

## The "Authorised Version" and its Influence

IF the *Authorised Version*<sup>1</sup> of the Bible be the first English classic, as seems by all competent authorities to be allowed, two enquiries suggest themselves: first, what is meant when it is called a classic, and, secondly, what are the qualities that entitle it to be ranked as the first classic in English? In other words, it will be necessary first to examine the Bible as literature, irrespective of any translation whatever; and, secondly, to examine its diction in the standard English translation, in order to see whether the choice of words, the mould of sentences and the harmonious disposition of sounds are such as deserve the highest praise, in comparison with the choicest productions of native English genius.

These two enquiries, however—the one into the nature of the Bible considered as literature, and the other into the nature of the English in which our standard version is written—will, of necessity, imply some consideration of the successive stages by which what we call the Bible grew into being, and of the successive stages by which the English of our Bible was gradually selected, imbued with the proper meanings and associations, and ordered into a fit medium for the conveyance of the high thoughts and noble emotions in which the original abounds. Especially is it true of our second enquiry that no adequate conception of the language employed in the Jacobean version can be formed, save through at least a brief survey of the series of English translations which led up to it. Their indebtedness to their predecessors is recognised most clearly

<sup>1</sup> Notwithstanding the current use of this term, the Jacobean revision was never publicly authorised by parliament or convocation, privy council or king. The acceptance which it has enjoyed has been won chiefly on its merits.

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by the translators of the *Authorised Version*, who say in their preface:

Truly, good Christian reader, we never thought, from the beginning, that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one; . . . but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones one principal good one, not justly to be excepted against—that hath been our endeavour, that our mark.

The Bible either proceeds from divine inspiration, as some will have it, or, according to others, is the fruit of the religious genius of the Hebrew race. From either point of view, the authors are highly gifted individuals, who, notwithstanding their diversities, and the progressiveness observable in their representations of the nature of God, are wonderfully consistent in the main tenor of their writings, and serve, in general, for mutual confirmation and illustration. In some cases, this may be due to the revision of earlier productions by later writers, which has thus brought more primitive conceptions into a degree of conformity with maturer and profounder views; but, even in such cases, the earlier conception often lends itself, without wrenching, to the deeper interpretation and the completer exposition.

The Bible is not distinctively an intellectual achievement. Like all other great works of literature, it springs from, and addresses, human nature as a whole. It has no more to do with intellect than with sensibility, imagination, or will. In fact, if it be more concerned with one of these faculties than another, sensibility, the sphere of the emotions, is the one that has pre-eminence over the rest.

The character of the Bible as a whole is best understood by regarding the Old Testament as its representative, and devoting attention primarily to that. It is the Hebraic temper, and the achievements of the Hebrew genius, that give the Bible a unique place among books; and these racial traits were much less subject to modification by alien influences—such as that of Greek culture—in the period covered by the Old Testament, than during the epoch in which the composition of the New Testament was effected. Much of the difficulty, for example, encountered in the adequate rendering of St. Paul's