

THE AUTHORIZED AND REVISED VERSIONS

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I AM to speak of those two English translations of the Bible which are commonly known as the "Authorized" and "Revised" Versions. The respective popularity of the two is not a matter of doubt. Does anyone speak to-day of "the English Bible," it is still the translation of 1611 which he means by the term, and not that which followed 270 years after. Strangely enough, the so-called "Authorized" Version seems never to have been authorized by King, by Parliament, or by Convocation, and the claim of its title-page that it was "appointed to be read in Churches" is unsupported by evidence. Yet if unauthorized in the technical sense, no one can doubt that through more than three centuries it has been supported by an authority of the best kind—its unquestioned place in the religion, the life, and the literature of English-speaking people. As for the Revised Version, I shall hope to convince you, if you need conviction, that it has been unjustly, because indiscriminately, condemned, and that its value is far greater than the general public seems to realize. Yet it will never cause the earlier translation to be forgotten. Not by any external decree, but by the force of its intrinsic merit, the work accomplished by King James's translators remains the "Authorized Version."

It is interesting to recall how casual, how almost accidental, was its origin. When in April 1603 James VI of Scotland was on his way south to become James I of England, he received a petition professing to have the support of a thousand Puritan divines. They desired alterations in the Prayer-book and in ecclesiastical usage, but their document made no request for a new translation of the Bible. The prospect of a debate on the points they raised was welcome to the King, who delighted in theological discussions, and had so small opinion of his own abilities as an expert. The prevalence of plague caused some months' delay, but in January 1603-4 the famous Hampton Court Conference was held. And the second day of this Conference, Monday the 16th of January, was in truth the birthday of the Authorized Version.

Of this Conference we have a fairly full account¹ put together by William Barlow, Dean of Chester, at the request of Whitgift, Archbishop of Canterbury—who, however, had died before the report was in print. It fills a pamphlet of 103 pages, and for the proceedings of the second and third days Barlow used not only his own notes made at the time, but those of the Bishop of London, the Deans of Christ Church, Winchester, and Windsor, and the Archdeacon of Nottingham.² The proceedings were more amicable than might have been expected. The King, it is true,

¹ *The Summe and Substance of the Conference . . .* Contracted by William Barlow, 1604.

² This point has been overlooked by historians, most of whom disparage Barlow's work as merely a private and highly partisan report. It abounds with fulsome flattery of James, but otherwise seldom seems unfair. When, for instance, Bishop Bancroft is sharply rebuked by the King for trying to interrupt and silence Dr. Reynolds, the fact is duly recorded.

was not an impartial chairman. His own description of the Conference, given in a letter to a friend, ran: "We have kept such a revell with the puritans here this two days, as was never heard the like: quhaire I have peppered thaim soundlie."¹ Yet they gained many of their requests without difficulty. About midway in the afternoon session of 16 January their leader, Dr. Reynolds, Dean of Lincoln, asked that steps might be taken to reform the profanation of the Sabbath, "and to this," writes Barlow, "hee found a general and unanimous assent." Then came the great moment. "After that," Barlow continues, "he moved His Majesty that there might be a new translation of the Bible, because those which were allowed in the raignes of Henry viii. and Edward vi. were corrupt and not answerable to the truth of the Original."

The three examples then quoted by Dr. Reynolds were not very important mistakes, but they were to be found in the Bishops' Bible then in use, as well as in the earlier versions. Bancroft, Bishop of London, remarked with characteristic rudeness that "if every man's humour should be followed, there would be no ende of translating." But to the other members of the Conference the proposal was welcome enough. At this time the Bishops' Bible of 1568 was the official version, read in churches, but the smaller and more convenient Genevan version of 1560 was that which most people owned and read at home. Clearly it would be better to have a single improved translation. The King observed that all English translations were bad, and the Genevan, of which a lady had given him a copy, was the worst of all. In particular, he objected to the

¹ Cardwell, *Conferences*, p. 161.

marginal notes of the Genevan Version. For instance, when in Exodus I the narrative recorded that the Hebrew midwives "did not as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the men children alive," the marginal note observed that "their disobedience to the king was lawful." Such notes, said James, were "seditious, and savouring too much of dangerous and traitorous conceits." Accordingly it was ordered that expository marginal notes, which had been a source of trouble from the days of Tyndale onwards, should have no place in the new translation.

