

THE EXCELLENCE OF THE AUTHORISED VERSION

The chief aim of the translators in preparing the national version of the Bible, now commonly called the Authorised Version, was to express without addition or diminution the exact meaning of the original Scriptures. This scrupulous regard to ‘the truth of the original’ exposed their work, when it was first published, to not a few unfavourable comments. John Selden (1584–1654) wrote,

The *English* Translation of the Bible is the best Translation in the World, and renders the Sense of the Original best, taking in for the *English* Translation, the Bishop's Bible* as well as King *James's*. The Translation in King *James's* time took an excellent way.¹

...but the Bible is rather translated into *English* Words than into *English* Phrase.²

On this latter point Selden was not the best judge.

The conspicuous merits of the ‘new version’ of 1611 gradually gained recognition. It was not only pronounced more scholarly, but it was found to be more readable than any other English translation of the Scriptures. Many of the changes incorporated in the Authorised Version were not designed to give a new meaning to the Scriptures, but to express the old meaning in another way, for the sake of literary improvement. Changes were made to make the English agree better with the truth of the original, but far more were made for the sake of good, plain English, and pleasant cadence in reading. The translators introduced a sweeter, smoother and more stately diction into our English Bible, and this was a great gain.

Public reading

The English Bible is designed for public reading, and whatever makes it read more smoothly, and in a style of pathos or majesty more accordant with its subject matter, is a help to the reader and a benefit to the hearer. The statements of the Bible that bear on our conduct and comfort, on our salvation and sanctification, are meant to be **remembered**, so as to be present in our minds whenever temptations or afflictions come our way. Whatever choice or arrangement of words makes these statements of the Bible more striking or more impressive, more pleasant to the ear, or more fascinating to the imagination, makes them also more easily remembered, and more potent for good.

It is not enough that our English Bible be a mathematically correct translation from the original Scriptures, word for word, point for point. It should, both in its literary grace and in its Divine revelations, be a well-spring of spiritual life in the broadest and highest sense of the terms. We cannot be too grateful, therefore, that the framers of our Authorised Version were not only skilled in ‘the discernment of tongues’, but were gifted with an ear for melody. This particular excellence of the AV was recognised even by Roman Catholic scholars who feared that it would make a deep impression upon the minds of many readers. Archbishop Faber declared,

Who will not say that the uncommon beauty and marvellous English of the Protestant Bible is not one of the great strongholds of heresy in this country? It lives on the ear, like a music that can never be forgotten, like the sound of church bells, which the convert hardly knows how he can forgo. Its felicities often seem to be almost things rather than mere words. It is part of the national mind, and the anchor of national seriousness.³

At the present time one might well inquire whether any such testimony could be borne in praise of any of the numerous modern versions that are offered in its place.

Faithful and accurate

Each successive version which led up to the AV was an improvement in some respects on the one which it professed to revise. In version after version increased accuracy and increased felicity of expression are to be found. There are many clauses and sentences which, in their transition from one version to another, indicate growth and development at almost every stage. In respect of the features which specially make a translation of the Scriptures precious to the common reader, the AV of the English Bible is a very great improvement on all preceding versions. The language is clearer and choicer, more impressive and more capable of making itself remembered, and the translation more faithful and accurate than any that went before. The improvement is everywhere perceptible to the judgment and to the ear. Both from a spiritual and from a literary point of view few things are more to be desired by a Christian community than a translation, as good as care and skill can make, of those Holy Scriptures which are the guide and the solace of life, and which make their readers wise unto salvation.

Deficiencies of the modern versions

There are no fewer than 5,000 readings of the Greek text of the New Testament underlying the AV which were set aside and changed by the revisers of 1881. Champions of many of the modern versions argue that these changes were made on the ground of the weight of evidence from ancient manuscripts, and that the changes were reversions to the true original. In fact, the textual critics of the 19th century, and those who followed in their steps, were sadly misguided in their evaluation of the old manuscripts which came to light in the 19th century. The well-worn cliché ‘oldest and best manuscripts’ embodies an assumption which cannot be sustained by evidence—the assumption that the ‘oldest’ are necessarily the ‘best’. Among the manuscripts there are some of very great antiquity which exhibit a very low standard of accuracy, and the ‘oldest’ are in reality by no means representative of the ‘best’.

