

**THE AUTHORISED VERSION:  
The Enduring Legacy**

**Prof. Hugh Cartwright**

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The title of this talk might create the impression that we are considering what has been left behind by something that is no longer with us. This is far from the case. The Authorised Version of the Holy Bible has ‘a wonderful and *unfinished* history’, as the title of Mr Hallihan’s book<sup>1</sup> puts it. It is on the unfinished, enduring aspect of the history we are to concentrate—the significance of the Authorised Version for today and tomorrow. The Authorised Version itself is the legacy which we have received from the translators who finished their work four hundred years ago. What is it about the Authorised Version of the Bible which makes us value it as a precious legacy left to us by its translators by the grace of God?

We are so accustomed to having the Word of God in our own language that we may not consider as we should the necessity and the privilege of having the Word of God faithfully translated into our own tongue. The *Westminster Confession of Faith*<sup>2</sup> in its first chapter, ‘Of the Holy Scripture’, after asserting that the church’s final appeal in controversies of religion is to be to the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, affirms that

because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto and interest in the scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore are they to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come, that the word of God may dwell plentifully in all, they may worship him in an acceptable manner, and, through patience and comfort of the scriptures, may have hope.

The translators of the Authorised Version had this principle very much before them in their work. They ask in their Preface, *The Translators to the Reader*:<sup>3</sup>

But now what piety without truth? What truth (saving truth) without the word of God? What word of God (whereof we may be sure) without the Scripture?’

They ask again:

How shall men meditate in that which they cannot understand? How shall they understand that which is kept close in an unknown tongue? Translation is that which openeth the window, to let in the light; that breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel; that putteth aside the curtain, that we may look into the most holy place; that removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water.

They point out that the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek in time for the coming of Christ and the spreading abroad of the Word of God outside of Israel, because Greek was then the common language of the empire. When Latin became

more generally used throughout the Roman Empire, the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures were translated into that language. The 'godly-learned' were concerned that those who did not understand these languages, 'who had souls to be saved as well as they,' should have the Scriptures translated into their own 'vulgar' tongues - the languages commonly spoken. The translators approved of the principle that every nation should, as they put it, 'hear Christ speaking unto them in their mother tongue, not by the voice of their minister only, but also by the written word translated.' They were very appreciative of, and made use of, the labours of those who had gone before them in producing the Scriptures in English. Their concern was to make a good translation better, 'or out of many good ones, one principal good one, not justly to be excepted against'.

Much of the welcome attention given to the Authorised Version on its four hundredth anniversary has focussed on its undoubtedly significant literary characteristics and influence. This aspect of the subject has been informatively handled by Leland Ryken, Professor of English at Wheaton College, in his 2011 Crossway book, *The Legacy of the King James Bible: Celebrating 400 years of the most influential English Translation*. Professor Ryken was literary stylist for the *English Standard Version* of the Bible. He frankly acknowledges that he does not believe that the AV is the best translation for a reader today, both on the grounds of the original text on which it is based and what he regards as the 'archaism of the language'. However, he prefers the AV to modern colloquial translations and regards the NIV as 'an insipid and lifeless translation' in comparison. He sees and explores the stature of the AV 'as the climax of a whole century of English Bible Translation.' He looks at it also in 'its influence in the subsequent history of Bible translation and in English-speaking culture', in its own literary excellence; and in its influence on English and American literature.

Leland Ryken's book deals in turn with the making of the Version; with its influence on the history of Bible translation, language, education, religion and culture; with it as itself a literary masterpiece; and with its literary influence down to the present time. I am not advertising or giving a review of Ryken's book. However, we should note that although he favours a modern version which, as he puts it, 'perpetuates the translation philosophy and style of the KJV'; he does, in his book's afterword,<sup>4</sup> acknowledge and lament what has been lost through what he calls 'the diminished presence of the King James Bible in English-speaking Christendom.' Among his reasons for lamentation are these:

First, we have lost a common English Bible in both the church and culture at large...  
Second, the authority of the Bible went into eclipse when we lost a common Bible...  
Third, biblical illiteracy has accompanied the decline of the King James Bible... The very proliferation of translations has discouraged the Christian public from seeking to know what the Bible actually says.

