diverting to Nietzsche before getting on track again with Wrede, Schweitzer, Bultmann, and Conzelmann. The primary focus here is on the historical Jesus, though theological motivations of the biblical authors are addressed by Wrede, Bultmann, and Conzelmann. The last extract is of a rather different character: Brigitte Kahl, “No Longer Male: Masculinity Struggles behind Galatians 2.28?,” *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 79 (2000): 37–49. Lacking an editorial introduction, we are left to guess the motivation for its inclusion as the only representative of “critical exegesis” on the Pauline corpus.

The articles and extracts subsumed under “Interdisciplinary Approaches” represent in reality a variety of literary approaches (including Ricoeur, Kermode, Meeks, and Hays) to the biblical text, tending to centre on different understandings of the way the New Testament relates intertextually both inside and outside the canon.

Part III, “Poetic Reimaginings,” brings together three types of poetic texts that draw inspiration from the Bible: lyric poetry, hymns and spirituals, and epics. Lyric poetry is the largest collection, from the “Dream of the Rood,” through (among others) Donne, Herbert, Milton, Blake, Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and T. S. Eliot, to Elizabeth Bishop. Once again predictable names mix with a few that were surprising and new, at least to this reviewer. Many, appropriately enough, are from the seventeenth century, as well as the nineteenth to twentieth centuries. The collection of hymns and spirituals is disappointingly sparse (eleven entries). The epics include a prose translation by one of the editors (Austin Busch) of a portion of Juvenecus, a brief commentary on the same by Roger Green, a translation from Marco Girolamo Vida, and “Christ’s Third Temptation” from Milton’s *Paradise Regained*.

Part IV, “Case Studies,” brings us back into closer connection with the biblical text. Sadly, there is no general introduction from the editors to give us insight into their motivation. However, the case studies themselves, on the character of Pontius Pilate, the meaning of Rom 7, and approaches to the Apocalypse, each provide a fascinating diachronic selection of commentary and response to three different parts of the New Testament. The case study on the character of Pontius Pilate, unlike the other two, does not have its own editorial introduction but tracks from Tertullian through John Chrysostom to E. P. Sanders (represented here, not under the Pauline study). The Rom 7 selection includes Origen, Jerome, Augustine, Luther (extensively), Barth (only here), Bultmann, Stendahl, Stowers, and Harrill. Approaches to the Apocalypse are characterized less by diachronic progression than by a dialectic contrast between writings that “provide more

insight into the anxieties of the interpreters than into the biblical text itself” (p. 1450, Nicholas of Lyra, the Geneva Bible, Hal Lindsey) and those that “attend carefully to its literary dimensions” (Isaac Newton, Elizabeth Gaskell, Austin Farrer). As a student of the Apocalypse, I confess to finding this latter set disappointingly unrepresentative. But perhaps the greatest weakness of this whole section, its extreme selectiveness, is an inevitable result of the constraints of the volume. It would take more than this review to discern motives behind the editorial choices.

Part V, “Translation,” with no editorial introduction and an inconsistently formatted header, is the most disappointing section of all. A reproduction of a page from the 1611 King James Bible covering 1 Cor 12.6–13.7 is followed by fifteen different translations of 1 Cor 13 and some extracts from the notes of KJV translator John Bois (scarcely relating at all to 1 Cor 13). The spectrum of translations (Wycliffe, Tyndale, Geneva, Rheims, Bishops, KJV, RV, RSV, NRSV, NEB, GNB, NIV 2011, NJB, Lattimore, J. B. Phillips) makes a fascinating study, but the scant notes from John Bois provide little contextual help. The King James Bible’s own preface “From the Translators to the Readers” would have provided far more information on the sociocultural context as well as the translational tendencies of the translators. Would it have been too much to have expected some broader meditations on the translators’ task from, for example, Jerome, Schleiermacher, Nida, Venuti, and Nord?

And so this tome ends abruptly. The editors, so helpfully vocal in the early parts, have progressively fallen silent, as though tired by the length of the exercise. It has been a long journey but a very enlightening one. I began my review wondering just who would be the intended audience—surely not specialists in biblical literature or classics, who presumably have access to the works included, complete and in context. As I conclude, I am very pleased to have it on my bookshelf, as it introduced me to writers I had not read and provides a thought-provoking setting for the text of the New Testament. But for the beginning or intermediate student of the Bible “as literature,” it is an invaluable resource. It is affordably priced, at the expense of longevity—as one wonders how long the paper cover will hold together the 1510 pages.¹

¹ This review was originally published in *Review of Biblical Literature* 04/2014 (www.bookreviews.org). Used by permission of the Society of Biblical Literature. It is published here with minor stylesheet modifications.