In the 16th century it was alleged by Roman Catholic scholars that the Latin Vulgate was of higher authority than any Greek text of the New Testament known to be in existence. The question may be asked, therefore, whether in textual changes adopted by the revisers of 1881 and to the present, there is any considerable return to the readings of the Latin Vulgate favoured by the Roman Catholic Church. There certainly are many changes of this kind. In the Gospel according to Matthew the revisers made 425 changes in the Greek text based on their allegedly ‘oldest and best’ manuscripts. The majority of these alterations have little significance and the more noticeable ones are no more than twenty-six in number. In nineteen of these twenty-six departures from the text underlying the Authorised Version the revisers have restored the reading of the Latin Vulgate (e.g., the omission of the doxology from the Lord’s Prayer; clauses omitted from 15.8, 20.7, 20.22–23, 23.19 and 28.9; and the alteration of 19.17).

In the Gospel according to John the revisers changed the Greek in 487 places, of which thirteen are particularly significant, and seven of these are reversions to the Latin Vulgate (e.g., omissions in 5.16, 8.9, and 8.59).

It is certainly a remarkable circumstance that so many of the Roman Catholic readings in the New Testament, which in Reformation and early post-Reformation times were denounced by Protestants as corruptions of the pure text of God’s Word, should now be adopted by the revisers of our English Bible. Some of the watchmen of Zion may possibly see in this circumstance an indication of the re-

ascendancy of popery in England, or possibly an evidence of concealed Jesuitism in the Protestant churches. Others will try to assure the anxious that there is no cause for alarm and that the revisers have merely accepted the readings which they found best supported by the testimony of more recently discovered manuscripts of great antiquity.

The modern versions

Since 1881 most modern versions have had a number of common features, the most important of which has been the adoption of emendations of the Greek text based upon the unreliable testimony of a comparatively small group of ancient manuscripts entirely unrepresentative of the great mass of documentary evidence that has come to light in the last one hundred and fifty years. Perhaps the most dangerous characteristic of the modern versions is that in following an unreliable Greek text they present in a weaker form, or completely omit, some of the clearest New Testament declarations of the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice. The ancient manuscripts favoured by textual critics were copied during a period when the Church was disturbed by heresies relating to the Person of the Son of God.

Far from helping to establish the truth of the Divine revelation in a more ancient and more reliable text, the adoption of these documents as superior guides has helped to strengthen the position of those who hold a 'humanitarian' view of the Lord Jesus Christ and deny His essential and eternal deity. As a result of the general acceptance of a defective form of the Greek text, the translations sponsored by the Bible Societies in many parts of the world deprive the reader of some of the most solemn and Impressive intimations of the Divine Glory of the Redeemer.

A great task

For too long the evangelical churches and missions have been insufficiently aware of these tendencies, but there are increasing signs of a growing realisation of the problem in places as far afield as India and Japan, Africa and South America. In these places the evangelical churches and missions are faced with a challenging responsibility, not only to criticise and expose what is wrong in the unsoundly-based revisions that are thrust upon them, but to apply their energy and experience to the production of something better. The Trinitarian Bible Society is in touch with a number of groups of Christian workers who are applying themselves to this great task in different parts of the world. The drift of the national Bible Societies into the 'World Church' movement, and their increasing readiness to cooperate with the Roman Catholic Church on the one hand, and 'liberal' scholarship on the other, make it now more than ever necessary that those who esteem the Bible as the divinely inspired, authoritative and inerrant Word of God, should stand together and labour together to preserve the purity of that Word and to propagate it throughout the world.

Endnotes:

1. S. W. Singer, *The Table-talk of John Selden*, second ed. (London: John Russell Smith, 1856), p. 5.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
3. Richard Chenevix Trench, *English Past and Present*, eighteenth ed. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, & Co. Ltd., 1905), quoting F. W. Faber, 'The Characteristics of the Lives of the Saints', in Candide Chalippe, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi* (Paris, France: n.p., 1727), p. 116.

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