As we consider the precious legacy which we have in the Authorised Version of the Bible we may sum up what we have to say under several headings.

**1.** In the Authorised Version we have a translation which originated in an environment still conditioned by the Reformation attitude to Scripture and to theology in general. A

translator's view of Scripture and his theological presuppositions will influence the translation which he produces. Although the Church in England was internally divided over very significant matters and there was a wide range in the degree of the commitment of its ministers to Biblical Calvinism, the Church was still organisationally one and basically orthodox in its view of Scripture. Translation of the Bible cannot be a neutral exercise, which can be engaged in by the scholar whose theology is unbiblical just as competently as by the scholar whose theology is Biblical. However objective a translator may consider himself to be, he must be affected to a large extent by his presuppositions and his theological beliefs. Because translation involves choices determined by an understanding of what is meant by the writer, the best translator is the one who is solemnised and controlled by the fact that he is handling the inspired, inerrant, infallible Word of God—whose understanding is regulated by the whole scope of Scripture—who works in believing submission to the doctrine of the Word. The translators of the Authorised Version were not only scholars of high repute, they were men who believed the Bible to be the Word of God and who felt a great responsibility to translate accurately that Word. Leland Ryken<sup>5</sup> calls in an unlikely witness when he quotes George Bernard Shaw: 'The translation was extraordinarily well done because to the translators what they were translating was...the word of God divinely revealed through His chosen and expressly inspired scribes. In this conviction they carried out their work with boundless reverence and care and achieved a beautifully artistic result'. Of course we recognise that the result was much more significant than merely 'beautifully artistic'.

However representative some modern translations may be of men in different denominations, they are the product of a time when the Church is deeply divided and in no position, theologically, to safeguard the orthodoxy of translation. It is significant that the emergence of texts and translations based on different principles from those operating in the production of the Authorised Version coincided with the capitulation of the churches to rationalistic thought in all areas of their belief and practice. That is illustrated very clearly in the history of the Church in Scotland towards the end of the 19th century, when under a variety of pressures the churches departed from Biblical doctrine, discipline, worship and practice. The Authorised Version, like versions in other languages such as the Dutch dating from the same general period, was the product of a time of scholarship and faith. The modern text and translations originate in a period of religious and ecclesiastical declension and even apostasy.

**2.** In the Authorised Version we have the translation of an original text on which we can rely. As all know, the Scriptures were not originally written in English but in Hebrew and in Greek, with a little Aramaic here and there. As far as we know, no original manuscript as it came from its human Biblical author survives. But these manuscripts were copied and they were translated and they were quoted in other writings. It is reported that over five thousand of these witnesses to the original text of the New Testament have now been discovered, dating from the second century onwards and containing different amounts of material. Sometimes mistakes would be made in copying, some unintentional and some intentional, whether from a genuine concern to correct what was thought to be incorrect or from less worthy motives. However, manuscripts could be compared, tests applied and the original text witnessed to by these manuscripts ascertained. The manuscripts available at the time of the Reformation bore witness to the text that had been known in Antioch, the early

centre of Christianity, and then in Constantinople, a centre of Greek scholarship, throughout the period of the Empire. Comparisons of these manuscripts determined the text which was printed in various editions in Reformation times and became known as the Received Text. This was the basis of the various Bible translations of the Reformation period. One has to believe that the God who gave the Word for all the generations of His people would not let it be lost and that His providential preservation of that Word not only preserved the text of the Old Testament in a reliable form throughout the centuries but also accounted for the printing of this text of the New Testament Scriptures at what has been to date the most significant and far-reaching point in the history of the church since Apostolic times.

