

# King James Bible still exerts influence, literary scholar argues

by [Chris Herlinger](#)

December 7, 2010

New York, December 7 (ENInews)--The King James Bible may not be the dominant cultural reference point it once was in the United States, but it still influences contemporary letters in the country, argues a new book.

While "we no longer have a culture pervaded by Scripture, where Bible reading is a daily practice in parlour and pulpit," the King James Bible's influence remains embedded in American culture, writes scholar Robert Alter in "Pen of Iron: American Prose and the King James Bible".

The King James Version of the Christian Bible was authorised by King James I of England. Completed in 1611, it became the standard Bible in the English-speaking world up through the 20th century. Its cultural influence in Britain, and subsequently the American colonies and later the United States, has long been noted.

However, its stylistic influences have not been widely studied.

Alter, who teaches Hebrew and comparative literature at the University of California, Berkeley, argues that writing style is not merely based on aesthetics, but is, in fact, the essential medium through which writers conceive and present their literary visions. "Style is the great agent of transformation in the constructed worlds of novels," Alter writes.

The great novel "Moby-Dick" by U.S. writer Herman Melville, with its distinct style, was influenced by the King James Bible, as well as by the works of Milton and Shakespeare. The writing style "elevates the motley crew and crazed captain of a 19th century commercial whaler into the indelible actors of a cosmic drama".

Alter also examines the works of William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Saul Bellow, and contemporary writers Marilynne Robinson and Cormac McCarthy.

Alter finds Robinson's novel "Gilead", about a Protestant minister's reflections on religious faith and McCarthy's "The Road", a chronicle of post-nuclear horrors, both rooted in a tradition in which the King James Bible has exerted an influence, stylistically and thematically.

The King James Bible, Alter argues, continues to present "a whole world of values with which both writers and readers have to contend - a demanding, often stern morality; a ringing promise of redeemed history in which it seems increasingly hard to give credence; a contrasting vision of the horrors to which life in history is exposed; a penetrating sense of the unfathomability of human nature; the belief in a benevolent, providential deity and a vehement challenge to that very belief".

Alter told ENInews that while "Pen of Iron" has not received much response from religious communities, scholarly reception to the book has been "quite positive". "What people are recognising is that, though the influence of the Bible on American culture has been thoroughly discussed by scholars, no one until now has directly addressed the question of how the King James Version has helped shape style in American writing ... As I argue, style is the medium for a vision of reality."

"Pen of Iron" is published by Princeton University Press.