

THE AUTHORISED VERSION OF THE BIBLE

The Authorised Version of the Bible, or King James Version of the Bible, is an English translation of the Christian Bible for the Church of England. The work began in 1604 and was first published in 1611. It has had a profound impact on the English language and English literature. It is historically very significant, since the Non-Conformist denominations that developed within English Christianity shared a common vision that all their members had easy access to the Bible in the vernacular language and the right to interpret scriptures for themselves. Like the earlier English translations, such as that of Tyndale and the Geneva Bible, the King James Version was translated from Greek and Hebrew texts, bypassing the Latin Vulgate.

Many of the phrases of the Authorised Version of the Bible have grown so common that they have become part of the wealth of current English speech, and are hardly thought of as Biblical at all, except on deliberate reflection. Some of them are illustrated by phrases like 'highways and hedges', 'clear as crystal', 'still small voice', 'hip and thigh', 'arose as one man', 'lick the dust', 'a thorn in the flesh', 'broken reed', 'root of all evil', 'a law unto themselves', 'dark sayings', 'a soft answer', 'a word in season', and so on. Even colloquialisms such as 'we are the people' found their way into English.

The diction and phraseology are a marvellous fusion of the Anglo-Saxon and Latin elements of the English language. The Anglo-Saxon element matches the Hebrew original in simplicity and directness, while the Latin element brings sonority and stateliness. In certain sections, one element predominates over the other. Elsewhere the two are blended. Moreover, large sections of the epistles draw heavily from the Rheims version, while the coinages of a few gems of English like 'loving kindness', 'tender mercy', 'morning star' are right out of Miles Coverdale.

Though the translated text of the Authorised Version of the Bible is considered highly modern and familiar, it is not free from Hebraism. A typical Hebraism is the use of 'of' in such phrases as 'oil of gladness', 'man of sin', and 'King of kings'. But, on the whole, the Biblical diction, assisted by its slightly archaic tinge, has a tendency to keep all English style above meanness and triviality. In the words of Coleridge 'intense study of the Bible will keep any writer from being vulgar in point of style.'

Apart from the diction and phraseology, the rhythms of the King James Version, deeply rooted in emotions stronger than in the earlier English Bibles, have greatly influenced the English style. The rhythms, words, and imagery of the Authorised Version of the Bible crowd the works of British and American writers as varied as Sir Francis Bacon, John Milton, John Bunyan, Jonathan Swift, Charles Lamb, William Blake, Charles Dickens, Abraham Lincoln, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, Thomas Carlyle, John Henry Newman, John Ruskin, Thomas Hardy, T.S. Eliot, and Winston Churchill. Immortal works of English literature like 'Paradise Lost', 'Samson Agonistes', and 'Pilgrim's Progress' register a deep influence of the King James Version of the Bible.

The King James Version has down the ages been appreciated for the quality of the prose and poetry in the translation. However, the English language has changed much with time, and therefore certain of its words and grammatical structures may sound rather archaic to the modern readers. Words like 'thou', 'thy' or 'thine' are no more used today. Some words used in the King James Version have undergone changes in meaning as well. The word 'replenish', for example, is used in the translation to mean 'to fill' while the modern verb means 'to refill'. The word 'even' is mostly used in the sense of 'namely' or 'that is'.

Since the 1611 Bible is a great work of literature, its influence on the world of letters has been profound to this day. Lawrence Housman goes even to the extent of remarking that 'not Shakespeare nor Bacon nor any great figure in English literature has had so wide and deep an influence on the form of the entire literary and political world' as the Authorised Version of the Bible. Indeed, the work lives in our mind not just as a religious piece, but also as piece of classic literature.