The King showed keen interest and much energy in pressing forward the enterprise. By the end of June 1604 he had drawn up a list of fifty-four scholars to carry out the work of translation. It was an excellent list, in which places were found for representatives of both parties in the Church. The fifty-four were divided into six companies, of which two were to meet at Westminster, two at Oxford, and two at Cambridge. Death caused some vacancies in the list of translators, not all of which were filled, and the actual number at work through most of the period seems to have been forty-seven. The one layman among them was Sir Henry Saville, Provost of Eton. The King told Bancroft that benefices must be found for those divines employed on the work who had no adequate incomes. He also suggested that students in every part of the country should be encouraged to send in any suggestions they had to make for the new translation. We can well imagine the overwhelming number of letters that would be drawn by such a request in modern times, but unhappily we have no means of knowing what response there was in 1605. It seems clear, however, that the

translators began by spending the greater part of two years in private study of the books assigned to them, and in examining previous versions and noteworthy emendations that had been submitted to them from outside. In 1607, apparently, the formal meetings of the six committees at Westminster, Oxford, and Cambridge began, and continued, as we learn from the Preface, for two years and nine months.

About the details of their methods there is, unhappily, no information. Among the translators of the Apocrypha was Dr. John Boys, Rector of Boxworth. His biographer records that throughout his work he resided in Cambridge as a guest at one of the colleges, "where," in the words of the narrative, "he abode all the week till Saturday night, and then went home to discharge his cure; returning thence on Monday morning."¹ Accordingly, his parishioners saw little of their incumbent during these years. Among the eight scholars to whom, working at Oxford, was assigned the translation of the Gospels, Acts, and Apocalypse, was Giles Tomson, Dean of Windsor. His industry was rewarded by his promotion to the see of Gloucester in 1611, but he died immediately afterwards, and this bishopric was then bestowed on Miles Smith, one of the final editors of the Authorized Version and the writer of its preface. An examination of our Chapter records at Windsor has shown me that Giles Tomson did not allow his work of translation to make him neglect entirely his normal duties. Between 1607 and 1610 our Chapter met on 31 occasions, and on 20 of these the Dean was present. It is interesting to notice that on May 29, 1609, the Dean appointed one of the Canons to act as his deputy

¹ Quoted by Dr. A. W. Pollard, *Records of the English Bible*, p. 55.

“during the time of his absence,” which continued until the end of September. This seems to suggest that during these four months his committee at Oxford was concentrating upon the revision of its work.

After the forty-seven translators had finished, the whole book was again revised by twelve of their number, who met in London for the purpose, and then the last touches of all were given by Miles Smith and Bilson, Bishop of Winchester. Miles Smith wrote the interesting preface which, owing to its length, is unfortunately omitted from modern copies of the Bible. It is far better worth retaining than the fulsome dedication to King James. Of this the authorship is unknown. But the preface states that the translators brought “back to the anvil that which we had hammered”; the dedication attacks those who like nothing “but what is hammered on their own anvil”; a similarity of phrase which suggests that Miles Smith wrote the dedication as well as the preface.

In 1611—that is to say, within four years of the time when the translators formally assembled to begin their labours—the Authorized Version was published. It seems an astonishingly short period. When the Revised Version was to be made, the New Testament took ten years to accomplish, and the Old Testament fourteen. In the Chapter Library at Windsor we are lucky enough to have a beautiful copy of the first edition of the Authorized Version, in perfect condition and in a special contemporary binding embossed with the Garter arms—probably Giles Tomson’s presentation copy.