In subsequent times place has been given to another class of manuscripts, associated with Alexandria in Egypt, a University centre in the ancient world, noted as a seed-bed of heresy. The most famous of these manuscripts are known as Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus. Most modern English versions of the Bible translate a text which critics have put together conjecturally from a variety of sources as seems best to them, largely on subjective grounds, preferring the Alexandrian text at points where it differs from the Received Text. Modernist scholars continue to treat the Bible as any other book and emend the text on which it is based and doubt if we can ever be sure of what the original text was.

In view of the fact that the text on which the Authorised Version is based emerged when it did, that it is witnessed to by the majority of manuscripts and that nothing has emerged since from any textual discoveries made which gives cause to doubt its authenticity, we should value that in our Bible we have reproduced in our own language the words which were spoken by men moved to speak as they did by the Holy Ghost.

**3.** In the Authorised Version we have a translation made on principles which give us confidence that it accurately reflects the very words which God spoke. We could have a translation which professed to be based on the text which we regard as most original and yet it might not communicate the original in a way that assures us that we have the very words which God spoke. The translation might be a paraphrase of the original. Or it might be made according to the principle known as 'dynamic equivalence'—which attempts to convey the idea or thought of the writer as understood by the translator rather than the words in which the writer himself communicated the idea. The Authorised Version is translated according to the principle commonly called 'formal equivalence', which attempts to reproduce the words and grammatical structures of the original in the language of the reader.

The necessity for accurate translation of the words is grounded in the fact that the Biblical doctrine of the Divine inspiration of the Scriptures means that the Scriptures are not the words of men but the words of God. God revealed Himself and His will to chosen men. The recording of what God revealed was not left to the natural or even gracious abilities of these men. God took steps to ensure that not only are His revealed thoughts conveyed to us in a generally accurate way but in words which precisely communicate what is in His mind. 'Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. For the prophecy came not in old time by the will of man; but holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost' [2 Peter 1.20, 21]. The Holy Spirit prepared and then controlled the writers of Scripture so that they were preserved from errors which would be natural to

them as sinful men. He infallibly guided them in their expression of thoughts and use of words so that what they wrote is God's revelation of Himself in words spoken by the Holy Ghost. The Holy Spirit of God so controlled the writers of Scripture that their words were the words which the Holy Ghost spoke. All of Scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, in its words as well as in its thoughts, is the product of a supernatural work of God which ensures that it is inerrant, infallible, wholly trustworthy. Because of its nature as the inspired, inerrant word of God Scripture ought to be translated to give not only what is considered to be the thought of God but also God's very words. The human words of these human authors are the very words of God.

The translators of the Authorised Version accepted and acted upon the principle that what they were translating was the fully and verbally inspired, and consequently inerrant, Word of God. They therefore endeavoured to translate accurately the words in which they wrote. Accuracy is much more important than a style which is immediately comprehensible. The original is not immediately comprehensible, even to those who read it fluently and are in perfect sympathy with its contents. Difficulty in comprehension may arise from something other than a difficult style, and a style which makes the content seem easily comprehensible may do so by removing difficulties inherent in the content. Peter found 'some things hard to be understood' in the Scriptures written by Paul [2 Peter 3.16]. The translator is to avoid introducing difficulties by the obscurity of his translation, but it is not the function of the translator to explain what the Bible means. It is the function of the translator to transfer as closely as possible what is written in the original language into the language of the reader. It is one of the chief strengths of the Authorised Version that it sets out to reproduce in English the very forms of speech found in the original Hebrew and Greek. As already noted, it translates on what is commonly called the principle of 'formal equivalence'. The commitment of the translators to assuring the reader that what he or she reads is what is written in the original is demonstrated by their practice that when words are introduced to convey the significance of an expression in the original, but there is no direct equivalent for these words in the original, these words appear in italics.

