

1611-2011: The 400th anniversary of the Authorized Version of the Bible

At the beginning of the New Year, the Archbishop of Canterbury urged us to read the King James Bible in order to get a glimpse of what he called “the big picture.” This sounded a strange injunction, coming as it did from a man who has been in positions of power and influence in the church for decades. For in that time the same church hierarchy has ruthlessly suppressed the King James Bible, along with The Book of Common Prayer.

I can add a personal note on this subject. When I came to the City in 1998, I discovered that St Sepulchre’s did not have a lectern Bible in the King James Version. So I asked St Paul’s if they would lend me one of theirs. They replied, “Oh yes, and you can keep it. We never use it at St Paul’s, only when the Royal Family comes – awkward people like that.”

The King James Bible is a work of literary and spiritual genius. It is the religious register in English and its words and phrases have penetrated deeply into English literature. You cannot read ten pages of Dickens or Arnold, George Eliot or the Brontes without coming across wholly integrated resonances of the King James Version. And, of course, English poetry is saturated with it. W.H. Auden said, as he witnessed the sidelining of the King James Bible: “It was our luck to have that translation made when English was at its strongest and most robust. Why spit on our luck?”

C.H. Sisson said that all we really know is what he called “the reluctant deposit on the mind’s floor.” That is to say, what you remember when you’ve forgotten everything else. For centuries people of all walks of life have carried around with them echoes of the King James Version. So to throw it out as the church hierarchy has done amounts to a savage act of deprivation and, as this deprivation is of the Word of God in English, it is vicious iconoclasm. There is no such thing as noble truth expressed in ignoble words. The choice of words determines what is being said. Therefore, we should choose the best.

“Strips of cloth” is no substitute for “swaddling clothes.” And Mary was “with child” – we think of the Madonna and Child – and she had not “fallen pregnant” as it says in one of the Godforsaken modern versions. You cannot satisfactorily replace “through a glass darkly” with the crass literalism “puzzling reflections in a mirror” or “sounding brass and tinkling cymbal” with “noisy gong and clanging cymbal.” The King James Bible was designed to be read aloud in churches. All the modern versions sound as if they have been written by tone deaf people with no rhythm in them.

What level of vacuity is reached when “Son of Belial” (i.e. the devil himself) is rendered by the New English Bible as “a good- for- nothing”? As if the son of the devil is only a truant from the fourth form who has been stealing apples from the housemaster’s orchard.

The real Bible says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." The NEB gives us instead, "The first step to find wisdom." But that is only the way in which babyish primary school teachers speak to their charges. The first step to find wisdom – and then, if you are ever so good little children, I'll show you the second step. This is infantilisation.

Sometimes the New Jerusalem Bible's pedantry, this pseudo-scholarly fascination with all that is merely foreign and obscure, is just silly as in "You, Yahweh examine me." But occasionally it is mindlessly unpoetic and banal, as in the substitution of "Acclaim Yahweh" for the mesmerisingly beautiful and timelessly familiar "make a joyful noise unto the Lord." But in one example of supreme idiocy the meaning becomes impenetrable:

The King James Version says, "He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord..."

In the New Jerusalem Bible this degenerates into tasteless obscurantism:

"If you live in the shelter of Elyon and make your home in the shadow of Shaddai, you can say to Yahweh..."

The Revised Standard Version loves to parade the translators' acquaintance with the slightest nuances in the ancient languages but their utter ignorance of what will go into ordinary ignorance. It renders the "giants" of Genesis as "nephilim" – to the confusion, one supposes, of elderly ladies everywhere. And the "two pence" which the Good Samaritan gave to the innkeeper as "two denarii" – lest we should imagine that the currency of the Roman Empire was the same as that of England, pre-decimalisation.

The RSV makes a habit of iconoclasm, as for instance in its destruction of that very familiar phrase: "Arise, take up thy bed and walk." The RSV says, "Take up your pallet and go home." Because we must on no account be allowed to imagine that the poor paralytic slunk off carrying his four-poster, we have forced upon us the literalism pallet: and the result sounds like instructions to a sloppy painter.

The NEB also cannot tell the difference between speech that is poetic and metaphorical and speech that is literal and descriptive. That is why for "wolves in sheep's clothing" we are given instead the pantomime howler "men dressed up as sheep." We recall perhaps Ulysses' escape from the Cyclops or else that pejorative expression "mutton dressed up as lamb." In the KJV men are "at meat" or they "sup"; but the RSV mentions a Pharisee who "asked Jesus to dine" – where, at The Garrick or White's? Likewise, his rebuke to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, "O fools and slow of heart" is emasculated to become "How dull you are!" How dull indeed.

The KJV's "pearl of great price" is exhibited in more of that infantilised Blue Peter language as "a pearl of very special value." And then the end of the world itself is described as if it were only an exceptionally hot afternoon at Goodwood:

"My dear friends..." (that is the voice of the NEB's urbane, housetrained St Peter) "...do not be bewildered by the fiery ordeal that is coming upon you, as though it were something extraordinary." But the end of the world not extraordinary?

There is a sort of discreet charm about the KJV's saying, "It ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women." This seems to reach up the underclothes of words, as that other great admirer of biblical prose, Dylan Thomas, said. But the Jerusalem Bible was written in the era of sex education, so it can confidently come straight out with "ceased to have her monthly periods." And the KJV's "great whore of Babylon" seems to have lost what is left of her character when the New Jerusalem Bible refers to her only as "the famous prostitute." Who is this, then – Eskimo Nell?

With studied pedantry, the New Jerusalem Bible replaces "inn" with "living space" – I suppose because they imagined readers to be so literal-minded that we might think St Luke meant the Rose and Crown. Unfortunately, most readers will associate that living space with Hitler's successive last territorial demands for *Lebensraum*. A similar pedantry removes the KJV's lovely "coat of many colours" and offers us "a decorated tunic." The KJV translates Psalm 139: 16 – a beautiful poem in which the Psalmist declares that God knew him "while he was yet in his mother's womb - as thine eyes did see my substance yet being unperfect." This is allusive, evocative, tender. Unbelievably, the NJB gives us instead, "Your eyes could see my embryo" - as if God were a member of the Human Fertility and Embryo Commission. It is hard not to take refuge in satire: "Does my embryo look big in this?"

There is a pervading irreverence bordering on blasphemy. The translation of the Psalms in the Book of Common Prayer is by Miles Coverdale and he renders the Hebrew, "O let thine ears consider well..." The NJB gives this as "Listen attentively Yahweh". But is that the way to speak to God, as if he were a fourth former rebuked for idling on the back row? What more is there to be said when we notice that the NJB, renders "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" as "Sheer futility. Everything is futile."

That phrase will serve as the motto for all the modern translations.

How hypocritical and sordid of the church authorities relentlessly to suppress the KJV, only to take it out and gawp at it as if it were a museum piece. The proper place for the KJV is on the lectern in every parish church – to be read week in, week out.