It is needless to spend time in eulogizing at any length the superb skill with which the translators carried out

their task. The first of their rules bound them to make none but necessary changes in the text of the Bishops' Bible of 1568. But the changes they made showed their unfailing ear for cadence, rhythm, and euphony. Let one instance out of thousands illustrate the point. A familiar verse of Isaiah liii. stood, in the Bishops' Bible, "He is such a man as hath good experience of sorrows and infirmities"; with a how clear a gain this was altered to "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief"! While they consulted many versions, not excluding the Genevan version at one extreme and the Roman Catholic Rheims version at the other, these seventeenth-century translators had the wisdom to see that the sixteenth-century Tyndale and Coverdale had provided an ideal idiom for an English rendering of the Scriptures, and this idiom, with quite astounding success, they set themselves to learn and to reproduce. Everyone knows the lovely flow of their sentences, their use of our twofold English vocabulary, choosing for the most part short Saxon words, so that sometimes scarcely one word in a sentence goes beyond a single syllable—"The Lord do so to me and more also, if aught but death part thee and me." Not less well they knew how to employ sonorous Latinisms on fit occasion: "This corruption shall put on incorruption, and this mortal shall put on immortality"; "now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible" . . . Masterly, too, is their skilful handling of consonants and vowels: "The quiver rattleth against him, the glittering spear and the shield." Familiar though it is, we must not take the literary marvel of the Authorized Version as a matter of course. That incomparably the greatest of books, the Holy Bible, should have come to us English-speaking

people in this noble translation must be a theme for perpetual gratitude.

Through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a number of proposals for a revised translation of the Bible were made, and by the middle of the nineteenth century the suggestion had become amply justified. Biblical scholarship had made such progress since 1611. Something like a thousand early biblical MSS. had been discovered. Just seventeen years too late to be used in preparing the Authorized Version, the great Codex Alexandrinus was brought to this country. In the nineteenth century had come the discovery of the Codex Sinaiticus. A vastly better Greek text, was now at the disposal of translators, through the work of successive scholars, crowned by the labours of Westcott and Hort. Of Hebrew also, and of kindred languages, much additional knowledge had been gained since the translators of King James's time did their work. In the year 1870 a proposal for a Revised Version was definitely brought before Convocation by Bishop Wilberforce. Two companies of Revisers were appointed, one for the Old Testament, the other for the New, and each comprised twenty-seven members. The Revision of the Apocrypha was deferred until that of the New Testament had been finished. Companies of Revisers were also appointed in the United States, working in close touch with those in this country. The first rule adopted by the Revisers was "to introduce as few alterations as possible into the text of the Authorized Version consistently with faithfulness." Each part of Scripture was gone through twice; at the first reading, a change in the translation was conditionally adopted if it secured a simple majority of the revisers, but it

was not finally adopted at the second reading unless it had then a two-thirds majority in its favour. Such a safeguard, together with the principle of making "as few alterations as possible" seemed to promise a revision on conservative lines.

After ten years the New Testament Revisers completed their work, and, while the Old Testament company continued their task for a further four years, the Revised New Testament was published on 17 May 1881. In a recent book¹ Sir Frederick Kenyon recalls the intense excitement caused by its publication. Huge sums had been offered in vain for advance copies. The Oxford Press alone sold a million copies on the first day. The feeling it stirred among the general public was one of dismay and resentment. The average man, having obtained a copy of the new volume, inevitably turned first to the Gospels, to see what the Revisers had made of sentences which he knew well and loved greatly. This was unfortunate. It made the name "Revised Version" highly unpopular, it led to a quite unjust condemnation of the Revised Version as a whole. The New Testament in it is vastly inferior to the Old Testament, and of the New Testament no other part so abounds with needless, pedantic, uneuphonious and exasperating changes as the Gospels. There are some calamitous instances, it is true, in the later books. Almost at the end of the Apocalypse, in a vision of the heavenly city, the Authorized Version gives us the sentence, perfect in its vowel-play as in all else: "the Lamb is the light thereof." This the Revisers changed into "the lamp thereof is the Lamb." It does seem almost incredible that in a company of educated people