The aim of those who follow the principle of 'dynamic equivalence' is to convey what they consider to be the thought of the writers in language which they think will have the same effect upon the readers of the translation as it had upon the readers of the original. They take account of the different context of the modern reader and aim at getting rid of difficult language structures and technical terms and what they regard as culturally conditioned expressions in the original. As a result the reader is not confronted with an accurate rendering of the words used by the Holy Ghost but with a rendering of what the translator considers to be the thought of the writer—the translator's interpretation of the ideas which the writer was communicating in words which he thinks will get a response from the reader. Whatever the intention of those adopting this principle the principle does not take seriously the implications of the verbal inspiration of Scripture. It fails to provide the reader with a volume in which he can be confronted by the very words of God. It does not sufficiently take account of the fact that the basic reason for a failure to understand the Bible is found in fallen human nature, and that man enlightened by the Holy Spirit will not be put off by the difficulties which he encounters in the form or content of the divine utterance but will, like the prophets themselves, enquire and search diligently into the meaning of the revelation [1 Peter 1.10, 11]. You remember the case of the man of Ethiopia who was reading the

prophet Isaiah as he returned in his chariot from Jerusalem. ‘Then the Spirit said unto Philip, Go near, and join thyself to this chariot. And Philip ran thither to him, and heard him read the prophet Esaias, and said, Understandest thou what thou readest? And he said, How can I, except some man should guide me? And he desired Philip that he would come up and sit with him’ [Acts 8.27f.]. The Authorised Version was translated on the principle that the translator should reproduce the words and grammar of the original as closely as possible and that the work of making it plain belongs to the Holy Spirit.

When we read our Authorised Version we can have confidence that the Translators have endeavoured with good success to give us as closely as can be done in another language the very words of inspiration. On occasions when they were at all uncertain regarding obscure terms they provided the possible alternative in the margin.

4. In the Authorised Version we have a translation which in its simplicity and dignity corresponds with the character of the Scriptures as originally written. These qualities of the Authorised Version— simplicity and dignity—which are widely celebrated, belong to it in virtue of its closeness to the original. The style is simple and yet it is dignified because the English is as Biblical as English can be. That is what gives it its character. Alister McGrath<sup>6</sup> acknowledges that the translators’ concern ‘was primarily to provide an accurate translation of the Bible, on the assumption that accuracy was itself the most aesthetic of qualities to be desired’. He says that they ‘achieved literary distinction precisely because they were not deliberately pursuing it. Aiming at truth, they achieved what later generations recognised as beauty and elegance. Where later translations deliberately and self-consciously sought after literary merit, the king’s translators achieved it unintentionally, by focusing on what, to them, was a greater goal. Elegance was achieved by accident, rather than design’.

Translating the Bible into the language of the people did not for these translators mean using colloquialisms or writing in the style of the modern tabloid newspaper or even in the common style of the day. That they were not making a point of writing in the style of their day can be seen by comparing the style of their translation with, for example the style of their address to King James. We see this with regard to their use of **thee**, **thou**, **thy** and **thine** in their translation of the second person singular personal pronoun when it appears in the Bible while they address the king in the singular using the plural You and Your. Attention is often drawn to the usefulness of having these pronouns translated as they are in the original with reference to Luke 22.31, 32: ‘And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired *to have you*, that he may sift *you* as wheat: but I have prayed for **thee**, that **thy** faith fail not: and when **thou** art converted, strengthen **thy** brethren’. Their address to the king is also in a much more flowery style than is used in their translation. The style of their translation has the qualities it has on account of their faithful rendering of the original. The simplicity and dignity of this style are not mere literary qualities but reflections of the spiritual transparency and majesty of the original Scriptures. Among the qualities which the *Westminster Confession of Faith* claims give evidence of the Bible being the Word of God are ‘the heavenliness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style’.

