

Read This Book! It May Do You Good

This year marks the 400th publication anniversary of arguably the most important book in the English language, the King James Version of the Bible. Actually a collection of 66 books, the King James (not St. James!) Version of the Bible is so named because it was authorized in 1604 by the Scottish King James VI, after he ascended to the English throne, as a new translation for English-speaking peoples. According to Vanderbilt University Press, it's the bestselling book of all time. Nelson Publishers claims that it's the most frequently quoted document in existence.

I know first-hand, however, that the KJV and subsequent English translations, though frequently purchased, are seldom thoroughly read. Any number of sayings and stories that people think are in the Bible are not, and even more that are in the Bible are not well known. Nonetheless, the heritage of the Bible, especially the KJV, is immense. Art, music, literature, and virtually every other form of cultural production in western civilization is filled with images, allusions, citations, metaphors, and/or story elements rooted in biblical literature.

Sadly, as fewer children and young people attend religious education classes in local churches and synagogues, there is growing biblical illiteracy. It would be perfectly fitting, and constitutional, to teach the Bible as literature in our public schools, but few are doing so. Fundamentalist Christians tend to fear that secular teaching would undermine the Bible's religious authority, while liberal Christians and non-Christians tend to fear that any teaching of the Bible could become indoctrination. So our children become increasingly ignorant not just of the Bible but of their cultural heritage.

What a shame that they may never fully appreciate the meaning of *The Messiah* or *Paradise Lost*, or *Indiana Jones* or *The Life of Brian* for that matter! Besides, there's a lot in the Bible that is really interesting, fascinating, even wise and wonderful. Plus there's a lot of food for thought. There are also portions that are hardly sublime, but without knowledge of them it's virtually impossible to understand the values, thinking, and actions of persons who find such portions authoritative and life-shaping.

If there are major portions of the Bible you have never read, put them on your summer reading list. Improve your cultural literacy, increase your understanding of others who seek to adhere to its teaching, and maybe even discover some new truth about yourself, your life, or the world.

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