¹ *The Story of the Bible*, p. 87.

a two-thirds majority should have sanctioned changes of that most deplorable kind. The result must have been very different had the Revisers included not only academic scholars but a few men of letters, men with a sense of style and cadence, men with a feeling for English prose. When Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch in one of his Cambridge lectures¹ describes the Revised New Testament as "a literary fiasco," no competent judge can disagree.

And that single flaw obscured such merits as the New Testament Revisers could justly claim for their work. They could plead, for instance, that a large number of verbal changes were inevitable, because they were rendering a different and far better Greek text than that which had been available for their seventeenth-century predecessors. They could urge, and again with justice, that in many passages of the Epistles the true sense of the original was now supplied to the English reader for the first time. Yet the average man was not disposed to listen to such pleas. He disliked, and not unjustly, many of the changes which had been made in familiar passages of the Gospels, and therefore, though with far less justice, he condemned the Revised Version as a whole.

As a result, when the Revised Old Testament appeared four years later, it did not attract a hundredth part of the popular attention that had been given to the New. And as a further result, continuing to this day, people are apt to remark in an off-hand fashion "I detest the Revised Version," without realizing that the odious faults of the New Testament Revised Version are almost entirely absent from the Old Testament Revised Version.

¹ *The Art of Writing*, p. 131.

In many ways the Old Testament company had the easier task. When they began it, the Hebrew text before them was far more settled than was the Greek text of the New Testament. Again, the prior appearance of the New Testament and the outburst of condemnation it provoked may well have served as an object-lesson, and shown them what to avoid. Anyhow, the Revised Version of the Old Testament is, as a whole, quite admirable. There are passages in the Book of Job, there are numerous passages in the prophetic books, which as they stand in the Authorized Version are really meaningless. The translators, bewildered by a corrupt Hebrew text, simply translated the words at random, leaving them to form a jumble of incoherent sentences. The Revisers were able to make most of these passages intelligible. For one example, you may turn to those verses of Isaiah ix. which are read as the First Lesson on Christmas morning; for another, to that picture of miners at work contained in Job xxviii. Yet the Old Testament Revisers kept undamaged the pure style, the matchless euphony and rhythm of the 1611 translation and they made the least possible number of alterations. Let us avoid, then, the common error of describing the Revised Version as though it were uniform in quality throughout. To put the truth quite plainly; the Revised New Testament is a literary fiasco, but the Revised Old Testament—and we may link the Apocrypha with it—is a literary triumph. It conserves the unique beauty of the Authorized Version, yet makes our reading more intelligent. Unquestionably it is the Version we should use. For the New Testament, while we might well introduce a few desirable changes from the Revised Version—and more often, perhaps,

from its marginal readings than from its text—in the main it is the Authorized Version which we shall rightly prefer.

Here I end the task entrusted to me of speaking about the Authorized and Revised Versions. Some day, no doubt, other companies of scholars—and, let us hope, of men of letters—will be brought together to revise the Revision. But the time for that has not come. Biblical scholarship, and especially New Testament scholarship, has made enormous progress within the last fifty years. Yet more is still being made. Riddles that still perplex us may have their answers on papyri not yet disinterred from the sands of Egypt. This much, however, is certain; that any future Version which aspires to become not merely a useful handbook for private study but the Bible of the English-speaking peoples must be loyal to the traditions of the past. It must have not merely technical merit but that sense of beauty, that reverence, that evident desire to clothe the greatest of messages in the loveliest of forms, which in the past gave the English Bible its supreme place in the hearts of men.