5. In the Authorised Version we have a translation especially suited to memorising and to reading aloud in the context of worship. It is a frequent complaint that today there is widespread biblical illiteracy, even among those who attend places of worship. No doubt

there are many reasons for this but one significant contributory factor is the multiplicity of versions and the nature of most of the popular versions of the Bible. When there was one Bible to which English-speaking Christians appealed, people made a point of learning and memorising what it had to say and when they met together they were all speaking the same language when they referred to Scripture. Some of the memorising came through frequent consultation causing the words to sink in and some came by specific application to the task of memorising. The language of the Authorised Version gives itself to being memorised and remembered.

The Authorised Version, both in the prose version and in the reflection of it in the metrical Psalms, is admirably suited to the worship of God on account of the dignity and majesty and devotional quality of its language. Because of its faithfulness to the content and style of the original it does not belong to one age or locality. It was the practice of the translators that when someone had finished his piece of translation work he read it before the Committee. It is a version suited for reading aloud. The translators had in mind that this Bible would be read in the churches. But it is most suitable for use in the worship of God and for promoting the worship of God because of its faithful and accurate reproduction of the original Scriptures. God honours His own Word. I am sure that there are devout souls who worship God in Spirit and in truth in spite of using inferior translations of the Word of God and that some who use the Authorised Version are strangers to spiritual worship, but it is no mere coincidence that the loss of the sense of God and of reverence for God which is general in the professed worship of the church today is contemporaneous with the desire for and use of versions of the Bible which do not faithfully reflect the very atmosphere of the original Scriptures. The devotional attitude and language fostered by this version is Biblical.

**6.** In the Authorised Version we have a translation which originated in the church, which provided the English-speaking churches and peoples with a common Bible and which has been much used in the salvation of sinners and edification of saints and in promoting a sense of the authority of Scripture. It is very important that we recognise that as in Old Testament times, so in New Testament times, God has deposited His Word in the church and that it is for the church of the living God, as 'the pillar and ground of the truth' (1 Timothy 3.15), to preserve and pass on the Word of God in its purity. In the present state of the church we are grateful for a Society such as the Trinitarian Bible Society which acts on behalf of the churches in providing the Scriptures. But it is not for any society, and even less for a profit-conscious publishing house, to determine the version of the Scriptures which shall be made available. The church depends on the Word of God and not the Word of God upon the church, but the church is entrusted with faithfully passing on that which has been delivered to it.

The loss of a common Bible has been most detrimental to the state of the professing church and to the testimony of the church in the world. It has undoubtedly contributed significantly to the loss of a sense of the authority of Scripture in the church and in society. People in the world may make an excuse for their unbelief by claiming that the many divisions in the professing church indicate that professing Christians themselves cannot agree on what they believe. They may feel even more justified when they realise that neither is there agreement as to the Bible to which the churches appeal and which they use in their worship. The habit of comparing different versions and deciding which one is to be followed at any

given point does not contribute to impressing on the reader a sense of the authority of Scripture. There is the danger of fostering an attitude to which fallen human nature is already prone—a sitting in judgment on the Word rather than being subject to the judgment of the Word upon oneself.

The Authorised Version is a church-originated Bible which for centuries provided the English-speaking churches and peoples with a common Bible and was much used in the salvation of sinners and edification of saints and in promoting a sense of the authority of Scripture.

7. In the Authorised Version we have a translation which, looked at in the light of the points which have been made, has not been bettered. The Trinitarian Bible Society makes a point of not claiming that the Authorised Version is perfect. In the history of the Society, *The Word of God among all Nations*, reference is made to ‘leaving open the possibility of modest future revision in passages where the English was obscure or where the traditional Greek text could be followed more closely’.<sup>7</sup> I think that the emphasis there is on modest.

One of the arguments we hear against the continued use of the Authorised Version in worship and in study and in evangelism is that the language is archaic – that there are words which are not in use today or which have changed their meaning. I recently came across a book published fifty years ago and republished more recently with 422 pages containing 827 articles explaining ‘the King James words and phrases most affected by changes in English’. No doubt such a volume may be found useful, but it very much exaggerates the inaccessibility of the language of the Authorised Version. Those of us who have been brought up with the Authorised Version may not appreciate difficulties in language which others may have. However, it is significant that the Authorised Version has been much used among people who do not have English as their first language and that our recent and more distant forefathers, who did not have the access to education and to instant reference to dictionaries and online resources which allegedly make the current generation better informed, were steeped in the Authorised Version.

There are words frequently referred to, such as ‘prevent’ meaning ‘go before’ and ‘let’ meaning ‘hinder’ rather than ‘allow,’ which certainly have changed their meaning; and no doubt there are others which may not immediately be clear. But the accurate use of **thee** and **thou** for the singular pronouns should not be sacrificed, as these easily become familiar to the reader, as indeed do the verb endings which go with such use, even if the most diligent reader may sometimes have difficulty using them in speech.

Under the notion of getting rid of archaic language, some believe that words can be disposed of which accurately convey what one might call the more technical or theological terms of the original—such as ‘justification’ and ‘adoption’ and ‘sanctification’ and ‘propitiation’ for example. It is very important that these words should be retained rather than have some attempt made to explain them, or in some cases explain them away, in the translation.

Because of the excellence and combination of qualities which we have been drawing attention to throughout this talk we believe that the Authorised Version of the Holy Bible is

the best translation available to us in the English language. In the providence of our sovereign God the translators of four hundred years ago were enabled to produce an English Version of the Bible whose conformity to the original is such that we must hold onto it and pass it on to the generation to come.

If I may be allowed I shall conclude and sum up by quoting from a paper which I gave to a TBS meeting in Inverness, perhaps twelve years ago, on *The Authorised Version and the Mission of the Church*:

The version of the Bible used forms the religious character of those using it. The Authorised Version was fundamental to the religious character of generations of English-speaking Christians. It formed their theological terminology and understanding. It gave them their language in prayer. It gave Biblical character to their spiritual experience. It was a significant factor in giving an identity to Protestantism and in preserving spiritual unity amongst those who received it. Departures from it are only deepening divisions and playing into the hands of Romanism which has a particular dislike for the Authorised Version...

Undoubtedly departure from the one authoritative translation of the Bible and the multiplicity of versions competing for its place has undermined confidence in the Word of God...

The substitution for the Authorised Version of a multiplicity of versions which sacrifice accuracy to simplicity has left us with a generation of professing Christians who are theologically illiterate and who cannot be certain that their beliefs are in accordance with truth...

Departure from the Authorised Version has left those who adopt modern versions with much less memorable language and it seems to be a matter of fact that there is much less memorising of Scripture than there used to be. It is noticeable that when you hear anyone quoting Scripture it is generally from the Authorised Version, even in the case of those who are dependent for their knowledge of it from extracts that float around vaguely in society. The multiplicity of new versions in contemporary English has not made the Bible more influential in the life of the church or of the nation...

Our confidence in the Authorised Version as we go out into the future is based on its being the most faithful translation of the Word of God in the English language, and that the God who has used it so powerfully throughout the centuries will still honour His own Word. It is not a new version of the Scriptures we need but repentance and confidence in the Word of God as published and preached and dependence upon God the Holy Spirit to make it powerful in accomplishing the purposes of God in His grace.

#### Endnotes

1. C. P. Hallihan, *The Authorised Version: A Wonderful and Unfinished History*, TBS, 2010
2. Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland Publications, pp. 23, 24
3. *The Translators to the Reader: The preface to the Authorised version of 1611*, TBS

4. pp. 229 - 233

5. *The Legacy of the King James Bible*, p.163

6. *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and how it changed a Nation, a Language and a Culture*, Hodder and Stoughton, paperback edition, 2002, p. 254

7. *The Word of God among all Nations: A Brief History of the Trinitarian Bible Society 1831 – 1981*, TBS 1981, p. 4